EDITORIAL

Reflections on disciplinary perspectives on students as partners

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> Recent studies have identified a lack of research exploring how partnership practices unfold in specific disciplinary contexts. (Baumber et al., 2020, p. 395)

> Disciplines are important in the construction of partnerships; traditional approaches to teaching associated with particular disciplines can aid or prevent the successful implementation of partnership activities. (Symonds, 2021, p. 246)

ORIGINS AND FOCUS

In thinking about writing this editorial, as three geographers, we began by wanting to reflect on what, if any, difference our discipline made to our lived experiences of engaging with students as partners (SaP). These reflections led us to explore broader questions about how interest in SaP in higher education varies by discipline, what forms SaP might take in different disciplines, and under what circumstances disciplines may be an important contextual factor in SaP. While recognising the dangers of not seeing beyond disciplinary boundaries and appreciating the value of cross-disciplinary perspectives, we see this editorial as an opportunity to explore the role of disciplines in SaP.

We begin by commenting on the nature of disciplines and suggest that "ways of thinking and practicing" in disciplines provide a useful framework for our discussion (Hounsell & Anderson, 2009). We then explore how interest in and forms of SaP vary by discipline. Next, we examine the circumstances under which the nature of the discipline may be an important contextual factor in SaP, followed by reflections on how our own discipline has influenced our lived SaP experiences and a discussion of the challenges of adopting disciplinary perspectives on SaP. We conclude with two suggestions for how to move the debate about the role of disciplines in SaP forward. In the space afforded by an editorial, we can only cover these topics briefly.

Given the points made by Baumber et al. (2020) and Symonds (2021) above, we illustrate the themes we discuss with indicative examples of published SaP studies from a variety of disciplines and our own lived experiences. Our findings are thus tentative and suggestive of directions for future research and debate.

THE NATURE OF DISCIPLINES

Disciplines may be conceptualised as providing distinct ways of thinking and practicing that are "not confined to knowledge and understanding" but also "take in skills and know-how, [and] an evolving familiarity with the values and conventions governing communication within the relevant disciplinary and professional community" (Hounsell & Anderson, 2009, p. 72). Ways of thinking and practicing in disciplines and professions involve focussing on thinking like, for example, an engineer, a scientist, a sociologist, a lawyer, or a historian. They underpin disciplinary forms of reasoning. These ways of thinking and practicing affect the opportunities and constraints of engaging in SaP. In multidisciplinary teams, individuals arguably still retain many aspects of their disciplinary origins and ways of thinking and practicing, and these may be made clearer by contrasting with those held by team members from other disciplines (Ciccione, 2012). Ways of thinking and practicing can also vary within disciplines, particularly in the social sciences and humanities where multiple paradigms may co-exist and where they are not immutable, as disciplinary knowledge, skills, dispositions, and values evolve (Barnett, 2009).

Disciplines have distinct approaches to their research and pedagogy that reflect their subject matter (Cleaver et al., 2018; Kreber, 2009). The challenges of teaching and learning are reflected in discipline-specific threshold concepts (Meyer & Land, 2003) and in the bottlenecks faced by students revealed by the "decoding the disciplines" literature (e.g., Middendorf & Shopkow, 2018). Others have suggested that disciplines may have signature pedagogies (e.g., Chick et al., 2012), for example, the use of laboratories in the sciences and studios in the arts. Disciplines are not, however, unique, and there are many commonalities between disciplines, for example, similarities in teaching methods, such as the use of lectures and tutorials (Gibbs, 2000).

While the growth of interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary approaches opens new possibilities (Jagannathan, 2022; Repko et al., 2020), "most academics teach in departments defined by disciplines and most students take courses in departments defined by disciplines" (Middendorf & Shopkow, 2018, p. 2). Therefore, many students and staff still see their academic identity in terms of their discipline or profession (Healey, 2000; Healey & Jenkins, 2003). One's discipline is an important community of practice. Even scholars who work across disciplines "have a 'home' or primary discipline that shapes their initial approaches" (Middendorf & Shopkow, 2018, p. 2) in which members share a language and experiences of practices that might make partnerships between students and between students and staff easier to cultivate. "Developing understanding of disciplinary pedagogies of partnership" was identified as a priority for research by Healey et al. (2014, p. 11).

DISCIPLINARY VARIATIONS IN COVERAGE OF SAP

There are indications that, at least up until 2016, more than half of the empirical SaP literature on learning and teaching in higher education was based in one or more disciplines (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017); the remaining literature was outside specific disciplines (e.g., at the institutional level). Disciplines vary in their interest in SaP. For example, there is an extensive SaP literature in health professional education (Barradell & Bell, 2021) and academic development (Healey & Healey, 2019), whereas a review of the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) literature in political science and international relations found only two journal articles about SaP (Murphy, 2023).[1]

Tentative mapping of the SaP discipline-based literature against the Healey et al. (2014) model, which identifies four overlapping foci for SaP work in learning and teaching in

higher education, suggests that there are significant variations in interest in SaP by disciplines. For example, in health professional education there is a focus on students as teachers and mentors (Barradell & Bell, 2021), whereas in geography we found more coverage of learning, teaching, and research partnerships than of partnerships in the enhancement of learning and teaching.

In health professional education, SaP is largely published in discipline-based journals (Barradell & Bell, 2021); whereas in political science and international relations, the few SaP journal articles published are in generic education journals (Murphy et al., 2023) or edited books (Smith & Yahlnaaw, 2021). Geographers publishing about SaP seek a variety of discipline-based journals (e.g., Hill et al., 2021), generic education journals (e.g., Healey & France, 2022), and book chapters (e.g., Moore-Cherry, 2019).

DISCIPLINES AS CONTEXTUAL VARIABLES IN SAP

Two of us have argued in an earlier editorial that SaP is a complex area and that it is difficult to make generalisations about practices and policies because it depends on the context in which the study takes place (Healey & Healey, 2018). Discipline is one of these contextual variables. We suggest that the nature of the discipline may be more important as a contextual factor where the discipline is more central to the partnership practice, as in learning and teaching, curriculum development, and disciplinary research partnerships, than in pedagogic partnerships or some assessment collaborations, where the emphasis is more on the process of working in partnership or draws on generic practices in co-creating assessments. Differences in ways of thinking and practicing between disciplines may play a more significant role in partnerships where the nature of the discipline is crucial to the activity but may play a less important role where the discipline is simply a backdrop. This point was reinforced by Cook-Sather (personal communication, February 13, 2023) when she noted that in her experience "disciplinary identity may be a background or context, but it does not define how people conceptualize and practice pedagogy-focused partnerships."

Here we illustrate the circumstances when disciplines appear to play a role in SaP partnerships by drawing on a range of examples from three broad disciplinary areas: health professional education (HPE); science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM); and social sciences, humanities, and arts for people and the economy/environment (SHAPE).[2] We examined numerous discipline-based SaP articles,[3] but most researchers are not explicit about how the disciplinary context affected their findings. We return to this issue later.

HPE

The practical-focused nature of HPE provides opportunities for SaP where students frequently act as demonstrators, tutors, and mentors (e.g., Brown et al., 2017). A common driver for SaP in HPE is to allow students to practice relevant professional competencies and skills (Barradell & Bell, 2021). However, Acai (2022), in commenting on Barradell & Bell's article, highlights several challenges for implementing SaP within HPE. For example, she emphasises the hierarchical nature of the profession with students in the "lower ranks" often expected to be silent observers who defer to senior colleagues (Vanstone & Grierson, 2019). Hence, practicing SaP authentically can be more challenging in HPE than in other disciplines where it is easier to treat students as equal partners (Acai, 2022; Healey et al., 2014). In contrast, where students and staff can negotiate flatter hierarchies, the length of

the typical medical degree, from 4–7 years, provides more opportunities for students and staff to be engaged in partnerships.

STEM

A review of 27 publications across STEM disciplines found that they encompassed course design and redesign and pedagogy-focused approaches, many with a focus on making STEM education more equitable and inclusive (Cook-Sather et al., in press). Diaz et al. (2015) identify three broad forms of co-creation/partnership practiced in STEM: co-created resources, co-created research, and co-created peer learning, indicating broad support for SaP within STEM. Woolmer et al. (2016) discuss practicing two of these forms of co-creation where students and staff worked in partnership to design and deliver an interdisciplinary course to develop scientific skills within STEM disciplines. Whilst students drew on skills and case studies from their specific fields, the commonality of the skills required meant the course could be co-created in such a way that it was suitable for all science subjects. Student partners were also involved in collaborative teaching of the course—the practical and lab-based nature of STEM subjects provides more opportunities for students to act as facilitators of learning than in most of the SHAPE disciplines (Woolmer et al., 2016).

SHAPE

Symonds (2021) suggests that the established ways of thinking and practicing within the humanities, and in English in particular, where conventional approaches to teaching emphasise "learning in isolation, as well as autonomy and individuality in the creation of knowledge," can act "as a deterrent for undergraduates and academics in establishing a partnership dynamic" (p. 246). Although Symonds points to examples where successful co-research takes place (e.g., Cook-Sather, 2014), she argues that co-creation within English is less likely to occur compared to disciplines where team-based research is more the norm, such as the sciences. In contrast, others have suggested that "the less hierarchical nature of the cumulative construction of knowledge in the humanities than in the sciences means that it is arguably easier for undergraduates to engage in research and inquiry at an earlier stage" (Healey & Jenkins, 2009, p. 49).

As an example of the impact of the nature of the social sciences on SaP, Rouse et al. (2017) recognise the importance of shared disciplinary background for a partnership in identifying bottlenecks in writing a literature review in political science. The team, led by three undergraduate students, found that "the common pedagogical processes of using small, discrete steps to teach complex tasks might help novices become more proficient in a disciplinary process; yet, these steps also might hinder student confidence as performance becomes more expert and less scripted" (p. 11).

In the arts, Fieldsend-Danks (2016) discusses the Dialogue Project at Norwich University of the Arts in which over 700 fine arts students were engaged in partnership with staff and artists in developing research-engaged learning over a 5-year period. The extension of student-staff partnerships to employers in the creative industries is emphasised by both Bridgstock (n.d.) and Carozzi (2019).

THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF THREE GEOGRAPHERS ENGAGING IN SAP

As is the case with many of the examples cited above, our ways of thinking and practicing as geographers are influenced by the ways we have been trained to look at the

world. This can involve consideration of space, place, and the environment and how people's experiences are influenced by and within these elements (QAA, 2022). Our knowledge of academia, teaching, research, and higher education is socially constructed by our disciplinary background. Here we briefly consider how such tacit knowledge may have influenced our experiences of SaP.

Harry

My initial experience with SaP was as a student partner collaborating on a pedagogic research project exploring assessment feedback (Hill & West, 2020) and as a student co-editor of the *International Journal for Students as Partners* (*IJSaP*). Because geographical research draws on a broad range of quantitative and qualitative research methods and transferable skills, I was able to easily apply these to undertake pedagogic research and edit manuscripts. This is a side to my research portfolio I have continued as a staff member involved in my pedagogic partnerships with students (Cox et al., 2022; West et al., 2023).

Ruth

I have recently been involved in decolonising a module with a student partner. There is a range of disciplinary characteristics that lend themselves to partnership work in this area. First, the collective disciplinary shame around geography's problematic past means that geographers are often keen to work towards creating a more socially just approach to studying the subject (Carter & Hollinsworth, 2017; Haji Molana, 2022). Second, decolonising approaches involve engaging with different knowledges (Tuhiwai Smith, 2002). Going beyond discipline-based research is a strength of geographers, who are particularly adept at "borrowing and adapting ideas from outside their discipline" (Healey et al., 2000, p. 129). Third, decolonising the curriculum involves adopting "problem-posing" and co-created pedagogies recognising "that everyone influences the classroom dynamics, that everyone contributes" (hooks, 1994, p. 8).

Mick

My approach to SaP has been influenced by the ways of thinking and practicing I developed as a geographer. The broad nature of the discipline, combining STEM and SHAPE subjects, has meant I value ideas from a wide range of disciplines, and I'm not precious about where I get my ideas. The emphasis of the discipline on synthesising knowledge from a wide range of sources has underpinned what has become my signature pedagogy in SaP (and other teaching and learning areas), where I typically begin by building a bibliography, collecting numerous mini-case studies of practices, and pulling together different conceptual frameworks, which I use in writing literature reviews and guides to a range of SaP practices.

CHALLENGES WITH EXPLORING SAP IN DISCIPLINES

To build on the strengths of a discipline-based perspective, we need also to recognise its limitations. This came out in Weimer's (1993) analysis of discipline-based education journals, where she found that many exist in isolation and often do not show awareness of the generic literature on learning and teaching or the findings in other disciplines. Although the danger of "recreating wheels" has dissipated since she wrote her article, as more scholarly approaches to education have been promoted with the development of the scholarship of teaching and learning, there remains a need to support

both new and experienced scholars on how to search and review both the discipline-based and generic education literature (Healey & Healey, 2023a, 2023b) and undertake educational inquiries (Cleaver et al., 2018). One recent discipline-based review of SaP only included one reference to SaP outside their discipline (Liatis et al., 2020).

We have already noted that many of the SaP articles we read that are based in disciplines only mention this fact in passing. This is perhaps not surprising as authors may wish to address a wider audience if publishing in a general higher education journal and not want readers from other disciplines to think the article may not address their concerns and interests. Indeed, we generally advise authors presenting at a higher education conference, such as the Annual International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning conference, or writing for a generic higher education journal, such as *IJSaP*, to think twice before naming their discipline in the title of their paper, as this may put off participants or readers whose identity belongs to other disciplines (Healey et al., 2020, pp. 90–91).

One of the challenges of taking a discipline-based perspective on SaP practices and policies is that most research in higher education draws on social science theories and methodologies. This can be a foreign territory for students and staff from other disciplinary backgrounds (Huber & Morreale, 2002). One strategy for introducing discipline-based students and staff outside the social sciences to the scholarship of teaching and learning and SaP is to start from where they are and recognise and value their discipline's research methodologies and explore what these can contribute to their educational investigations. For example, emphasising SaP studies that use quasi-experimental pre- and post-testing may work in HPE and STEM disciplines (Stigmar, 2016), whereas highlighting the use of ethnographic and interpretive approaches to SaP may be better received in the humanities and arts. Social science methodologies can then be gradually introduced to help them answer questions that are not satisfactorily addressed by other methodologies (Healey & Jenkins, 2003).

Reasons for not including a discussion of the possible impact that the disciplinary context may have had on research findings may have deeper causes, particularly where the authors are examining learning and teaching, curriculum development, and disciplinary research partnerships, where, as we have suggested above, the nature of the discipline might be expected to have an influence. Most students learn to think and practice within their discipline through a process of slow acculturation, and the similarities and differences with other disciplines are not usually made explicit. Indeed, many of their teachers may only be aware tacitly of what constitutes their practice. Pace (2009) refers to this as the black box in which practitioners are not conscious of the ways of thinking and practicing in their field. Often the similarities and differences between disciplines are most clearly revealed when working across disciplines.

Focusing solely on disciplinary perspectives on SaP risks the danger of reifying disciplines. We need to be aware that there are many commonalities across disciplines when examining SaP, including partnership values and the need to consider issues around social justice (Acai, 2023).

CONCLUSIONS

We have found writing this editorial both challenging and rewarding as we have tried to clarify our views about the role of disciplines in SaP. We fully accept that the evidence base we cite is dependent on a limited number of examples, our own lived experiences, and conceptual literature on the nature of disciplines. Hence, our findings and arguments are

tentative. Moreover, we recognise that a discipline-based perspective is but one way of looking at SaP. Interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary, and transdisciplinary perspectives provide complementary viewpoints (e.g., Baumber et al., 2020).

We suggest that disciplines, alongside interdisciplines and multidisciplines, are an additional variable to add to the four inter-related areas that underpin the context-dependent nature of SaP work that two of us explored in an earlier editorial:

- The meaning of partnership;
- The emotions, motivations, attitudes, behaviour, and values of participants;
- The aim, scale, and timeframe of the project or initiative; and
- The conceptual framework adopted (Healey & Healey, 2018).

Together, these contextual variables emphasise that we need to be nuanced in discussing our research findings about the nature of student-staff partnerships. We need to be wary of over-generalising.

To move the debate on the role of disciplines in SaP forward, we need more reviews of the SaP literature in particular disciplines, but these need to be placed in the context of the general literature on SaP. Our challenge to readers who see themselves as based in disciplines is to address the following questions: how, when, and why does your disciplinary background influence your lived experiences of undertaking SaP, and, where the nature of your discipline is significant to the partnership, how can you make this explicit in your conversations and writing about SaP?

NOTES

1. Alison Cook-Sather found 27 articles about curriculum- and pedagogy-focused SaP work published in *IJSaP, Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education*, and other venues that were undertaken in the natural and physical sciences (Cook-Sather, et al., in press), while we identified over 25 articles about SaP in geography. Healey & Healey (2019) list 24 articles on student-staff partnerships published in the *International Journal for Academic Development*.

2. Social sciences, humanities, and the arts for people and the economy/environment (SHAPE) is a collective name for the social sciences, humanities, and the arts (https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/this-is-shape/).

3. We examined around 100 discipline-based SaP articles. These were found largely through searching the SaP bibliography maintained by one of us (Healey, 2023) and a list of SaP articles in sciences provided by Alison Cook-Sather. These sources were supplemented by Google Scholar searches.

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