VOICES FROM THE FIELD

Partnership work as practice of and preparation for navigating complexity, uncertainty, and precarity

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This iteration of Voices from the Field explores the numerous ways that faculty, staff, and students see partnership work as both a practice of and a preparation for navigating an increasingly complex, uncertain, and precarious world. Sustaining its commitment to offering a venue for a wide range of contributors to address important questions of students-as-partners work without going through the intensive submission, peer-review, and revision processes, this section of the journal offers glimpses into how those in higher education already enact or call for students-as-partners work that both constitutes and contributes to building capacity, resilience, and more connected and sustainable ways of being in the present and in the future.

The invitation we extended for this iteration of Voices from the Field was to consider UNESCO's (2020) assertion that we live in a world of "increasing complexity, uncertainty and precarity" characterized by "persistent inequalities, social fragmentation and political extremism" (p. 11). The specific prompt we offered was: "In what ways does students-as-partners work develop capacity to work under conditions of—and prepare for—complexity, uncertainty, and precarity?" We received responses from 32 contributors. These included 16 faculty members, eight staff or administrators, and seven students from 18 universities in the UK, four universities in Canada, two universities in the US, and one each from Australia and Pakistan. These contributors occupy a range of roles in higher education: undergraduate, master's, and Ph.D. students; faculty in disciplines from nursing through theater; staff in various campus offices; and administrative leaders.

Across all contributions we found adamant assertions regarding the potential of students-as-partners work as both a practice of and preparation for navigating an increasingly complex, uncertain, and precarious world. Some contributors reflected on what needs to be unlearned to embrace such an orientation. Others offered examples of institutional efforts and individual

practices. Still others articulated more general calls for conceptualizing students-as-partners work not only as contributing to a practice but also as constituting a necessary way of being.

As is often the case with contributions to Voices from the Field, authors' experiences and insights could be included under multiple themes or categories. We trace a pattern we saw in contributions that highlights shifting mindsets, engaging in practices, and calling for ways of being. We grouped contributions under the following sections:

1. **Unlearning traditional ways and embracing a partnership orientation**. Almost everyone who engages in students-as-partners practices has to unlearn "traditional" ways of being in relationship and engaging in education. Such unlearning embraces a sharing rather than a wielding of power, seeks reciprocity in learning and teaching rather than hierarchical, one-way delivery, and supports ongoing and iterative processes of learning. While we recognize these as hallmarks of partnership work, contributors featured in this section highlight how such a partnership orientation informs both practice of and preparation for navigating an increasingly complex, uncertain, and precarious world.

2. **Attending to student voice to inform practice**. Related to unlearning traditional ways of being in relationship and engaging in education is gathering and listening to student voices. These are not tokenistic processes but rather involve students as partners through the "lifecycle" of projects, as discussed by contributor Allman below; embrace the relational nature of students-as-partners work, which is highlighted by contributor Gratrick; and offer what contributor Hemsworth calls "authentic windows into student experience" through students' own voices. Such attention and practices can position students, staff, and faculty to better navigate an increasingly complex, uncertain, and precarious world.

3. **Meeting students where they are as a way of enacting students-as-partners work.** Building on the unlearning and listening highlighted in previous sections, this section offers several examples of recognizing the need to support a diversity of students in preparing for and functioning under uncertain and precarious conditions. Contributors focus on barriers to engagement and success and on how a students-as-partners approach is both practice of and preparation for navigating an increasingly complex, uncertain, and precarious world.

4. **Structuring students-as-partners approaches into universities.** Meeting students where they are within classrooms and helping them navigate barriers in higher education can be supported through extra-classroom partnership approaches. The contributors included in this section address how university-wide partnership programs build infrastructure and capacity for navigating an increasingly complex, uncertain, and precarious world.

5. **Embracing agency beyond the classroom in the face of uncertainty.** This section focuses on how a partnership orientation that develops a mindset and skills to navigate an

increasingly complex, uncertain, and precarious world can extend beyond classroom teaching and learning. Contributors to this section address how applications of what is learned within classrooms through a students-as-partners approach can facilitate what Lee, below, calls "meaning-making," bridging "from existing to new knowledge" (as articulated by contributor Derounian) that "ripples across staff, service users, and communities" (to borrow from the words of Porter in their contribution).

6. **Building capacity for resilience and resistance.** Unlearning traditional ways, meeting students where they are, and embracing agency beyond the classroom are necessary prerequisites for not only navigating an increasingly complex, uncertain, and precarious world but also building resilience and fortifying resistance to both enduring and new "givens," including forms of systematic inequity. Contributors featured in this section provide examples of projects and pedagogical approaches that develop necessary skills and foster agency to challenge the status quo.

7. **Affirming and calling for students-as-partners practices.** Many contributors affirmed and called for embracing students-as-partners approaches. We include in this section contributions that foregrounded these calls, offering explanations for why this work is essential to navigating an increasingly complex, uncertain, and precarious world. We saw two ways in which contributors made this argument: the first was to listen to students as a way of resisting precarity, and the second was to enact students-as-partners work as a response to precarity.

8. **Embracing partnership as a mindset and a way of being, not just a practice**. Like the affirmations and calls above, several contributors argued for embracing partnership as a mindset and a way of being, not just as a practice. These were among the most impassioned assertions for partnership as a way of being essential for navigating complexity, uncertainty, and precarity.

We invite you to read the contributions to this iteration of Voices from the Field both for what you might already be doing and for what you could do to support students-as-partners work as both a practice of and preparation for navigating an increasingly complex, uncertain, and precarious world.

UNLEARNING TRADITIONAL WAYS AND EMBRACING A PARTNERSHIP ORIENTATION

Over my 10+ years of teaching, I had to do much unlearning about what good teaching means. I later came to realize that I had succumbed to the generational effect of education in which I modelled my teaching after how I was taught. Moving away from traditional, didactic forms of teaching and learning to student-centered approaches was a challenging yet important transition for me. I learned that when I shift the role of knowledge-holder away from me, the instructor, students feel empowered to decide

Cook-Sather, A., Kane, B., Allman, Z., Asad, H. F., Atkinson, W. T., Bauman, L., Benoit, A., Black, K., Briggs, S., Chavira, T.,   295
Derounian, J. G., Dyer, L., Fellows, I., Gratrick, P., Guo, Y., Hemsworth, K., Karaceper, S., Lee, W. V., Loveman, E., Morrell-
Scott, N., Oti, C., Parker-Strak, R., Pike, C. V. S., Polkinghorne, M., Porter, L., Satia, A., Usman, M., Veuger, S., Wade, H.,
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their own learning trajectories. Student-centered approaches thus model a reciprocal community of learning, where I work collaboratively with students to generate possible answers to questions that currently are not known. While students may initially resist these pedagogies, they gradually come to understand that working through this discomfort helps them build skills—resilience, adaptability, and reflective thinking—that are essential in today's uncertain world.

—Michael Wong, McMaster University, wongm8@mcmaster.ca

As an undergraduate kinesiology student at McMaster University partnering with faculty members for the first time, I've had the opportunity to reflect on how my perceptions of professors, once shaped from the back row of a lecture hall, shifted as we sat together as partners at the same table. Traditionally, professors are viewed as conduits for knowledge dissemination, while students are expected to be passive, unopinionated information sponges. By transcending the labels of "student" and "professor," placing "partner" at the forefront of one's academic identity helps dissolve the invisible barrier between colleagues. Rather than reinforcing linear endpoints, a system grounded in partnership with students encourages open-ended learning and the co-creation of understanding. While it may feel jarring at first without academia's silent hierarchies, embracing the uncertainty of partnership allows us to prioritize what matters most: lifelong learning with and from each other.

—Lily Bauman, McMaster University, baumanl@mcmaster.ca

I became an educator following a successful commercial career, endowing me, a middle-aged, cis-gender, straight, white, able-bodied man from the professional class, with capitals that the predominantly widening-participation students I teach do not (and may never) have access to. To support student learning, I forcefully address the inhibiting power dynamic that underlies (and undermines) effective collaboration. I have learned that simplistic "empowerment" tactics like delegating roles and negotiated assessment are insufficient. My experience indicates that partnering with students is an iterative process that requires consistent, repeated, and authentic demonstrations of trust and esteem that cannot be achieved within the arbitrary boundaries of a single module and often requires conversations that exceed the boundaries of the curriculum itself. When this works, the beneficial impact for students regarding confidence, belonging, and achievement is genuinely transformative, disinhibiting them and developing their self-esteem to ready them to face a disrupted graduate labour market.

—Ian Fellows, Canterbury Christ Church University,
ian.fellows@canterbury.ac.uk

Recently, I was fortunate to begin a PhD in education after years of deliberation. The impetus to enrol came from a growing awareness that my lived experience no longer enabled me to understand the "increasing complexity, uncertainty and precarity" I saw around me. One positive aspect of this change is the unsettling of hierarchical

Cook-Sather, A., Kane, B., Allman, Z., Asad, H. F., Atkinson, W. T., Bauman, L., Benoit, A., Black, K., Briggs, S., Chavira, T.,   296
Derounian, J. G., Dyer, L., Fellows, I., Gratrick, P., Guo, Y., Hemsworth, K., Karaceper, S., Lee, W. V., Loveman, E., Morrell-
Scott, N., Oti, C., Parker-Strak, R., Pike, C. V. S., Polkinghorne, M., Porter, L., Satia, A., Usman, M., Veuger, S., Wade, H.,
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relationships within families, workplaces, and public institutions, including universities, where faculty are increasingly sharing power with students as partners. There are tangible signs of momentum, though many voices remain marginalized. Returning to school has reminded me that while talking about sharing power is easy, it is much harder to practice, especially in systems that weren't designed to be equitable. When faculty engage with students as partners, they model how to share power responsibly and ethically. This is an essential skill that students will need to address the complexities of an uncertain future.

—Andy Benoit, University of Saskatchewan, vml598@usask.ca

ATTENDING TO STUDENT VOICE TO INFORM PRACTICE

England's higher education providers must respond to regulatory requirements to develop access and participation plans that address risks to equality of opportunity for students, ensuring students have opportunities to access, succeed in, and progress from higher education. At De Montfort University, a students-as-partners approach when designing the access and participation plan was crucial to developing a co-created proposal that includes student partnership designed into the four-year plan, supporting delivery of equality improvements in partnership. Additionally, students responded to perceived risks to equality of opportunity within the provider; their feedback combined with that from university staff and governors collectively shaped the direction of focus to ensure targeted impact was not only data-led, but crucially, stakeholder informed. Involving students as partners throughout the plan's lifecycle facilitates an agile and adaptable approach, enabling the university to respond to complexity, uncertainty, and precarity through addressing inequalities.

—Zoë Allman, De Montfort University, zallman@dmu.ac.uk

The transition into university is a critical period for students, shaping their academic, social, and personal trajectories. The 100 Days 100 Voices campaign at the University of Liverpool, run annually, provides a comprehensive exploration of student experiences during this pivotal phase. Through a mixed-methods approach involving longitudinal surveys and qualitative narratives, this study captures the voices of over 1,000 students, offering nuanced insights into their sense of belonging and challenges over time. Findings reveal that while 83% of new undergraduates are excited for the future, nearly half express concerns about social integration and finances. Engagement with student societies and city exploration is robust (75%), yet traditional modes of delivery often fall short for commuter and mature students. By day 100, most students feel part of the university community and confident in their studies, and this partnership approach over the first 100 days enables us to capture these insights and make changes.

—Paul Gratrick, University of Liverpool, paul.gratrick@liverpool.ac.uk

For me, student partnership offers insights into the lived experiences of precarity and the realities of what it means to study while commuting, caring, working part-time, and navigating an uncertain graduate job market. At Sheffield Hallam University, our student skills partners in the Library's Skills Team recently created student journey profiles—some real, some imagined—mapping key milestones, challenges, and interactions with support services. The result was a set of honest, authentic windows into student experience, reflecting the diversity of our student community far more effectively than metrics or enrolment data. As teams and budgets shrink, there is a temptation to use student partners to fill staffing gaps, but the greater value lies in developing shared knowledge, critical awareness, and co-design strategies that help us engage and support under-represented students. In times of precarity, partnership becomes a way to work through complexity together, rather than just observing it.

—Kirsty Hemsworth, Sheffield Hallam University, k.hemsworth@shu.ac.uk

MEETING STUDENTS WHERE THEY ARE AS A WAY OF ENACTING STUDENTS-AS-PARTNERS WORK

As I started teaching in higher education in 1990, I have witnessed the evolution of practice over 35 years. At first, I was teaching small classes (<25 students) of locally based mature students, and now I'm teaching large classes (>450 students) that include a significant percentage of international students. The culture shock for many of these international students is immense, and this does not just relate to living in the UK, but also to how we teach, and the expectations that we have for their engagement and self-management. As every student is unique, taking a students-as-partners approach enables us to break down barriers, understand how we can best support each individual student, and personalise our teaching as a result (Polkinghorne et al., 2022). By doing so we are helping them to build the confidence and skills that they need to meet the challenges and opportunities presented by their future careers.

—Martyn Polkinghorne, Bournemouth University, polkinghornem@bournemouth.ac.uk

An experience I would like to write about (regarding students working as partners to improve education and research endeavours) involves an overseas conference/training opportunity I missed out on due to systemic discrimination based on travel passport (and by implication nationality). Having lived in the UK virtually 3 years on my PhD, I was booked for a New Zealand conference, was granted a New Zealand visitor visa, and made full payments for flights and hotel lodging. Unfortunately, I arrived at Heathrow airport and was told by airline staff that they needed to call New Zealand before printing my boarding pass due to my international student status, and, following that call, I was informed that as I was a conference attendee and not a presenter, the call to New Zealand

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advised I should cancel my travel plans. Such conferences/trainings afford students extensive skills development and networking opportunities, and I missed out on it.

—*Chukwuemeka (Chuks) Oti, University of Derby, banksoti@gmail.com*

As a lecturer in English for academic purposes, I encounter so many students who express concern and anxieties over giving presentations in English. Many have limited or no previous experience of presenting and the idea of giving a presentation in a foreign language only adds to their stress levels. We should listen to students and ask them how we can carry out teaching, learning, and assessment through speaking without putting them under unnecessary pressure. Many have expressed concern over standing up and speaking in front of a large audience—can we remove these barriers? I have removed both of these from presentations which has resulted in more positive outcomes for many students. Teaching, learning, and assessment should be about giving students the opportunity to achieve their true potential. But if we as educators don't ask students what the barriers are, we are setting them on a curtailed path.

—*Laura Dyer, University of Leeds, l.v.dyer@leeds.ac.uk*

STRUCTURING STUDENTS-AS-PARTNERS APPROACHES INTO UNIVERSITIES

As an associate professor in Education and founder and chair of a university-wide students-as-partners (SaP) learning circle, I see SaP as a powerful way to build the capacity to navigate complexity, uncertainty, and precarity. SaP is about preparing for the future by learning through partnership now. By disrupting traditional hierarchies, SaP promotes a more equitable and responsive approach to learning and leadership. Our learning circle fosters relational environments where power is shared and diverse perspectives are genuinely valued. This work invites students and staff into collaborative inquiry that requires openness, trust, and a responsiveness to challenges. Through these experiences, participants develop the skills and mindset needed to respond ethically and effectively to shifting academic and societal landscapes. My hope is that this approach not only helps participants cope with uncertainty, but empowers them to lead within it—with confidence, resilience, and a deepened sense of responsibility to one another and to the broader learning community.

—*Stephany Veuger, Northumbria University, s.veuger@northumbria.ac.uk*

The DUET Fellow Program at the University of Oklahoma pairs professors with students of a contrasting discipline with the aim to unpack pedagogy, offer outside observations, and challenge the assumptions and hierarchy that live in the subconscious. As a professor of performance in the School of Drama, I was curious how a student from the hard sciences would interpret the impulsive and extreme world of a scene study class. The uncertainty of cross-discipline translation and the complexity of physical commitment that underlies actor training wasn't guaranteed to promise results. However, when I decided to participate to deepen my instruction, I was able to filter every interaction as a

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data point through the lens of my student fellow. From class announcements, to assignment rubrics, warm-ups, and reading comprehension discussions, my student fellow's insight gave tremendous value into how students can perceive or experience my instruction. This has produced tremendous fruit as the class evolves.

—Thomas Chavira, Assistant Professor of Performance, School of Drama, University of Oklahoma, tchavira@ou.edu

I'm a language and learning educator at Queensland University of Technology, where I led the development of Speakeasy—a university-wide speaking initiative for anyone wanting to build spoken confidence and social connection. What began as an educator-led space is now a SaP model with student partners on paid 6-month contracts. In our first SaP semester, student partners facilitated all sessions, drawing on their lived experience to support diverse peers, from first-year undergrads to HDR scholars. Working together across shifting schedules, blurred roles, and emerging needs taught us to lean into complexity and create responsive spaces. Now, as we co-design our second semester, we're deepening our capacity to navigate uncertainty together. Partnership has taught me that adaptability, shared vulnerability, and relational leadership aren't just tools for learning support, they're survival skills in higher education.

—Anna Wardle, Queensland University of Technology, anna.wardle@qut.edu.au

As a student partner at the Lahore University of Management Sciences (LUMS) Learning Institute, I experienced what it truly means to collaborate with faculty rather than for them. Unlike traditional research assistant (RA) roles, this partnership gave me agency to co-design meaningful projects like an onboarding e-guidebook for new student partners and LLI's first annual progress report. Working alongside my faculty lead pushed me out of my comfort zone and nurtured adaptability, confidence, and a deeper sense of belonging. In times marked by uncertainty and fragmentation, students-as-partners work offers a powerful model of shared responsibility and mutual learning. It equips us not just with skills, but with mindsets to navigate ambiguity, take initiative, and engage ethically in complex systems. While I sometimes wished for more intellectual challenge over logistical tasks, the experience affirmed that transformation begins when students are seen and treated as partners in change.

—Hafiza Fatima Asad, a graduating MPhil Education Leadership and Management student, Lahore University of Management Sciences, fatimaasadconnect@gmail.com

EMBRACING AGENCY BEYOND THE CLASSROOM IN THE FACE OF UNCERTAINTY

As one of very few staff members who teach the scientific aspects of buildings in the school of architecture, where much of the curriculum leans towards the arts and humanities, I believe that the students-as-partners approach is essential in cultivating these future architects' quantitative curiosity about sustainable designs today. There is

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often a mismatch between the level of enthusiasm and the quantitative knowledge it takes to realise climate-responsive buildings. Insufficient numeracy can lead to greenwashing and tokenistic sustainability that are unsubstantiated by actual performance. To set up an environment where students can self-direct their engagement with real-world examples where numbers have real impact, I introduced short assignments that require them to analyze current discussions on architecture, the environment, and society from various news sources, grounding the concepts we worked through in class with what's happening around them and their own lived experiences. This method facilitates meaning-making in students' learning, preparing them to navigate and innovate under conditions of complexity, uncertainty, and precarity.

—W. Victoria Lee, University of Edinburgh, w.victoria.lee@ed.ac.uk

Before I became a higher education teacher, I was a "lone ranger"—helping communities to fulfil their wishes for sustainable development. I experienced an epiphany when lecturing part-time at Newcastle University. I realised that I could reach and perhaps inspire many more people than I had as a project officer. I adopt a pluralist approach, influenced by Paulo Freire, believing that, given support and encouragement, individuals and communities can achieve remarkable results. My students are mature, part-time, parish sector staff who learn via blended learning. They come to the table with significant life experience, up-to-date knowledge, and case studies to contribute. Students and graduates practise peer-to-peer learning in the form of projects, policies, practices, and perspectives. Recent graduates demonstrate Lev Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal Development, that is, the ability to bridge from existing to new knowledge with "adult guidance or in collaboration with a more capable peer" (p. 86).

—James Garo Derounian, Society of Local Council Clerks SLCC,
j.derounian57@btinternet.com

As an educator, I redesigned a Level 5 teamworking module using a problem-based learning (PBL) approach to support authentic, applied learning in health and social care. What's been remarkable is how graduates have translated this learning into real-world leadership, often without consciously naming it. One alumna led an award-winning inclusive community project involving individuals with profound disabilities as active co-creators, not passive recipients. Another addressed service gaps by collaboratively developing a practitioner programme with colleagues. Both credited PBL with fostering creative, values-driven leadership, helping them to navigate complex, resource-stretched systems with optimism and agency. Through collective sense-making, ethical decision-making, and inclusive practice, their impact now ripples across staff, service users, and communities. We are now working together to publish their case studies to share these insights more widely. These stories remind me that students as partners is not only pedagogical—it is also cultural and transformational.

—Lisa Porter, University of Worcester, l.porter@worc.ac.uk

Cook-Sather, A., Kane, B., Allman, Z., Asad, H. F., Atkinson, W. T., Bauman, L., Benoit, A., Black, K., Briggs, S., Chavira, T.,   301
Derounian, J. G., Dyer, L., Fellows, I., Gratrick, P., Guo, Y., Hemsworth, K., Karaceper, S., Lee, W. V., Loveman, E., Morrell-Scott, N., Oti, C., Parker-Strak, R., Pike, C. V. S., Polkinghorne, M., Porter, L., Satia, A., Usman, M., Veuger, S., Wade, H., Wardle, A., Watkins, M., Wheeler, S., Wong, M., & Wysocka, S. (2025). Partnership work as practice of and preparation for navigating complexity, uncertainty, and precarity. *International Journal for Students as Partners*, *9*(2), 293-309. https://doi.org/10.15173/ijsap.v9i2.6856

BUILDING CAPACITY FOR RESILIENCE AND RESISTANCE

I'm an eLearning technologist at The University of Manchester, and during my ITL fellowship I explored ways to reimagine online learning using principles from critical pedagogy. Although the original plan, to co-design a Blackboard unit using interactive fiction, wasn't fully realised, the project adapted into a comparative study of students' and lecturers' experiences of online education. A key highlight was working with Caitlin, a final-year nursing student, whose contributions, especially organising and facilitating focus groups, transformed the project. Her involvement exemplified partnership amid complexity: not as tokenism, but as meaningful collaboration that shaped research direction and outcomes. In a time of educational uncertainty and institutional inertia, genuine partnership offers a route to rehumanise our practices, grounding them in dialogue, care, and shared inquiry. The messiness of partnership is part of its strength: it cultivates the very resilience and adaptability that complexity demands.

—Stephen Wheeler, The University of Manchester,
stephen.wheeler@manchester.ac.uk

As a lecturer working in higher education, I see students-as-partners work as a powerful way to build students' agency and resilience. By co-creating aspects of learning such as assessment tools and marking criteria, we not only help students better understand assessment, but also support them to develop the confidence, communication, and negotiation skills needed to navigate complexity and uncertainty. These experiences help students recognise their capacity to make change and to act with intention. This kind of partnership reframes students not as passive recipients but as active contributors to their learning and development. It prepares them for a world that demands adaptability, collaboration, and critical engagement. We are also beginning to explore partnership in the context of generative AI, inviting students to co-create ethical guidelines and reflect on disciplinary use. This helps them build digital fluency, take shared responsibility for learning, and develop the relevant skills and greater confidence needed for an uncertain and precarious future.

—Mary Watkins, University of Portsmouth, mary.watkins@port.ac.uk

In an era defined by rapid upheaval and instability, the need to question norms, confront systemic inequalities, and enact change is not merely useful, but arguably essential for learners and educators alike. This relies on challenging the traditional relationship between faculty and student and, instead, fostering one built on radical empathy, reciprocity, and shared responsibility. As convenor of a postgraduate module on "Popular Movements and Sustainable Change," I experience the potential of such an approach. Rather than being organized around an "expert" sharing knowledge on the subject, the sessions are structured around periods of active and purposeful reflection on our own positionality in relation to various social challenges and forms of action. After briefly signposting key theories and relevant examples, together we share, deliberate on, and

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analyse our own experience before using creative methods (such as body maps, performance, song, and dance) to collectively seek possibilities for reform. In this way, students-as-partner work within teaching presents opportunities through which we can work towards radical alternative futures, rather than simply preparing ourselves for "dealing with" the status quo.

—Edward Loveman, University of Warwick, edward.loveman@warwick.ac.uk

AFFIRMING AND CALLING FOR STUDENTS-AS-PARTNERS APPROACHES

Listening to students to resist precarity

As voice and representation manager working in a students' union on a global campus, I believe that working with today's students as partners has the power to clarify complexity, give certainty, and stabilise the precarious. The hope, light, and honesty that exists within students during their university journey can be captured and harnessed by us all to develop a better future together. They can enable the knitting together of cultures, expectations, experiences, viewpoints, and knowledge at a time when they are being given the very tools to articulate and direct their learning, research, and outputs. If we listen to them and engage them fully at this opportune moment, then they will give us the insight to heal this world. A commodity they are not. We ignore them at our peril.

—Heather Wade, University of Huddersfield, h.wade@hud.ac.uk

As a former nursing academic and associate dean of a health faculty who is now a senior nurse in England, I believe that this is such an interesting point to help us to ensure that the world that we live in is a better place. Students-as-partners work develops capacity for complexity, uncertainty, and precarity by cultivating adaptive skills, resilience, critical thinking, empathy, and democratic engagement. This prepares students to tackle persistent inequalities, social fragmentation, and political extremism by equipping them to collaborate, innovate, and lead in a turbulent world. Practically, it means students are better prepared for unpredictable futures; conceptually, it redefines education as a tool for societal transformation. For me the reflection is that working with students will help to drive change and share a voice and a mission of doing the right thing through education.

—Nicola Morrell-Scott, nicola.morrell-scott@nhs.net

As a multilingual educator and museum interpreter originally trained in China and now working in Canadian elementary classrooms, I've come to see students as partners not only as a pedagogical concept but as a survival ethic. One day, a Grade 1 student in a Daily 5 writing block sat frozen at his desk. The prompt—"geese" and "nest"—left him blank. But he held a small bag of SpongeBob candy. I leaned in: "SpongeBob, it's time to write." Ten minutes later, he had written four full sentences—the first time he'd ever done so. Partnership, for me, means recognizing who the student is in that moment, and inviting

Cook-Sather, A., Kane, B., Allman, Z., Asad, H. F., Atkinson, W. T., Bauman, L., Benoit, A., Black, K., Briggs, S., Chavira, T., Derounian, J. G., Dyer, L., Fellows, I., Gratrick, P., Guo, Y., Hemsworth, K., Karaceper, S., Lee, W. V., Loveman, E., Morrell-Scott, N., Oti, C., Parker-Strak, R., Pike, C. V. S., Polkinghorne, M., Porter, L., Satia, A., Usman, M., Veuger, S., Wade, H., Wardle, A., Watkins, M., Wheeler, S., Wong, M., & Wysocka, S. (2025). Partnership work as practice of and preparation for navigating complexity, uncertainty, and precarity. *International Journal for Students as Partners*, *9*(2), 293-309. https://doi.org/10.15173/ijsap.v9i2.6856

them into learning on their own terms. Amid increasing unpredictability, especially for linguistically diverse learners, it is these playful, momentary co-creations of meaning—these mutual improvisations—that reawaken engagement. Students are not guests in our plans. They are co-navigators through the fog.

—Yujian Guo, University of Saskatchewan, tfh347@usask.ca

Students-as-partners as response

As a doctoral student and a teaching assistant in the social sciences, I hear from students about the prevailing challenges and complexities that are most important to them. Students are worried about increasing barriers in academic and professional life, brought about by an ever-changing complex world. I operate in a students-as-partners (SaP) framework to cultivate an environment where the students involved can contribute their lived experience, creativity, skills, and knowledge to co-designing research and teaching processes. This framework instills confidence in the abilities of the students, which is vital to building resilience. Students benefit from this resilience when navigating barriers, failure, and hurdles in their academic or professional pathways. Through the lens of Paulo Freire, I see the SaP approach providing a pathway to transformative liberation through co-creation in a world that is actively trying to challenge or suppress it.

—Senem Karaceper, York University, karaceps@yorku.ca

As a teaching and scholarship academic in UK higher education, I have found that working in partnership with students has fundamentally reshaped how I approach complexity and change. In a world marked by uncertainty, inequality, and fragmentation, students-as-partners work builds the capacity to navigate these conditions by fostering mutual respect, adaptability, and shared responsibility. These partnerships create space for students to lead, question, and innovate, while challenging staff to reflect, listen, and evolve. This collaborative ethos equips both students and educators with the tools to respond to precarity—not with rigid solutions, but with empathy, creativity, and resilience. By co-creating learning and support environments, we prepare ourselves to face the unpredictable together. For me, partnership is not just a pedagogical tool—it's a transformative practice that enables us to thrive amid uncertainty and work toward more inclusive, responsive institutions.

—Rachel Parker-Strak, The University of Manchester, rachel.parker-strak@manchester.ac.uk

As someone who grew up in a family who preached the value of education—both my parents were the first in their family to attend university and both hold multiple degrees—I was, from an early age, aware of the precarious nature of academia. As tenure-track positions become increasingly rare, I think that students now, who have grown up in the digital age, are better equipped for alt-academia work given our nativity to the digital sphere and our ability to use social media and digital communication to disseminate our

304

work and inform the public of developments in our fields at a time when expertise is under attack.

—W. Trent Atkinson, Queen's University, 23kqg3@queensu.ca

As pro-vice-chancellor in a large, complex, UK-based higher education institution (HEI), I have the privilege of working strategically with student union (SU) officers, discussing and collaborating upon the constructive implementation of their campaigns. Year on year, officer teams rightly have their own priorities. Previously, I would characterise SU campaigns as chiefly focussing on "added value" initiatives—events and movements in the co-/extra-curricular space. Now, though, I observe an increasing—and increasingly systematic—SU focus on getting the "business as usual" right. As the world becomes more complex, uncertain, and precarious, students need the means via which their education is provided to be as simple, reliable, and stable as possible. Clear, predictable timetabling. Effective, quick processing of queries. Apps that work. Students' capacity to absorb and tolerate clunky processes and byzantine systems diminishes as the world around them becomes more challenging and volatile; it is now, more than ever, incumbent on leaders to get the educational basics right.

—Claire V. S. Pike, University of East Anglia, claire.pike@uea.ac.uk

As a director of learning and teaching based at a UK university, I believe that global collaboration is critical to prepare students for increasingly complex, uncertain, and precarious futures. However, like many others, I am increasingly concerned by governmental policies (such as those in the United Kingdom or United States) that are serving to reduce the numbers of international students and in turn the diversity of universities. Should this trend continue, I envisage that SaP leaders are going to need to urgently rethink how best to facilitate global collaboration. This could potentially involve universities developing international partnerships that include the co-delivery of distance learning modules explicitly designed to provide opportunities for SaP collaboration related to addressing social inequalities, fragmentation, or political extremism.

—Steve Briggs, University of Bedfordshire, steve.briggs@beds.ac.uk

EMBRACING PARTNERSHIP AS A MINDSET AND A WAY OF BEING, NOT JUST A PRACTICE

In today's climate, I saw how students-as-partners work builds capacity for empathy, adaptability, and collective problem-solving. In my work, I've come to realise that partnership is not a goal, but an evolving practice built on respect, transparency, and shared purpose. When working on collaborative projects students still feel underprepared; many are not compensated. Documents are staff-oriented and inaccessible. Meetings are often scheduled without consideration for student workloads. Still, many students contribute meaningfully to conversations by challenging assumptions, reframing priorities, and helping shape strategies. But true partnership is not just inclusion. We are still learning. But what feels important is creating space—for

Cook-Sather, A., Kane, B., Allman, Z., Asad, H. F., Atkinson, W. T., Bauman, L., Benoit, A., Black, K., Briggs, S., Chavira, T.,   305
Derounian, J. G., Dyer, L., Fellows, I., Gratrick, P., Guo, Y., Hemsworth, K., Karaceper, S., Lee, W. V., Loveman, E., Morrell-
Scott, N., Oti, C., Parker-Strak, R., Pike, C. V. S., Polkinghorne, M., Porter, L., Satia, A., Usman, M., Veuger, S., Wade, H.,
Wardle, A., Watkins, M., Wheeler, S., Wong, M., & Wysocka, S. (2025). Partnership work as practice of and preparation for
navigating complexity, uncertainty, and precarity. *International Journal for Students as Partners*, *9*(2), 293-
309. https://doi.org/10.15173/ijsap.v9i2.6856

dialogue and for messiness. Sometimes, that means missing deadlines and having honest conversations. It means acknowledging that one person's contribution may not look like another's. We keep reminding ourselves that partnership is not about perfection. It's about trust, presence, and a willingness to grow together.

—Sara Wysocka, University of Warwick, sara.wysocka@warwick.ac.uk

Working as a projects administrator for McMaster's Teaching and Learning Strategy, I can't ignore the forces reshaping higher education, from neoliberal capitalism and colonial legacies to rising fascism and the uncritical use of AI. Often masked by bureaucratic façades, these forces leave deep and lasting impacts. That's why the SaP model resonates so strongly with me. Grounded in relationality, equity, care, and co-creation, it offers a purposeful way to reimagine our work and push back against disillusionment. To me, it signals a shift toward a 360-degree approach to pedagogy, one that moves beyond performative gestures and challenges the dominance of timelines and output-driven systems. From my administrative vantage point, I see SaP not just as a framework rooted in praxis and critical pedagogy, but as an institutional imperative: a model that prepares us, alongside students, to navigate uncertainty, disrupt hierarchies, and foster a culture of collective pedagogical transformation.

—Aasiya Satia, McMaster University, satiaa@mcmaster.ca

"I've been reflecting on how different it is this time, 'cause I feel like I know y'all. Together last time, it was very mysterious to me." I shared these thoughts as my second interview opened for a multi-institution research-practice partnership (RPP). Before the RPP, I hadn't considered pedagogy research—folks discouraged me from caring as a graduate student in number theory! Nevertheless, the RPP research team supported our institution in conducting some focus group analysis. The collaboration fostered enduring relationships which I have come to ground in. I see relationships as the bedrock we anchor in as we sift through the challenges of an uncertain and unstable world. I think fear, isolation, and a desire for control are natural (but counterproductive) responses to uncertainty and instability; RPPs—especially when they engage students alongside faculty—can instead cultivate mutual respect, transparency, and interdependence. What do we have if not each other?

—Kairi Black, Duke University, kairi.black@duke.edu

As a Pakistani Muslim woman and senior lecturer, I have found that students-as-partners (SaP) work has offered a rare space where I can engage in difficult conversations about inequality, race, and power with a sense of shared purpose. In traditionally hierarchical settings, speaking openly about these issues often feels risky. However, co-creating a critical thinking module with students allowed us to directly engage with the issues that matter to all of us. Working in partnership, we designed learning that was inquiry-driven, reflective, and grounded in our lived experiences. That collective process affirmed that we all had something meaningful to contribute and that education could be a tool for

Cook-Sather, A., Kane, B., Allman, Z., Asad, H. F., Atkinson, W. T., Bauman, L., Benoit, A., Black, K., Briggs, S., Chavira, T.,   306
Derounian, J. G., Dyer, L., Fellows, I., Gratrick, P., Guo, Y., Hemsworth, K., Karaceper, S., Lee, W. V., Loveman, E., Morrell-
Scott, N., Oti, C., Parker-Strak, R., Pike, C. V. S., Polkinghorne, M., Porter, L., Satia, A., Usman, M., Veuger, S., Wade, H.,
Wardle, A., Watkins, M., Wheeler, S., Wong, M., & Wysocka, S. (2025). Partnership work as practice of and preparation for
navigating complexity, uncertainty, and precarity. *International Journal for Students as Partners*, *9*(2), 293-
309. https://doi.org/10.15173/ijsap.v9i2.6856

transformation, not just transmission. In a world shaped by persistent inequalities, SaP offers a vital space for co-ownership, recognition, and critical engagement that prepares us to navigate complexity together. This kind of work doesn't just prepare us to respond; it becomes the response.

      —Moonisah Usman, University of Westminster, usmanm@westminster.ac.uk

CONCLUSION

The prompt for this iteration of Voices from the Field was inspired by a recent analysis faculty co-editor Alison Cook-Sather had conducted of student partners' reflections on their experiences of participating in pedagogical partnership through the Students as Learners and Teachers (SaLT) program at Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges. This analysis drew on one student partner's notion of "unknowingness," a state of mind that allowed this student partner to recognize "that there is not always a 'right answer' and, more importantly," that it is possible to learn "to be comfortable in not knowing the answers—comfortable with the unknown" (Brunson, 2018, p. 4). In her analysis across both published writing by student partners and data from numerous studies, Alison found a wide range of ways in which pedagogical partnership affords opportunities for students to work against hierarchies that keep inequities in place; to re-understand complexity, uncertainty, and change as generative realities; and to develop the capacity to navigate with an equity orientation the challenges and opportunities presented by a complex, unpredictable, and increasingly undemocratic and inequitable world (Cook-Sather, 2025).

      Student co-editor Brisa Kane also recently wrote about the potential of partnership in responding to crises, challenging ongoing inequities and finding hope in the face of complexity, uncertainty, and precarity. In an *IJSaP* editorial Brisa co-authored with other *IJSaP* editors (Kane et al., 2025), Brisa quoted Veletsianos et al. (2024): "education futures oriented towards justice and hope are not simply about speculating about what might be," but also constitute a "reckoning with the historical and ongoing sources of injustice in play in education systems today" (p. 3). In keeping with the framing of the theme for this iteration of Voices of the Field, Brisa also asserted that student-staff partnerships require both "reckoning with the education world as it currently exists" and working "to build just relationships in education, starting on a smaller scale that can lead to much more significant changes" (Kane et al., 2025, p. 3).

      We see the same reckoning and work in the contributions to this iteration of Voices from the Field. We note the focus on the empowering relational nature of students-as-partners work that is foundational to this practice. To build this foundation, contributors note that we must unlearn traditional ways of being. We must move, for instance, toward sharing rather than wielding power, embracing reciprocity in learning and teaching rather than relying on hierarchical, one-way delivery, and engaging in ongoing and iterative processes of learning. A part of this unlearning, which can be destabilizing to some at first, is the empowering of student voices to inform our pedagogical practices. A critical part of this work that our contributors note is meeting students where they are rather than assuming that all students have the same experiences.

Cook-Sather, A., Kane, B., Allman, Z., Asad, H. F., Atkinson, W. T., Bauman, L., Benoit, A., Black, K., Briggs, S., Chavira, T.,   307 Derounian, J. G., Dyer, L., Fellows, I., Gratrick, P., Guo, Y., Hemsworth, K., Karaceper, S., Lee, W. V., Loveman, E., Morrell-Scott, N., Oti, C., Parker-Strak, R., Pike, C. V. S., Polkinghorne, M., Porter, L., Satia, A., Usman, M., Veuger, S., Wade, H., Wardle, A., Watkins, M., Wheeler, S., Wong, M., & Wysocka, S. (2025). Partnership work as practice of and preparation for navigating complexity, uncertainty, and precarity. *International Journal for Students as Partners*, *9*(2), 293-309. https://doi.org/10.15173/ijsap.v9i2.6856

While individual faculty, staff, and students can do the above, structuring students-as-partners approaches into universities builds infrastructure and capacity for navigating an increasingly complex, uncertain, and precarious world. Contributors in this iteration of Voices discuss the ways that building agency is critical in times of uncertainty and precarity, and an orientation towards partnership approaches throughout university and greater societal structures fosters one's sense of agency.

Finally, moving beyond practices and structures, we see contributors calling for building capacity for resilience and resistance, not only working within but also against existing structures, developing necessary skills, and fostering agency to challenge the status quo. The section focused on affirming and calling for students-as-partners practices offers inspiration and conveys a sense of urgency to both listen to students as a way of resisting precarity and enact students-as-partners work as a response to precarity. The final section of contributions calls for embracing partnership as a mindset and a way of being, not just a practice, as essential for navigating an increasingly complex, uncertain, and precarious world.

As Alison notes in the conclusion of her recent article on "unknowingness," learning to work across the complexities of difference and remaining open to problem solving in ways that do not rush too quickly to right answers can contribute to developing "an intergenerational democracy better able to navigate complexity, uncertainty, and change in ways that not only do reproduce the inequities of existing systems and practices but also offer an alternative" (Cook-Sather, 2025, p. 12). How do or could you enact and support students-as-partners work as both a practice of and preparation for navigating complexity, uncertainty, and precarity?

NOTE ON THE EDITORS

Alison Cook-Sather *is the Mary Katharine Woodworth Professor of Education at Bryn Mawr College and director of the Teaching and Learning Institute at Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges. She has published and consulted widely on student-faculty pedagogical partnerships, co-creation, and student voice.*

Brisa Kane *worked as a student consultant through the Students as Learners and Teachers (SaLT) program and has published on this work. She graduated from Haverford College in 2025 with a double major in anthropology and education studies. Brisa is currently an Admission Counselor at Haverford College.*

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Cook-Sather, A., Kane, B., Allman, Z., Asad, H. F., Atkinson, W. T., Bauman, L., Benoit, A., Black, K., Briggs, S., Chavira, T.,   309
Derounian, J. G., Dyer, L., Fellows, I., Gratrick, P., Guo, Y., Hemsworth, K., Karaceper, S., Lee, W. V., Loveman, E., Morrell-
Scott, N., Oti, C., Parker-Strak, R., Pike, C. V. S., Polkinghorne, M., Porter, L., Satia, A., Usman, M., Veuger, S., Wade, H.,
Wardle, A., Watkins, M., Wheeler, S., Wong, M., & Wysocka, S. (2025). Partnership work as practice of and preparation for
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