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.
  – 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

13 May 2015
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?