The Deakin 'Students Helping Students' and 'Students as Partners' collection: A contemporary take on the classic cut. A Practice Report*

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Abstract

Fashion metaphors are used to explore the relationship between Deakin's 'Students Helping Students' strategy and its emerging 'Students as Partners' initiative. As the curtain is raised, the current 'tertiary trend' of Students as Partners is seen through a global lens. The Deakin Students Helping Students and Students as Partners collection is then paraded across the runway, at once unveiling savvy design and high-quality workmanship. A key feature of both Deakin's Students Helping Students and Students as Partners models is that they are expressions of a community of practice approach and of social learning theory, with some variations in texture and palette. This 'Absolutely Fabulous' show concludes that while both looks are based on a timeless, 'classic cut' approach to education that engages both students and staff, each trend adds colour, interest and appeal. Fashions in education are sometimes fleeting, sometimes fun, and they are sure to invigorate, refresh and challenge.

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Introduction

Over the last few seasons, *Students as Partners* has emerged on the global learning stage, creating statements that are both bold and beautiful. Discover the rich colours and unique details that will inspire your learning community this season! Engage with Students as Partners and revel in the delicate, soft hues and fabulously intricate patterns. It's all in the detail.

Students as Partners (SaP) is the latest tertiary trend, the look of the moment. We explore what is behind this current trend as we examine Deakin's emerging SaP initiative, Deakin's *Students Helping Students* (SHS) strategy and the 'classic cut' of what good education is all about. We do this because we are intrigued by the reference to SaP as a new way of looking at student-staff relationships, and one which breaks down hierarchies and power structures to create a better learning environment for students. In fact, SaP is often presented as a brand new 'style' in the way we think about education. Is it? Isn't it what learning is all about and has always been all about? If SaP is a major new style of education, what were educators doing before SaP? What are they already doing in SHS at Deakin? We highlight that like a good classic educational cut, both SaP and SHS are underpinned by a community of practice approach and social learning theories, making them of the highest calibre, in both fabric and design.

The current global tertiary trend

'Students as Partners', 'Student-Staff Partnerships', 'Student-Faculty Partnerships'— these are just some of the current labels that are guaranteed to make *your* university stand out! In their thorough exploration of SaP, Cook-Sather, Matthews, Ntem and Leathwick (2018) have worked though many of the complexities involved in "the work of partnership across power differences and fluid identities of people

in higher education" (p.6). In fact, the complexity of SaP is discussed across the literature, with research such as Taylor's (2018), which attempts to organise the ethics involved, and O'Shea (2018), presenting how student-staff partnerships can help to address equity issues. Despite the complexities, there are many institutions that have specific, clearly defined SaP programs, such as McMaster University's Student Partners Program at the MacPherson Institute which has been operating since 2013 (McMaster University, 2019). This formal program allows students and staff to work as partners on teaching and learning projects and provides a guidebook which covers processes and procedures for staff and students involved in this program. The University of Queensland's Institute for Teaching and Learning Innovation supports the Student-Staff Partnerships Program, providing a handbook that includes a definition of Student-Staff Partnerships and detailing the types of projects available, benefits, requirements and tips (University of Queensland, 2019).

Healey, Flint, and Harrington (2014) describe SaP as "a relationship in which all involved—students, academics, professional services staff, senior managers, students' unions, and so on—are actively engaged in and stand to gain from the process of learning and working together" (p. 12). Acknowledging that SaP is inherently process-orientated rather than outcomes-driven, Matthews (2016) makes a distinction between student engagement (what students do) and SaP, which is "engaging with rather than doing to or doing for students" (p. 2). SaP is enacted within "an ethic of reciprocity" (Cook-Sather & Felten, 2017, p. 5) that is underpinned by partnership principles of respect, reciprocity, and shared responsibility in learning and teaching (Bovill, Felten & Cook-Sather, 2014).

The complexity of SaP has led to different ways of naming and thinking about exactly what it is. Cook-Sather et al. (2018) look critically at different terms used for these types of relationships, including 'Students as Partners', 'Student Voice', 'Student-Staff Partnerships' and 'Student-Faculty Partnerships'. They point out that the various reactions triggered by what we call our different initiatives helps us to be more aware of what it is we are doing and identify and analyse any assumptions our work is based on. While SaP is a complex fashion that has various styles and brands, a key feature that runs through the research and takes centre stage for us is the notion of SaP as a process rather than a specific method by which to achieve pre-known outcomes. In other words, it is a *relational* process (Taylor 2018). This puts SaP on the same runway as the classic cut community of practice approach (e.g., see Wenger 1998) and social learning theories (e.g., see Gee 2000), where both beauty and stylish fit can be enhanced by the various landscapes in which partners interact.

Deakin's *Students Helping Students* strategy

In 2014, Deakin's SHS strategy was unveiled on the runway, bringing together the collection of student mentoring programs from across the University. These programs had been developed and operated individually, and while there was certainly collaboration, it was purely informal. Without a unified and coherent overarching strategy, there was no explicit understanding of what student mentoring at Deakin was, making it difficult to communicate about it across the institution and externally. On a practical level there was no formal vehicle for staff or for student mentors to share expertise, information or resources. The individual operation of the various student mentor opportunities meant that it had been difficult for students and staff to find information about the different programs.

Deakin's SHS strategy has been extremely successful, in large part because of the community of practice approach that underpins it. This has created a living, breathing student mentoring culture at Deakin which reflects what mentoring is all about: working together, learning and sharing expertise, creating, building and growing together. Deakin's community of practice approach has created a community of members who are fully involved and engaged in developing and sustaining Deakin's SHS strategy, ensuring that it reflects reality and is relevant to everyone involved. It is a place where members share strengths, reveal weaknesses and learn from others. This is why SHS at Deakin has become a stylish yet enduring classic cut.

SHS at Deakin includes a community of practice for coordinators, who regularly work together to refine and shape student mentor practice at Deakin. In 2017 the success of this staff community of practice, coupled with inspiration from the UK's REACT initiative's (Realising Engagement through Active Culture Transformation) investigation of student engagement (2016), led to the creation of a community of practice for student mentors to support the student voice by providing a structure for Deakin student mentors to work alongside Deakin's professional peer coordinators to exchange knowledge and ideas. Those involved in the community have benefitted from the dynamic, ever-changing roles that both the student mentors and the staff coordinators experience when working as partners—one moment supporting the others' learning, then being learners themselves. It is not students as staff, but students as students who are partners with staff—and that is where the value lies. This has created a number of both student-student and student-staff partnerships in which student mentors:

- train SHS coordinators in Deakin's SHS Development Program;

- work on Deakin's mentoring Reward and Recognition project;

- contribute to the Peer Programs Network (STARS Conference Network Group) online newsletter, *Community Notes;*

- revise Deakin's peer mentoring Good Practice Principles;

- advise Health and Wellbeing staff on a possible peer health ambassador program, and;

- co-present with staff at Association of Academic Language and Learning (AALL) and Australia and New Zealand Student Services Association (ANZSSA) conferences.

Deakin's Students as Partners initiative

SaP at Deakin is in its early stages of design, so what is paraded down the runway here is likely to change. In fact, it will keep changing, as SaP is not a static formula that can be applied or imposed; it is a living, breathing culture that is beginning to take shape at Deakin and will continue to unfold. Its current look blends the recent research on SaP with all of Deakin's work on initiatives that embrace empowerment, active community learning, autonomy and respect, including Deakin's SHS strategy. This has created a many-textured design that is graceful, fluid and fluent.

Deakin has certainly embraced Bovill, Felten and Cook-Sather's (2014) SaP principles of respect, responsibility and reciprocity and the UK's Higher Education Academy (2016) values of authenticity, inclusivity, reciprocity, empowerment, trust, courage, plurality and responsibility and emphasises the importance of modelling these principles and values in everything we do. In other words, SaP at Deakin aims to create a *culture* where these principles and values become the way we think, work,

relate, teach and learn, whether involved in specific SaP projects or not. It is much more than just a fashion statement!

Specific SaP opportunities for students will include student representation that impacts the governance and strategic direction of Deakin; student feedback such as participation in focus groups, interviews and piloting; student-staff academic projects, including co-designing, revising assessments and students as pedagogical consultants; and student-staff non-academic projects, including the SHS Mentor Community of Practice mentioned previously and Deakin's annual SHS Awards event.

As Deakin's SaP initiative emerges, we have been looking beneath its surface to define it for our context and clarify its purpose and values for the institution. One way we have done this is by comparing it with our SHS strategy and relating it to sound educational models and practices. A major question for us is whether SaP is really a fashion revolution that is different from anything that has been done before, or if it is simply a new label for an enduring classic.

The complete collection: Deakin's SHS and SaP align with the classic cut

Given that a community of practice approach (and communities of practice), social learning theories and student-student and student-staff partnerships define SHS at Deakin, it is easy to see why our eyebrows raised upon hearing about the SaP 'bold new design' in tertiary education. The SaP initiative at Deakin therefore prompted us to look closely at what SHS is and what it is not. Is it SaP? Is it different? If so, how? It certainly involves a variety of partnerships. Student-staff partnerships in SHS include staff coordinators and mentors working together, and the staff and student communities of practice often liaise. SaP at Deakin will involve projects, curriculum development and advisory bodies. Student-student partnerships

in SHS include the mentor-mentee and mentor-mentor relationships, and in SaP it will include projects and mentoring programs. Finally, staff-staff partnerships in SHS involve staff working together within their area and across, as in academic-professional liaisons. In SaP there will be student-institution partnerships including student representation on the academic board.

SHS and SaP at Deakin are also based on key values incorporating the research of practitioners in this field. For example, SHS focuses on learning (social, practical and academic) and values student centredness, inquiry, experiential learning and social learning sheory. SaP focuses on engagement and experience and values reciprocity, respect, shared responsibility. Key theorists, researchers and practitioners influencing SHS at Deakin include Etienne and Beverly Wenger-Trayner, Jennifer Keup, James Gee and Vincent Tinto, while some of the major theorists behind SaP at Deakin are Catherine Bovill, Mick Healey and Kelly Matthews. Most importantly, both SHS and SaP value students because they are students.

By looking closely—and deeply—at what SHS is and what SaP may be reveals important similarities and differences, helping us to understand what each is and is not, for example:

1. Both are manifestations of social learning theory so should be underpinned by a community of practice approach. Note that:

   - A community of practice *approach* is social learning theory

   - A community of practice *approach* is not a community of practice

   - A community of practice *approach* is a way of doing things

   - A community of practice is a formalised group of people within a shared domain

who regularly share ideas and learn from each other.

2. Important similarities between Deakin's SHS and Deakin's SaP are that both:

   - are not just about projects; they are about changing the learning culture at Deakin

   - recognise that the value of a student is *being a student*

   - value the learning for both staff and students that comes from developing relationships.

3. Differences include:

   - SaP is not about mentoring

   - SHS is more about *individual advancement* while SaP is possibly about *institutional and societal change*

   - SaP at Deakin emphasises an equity-first approach, which aims to purposefully include hard to reach students to ensure that SaP projects benefit from the involvement of the full range of Deakin students.

The comparison of these two styles suggests that they are both based on the same classic cut of what good education has always been about: student centredness, co-production, engagement, active learning, active listening, questioning, exploration, discovery, teacher-as-learner, etc. (as opposed to hierarchical teaching structures, passive learning, memorisation, rote learning, etc.).

Conclusion

Regardless of any pretty labels, it is clear from the literature and our comparison of Deakin's SHS strategy and the SaP initiative that learning works best when both students and staff are engaged. However, SHS and SaP *are* different, and only through such deep examination did we

discover this, as we touched the different textures, watched how the fabrics flowed and admired the exquisite cut of each. Labels come and labels go, and fashion is a fabulous way to express what we are doing. So, experiment with these different styles, like any decent fashionista would! Feel their different textures and movement. Then choose what works best for *your* own special look. Or, *really* pamper yourself and try both—it is, after all, what is beneath these labels that is key: the enduring classic of good educational practice.

Take the runway, SHS, and show your vibrant stylishness! Revamp our enduring classic by adding your own must-haves. Think *confident*. Think *outrageous*. Think *stunning* and *unstoppable*. Good for you, SaP, your rich and textured palette sets a to-die-for, gorgeous tone for the season ahead.

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