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Dancing with power in 'We are the university: Students co-creating change'

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Dancing with power in 'We are the university: Students co-creating change'

Abstract

Much of the student-staff partnership literature calls for increased collaboration and power sharing among staff and students. Less common are accounts by student partners themselves that take up the challenge of what partnership and power feel like as universities embrace their neoliberal trajectory - and purport to do so on behalf of students themselves. Especially acute is the conundrum of how partnership initiatives can, and do, reproduce the very power dynamics they set out to transform. We are a group of students and staff working in curriculum partnership together at Western Sydney University. The context of our work together is the 21C project, a university-wide strategy to transform curriculum, teaching, and learning, drawing on 'partnership pedagogy'. In this paper, we engage in a process of reflexive inquiry to interrogate a new elective unit that many of us are involved in as advocates, co-creators, as students and staff learning together, and as evaluators, called *We are the university: Students co-creating change* (WATU). To highlight partnership's intricate power plays, we offer a fictionalised account to reflect our multi-voiced experiences of being involved in WATU. We have come to understand power's simultaneity in partnership as forms of power *over*, as *permission-giving*, as *sharing (or partnership)*, and as the power to *act (agency)*. The account is our story of partnership's inevitable contradictions - a collaboration that teaches us about the challenges of working together while being cautious of partnership's transformatory claims.

Practitioner Notes

1. How do student-staff partnership initiatives often reproduce the power dynamics they set out to transform?
2. How can student-staff partnership initiatives work with power in complex ways? How do we attend to power?
3. What stories are we trained to tell about our student-staff partnership initiatives? What theories can we draw on to disrupt stories of practice, and how do practices push our theoretical knowledge?
4. What are the success criteria of our student-staff partnership initiatives? Who sets them?
5. In what way does our WATU story led you to rethink a student-staff partnership practice you are involved in?

Keywords

Student-staff partnership, partnership pedagogy, power, curriculum, collaboration

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An opening: Telling stories about power

This paper both describes and theorises our participation in a 14-week elective unit called *We are the university: Students co-creating change* (hereafter WATU) as student and staff partners labouring together in a university-wide curriculum and teaching transformation project at Western Sydney University (WSU), Australia. Through the act of making and experiencing the unit, WATU has engaged us in a set of curiosities about the ways power circulates in student-staff partnership collaborations. In particular, the stories we tell about power's networks and intricacies. On the one hand, the emergence of WATU aligns precisely with how universities across the globe are seeking to increase, deepen, and expand forms of student engagement. There is a move from student voice and feedback, to seeing students as co-researchers, producers, participants, partners and changemakers (Little, 2011; Healy et al., 2014). On the other hand, our experiences of making, learning in, teaching, and caring for WATU showcases the realities and contradictions of how we have experienced the shift to partnership co-creation. In essence, our collaboration takes place at a time when ideas about the university's purpose are more contested than ever (Barnett, 2016; Barcan, 2013). And because of that, our partnership collaboration has not been at all straightforward.

In this paper, we offer a subtle, complex, layered and fictionalised tale about our experiences of WATU as an example of student-staff partnership. Working both 'with' and 'against' four ideas of power that have circled our collaboration – as power *over*, as *permission-giving*, as *sharing or partnership* and as *agency* – our aim in this paper is threefold. First, we set the scene by describing what WATU is as well as its connection to the 21C project. Second, guided by reflexive inquiry (Savin-Baden, 2004; Fox and Allen, 2014) and Clough's (2002) call to centre the expressive qualities of research, we offer a fictionalised account of our collective WATU experiences generated from a series of conversations we engaged in with each other. Finally, we draw on this fictionalised account to continue to raise pressing questions about the uneven and seductive ways power circulates through WATU. Our aim in this paper is not to offer a set of recommendations, rather, it is to contribute to a broader conceptualisation of power, curriculum, collaboration and co-creation.

Context: We are the university

WATU is a new third year elective unit (14-week module/ subject) open to any undergraduate student with elective space in their degree at WSU. Its development was funded by the University's own 21C Project – an institutional strategy intended to drive teaching and curriculum transformation (WSU, n.d). Informed by partnership pedagogy (Barrie and Pizzica, 2019), the 21C project puts partnership between students, staff, the University, and external partners at the heart of transformation. In that context, WATU offered an opportunity for students interested in governance to learn about and practise partnership, and most importantly, to receive credit for their contributions to institutional change-making. Like many universities, ours was keen to incentivise students to engage in institutional governance spaces. However, since this initial conceptualisation, WATU's focus has become more expansive to include student-staff partnership.

The co-creation of WATU was led by a collective of paid 21C Project Student Curriculum Partners (SCPs) – a rotating team of 6-10 students from a range of degrees: Medicine, Psychology, Education, Arts, Law and Business – and supported by an academic staff member in the then Learning Transformations team. From mid 2018-early 2020, this team (a selection of the authors) led the curriculum design and co-creation of WATU. We immersed ourselves in the scholarly and grey literature about universities, student-staff partnership, and institutional change-making. Together, we crafted the usual curriculum artefacts: aims, intended learning outcomes, themes, an

assessment strategy (with criteria and standards), a 14-week structure for the proposed three-hour workshops, and we began to fine tune weekly lesson plans. We also developed the typical learning guide and planned the online presence for future WATU students. We consulted extensively with other interested students, student representatives, and key staff in the University: from the Office of Student Engagement, Chair of Senate Education Committee, Chair of Academic Senate, Pro-Vice Chancellor Learning Transformations, to the broader Learning Transformations team. In all cases, these stakeholders made significant suggestions that changed or expanded what the initial design team started with. In some cases, they suggested we sharpen WATU's aim; asked critical questions about the number and weighting of assessment tasks and the relation between them; invited us to be clearer about how students would be able to use their knowledge and skills from WATU outside the University, and they recommended relevant resources and artefacts to flesh out the unit's themes. Alongside the consultation phase, a smaller number of SCPs in the team also researched our university's learning, teaching and assessment policy landscape to ensure compliance. They also completed the new unit approval documentation (engaging in the same process as any academic proposing a new unit); and joined the conversation when the two school-based academic committees were approached to host the WATU unit.

Influenced conceptually by the scholarly tradition of critical university studies (Williams, 2015; Steffen, 2017; Morrish and Sauntson, 2020), the idea 'teach the University' (Williams, 2007; Peseta and Bell, 2020) and the North American Ethnography of the University Initiative (EUI) (Hunter, 2012; Hunter and Ableman, 2013), WATU's intended curriculum shape is outlined below (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Extract from 102791 WATU Unit Learning Guide (Spring 2020)

Aim
 This project-based unit offers students a chance to learn, negotiate and practise change-making skills in, and for, our University, Western Sydney University. At the heart of this unit is student partnership, curriculum co-creation, and an invitation for students to be involved in improving the educational experience at Western. Working in groups and alongside a University mentor (coach), students will have an opportunity to contribute genuine solutions to an authentic education challenge that might be (a) commissioned by senior staff of the University; (b) intended to support students' aspirations to become a student leader; or (c) offers students a chance to undertake a project that advances their existing student leader or representative role. By choosing this elective unit, students not only receive credit for the partnership work they undertake, the University will have a new way of involving students in its decision-making processes. This is a unit intended to sharpen students' analytical skill sets and provide a taste of what it's like to operate as a change-maker inside a large and complex institution.

Themes

- Why study 'the university'?
- Governance, leadership and management: Why students should care
- Student voice in Australian universities: Shifts in the national landscape
- Student partnership: Pros, cons and everything between
- Change-making for student partnership in universities
- Reflection: Integration and action

Learning outcomes

- Articulate a view of the purpose of universities and students' role in them, drawing on the scholarly literature and multiple sources of data
- Carry out an inquiry project that addresses a substantial challenge intended to improve students' educational experience at Western
- Create an artefact that communicates the findings of the project to the broad university community
- Identify why and how a student partnership approach can contribute to successful change-making in universities
- Describe the applicability of a partnership approach to your life as a student, and to your likely future endeavours.

Assessment

- 15% - Peer Review (early feedback on another group's project ideas)
- 30% - Major Project Report (paper to the University's Senate Education Committee)
- 20% - Major Project Pitch (based on the Major Report Paper and open to the public)
- 35% - A reflective artefact (based on your engagement with the unit's learning outcomes)

One of the innovations of the unit is that the Major Project which constitutes WATU's assessment spine can be commissioned by the University's Senate Education Committee – that typical cross-disciplinary body responsible for the governance and quality assurance of teaching, learning, curriculum and education in most universities. The Committee is one of WATU's partners. A second innovation is that these Major Projects are supported by staff partners (both academic and professional) who volunteer their time as coaches and in exchange, are supported to draw on the experience as evidence in their applications to become Fellows of Advance Higher Education. The coaches support WATU students to scope their projects and to network and navigate systems, resources, scholarship, data, ideas and people both in, and out of, the University. As we write, WATU has run once – in the Spring of 2020 with four students (pivoted to an entirely online mode due to Covid-19) – and is due to run again in Spring 2021.

Our approach

Who are we?

Each of us (the authors on this paper) have been involved in WATU in the following ways. We are its custodians:

- A selection of six students participated in the initial curriculum co-creation of WATU. They co-created the unit aim, learning outcomes, themes, structure, assessment and contributed to the development of activities and resources. Two of the six were also involved in shepherding WATU through the University governance and approval.
- Three students were part of the inaugural WATU cohort in Spring 2020.
- We were all involved in the research process – either facilitating or transcribing conversations or offering perspectives about WATU.
- Tai is the academic staff member, and the WATU unit coordinator.

How did we work together to reflect on WATU?

As authors and co-researchers, we agreed to collaborate on this article and started by detailing our various experiences of WATU. We had twelve one-to-one conversations – essentially, comprising our dataset – which formed the basis of our fictionalised account below. Through these conversations, we talked formally and on the record with each other as an opportunity for reflection and surfacing our experiences and views about power. These conversations were organised according to a particular phase of WATU's development. Three co-researchers together took responsibility for a phase:

- Phase 1: The origin story (institutional context)
- Phase 2: The co-creation story (making WATU from scratch)
- Phase 3: The student learning experience (being a student in WATU)
- Phase 4: Next steps for WATU (using feedback).

Our conversations were influenced by the traditions of reflexive inquiry (Savin-Baden, 2004; Fox and Allen, 2014) and surrounding debates. This is a form of qualitative inquiry in which we, as co-researchers, aimed to:

- Analyse our views and experiences of WATU critically (as particular kinds of students and staff already engaged in partnership)
- Situate our experiences in relation to the broader object of inquiry (student-staff partnership through WATU)
- Bring ourselves critically to the key concepts (curriculum collaboration and power)
- Understand how our work is implicated in wider discourses and debates.

As a methodological commitment, reflexive inquiry has encouraged us to declare our positionality, acknowledge our personal and collective attachments to WATU (invested rather detached), and to recognise the not-so-straightforward relational dynamics of our conversations (Abbot and Cook-Sather, 2020). Additionally, we have come to see the impossibility of producing an 'objective account' because our goal was not just to centre our own experiences, but to critically interrogate those experiences too. This has been especially important at a time when the enterprise of research, knowledge production and dissemination is neither neutral nor innocent (Pillow, 2003). We were

keen to ask hard questions of ourselves and each other, our participation in WATU, and the institutional 21C project that sponsors our partnership work. We were not keen to generate a celebratory account of collaboration that effaced the important differences between us. We were just keen to generate an honest one.

The conversations between us took place online, were video recorded, with the longest at 75 minutes. A handful of us who neither facilitated nor were participants in the twelve conversations took on the responsibility of transcription to aid our collective analysis. We committed to working in more detail with the transcripts associated with a particular phase of conversation. For each transcript, we made notes individually about what seemed to provoke an emotional response or curiosity. Then, for each phase, we set ourselves the collective task of generating a response to one question: *What do we notice about how power works in our WATU partnership?* Our responses to that question were no doubt informed by previous discussions between us about more subtle and insidious forms of power. As a group, we had become interested in pushing our thinking beyond the conventional idea that the institution and teacher stands in for power (*e.g. that there is only power over students*). We had become attentive to more provocative views where power might also be about permission-giving, agenda setting or defining success criteria. In addition, our conversations were circling around more challenging questions of how students can begin to recognise the power they have, and how to act with it. We then shared our analyses of each phase among the wider group at a series of meetings. Collectively, we agreed on a set of themes that would best showcase not only experiences of power in WATU, but also our scholarly thinking about it. We landed on a set of related themes that ran the spectrum of all four phases: *the contradictory partnership promise of WATU; the idea of necessary hierarchy; translation; and finally, imposter syndrome.*

Articulating our themes

Our portrait of themes takes its cue from a rationale for narrative and fictional approaches to educational research evident in the writings of Clough (1999, 2002, 2004). The call to fiction is perhaps unusual but it is intentional. In Clough's (2004) work, fiction is not about 'make-believe' or 'making things up.' It is about signalling that like fiction, the research enterprise relies on choices researchers make that frame and communicate their objects of inquiry. In research, judgments and choices are made about how to assemble an inquiry: for example, what to read, what to ask, what to include and exclude, to trace or pursue, to connect, and to write. The juxtaposition of fiction and research reminds us that we too are making choices that readers are not always able to access from our published accounts. By referring to this process as 'fiction', Clough points to the way research is 'made' through the curatorial judgments of researchers.

In his stirring accounts of *Rob* (Clough, 1999) – a teacher in trouble, and *Lolly* (Clough, 2002) – a boy in difficulty, Clough (2002) also asks how our attachments to the methodological and discursive arrangements of research in education (e.g., to methods, objectivity, validity, among others) invites our projects to:

proceed along safe, well-sedimented channels that take their objects and the instruments which investigate them for granted; [where] there may be curiosity but seldom if ever any radical astonishment, or concern really to problematize phenomena in terms of their moral and political colour. (p. 372)

For Clough (and us), one of the disheartening effects of this focus is that the language of research – its affective, moral, and aesthetic desires – are elided by the dominance of its reporting function. Quoting Apple, Clough (2004) writes

[t]he researcher's struggle, then, is not primarily with method; it is a struggle for language that will 'reawaken ethical and aesthetic sensitivities that, increasingly have been purged from the scientific discourses of too many educators.' (p. 375)

It is common in a good deal of phenomenologically inspired education research for the analysis to take place at the level of individual experience. A set of themes is then discerned from across a collection of individuals' experiences, which are then mined for commonalities and differences, and finally situated within a larger scholarly literature to suggest 'contribution.' Here, we take a less direct route. Buoyed by Clough's (2004) reminder of our responsibilities to employ language and aesthetics' expressive capacities, we explore our themes through the creation of a fictionalised account; one that offers a layered insight into the power dynamics of WATU.

WATU: A fictionalised account

It's after lunch in a flat-floor 60-seater university classroom. The afternoon sun floods in from the floor to ceiling windows, casting odd-shaped shadows across the room. Groups of desks order our progress. Workstations marked with oversized A2 signs – Week 1 to Week 14 – are scattered with coloured post-it notes, dog-eared articles, butcher's paper, and whiteboard markers. Seven of us – Chris, Edie, Anja, Jordie, Mish, Rach, Tess and Shalini are scattered in the centre: rested but anticipating the afternoon slump. We're about to engage in our usual debrief – a collective stock-take to see where we've got to and the work ahead. Someone promises chocolate at 3pm. We've been revisiting an elective unit 'We are the university: Students co-creating change' we have made together, following its first iteration. In the room are some of the students who had a hand in co-creating WATU; a couple of students who took the unit, and a staff member who shepherded it. The chat is casual – we know each other reasonably well and can be frank.

'It's obvious, isn't it? If students are consuming the unit, then they should be involved in the creation process because it'll be more engaging, more meaningful, and more successful.'

Anja's been at the coalface of the student partnership game. She's practised at making these arguments now although she winces at her poor but probably accurate word choice: *consuming*. Someone'll have an objection.

'But... let's be honest. WATU couldn't have happened without working with staff. It just wouldn't have been created. If we were told 'here go and create a unit', I wouldn't have had any clue on how to start, where to start, where to go and how to get it approved or anything. I've realised this from doing my Masters; we really needed that staff expertise to play a part in the pedagogical theory behind WATU – outcomes, assessment design. And I learned it again when me and Mish were in those School discussions about getting the unit approved. That was tough but we had to learn what WATU looked like from staff too. Mish... do you remember that academic who had a go at us at that event? He said something like... the unit represented everything that was wrong with universities today...'

Hearing Anja mention her name, Mish counts how long – four years – since she's been a student partner... how naive she was at the beginning, and how much she's learned about herself.

'Yeah, I remember that academic Anja, but I can't remember the detail, only that they were feisty and a lot of us were upset. I'd just done that first pitch for WATU to a room full of 100 uni people I didn't know, and I felt like a fraud because of the pressure to talk on behalf of other students. It's only recently I realised I had to stop myself from doing that. It's an impossible task. Just look at us. We're all so diverse already! At the end of the day, you don't have to be an expert – reading the literature definitely helps but it made me realise how important my own experience is and that I have to own it. Anyhow, I'm getting off track – back to WATU.'

Eddie's nodding now too. She's been doing the work for 13 months – a short time by comparison – and despite that, has always envied the growth mindset she spies in Mish and Anja.

'It's interesting looking back. When I came on board WATU was fairly-well progressed. For the first couple of months, I thought 'how the heck did I get this job and deserve to be talking about these things?' I offered up ideas but was also totally happy for them to be rejected because the more experienced student partners' opinions were way more informed than mine. And I was totally cool with that.'

'Eddie and Mish raise really good points. What really are our qualifications to be co-creating?'

Chris's question hangs in the air. Along with Anja and Mish, she is one of the three remaining original student partners, and one of the few whose experience with partnership has expanded to university-wide governance – for a while at least.

'Everyone's like 'yes your idea is valid' because as a student, that's the experience you're bringing. But then there are moments when you're in that teaching or co-creation space and you're questioning whether you should be there. You wonder how your student experience actually helps you to make judgements. As a student you're questioning that, and as a student partner you're especially questioning that. It took me a while to work through this but here's where I've got to. Can I test out my theory about student experience and expertise?'

The others look around at each other, nodding eagerly. Chris settles in.

'Ok... so, as a student partner your experience isn't just your expertise as a student; it's also what you bring to the partnership and the fact you're working with staff. So, within that dynamic, as a student you're always growing and changing and evolving because what you bring doesn't stay the same. So, your expertise – I don't really like the word expertise – changes as it goes on. That's pretty much it. What do you reckon? Sound convincing? Does it capture what we did to co-create WATU?'

The cogs in Eddie's brain are ticking over.

'Yeah, I can see that, Chris. It makes sense to me.'

'I don't mind that either Chris.' Tess, the only staff member, weighs in. *'I'd describe it as expanding your idea of what it means to be a student. It's the move from being a student whose focus is their degree, to one who's curious about what goes on in the University, to a student who wants to make change at the University through partnership or leadership.'*

Each of those steps are points of expansion that need meaning-making with staff. It's hard to make those transitions on your own without translation or partnership. For each level of expansion, your identity as a student grows because your horizon gets bigger. You don't ever stop being a student, you're just a different kind of student... aren't you? Maybe you lose whatever beautiful naivete you have...'

'Hmmm maybe Tess. While I don't disagree with you, can we add in the perspective of the students who actually did WATU?'

Rach's one of the inaugural WATU cohort. Jordie and Shalini are too. Until now, all three have been uncharacteristically quiet.

'Yeah of course, let's shift focus. Makes total sense.'

Tess knows some things might be hard to hear. She nibbles into a square of chocolate and orients herself towards Rach, who begins to pipe up.

'A lot of you know that with my student rep role, I've known about WATU for a long time. I watched it go through the approval process for about two years, from the committee and then back to Tess, and back to approval with all these requests for small changes. And we all know from our other units that what happens on paper isn't necessarily what happens.'

Knowing Rach's a strong personality, Jordie's keen to say her piece before Rach goes too much further. Rach won't care – they're friends and she should have a chance to say her piece.

'For me, WATU appealed to my inner activist. I just wanted to have a go. It was empowering and liberating as well – free from the constraints of what you usually do in a unit. We had the freedom to investigate something. We had access to a lot of data that only the University would have access to. To be brought on board and trusted to examine the data and say 'well this is what I found' – that's really when I started to feel partnership. I did have other WATU challenges though...'

Shalini witnessed the troubles Jordie went through: 'The group?'

Jordie responds: 'Yep, the group but I don't want to go into it.' There's an implicit understanding when 'group work' gets mentioned. She turns to Shalini. 'It can't have been easy for you coming into WATU from a Science background?'

'Yeah, I came in like a blank canvas waiting to be painted on.' Laughing at the memory, Shalini continues. 'It was similar and different to the other units I'd done but WATU was an actual learning experience for me. I had no clue about partnership and so as we worked through the unit, Tess would ask for my opinion and we'd make combined decisions. Rach described it to me once as 'a little bit icky' because we're so used to the hierarchy of the unit coordinator. It was empowering but also strange and overwhelming. And also, before WATU, my understanding of the University was pretty shallow. When I thought about it - if I did at all – the University was a bunch of anonymous people sending me systems-generated emails about my feedback or marks. Sometimes, when I went, it was fun. But it's gone from that shallow understanding to a place where I see so many little doorways of limitless potential to work together. I really came out so idealistic!'

'And what about now? Still idealistic?', Mish asks.

Rach interrupts before Shalini can respond to Mish:

'Not me. And this is where I'm probably different. I had a lot of expectations just from the unit's name 'students co-creating change.' In student governance, we always hit a wall whenever we try to change something, lots of push back, very frustrating, so I was a bit jaded. But I wanted to give WATU a go – I wanted to see what was different about it.'

Anja and Mish's ears prick up because very early on in WATU's conception, the senior sponsor had initially wanted it to be a training ground for student reps and leaders who could bring their rep work to the unit, craft an assessment task around it, and get credit. It was meant to be for student reps like Rach.

'Rach, what about the partnership with Senate Education and the coaches? Yeah, how was that?'

Anja's more than curious.

'With the coaches, mixed. I didn't feel ours understood the vision my group was going for. I felt like we were trying to break boxes and they were trying to put us in a box. I've already talked to Tess about how to make the coaches bit work better. One thing, students could choose their coaches. With Senate Education, it was also mixed. To me, it doesn't feel like true partnership when you get 'invited' into their space, and you have to do particular things by this particular date that is on a university timeline. I know that's probably what will happen in the real world but in the end, we're still students. It was a lot. And this was only one unit.'

Tess always feels grateful to learn with and from these WATU students' experiences – they're open and productive and are keen to make it better – but she also remembers the pressure she felt to get WATU approved and ready with coaches and Senate Education. She felt as many of her teaching colleagues do; there's never enough time to prepare, to read, make resources, or iron out kinks. And then there's online. And she is constantly reminded: there were *only* four students. Sometimes she feels like she failed.

'I'll just say one more thing and then I'll shut up. Promise.' Rach hurries as if her time's running out. 'We REALLY need Senate Education to show students how they plan to take our projects forward. That was a big issue for me. They commissioned these projects – projects they said they wanted – and then didn't really communicate with us after the pitch. Sixty people came to that pitch and some staff were keen to get us involved in their curriculum projects but then we never heard anything. It was very frustrating. Senate Education also needs to give us more context with scope. That was one of the hardest parts. Did they want a big ambitious project that was bold, or did they want us to solve an issue that's already been defined by them, is action-able, and allows them to say they consulted with students? Is that even partnership?'

Tess has already locked that in for a later conversation with the Committee Chair. Rach isn't the only one to put this on her plate for attention. She knows that the long timelines of university projects are a challenge for the semesterisation of WATU. And, that it takes a long time for students to understand and get familiar with how universities operate, the systems and languages they use, and

the hierarchical cultures they encounter. It was always a tough ask of the students who co-created WATU, and it's a tougher ask still for WATU students. Most students who take the unit are unlikely to be schooled in the art of governance the way Rach is.

'Ok, lots for us to do. We don't have to do it all at once.' Tess projects her best 'it's time to rally' voice. *'Let's put our minds to the question of what we do next. Can be big or small. You choose. Then we can prioritise together.'* She's keen for the students to see that there is still a mountain of work to do together. *There's always work to do.*

'This might sound lame, but I still really want to work on the Learning Guide.' Edie's picking up on her mission to make it more student friendly. *'We still want to make sure that students think the Guide's helpful for them and they want to read it. I think it's probably alright, but I just want to have another look.'*

'There's also that section in it about what's changed from last time. We need to write something for that. When we put that Learning Guide together, it gave me a whole new appreciation for what goes into it.' Chris is onto it.

'What do you think Tess? What are you thinking?' Shalini's always reaching out.

'You always give me a lot to think about. Maybe something we – I – need to be clearer about is WATU's focus. What's the promise WATU's making to students? Is it partnership and co-creation with the University? Is it that the project makes an impact? Is it learning about the scholarly tradition of the University? Or some combo of all three? We might not have the balance right yet. And the diversity of our partners means we have to think about their interests because they help us tell the story of WATU too. I hate to say it, but I'm starting to realise that your views and mine, are not always the only ones that matter.'

Tess realises she's starting to sound less like an academic and more like a university marketing manager. She doesn't like it; it's not a natural fit.

'There's also some thinking about the criteria for judging the success of WATU as well. We've been having this conversation for ages and it's still a hard one. And your criteria would be different from each other, and different from mine too probably. We definitely need more students. It's not financially convincing for WATU to run in the current climate. If I was to give you my list, I'd say the following...'

She can recite these by heart now. It's because she's been asked the question before by her bosses and she's heard their views.

'... that WATU even exists – is one; that it was co-created with students is the second; that students' enrol and complete it – that's the third; that the students who did it had a good experience - the fourth and most obvious; that they passed is number five; six, that students' projects contributed something meaningful to the University; and last, that students remain as the custodians of WATU. It's probably more criteria than any other unit. How many do you think we're on our way to meeting?'

As if by osmosis, both Edie and Anja reach for the same whiteboard marker to scribble up Tess's list. The chat about WATU's success criteria goes on well into the afternoon. Criterion are moved around on the whiteboard, reprioritised, wiped off, and then returned to – with an asterix, context

and sometimes, a caveat. Arrows to other criteria are added. Laughter ensues until there's no evidence of chocolate and time beats us. It's a decent insight into what collaboration and partnership looks like for us.

On partnership and power

In prompting us to question how fictionalised stories raise absorbing moral, ethical and political questions, Clough (2002) compels us to attend to the particularity of our own story. In our account, we have attempted to lay bare something of the contradictory nature of curriculum partnership as we encounter its promises, paradoxes, and realities. Like others, we are in the habit of asking hard questions of each other, our dynamic, about how we work together, of the project that sponsors our work, as well as the claims made by the global community of students and staff engaged in co-creation:

- Where does power come from and what does it do to, and for, our work?
- Who gets to exercise power and for what ends?
- What do we do with the power we have? How do we use it to intervene and to ‘think otherwise’?
- Who gets to initiate partnership, define the partnership problem, and drive the agenda?
- Who has access to information, data, systems, expertise, and conceptual resources, with the time and capacity to make sound judgments?
- Who gets to determine and report the success criteria of partnership initiatives and by what measures?
- In what ways are students expected to perform ‘institutional gratitude’ for partnership opportunities?
- Who can publicly narrate our work?

Indeed, there are always more, and pressing, questions. One thing we do know from our experience of working together – and not just on WATU – is that it is very difficult to engage in partnership without an ongoing and honest conversation (as well as recognising conversation’s limits) as a foundation for collaboration. This is because we continue to work with different notions of partnership. At times, our views align with our University’s, and at others, they are internally inconsistent. We each have different levels of energy for and commitment to partnership. And our actual experiences of learning and working in the University often clash with the ambitions of our partnership work. This is not entirely unusual. After all, student-staff partnership initiatives buttress a range of contradictory agendas (Dollinger and Mercer-Mapstone, 2019). Some scholars claim that partnership enables more democratic forms of higher education practice (Deeley and Bovill, 2017); that its relational aspect improves belonging and identity (Cook-Sather and Felten, 2017); that it is good for equity, inclusivity, social and epistemic justice, and decolonisation (O’Shea, 2018; Mercer-Mapstone and Bovill, 2020; Raza Memon and Jivraj, 2020; Fraser and Usman, 2021); employability (Oberhollenzer and Brady, 2017), and market-based value co-creation (Dollinger and Lodge, 2020). The sheer range and scale of possible agendas might well suggest that student-staff partnership initiatives contain a slippery kind of ‘insert anything here’ logic that subjects it too easily to political capture.

Our WATU experience is also echoed in much of the existing curriculum co-creation literature. For instance, there has long been a recognition that curriculum partnership work takes place in institutions steeped in uneven and unjust structural privilege. As Higgins et al. (2019) note, it is the kind of privilege which “implies that students, as non-experts, lack the knowledge and authority to

contribute meaningfully” (p. 1155). In our curriculum partnership, the question of co-creation for students and staff is more complicated than a matter of staff relinquishing power, making space for students or the claim to expertise. While these are undoubtedly key dimensions of the partnership story, in WATU’s co-creation, students themselves encounter the limits of their experience, expertise and know-how. Because their gaze shifts from their degree to that of being engaged in institutional change-making, the questions about what precisely their expertise is, how it grows and is meaningfully deployed, are writ large. We have learned that the substance of expertise – more generally – is never settled. In the academy, expertise is constantly subject to peer review and challenge as part of the enterprise of knowledge production. And as we began to engage together with the ugly realities of the curriculum-making and assurance process – including the rise of business cases – the ideas about co-creation encounter the politics of resourcing and financing the modern neoliberal university.

Through our WATU work together, we have also become attuned to how power manifests when co-creation initiatives are subject to the specificities of institutional project rhythms: expectations around timelines, outputs, impact, and success. The relational aspect of partnership – its commitment to care, learning and development – can very easily be trumped by the efficiency required to get things done. In our account, a WATU student confronts this where staff promise interest, and then likely, for understandable reasons, do not deliver in the ways students anticipate. In addition, the WATU staff member carries the weight of portraying the unit’s partnership success, and then effectively transfers that into the partnership ethos with students. Subjectivities become enmeshed in discourses of impact. Power moves seductively, in part, by insinuating itself on our desires to see ourselves, and our work, as successful.

Like many of the broader questions in the scholarly literature about the extent to which students can assert their autonomy and set a partnership direction they can themselves pursue, what is clear from our WATU experience is that the University sets the tone and the terms of engagement. Make no mistake, there is negotiation, however, students are invited into partnership in ways that the institution deems permissible. While the students who have led the making of WATU are undoubtedly learning about themselves, the institutional conditions for partnership, the University, and new ways of being in and inhabiting it, they puzzle at how their everyday student experiences in classrooms and online, remain relatively untouched by the aspirations we are working towards in our partnership endeavours. In some cases, the slow speed of change leads students to disappointment, inaction and increasingly, silence.

A closing and re-opening

As custodians and stewards of WATU, we are learning to be realistic and cautious about the transformatory claims of student-staff partnership. Yet there are distinctive aspects of our work in WATU that we are proud of: one, is the *extent* of initial co-creation with student partners (a completely new unit); two is the *substantive knowledge focus* of the curriculum itself (partnership, co-creation and changemaking in the University); three is the commitment to *ongoing in-class negotiation* with students learning in the unit (flexibility to support student-led inquiry), and last, is the utilisation of the broader *community of students and partners who participate authentically in the cycle of care* for WATU. For us, WATU still provides an opportunity for staff and students to engage in communal curriculum inquiry.

Alongside that story, we are also learning to notice how power circulates in our partnership efforts together; not as an occasion to undermine our work but to manage our ambitions for it and our

claims about it. WATU is one of many initiatives we work together on where student-staff partnership is incremental, compromise-filled, restricted, and contingent. We hope that what we have presented here offers the broader partnership community a glimpse into a story that is complex, contradictory, and still filled with hope and possibility.

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