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Reframing Success in A Pivoting Partnership – Student Mentors Trying to Engage: A Tale of Trial and Error

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Introduction

Partnership working has become part of the culture within the School of Law at the University of Reading, with successful partnership projects building upon each other, encouraging students to see themselves in the partnerships, and raising students' voices (Millmore, 2021).

This case study shares our experiences of a partnership which was less overtly successful than we hoped; whilst there were positives for the student partners, the aims of the partnership were not achieved, despite attempts to pivot and reinvent ourselves, leading to a need to review what is meant by "success" in partnership working.

What are the metrics for success in student-staff partnerships? Do we measure the concept of success purely in relation to a tangible outcome or in doing so are we missing the impact on student and staff partners' development? The authors propose that identifying success purely as an outcome misses the value of those incidental successes which are intrinsic to the process of partnership working, and their impact should bear equal value and not be disregarded.

Context

During the Covid-19 pandemic, our students had struggled with their sense of belonging, not feeling part of the School of Law community due to lockdowns, online teaching and restrictions on gathering socially. Student partner Anam explains, *"As a student who had her first year of university completely online, due to Covid, I felt like I would appreciate more support and like I was missing out on a lot of experiences."*

Our 2020/21 cohort, who commenced university in the midst of the pandemic and spent half the year learning wholly online due to national lockdowns, felt disengaged from their peers. Ad hoc conversations with students and formal feedback mechanisms from student representatives suggested that we needed to be doing more to foster this feeling of community, not just within a cohort, but between year groups as well (Gelles & Walker, 2022).

We were creating a new elective, Level 4 undergraduate law module called "Law and Society", and we wanted to work with students to develop the module. We were also

conscious that we needed to improve support for our new first-year students, to ease their transition into university and their studies by enhancing their sense of belonging, and noted the significant impact that the pandemic had had on their pre-university educational experiences (Pownall, Harris & Blundell-Birtill, 2021). We came up with the idea of supporting the new students by building bridges with the cohort in the year above.

The focus of this case study is on the peer mentoring experience we devised, to show the value intrinsic to the process of partnership working, even when a partnership appears less obviously successful and is beset by obstacles.

The Student-Staff Partnership

Having successfully applied for, and been granted, internal funding for a student-staff partnership project, paid student partners heading into their second year were sought to work with the staff on this new module as active partners and change agents (Bovill, 2017). Five student partners have co-authored this paper, the others having stepped back from the partnership at earlier stages due to other commitments. This was an elective partnership, with students choosing to put themselves forwards. They were recruited via a cohort-wide email and online sign-up asking them to briefly outline why they should be selected; our criteria for recruitment focused upon enthusiasm and willingness to support new students. Paying student partners whenever possible is important as a matter of equity and to ensure a diverse student partnership whose time and efforts are valued (Millmore, 2021), and our student partners were paid for their time.

Our project had two strands: curriculum design and development, and peer mentoring. In the first strand, student partners focused upon module design and development (Healey et al, 2014). Anam summarised the partners' role: *"We had the chance to help the professors design parts of the module and to make the module more student friendly."* For example, student partner recommendations dictated how the module was set up on the Virtual Learning Environment and provided "clickable" reading lists to help the first years.

Discussions amongst the partnership highlighted that these student partners felt disconnected from their peers and the year groups above them within the Law School. When their studies moved wholly online in Spring 2021, it had left them isolated, not knowing anyone beyond those who they met briefly in online classrooms. Student partners felt strongly that we needed to embed support for our new students and that they could bridge that gap.

Student partner Bethany explains, *"When discussing what we thought would be useful for the module, we placed an emphasis on interaction between year groups. To embody this, we hoped to set up a mentoring system and sessions dedicated to meeting us as their mentors."*

We were most excited about this second strand to our partnership; it involved the student partners working throughout the 2021/22 academic year as paid peer mentors for the new first-year students. The focus of this case study is on this second strand (the co-design of the module will be written up later) as something of an antidote to the typical literature of partnership working, where everything goes to plan and where outputs are waved as flags of success.

The Peer Mentor Scheme

Our peer mentoring scheme was a simple one: we had nine second year student partners and seven seminar groups for the Law & Society module (125 students). We decided to attach a partner (or pair of partners) to each seminar group, with the intention of them building a relationship with both the academic who was leading the seminar and the group of first years, in order to provide a friendly face and offer peer support. Six of the seminars were to be taught in person on campus and one partner (Anam) was studying at a distance internationally due to Covid restrictions, so volunteered to support the seventh, online-only, seminar group.

The rationale behind this approach was that by embedding mentors within specific seminar classes, the new students would have a mentor who “belonged” to them, with no confusion about who to talk to, or approach with questions or concerns. The academics teaching on the module were all members of the partnership and had developed good working relationships with the student partners, so there was an added bond between each staff partner and their linked mentor(s). This ensured that the student partners were well-supported in their new role; crucially student mentors were not expected to deal with any issues in isolation and could easily call upon the assistance and support of their staff partner.

Stage 1 – Introducing the Mentors

We engineered several ways to build relationships between the mentors and first year students. Our initial approach was to create a dedicated “Mentor” section on the Virtual Learning Environment. In that section, we set up introductions to each of the mentors, with smiling photos and a brief biography where they introduced themselves to their mentees and shared their university email address as a contact method. We hosted a highly visible online Q&A Padlet where students could asynchronously and anonymously ask the mentors questions.

We designed the module framework with the mentors firmly embedded, so that there were specific timetabled sessions where mentors would be able to attend the seminars to meet their first-year mentees. We also offered weekly online drop-in sessions with an academic to support pre-recorded lecture material and identified weeks that would have mentors attending and involved.

Additionally, academics shared information about the mentor programme with the first-year students in their first seminar, so that it was clear how the mentoring would work. Students were told that peer mentors would be coming along to online drop-ins and in-person classes, highlighting explicitly how they were there to support them as part of their transition to university and to help them become part of the Law School community.

Stage 2 – Mentor Support in Timetabled Online Sessions

The mentors were timetabled to join weekly online drop-in sessions in the 3rd and 4th weeks of term, to introduce themselves to their groups and break the ice. This was our first

mistake. The drop-in sessions were not timetabled, not compulsory and were described to students as supplementary to the lectures and seminars. As a result, we had very poor attendance from the first-year students and in fact, on one occasion, the mentors outnumbered the students attending the drop-in session.

Bethany describes how she felt: *“We were all very excited about this, but when it came to the actual session, only a few students attended and there were in fact more mentors and staff than students. Specifically, none of my mentees were in the session.”* Anam reflected: *“it was very disappointing and confusing that the first years did not want to interact with us, or be a part of the drop-ins.”*

The First Pivot - Mentors sharing advice asynchronously, rather than synchronously

So we pivoted: rather than overwhelming the handful of students who attended online, the mentors took part in an impromptu discussion sharing their advice for doing well in a Law degree. Bethany explains: *“We improvised within the session to become a space where we shared our top tips for success.”*

This naturally-flowing, friendly conversation between the mentors was valuable to the students who did attend, and we collated the mentors’ advice, compiling their ideas into a “Top Tips” resource which we shared with all students on our Virtual Learning Environment, and which we have been able to reuse and share with students in subsequent years.

Bethany’s reflection on this experience was echoed by the other mentors: *“This whole experience of creating an event and having low student engagement with it was rather surreal. It was made even more unbelievable considering all of us, as mentors, were very keen on the idea and insisted we would’ve attended in our first year.”*

Stage 3 - Mentor Support in Timetabled In-Person Classes

As part of the community building aspects of the module, we had specifically designed groupwork activities to encourage the first-year students to get to know each other and work collaboratively. They were tasked with a formative piece of group work to design a poster on one of the first topics studied, to be presented in their seminars in weeks 5 and 7 of term. The mentors were timetabled to attend those presentation seminars to support the students and assist them with future groupwork activities. Mentors were enthusiastic, offering praise and constructive feedback, all of which was intrinsic to the positive relationship they were trying to cultivate. Student partner Isha explained, *“it was lovely meeting new people especially after the lockdowns due to the pandemic.”*

Mentors encouraged students to contact them, either formally through the Virtual Learning Environment, or through non-academic social media channels. Student partner Meg reported: *“At the end of the tutorial, I asked the students if they would like me to make a WhatsApp chat where they could ask me questions about the module, to which they were all very keen, with some of them staying behind after class to ask me questions. Despite every student wanting to be part of the WhatsApp group, much to my surprise, none of them*

replied to my initial message, nor did they reply to any of my messages throughout the term.”

This response was all the more surprising as the students had queued up to voluntarily share their mobile phone numbers with Meg, yet no matter what she posted, they did not respond. This experience was echoed by the other mentors who were unable to break through this barrier to engagement, even when they were face to face with the mentees; students were enthusiastic at first but did not follow up, whether approached in person, via email, in class, or outside.

The Second Pivot – A change of direction

At the end of the first term, we held a debriefing meeting where partners shared their experiences. Our asynchronous Padlet had no questions posted and mentors were struggling to get the first years to respond to direct overtures. The universal experience was that the first years did not want to engage with the mentoring, which confounded our student partners' expectations. Together we discussed how we could best take the partnership forward, whether that involved relaunching the mentoring, rebranding it in some way or embedding the mentors differently. The student partners felt that we were flogging a dead horse trying to mentor first-year students who did not want to be mentored, but were interested to explore whether or not there were barriers to engagement with the mentor programme, so they pivoted from being mentors to researchers. As Meg explained, *“(the lack of interest) ...was initially disappointing, however, it definitely sparked our interest into researching their lack of engagement”*.

Stage 4 – Student Partners as Researchers

After identifying some key questions to explore with the first-year students, staff supported the partners with questioning techniques and advice, then sent them out to investigate, with a focus upon exploring the reasons for lack of engagement with mentoring, and identifying barriers to learning. The aim was to run student-partner-led focus groups, a method of encouraging discussion which had been successful for the staff-partners in previous partnership projects, with less power disparity between interviewer and interviewee, leading to more fruitful discussions when compared with staff-led focus groups (Millmore, 2021).

There were significant challenges in getting the first years to volunteer to share their experiences within student-led focus groups. The student partners had few responses to their direct approaches to the cohort, so the academics used in-person teaching time to seek volunteers. Frustratingly, even when first year students signed up, many did not respond to the partners' messages. Fortunately, the student partners were able to undertake a limited number of structured interviews in order to gain some insight into how the first years felt about the issues.

Student partner Ellie explained, *“A group of Part 1 students expressed an interest in taking part in a focus group to express their views about barriers to learning during the pandemic. However, I only managed to secure one interview from a participant...It was quite frustrating*

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that a lot of the participants did not respond to my emails, but that student's views were useful in giving a broader insight regarding the overall attitude of the first-year students."

The themes that emerged from these few interviews (low engagement means they are not statistically significant) were that the mentoring aspect of the partnership failed primarily because the first-year students did not want this kind of peer support. First-year needs appeared to be different from what the partners themselves had felt would be helpful. Anam said, *"I was successful in interviewing students...the general consensus was that the students were satisfied with everything and did not feel the need for more help."*

We combined this insight with feedback from end of module questionnaires and formal course representatives. It was apparent that the student dynamics and needs had changed significantly from the student partners' cohort the previous year as we reverted to in-person teaching after the constraints of the pandemic-imposed restrictions. As a result, the sense of isolation and lack of belonging was diminished, and first year students were generally happy in their classes and feeling confident in their studies, so did not feel the need for - or benefit of - informal chat with their peers. Anam explained: *"whereas my cohort wanted more help and support, due to Covid-19, the freshers' cohort were satisfied with the support they received."*

It was clear that the mentoring aspect of our partnership was not unsuccessful due to a lack of planning, conflict between partners or a power imbalance - all common causes of partnership problems. It was simply that the first years did not require this type of support at this time, and where it was optional or additional to their studies, they had little incentive to engage.

Reflections on the Partnership – Benefits for the Student Partners

From an academic viewpoint, it is important to maintain perspective when working in partnership. Amanda reflects, *"With so much time and energy put into a student-staff partnership, it is easy to blame yourself for the lack of overt success, particularly as my previous partnerships had flourished. However, the student partners' reflections helped me reframe how I viewed my partnership working; partnership is a process that may not always lend itself to being measured by SMART targets. Given the positives that my students have highlighted, this has been a successful partnership of real value to the partners; the mentoring may not have worked as planned, but our ability to be agile and pivot is a cause for celebration, as are the employability skills the students gained."*

Whilst not one of our explicit aims, the notable success of our partnership is the value to the student partners who worked as module designers, mentors and researchers. These students have had the opportunity to disseminate their experiences at conferences and in writing and can see real benefits to their partnership experiences (Millmore et al., 2020). As Meg reflects: *"Overall, developing the Law and Society module and the subsequent research that followed was invaluable. Not only the opportunity to work with staff and other students in a collaborative way, but the resilience and perseverance we developed through the failure we initially faced; I now consider the initial failure as a success, as the challenges we faced and the lessons we learned through adapting to them are arguably more valuable than if the original plans had been a success."*

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Isha echoed this idea: *“The rollercoaster of introducing the module and trying to get the students to engage amidst Covid-19 was a life lesson in disguise, it was in this partnership where I learnt the value of being consistent and persistent.”* Anam meanwhile felt that *“it built my ability to face rejection, gain resilience and adaptability”*.

The skills and employability attributes developed by the student partners were one of the visible benefits of this project. The School of Law at the University of Reading has a set of 11 employability attributes that a Reading Law Graduate should have gained by the end of their degree (Bennett & Cooper, 2018). Whilst teamworking and communication form part of these attributes, it is the attribute of flexibility that these student partners have best demonstrated and developed throughout the process. Ellie explains: *“This experience has shaped me to become a more resilient person. It has made me realise that when things do not go to plan, it is good to adapt, and make the best of a bad situation.”*

Meanwhile Bethany has used partnership as a stepping stone to showcase her skills in the workplace: *“I have been able to use the challenges I faced within the role to secure work experience within this sector. As an applicant, my experience and realism about the barriers I’ve faced have helped me to stand out from the crowd.”* Similarly, Meg reflects on how being a student partner has given her a boost in applications: *“Being able to talk about the experience in interviews and on applications has been beneficial, as it is an experience that sets us apart from other applicants.”*

Discussion and Conclusion

Student-staff partnerships vary with the personalities involved and the nature of the project, but our partnership has shown the importance of being responsive, adaptive and inherently flexible in your approach, particularly when plans go awry. Should we not be reframing the metrics for success in student-staff partnerships, and moving away from pure measurement of tangible outcomes, as in doing so we are missing the impact on student and staff partners’ development? Alternatively, when setting objectives for a partnership, the development of skills for the partners should perhaps form part of the measurable outcomes and markers for success. Amanda explains, *“this has been a useful reminder to reflect upon the value to the individuals involved. Success is not a binary measure of ‘Did we meet the aims?’ but can be viewed in different ways. Our partnership was successful despite the original aims not being met.”*

Risk-taking can be hard for Law students, who face high-stakes assessments all with a view to heading into a competitive working environment. Partnership working offers students the chance to experience different ways of working, and as this partnership has shown, the apparent “failures” morphed into the opportunity to be creative, to pivot and to try something new, all in a safe environment. The students have safely developed the key employability attributes of resilience and flexibility, and now have tangible examples of these skills to utilise in interviews and applications as they transition to employment.

This personal development for the student partners can extend to the wider cohort (Curran, 2017) and it is an important part of building a culture of partnership in an educational community that students see partnership working happening and are more open to it themselves in the future. Each partnership builds on its predecessors as a foundation for

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future partnerships (Millmore, 2021), but that does not mean that each partnership must be a drumbeating trailblazer or demonstrate rooftop-shouting remarkable results. If the partners gained valuable experience in the process, then that success trickles down to future partnerships.

In our project, despite the lack of success in mentoring students who did not want to engage, the process of working in partnership is evidently what was most valuable for all involved (Millmore, 2021) and the development of employability skills and attributes was of considerable benefit for the student partners. We argue that, to identify success in the pure sense of whether we achieved our aims without homing in on the value of the process of partnership working, is to omit a key element of this unique way of working. We therefore share our pivoting partnership with pride, to highlight how an apparently “less successful” partnership retains clear value as evidence of a reflective way of working in partnership, enhancing the skills and development of all the partners involved.

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