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# Defining Partnership in Sensory Terms

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**Abstract**
Students as partners, is a fast-developing field within student engagement. By considering students not simply as recipients of knowledge or, consumers of higher educational offerings, but producers of their academic experience, and, partners in their learning, institutions are beginning to redefine the university experience of students by placing them at their centre. The challenge, however, is in understanding what active student partnership means, and more importantly what this means on an institutional basis. This article reveals the views of academics, students and professional staff which came out of a workshop regarding student partnership and covers a discussion of the strengths, possible definitions and concerns of such an approach.

**Key Words:** Student, students, partnership, partners, education, university, engagement

## Introduction

During the Learning at City conference in June 2014, I facilitated a workshop to consider how we can begin to define the idea of student partnership in sensory terms. The workshop was based around the use of dialogue sheets, a democratic method used to create 'good conversation' in discussion-based settings (Kelly, 2011). The sheet used in the session was deliberately quite sparse; in looking at this relatively new concept of partnership there was the danger that too much information would be leading. As such, pictures of eyes, hands, a nose, ears and a tongue surrounded the central question, with quotes from internal surveys and previous National Student Survey data to reflect the senses.

This dialogue sheet, which was used by five groups of no more than six people, was focused on the definition of student partnership in relation to human senses. Considering aspects of higher education analogously with respect to human physiology is not an uncommon practice. We often refer to the 'student body' and the idea of a higher education institution as a body is quite an appropriate one, whereby multiple elements play their part to the ongoing growth and development of the whole whilst at the same time themselves developing and growing. Further, in choosing the human senses, it provided opportunities for different viewpoints and a more creative interpretation of partnership.

Using the dialogue sheet, which features a predetermined set of questions and stimulants such as pictures and quotes, a group of 24 academic staff, educational developers, students and others sought to consider student partnership, for around 45 minutes, in the following ways:

- What does student partnership look like? (To consider what partnership looks like in teaching, assessment and feedback, student support and building relationships between staff and students)

- What does student partnership sound like? (From the perspective of staff and students, what kind of terms do we associate with partnership now and for the future?)
- What does student partnership taste like? (From the perspective of how this is externally promoted to applicants or the sector, what could be uniquely 'City' about students as partners?)
- What does student partnership feel like? (What kind of environments, be it learning and teaching processes or otherwise can you engage students as partners and what kind of activities could this entail?)
- What does student partnership smell like? (Is student partnership another Higher Education fad, what are the negatives of this approach, what do you see the biggest obstacles being?)

The following sections consider the themes which arose during the workshop, and point to further questions which all universities considering student partnership should be looking to answer. The questions inferred from the discussions around each sense are those which either clearly arose from the overall feedback from each sense, or have been drawn out from the varied discussion and focused for further use both internally and externally.

**Students as Partners**

In the 2011 Higher Education 'White Paper' *Students at the Heart of the System* (BIS, 2011), the current government changed the face of higher education with an expanded model, facilitating increased numbers of not only students but higher education providers. Increased importance of student charters and feedback placed more information in student hands to, in theory, enhance applicant choice and student power. This was further bolstered by 'Enabling greater competition, while removing unnecessary regulations…because of the benefits for all users of higher education'. Opinion on whether or not this truly places power in the hands of the students continues to be pessimistic (at the least), but the subsequent importance of the National Student Survey and statistical window dressing through the Key Information Set (Unistats) and increased focus by UK institutions on league tables seem to have caused marketization of UK HE.

An important publication from the National Union of Students, *A Manifesto for Partnership* (Wenstone, 2012) offered an alternative focus for institutions, placing student engagement through a partnership at the heart of what HE could be about. Underpinned by a student engagement agenda which 'advocates for the idea that students should be active participants in the learning process', students as partners considers students as 'co-creators' of knowledge and extends the student voice within universities beyond academic representation and into the heart of learning and teaching. This goes some way to the building of trust relationships between staff and students (as well as students and their peers) but also highlights the weakness of trust relationships currently between these parties (Bryson, 2014).

The Higher Education Academy currently have the concept of 'students as partners' as a research area and workstream, and developed a conceptual framework for partnership learning communities. This model is highly effective at highlighting the overlap between four distinct areas of consideration for partnership: learning, teaching and assessment; curriculum design and pedagogic consultancy; scholarship of teaching and learning; and subject-based research enquiry.

*Figure 1. A conceptual model for students as partners in learning and teaching in higher education*
*(Healey, Flint and Harrington 2014)*

Whilst this framework is particularly useful for those involved in learning and teaching, it does not so easily transfer to the broader university community. And whilst partnership predominantly relates to learning and teaching, a holistic approach across professional services and programme teams, enables students to become active partners in their learning experience, with each constituent part of the institution which enables their learning.

In looking to define students as partners amongst City University staff and students, the intention of the workshop was to consider the benefits and barriers of a partnership approach within the institution, acknowledging the current climate of UK HE as hostile but more importantly considering how a partnership approach can be embedded within an institution. This was benefited by the cross-institutional make-up of the group who participated.

**The 'look'**

Participants broadly attributed the look of student partnership to a physical contract or assumed agreement between parties within an institution. One group commented that it was a charter, but one where 'we do what we say'. It can be seen as fundamental to an institutional approach to partnership is that it is visible to all members of that institution, staff and students. Partnership can't be a hidden policy but a tangible culture within which partnership is two-way and ingrained within an institution's makeup. A visual representation of partnership was offered as 'a team pulling together', echoing the sentiment that student partnership is an institutional effort.

Other views on this centred on the willingness/ability of students to be *in* partnership. One group asked 'Do our students want to be in partnership?' Whilst this is a fair question, it can be argued that as a result of the currently changing nature of UK higher education, institutions should be encouraging students to participate as actively as they can to make the most of their time studying, however this doesn't need to be told to the students necessarily. In this way, if a culture and approach to student engagement exists so students arrive as partners, then they never need know they couldn't be. A concern for students was whether it was challenging for students to be partners in their university experience. This could be due to their cultural or national differences, or simply down to their programmes of study.

For me, this adds weight to a significant area which institutions should be considering. Due to the diverse nature of our student bodies, the academic make-up (not to mention campus estate and location) of our institutions as well as other factors, there may never be a sector-wide approach to student partnership other than the commitment to develop in this way. Resultantly, what each institution must do is consider what is most relevant to their aims, as well as those of the students. One participant suggested that for City, our different schools within the university have different cultures which are linked to the professions our students are looking to transition into, and that the role of the institution is to help students make sense of this.

Other points raised in terms of the look of student partnership was the visibility of the student body, in that a partnership approach yields a more active and engaged student body. Another view was that partnership looks complex, but that 'this should be visible and celebrated'. The celebration of student partnership, and by extension the diversity/complexity of individual institutions, should be an ongoing exercise to reinforce the approaches. Most importantly perhaps, highlighting the successes of a partnership approach would foster a sense of pride in the institution and the role each party plays within it. Additionally, one participant mentioned that partnership looked like lots of people speaking, and one way to ensure this continues would be to give people something to speak about.

Coming out of this sense, the most salient point would seem to be that student partnership looks unique to an institution, and that what works for a campus university may not at a city university for instance. With this in mind, the first question for institutions to consider is:

*What does our university community look like, and what kind of support would be needed to create a balanced partnership between different parts of it?*

**The 'sound'**

The overriding theme which arose was one of (unsurprisingly) music, and interestingly this analogy however opened up an interesting contrast in opinions. Some suggested a celebratory 'hootenanny' of sound, whereas one group suggested that partnership sounded like lift music (referred to as *muzak* in musical terms). This point is perhaps of particular importance, as the concept of muzak can be applied to perceptions of students as partners and the ongoing current debates which were mirrored in this session. Vanel (2013) ascribed muzak as 'efficient', stating that muzak needs more than just to be implemented. It requires, above all, a collective suspension of disbelief. One could say this interpretation defines muzak, and by extension partnership, as a secondary factor underlying one's main activity. A person doesn't typically go into a lift to listen to the music being played, however the fact it is there can improve the experience. Buildings and their incumbent organisations often use specific music to create a mood, and as can be seen throughout scholarship around student engagement and partnership, for instance in Bryson (2014), partnership is a mechanism for student engagement but not engagement in and of itself.

Some groups suggested that partnership included a wide variety of sound, one group suggesting partnership was orchestral, whereby 'everyone has a part to play'. The idea that partnership was improvisational suggests the role of agency and motivation through a partnership approach, as individuals are allowed to stand out from the whole whilst at the same time synchronising with the rest of the piece. One individual suggested that partnership sounded like 'fine tuning' before a performance, further supporting the notion that partnership is of importance but as an underlying principle. An out of tune orchestra doesn't entice the listener, whereas an orchestra in-tune captures the audience and is able to perform to its best.

Some groups, based on their roles in the university, considered solely the sound of partnership to staff. A critique of the current situation suggested partnership would sound 'atonal', 'not in harmony' with existing practice, some proposing that it was a 'small movement' or a 'pop song' rather than a full symphony. It is a fair representation of the mood of some that partnership was seen as somewhat of a passing fancy, dreamt up as an ideal aim but not a realistic goal. This could in some ways be attributed to the other theme which arose, which was one of specific dialogue around metrics, surveys and a specific dialogue being guided. One group however suggested however that a statistical approach allowed for 'having mechanisms to make change'.

The idea of hearing and listening differences arose, between individual students and between staff and students. This relates back to Bryon's earlier point around trust relationships, but is further solidified through one group's perception of partnership sounding like a 'good cop/bad cop scenario' where there may not be parity, but there is an understood role of each party. One group also suggested that the student voice is 'not heard so well at the moment', suggesting that partnership is perhaps a distracting sound at the moment and the clarity of hearing students initially needs to be improved.

In considering what 'students as partners' sounds like, one group summed it up perfectly when simply writing 'eclectic'. There is no easy way to qualify this, and indeed the question which seems to arise from these varied perspective (in terms of both harmony and type of sound) seems to be:

*Which aspect of a partnership approach does an institution want to be heard clearest?*

Be it a clear dialogue which both staff and students understand and can easily call to mind (akin to Led Zeppelin's famous guitar riff from 'Whole Lotta Love' (BBC, 2014)) or an acknowledged understanding that partnership underpins an institutional approach to students, this decision needs to be made and widely accepted in order to function fully. Wenstone (2012) argues that partnerships needs to be chosen 'as an institution, not as a clique of senior managers', and with broad buy-in partnership stands the best chance of positively impacting upon students' experiences.

**The 'taste'**

One group considered the taste of a student partnership approach in terms of a restaurant and ambition. They wondered whether a partnership approach should be a 'Michelin-star' restaurant, an independent restaurant or an 'off-the-beaten-track tasty bistro'. This raises questions of the quality of partnership – is it prized but niche as the aforementioned 'bistro' or independent establishment, or is it championed with the highest acclaim? It can be argued that both perceptions are valid, yet at the same time hollow without each other.

Some pessimism was shown through the suggestion of somewhat unsavoury flavours like umami, boiled cabbage and leftovers, or indeed that it could leave people with indigestion. One participant believed that currently, the notion of partnership could look 'bland' externally. The latter point is an important one – universities such as Lincoln and Exeter have particularly visible external-facing websites about their work in student engagement (and the underpinning principle of partnership) which help make their work more interesting to the outside viewer. One individual suggested that partnership, if indeed it is another buzzword fad, 'could leave people with indigestion'. Much of this pessimism comes from a concern around an institutional approach, one group suggesting that there could be 'too many chefs', or wondering who the 'head chef' to lead this initiative could be. The importance of an aforementioned institutional approach, rather than a 'top-down' initiative, but also that you can't expect people to buy-in to a partnership approach, and that development work needs to be done to encourage a partnership approach.

Questions arose within the group discussions, such as 'is it richly flavoured?', 'is it sweet or savoury?' or enquired as to whether student partnership leaves the 'appetite whetted'. In considering an institutional approach to partnership, such questions highlight the fact that partnership means different things to different people, just as some people prefer puddings to main courses. Other groups highlighted this diversity of opinion, but focused it on the students themselves, asking 'how do you cater for all tastes?' This challenge is perhaps the most important; there is no typical student body, as recognised by groups who highlighted that partnership should be made up of a 'global menu' in the case of both staff and students. The complexity of this diversity was summed up by another group who noted 'navigating the menu is dreadful, [it] should be easy to read'. One group were adamant however that partnership should not be 'too salty!' clearly showing that whatever your preference, care needs to be taken to ensure that a partnership approach is not carelessly applied.

A few groups suggested partnership would taste 'sparkling' and 'refreshing', embracing the positive feeling that this new approach to an institutional learning culture. Groups also suggested that a partnership approach should include an increased use of the student voice to add 'flavour' to the institution. The importance of the student voice in partnership is stressed throughout much of the literature on student engagement and partnership, with Jarnecki and McVitty (2013) also noting the role of the Students' Union as 'prospectively a vehicle for student engagement that extends far beyond the concept of the student voice'.

If we look at the sense of taste, we see that it, like student engagement, is a matter of personal preference. Rather than looking at this as an unanswerable issue however, we can consider the abilities and desires of all members of university communities. Indeed, when we look at our own institutions we can ask the question:

*What opportunities can we create and maintain for staff and students to act in partnership?*

**The 'feel'**

The groups were unanimous in their ideal feeling of partnership as 'fluid' like water, suggesting it should be 'cooperative' and 'effective' but most importantly 'joined-up'. To enable this, consensus suggested that it should also be democratic. Wenstone (2012) stresses the ongoing importance of keeping partnership under review, with the annual change of students and student representatives, as well as the changing priorities and members of staff within an institution. A democratic approach would need careful management, to enable it to be productive rather than getting tied down in a battle between formal and informal approaches as one group identified.

One group were concerned that partnership should not be too 'touchy feely', stating that for partnership to work 'we don't have to "hug" each other'. However, there was also a recognition that adopting a partnership approach would entail a 'shift in staff attitude', stating that there was a concern currently that if partnership was adopted and implemented tomorrow, the feel and sense of the culture would feel fragmental. This sharp shift was echoed in other groups who asked if partnership was spikey or hard, rough or smooth.

The groups raised some positive aspects of how an institution who worked in partnership with their students, identifying that partnership is 'friendly', offering 'community and belonging' to all within an institution. The importance of partnership existing when students arrive was considered, with one individual suggesting partnership should be a 'tactile introduction like a handshake' to new arrivals. It was also agreed that partnership should open doors to students, enabling to navigate not just their academic degrees but the physical and developmental aspects of university.

The 'feel' of partnership seems to support previous calls for a partnership approach to be an important part of an institution's makeup, but not so overbearing that it intimidates or distracts its members from their role within the organisation. The salient question arising from this sense therefor is:

*Which elements of our university do we want our students and staff to remember in years to come?*

Consideration how partnership plays a role in these key strategic and institutional areas could enable institutions to not only meet their own goals, but allow all members of the organisation to be part of making these ambitions their own, and by extension achievable.

**The 'smell'**

Whilst this sense was aimed at considering the challenges or criticism of a partnership approach, like the other senses there was an even discussion around both positives and negatives. Some considered partnership to smell like 'cake', 'sweet', 'exotic', 'perfume', 'engaging' 'aspiring to a bed of roses'. The idea that partnership is a refreshing approach is an important one, in that embedding partnership deliberately as an institution may not be new to pockets of our universities, but it begins to redefine our approach to students in a marketised era and takes the focus away from 'students as consumers'.

One group identified that the way partnership smells should be almost like a 'reputation' or signature, almost sensed before you arrive at an institution. Partnership can turn the heads of prospective students, but shouldn't be considered merely to build student numbers. Another group added that partnership could start to smell stronger as things develop, perhaps the closer you get to the institution or the longer you are 'baking' a culture of partnership.

Some were concerned about the ability of partnership to have a meaningful impact to city-based institutions, highlighting the difference between campus and urban institutions. There was also sense that a growing acceptance and embedding of partnership in the higher education sector could cause further distrust between institutions, their staff and students if things didn't start to change. This is a fair consideration; we often see students talking to their friends at other institutions and comparing their experiences, and if partnership is used variably across the sector it may not improve the existing relationship between institutions and students.

Some of the negative perceptions of smell were that it was like a 'rat', 'cheesy', 'acrid', 'decay', 'sour'. One individual went so far as to suggest it smells like a 'rotting corpse in the corner'. The challenge seemingly faced by adopting a partnership approach is making it meaningful and tangible to all involved. The concern, as expressed by another participant, that adopting partnership is 'smoke and mirrors' to divert attention from the existing issues in higher education, or that partnership is in fact a 'disinfectant' to clinically solve the problems universities face rather than work through them methodically with engagement of all stakeholders.

What seems most important to hold on to was highlighted by one group, who said partnership 'smells like teen spirit – a transition into independence, fraught, and maybe we don't have the vocabulary for it yet'. Each level of university education can be argued as a transitional period for our students, who, let us not forget, we largely exist for. But the cautions raised within this discussion suggest that an appropriate consideration should be:

*How can we embed partnership so that it is helps to improve our institution?*

**Summary**

Despite operating within the confines of a one hour workshop, the discussion which took place provided insightful and meaningful discussions of students as partners in a balanced way. The dialogue sheet, coupled with the use of a sensory framework to guide the discussion, supported this, however it may not be as appropriate if a more pragmatic discussion of the meaning and/or practicalities of partnership in a higher education context is desired. That is not to say this exercise was beneficial; the breadth of conversation within the workshop clearly shows that if different members of your university community are given the time and space to think, discuss or debate, then a considerable amount of groundwork can be achieved. The use of a sensory framework enabled participants to think about an institutional approach to partnership from a student perspective, placing what the student 'sees' or 'feels' at the centre of the discussion. This is critically important to partnership, and

reflects a positive interpretation of 'Students at the Heart of the System' where they are the focus and simply targets of pedagogy or institutional policy.

To recap, the questions arising from the discussion are:

1. What does our university community look like, and what kind of support would be needed to create a balanced partnership between different parts of it?
2. Which aspect of a partnership approach does an institution want to be heard clearest?
3. What opportunities can we create and maintain for staff and students to act in partnership?
4. Which elements of our university do we want our students and staff to remember in years to come?
5. How can we embed partnership so that it is helps to improve our institution?

It can be argued that the importance of partnership can be presented in terms of legacy. Two of the questions above directly relate the lasting impression that an institution will leave on its graduates. Smell, it can be argued, is the strongest of our senses. Whilst not as directly stimulating as touch, a scent can evoke memories from years in the past in mere seconds, it can make you salivate and can also draw or divert your attention. Supermarkets are known, for instance, to pipe smells in to tantalise customers. Implementation of partnership can improve retention through a sense of belonging and connectedness (TSEP, 2014), and can be shown to improve retention, success and satisfaction (Healey, Flint & Harrington, 2014).

The above questions shouldn't simply be considered at institutional, faculty, service or programme level, but all together and separately. Your library will need a different approach to partnership than your course office, but this isn't to say it isn't partnership, rather that it is a different *kind* of partnership. This should be embraced – the diversity of relationships between students and the university is one of the things which underpins the higher education experience of our students.

What seems certain, however, was best summed up by one group who wrote 'it feels as though it could be a paradigm shift rather than a fad'. Carefully considered and watchfully maintained, partnership has the potential to redefine the experience of our students and the purpose of our institutions more than governmental policy or isolated institutional strategies ever can.

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