

# Student Engagement Through Partnership

Rose Gann (ATL), Kevin Love (SL) and Dominic Holland (RA)

Division of Politics and International Relations

Nottingham Trent University

# Why is student engagement problematic?

- Why are we interested in student engagement in higher education?
  - Reflections on own practice
  - NUS speaker on partnership
- What is student engagement in higher education?
  - Process through which students relate to staff
  - Encompasses practices such as teaching, learning, assessment, course design, evaluation etc.
  - Students can engage with higher education in different ways
- How do students currently engage with higher education in the UK?
  - As consumers of, and investors in, higher education
  - Problematic form of engagement: affects how they approach learning and what value they give to higher education

# Rational Actor

- Economic motivation
  - Need to limit allocation of material resources to higher education in order to support continuing accumulation of capital
- Political agenda
  - Government-promoted marketization of higher education and commodification of knowledge
- Pedagogical practice
  - Measurement of teaching quality through various metrics e.g.
    - NSS (National Student Survey)
    - DLHE (Destination of Leavers from Higher Education)
    - Numbers of 'good' degrees (number of first-class and upper second degrees)

# Rational Actor cont.

- Cultural consequences
  - Increasing prevalence of instrumentalism among students and staff
- Impact on student engagement
  - Conditional and partial engagement

# What are the alternative forms of student engagement?

- Authoritarian–Didactic

- Authoritarian: teachers control curriculum and assessment through hierarchy
- Didactic: teacher-focused teaching and transmission-led learning

- Partnership

- Staff and students work together on an equal basis to determine teaching methods, curriculum, assessment etc.
- On the agenda of QAA (2012), NUS (2012), HEA (2014) and TSEP (2014)
- However, meaning contested

# Partnership

- Economic motivation
  - Ensuring that British graduates can compete in an international labour market
  - Marketization and commodification of higher education
- Political agenda
  - Partnership as an opportunity to re-distribute rights/responsibilities between staff and students and resist commodification of knowledge (NUS and HEA)
  - Partnership as a way of improving quality of higher education (QAA, TSEP, HEA)
- Pedagogical practice
  - Teaching activities centred on students and learning activities oriented towards development of understanding and higher-level thinking skills (HEA)
    - Activities that are student-led/Activities that develop broader knowledge and skills as good in itself (e.g. international exchanges/undergraduate research conferences)
- Cultural consequences
  - Communitarian ethos: students feel sense of belonging ( ‘Partnership Learning Communities’ [HEA 2014]); higher education as end in itself
- Impact on student engagement
  - Unconditional engagement in course
  - Greater interest in learning and superior learning outcomes

# Partnership cont.

- Contested meaning
- Different groups have appropriated partnership
  - Partnership as 'joint working' according to a 'common agreed purpose' (QAA 2012, p. 3)
  - Partnership as 'dispersal of power' and 'shared responsibility' (NUS 2012, p. 8)
  - Partnership as particular 'culture' underpinned by a distinctive 'purpose' and set of 'values' (TSEP 2014, p. 6)
  - Partnership as 'relationship' and 'process' (HEA 2014, p. 2)
- Different interests generate different meanings

# To what extent is partnership possible in practice?

- Empirical work with students in School of Social Sciences at NTU
  - To understand current nature and culture of student engagement in P & IR
- Focus groups
  - One pilot study (first-year Sociology): 1 out of 6 students expressing interest turned up
  - Two formal studies (first-year Politics): 0 out of 9 students expressing an interest turned up
  - Voluntary student participation
- Course committees
- Student reps/course leader relationships
- UG engagement in research processes
  - SPUR
  - Undergraduate research conferences (BCUR)

# To what extent is partnership possible in practice?

- How do we want to define partnership?
- What further empirical work is needed to support this position?
- Also need to evaluate interventions
  - Evaluate effect on nature and culture of student engagement in P & IR of new student–staff forum (2015/16)
  - Evaluate impact of undergraduate research conference
  - Test and evaluate new approach to course committees

# What is problematic about the partnership agenda?

- Acknowledged difficulties

- Political

- challenge to (unequal) power relations within established academic hierarchies

- Unacknowledged difficulties

- Economic

- capitalist relations of production imposing limit to public expenditure

- Ideological

- neo-liberal ideology justifying marketization of higher education

- Political

- authoritarian government imposing internal markets on higher education
- definitions of partnership which deny the existence of power relations in higher education

- Cultural

- dominance of instrumentalist rationality

# Neither Customers nor Partners: enframing education

- Ideology of Customerisation

- Neo-liberal economic model; commodification of product; economic utility; instrumental rationality of exchange

- Partnership Ideology

- Social constructivist epistemology: knowledge constructed through process of intellectual change (Vygotsky, Dennett)
- Social relational ontology: how students approach learning relates to their perceptions of the academic context (Ramsden)
- Critical response to empiricist epistemology and individualist ontology underpinning Authoritarian–Didactic model of engagement and neo-liberal ideology of efficient resource distribution underpinning Rational Actor model of engagement
- **BUT:** to what extent does the partnership model continue to mediate the pedagogic relation? Neo-liberal political model? Education as political democracy?

- Heidegger on Art (aesthetics and subjectivism); Heidegger on Technology (*Gestell* or 'enframing')

- *E-ducare*: the culture of education

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# Evaluation and conclusion so far

- To what extent will it be possible for staff to engage with students on an equal basis?
- How much autonomy should we give to our students?