

Student Partnerships in Assessment: ‘in conversation...’ episode two

Podcast transcript

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Key

- + **KM:** Kelly Matthews (host)
- + **JF:** Jennifer Fraser
- + **OH:** Oisín Hassan

Transcript

KM: Hello listeners. It's an absolute pleasure to be with you today. I am Kelly Matthews and I'm talking with you from Australia. And I am here with two wonderful colleagues, Jennifer and Oisín. I might start with Oisín. Can you just introduce yourselves to listeners and tell us where you are?

OH: Hi everyone. My name's Oisín Hassan. I'm currently in Ireland and I suppose I've been here now stuck in lockdown for quite a while. My role is programme manager of NStEP, the National Student Engagement Programme in Ireland. And we're a national organisation that works on developing and enhancing student engagement and decision making and supporting the emergence of a culture of students as partners throughout Irish higher education. So it's nice to be with you.

KM: Thank you Oisín. And Jennifer?

JF: Hi Kelly, hi Oisín, hello everyone. It's really nice to be here with you today. I'm Jennifer Fraser. I work at the University of Westminster here in London in the UK. At Westminster I am the University Director for Student Partnership and also a Principle Lecturer in the School of Social Sciences. So a lot of my work is working with students and staff across the institution to develop cultures of partnership. Whether that's in the curriculum or in extracurricular activities, or thinking about how we engage in university structures.

KM: Thank you, Jennifer and Oisín. I'm an Associate Professor at the University of Queensland. You might notice that I don't quite have that Australian accent because I was born in New Orleans and moved to Australia a bit of time ago. But like you all I've been engaged in students as partners work. Trying to both grow practices across my university

and across Australia as well as really thinking about the ethos of partnership and the values of partnership and what that means. I'd love to get started with what energises you? Thinking about students as partners in assessment specifically. And I might start with you, Jennifer?

JF: Thanks Kelly. I like to think of partnership as an opportunity to be in conversation differently with people. I think assessment is one of those key moments in our university educations. We have really an opportunity to think through and demonstrate what we've done. But in order to do that we really need to be engaged in that conversation between students and staff to develop our ideas. So that's what's exciting to me, thinking about partnership in assessment. That it's sort of a continuation of a conversation that's begun early on in the module or the class or the course that we're taking. And it's an opportunity to kind of not put a close to that conversation but perhaps put a full stop to that part of the conversation before you engage in a different one.

KM: Yes, thanks Jennifer. Oisín?

OH: I'm not from a teaching and learning background. I think for me the thing about students as partners in assessment is that when we get into discussions about student engagement and decision making and how students can shape and influence their own education and indeed how staff shape and influence the future of education. The major touchpoint I think for everyone that we can all understand, that we've all struggled through, that we've all felt that pain, but also felt that joy is assessment. I think it's the perfect example of what students as partners could mean. It's a perfect example of just how difficult students as partners can be, but it's also the way in which we can I think empower and demonstrate that empowerment for people. So I think it's very important for those of us who do work in this area that we're able to use change in assessment practice as the example. I think that's something that should energise us all whether or not we have the background in assessment ourselves, you know, to empower colleagues to be able to do that.

KM: Yes. And I'm picking up what you all are saying and the seven year old Kelly in me is thinking about students as partners from a perspective of I want to be able to trust what's happening in my classroom. I think for me that really is what energises me and makes me want to face up to what could be some big challenges potentially around engaging students as partners in assessment. And that is it's the crux of trust in a classroom. It's a way in which students feel like, as you suggested Oisín, there's some joy in demonstrating my learning. Or there's a lot of fear, there's a lot of anxiety and there's a lot of judgement. So I think facing up to students as partners in assessment is going to give us that opportunity to really live the values of partnership that I think about. And Jennifer, I know you've talked a lot and

written a lot about the values of partnership. When you think about students as partners, particularly around assessment, given the high stakes of assessment for universities and for students, what are the values you think we really have to think about and understanding practising partnership in assessment?

JF: Kelly, that's a really good question. And I think the point you touched upon around trust is so important. I think we need to think about trust, we need to think about openness. So we need to have open and real conversations about what is at stake for people in partnership and especially in assessment. So how we go about discussing assessment, how we build partnerships through assessment. We need to be really open about what we're doing. And from there we really need to wrestle with power and to have open and honest conversations about that. Because there are things that we can't do away with. So we can't do away with power. But we can have real discussions about how power flows and how power lines move. To enable that we need to have these sort of open conversations, we need to build environments of trust. I think about Deanne Bell's work where she talks about building atmospheres of decoloniality in the classroom. And she talks a lot about what that means in terms of creating that human and humane atmosphere in a classroom where students can bring the parts of themselves that they want to those conversations and that staff can do the same. In doing that we can build that space of trust. So I think trust is fundamental to it, as is openness and a willingness to have difficult conversations.

KM: Yes. And I'm thinking about that at a really simple, simple level in the classroom, what that means. How many times I've sat in schools and university classrooms as a student and just wondered, why am I doing this assessment? Why in the world is it this way? And just being frustrated that no one took the time to even explain something that was so important. Which is just a conversation around, why am I doing it this way? What are the opportunities within this for you? And I'm not getting even to the point of having choice for example, just the basic explanation. So at the very simple level, we have that opportunity through thinking about students as partners in assessment, how do we start to have those types of conversations and then where can they grow? And I think there's so many possibilities, yet we've really got to think differently about assessment. So Oisín, from your perspective, where is it you think people are going to really be challenged to have to think differently about our taken for granted assumptions about assessment and why we do it the way we do it?

OH: I suppose that's a difficult question. And maybe my copout answer is to say that where people are going to be challenged is wherever they currently are and that next step that they need to take. I think to your point there, Kelly, in that even the basics are sometimes very, very difficult to get right. And that sense of frustration from students who aren't being communicated to well. They don't understand or know when the deadlines are, perhaps

don't know the weighting of particular assessments, feel a sense of frustration that assessments are done in a particular rigid way or the way they see it. All of those things have I think been uncovered particularly for people over the past year and a half. We'll not mention the word that begins with P. But then we do look at starting to negotiate assessment practices and open up the dialogue within the classroom. That's going to be at a different stage for everyone because you have to build a sense of confidence around what can I unpick? What can I change? What barriers am I going to come up against because my sphere of influence is perhaps more limited than I wish it to be? Before you get to that model of inclusivity and more empowered dialogue and beginning to really have I suppose not just change in assessment practice itself.

I think sometimes we confuse varied assessment practices with students as partners in assessment. That's a difficult line to tread and it takes a while I think for people to negotiate that and work through it and figure out what works. But to answer your question, I think wherever you are in your own practice, in your own professional context, it is going to raise its own challenges and its own questions. And students every step of the way aren't naturally going to know where you are. I think that's difficult. If your students don't know where you are on the continuum of partnership, how do you communicate that and how do you bring them with you on that journey? I think that's tricky too.

KM: And I'm thinking, Jennifer, in your teaching, and you have a very dialogic teaching approach, what does it feel like for you? And what does it kind of look like in your classroom when you engage students as partners in assessment?

JF: Oh, Kelly, that's such a good question (*laughter*). I can tell you what it feels like for me. Sometimes I really wonder what it feels like for students. I mean, they write to me and they talk to me, but I don't know how it feels. But for me, it feels like there's an openness. So I try to make space in my modules to have an ongoing conversation about assessment. So it's not just about thinking about how we build blocks of assessment, but how we make time to have that conversation about what the assessment is about, how students are feeling about it, so what they need to be prepared for that assessment. And where I can I try to build a bit of give into my background schedule for the module. So that if they say to me, "Actually, could we have some space and time to have this conversation?" Then I can say, "Yes, in fact, we can build that in here." Or they can come to me and tell me how they're feeling about it. They can come and say what it is that they need. But equally, I try to show up and say, 'So, these are my thoughts about this assessment. This is why this module has this assessment. This is how I feel when I get to read your assignments'.

So I should say, I mean, I teach in sociology, a lot of my assessment is students writing critical autoethnographic or autobiographical work about education. So we're very in the moment of thinking about teaching together, even if what they're thinking about is their primary or secondary schooling, we're constantly talking about the classroom, we're talking

about teaching. And so it lends itself to that very well. But I came to that way of doing it because as an undergraduate in a very different disciplinary area I had teachers who were really open about discussing assessment with me. So we could talk about, you know, what was at stake in that for us. That didn't mean that the assessment necessarily changed but our approach and our feeling about the assessment could shift. And it allowed us as students, it enabled us, to do some of our best work I think. Because it became much less scary. It became much less a sort of end game and became part of a process of learning. I think that that was a really important shift. So that's what I'm trying to create in the classroom when I'm teaching the modules that I teach now. I don't know if that quite answers your question or not. *(laughter)*

KM: I really enjoyed that answer and it's evoked a lot of thoughts in my mind. And it really reminds me to focus on the synergies and the overlaps between partnership as a process of learning, of dialogue, of ongoing conversation, and the idea of assessment. I think all too often we don't think of assessment as a process. Which is probably one of the reasons why when we think about students as partners there's been so much more work done around student reps and partners in committees, students pedagogical partners, curriculum partners, cocreation, but not assessment. And we really do need to shift into seeing assessment as a learning process that has a particular goal and particular purposes. But it should still be that ongoing process where there's a lot of room for conversation. And one of the things I really like about some of my colleagues in the assessment and feedback scholarly communities is they talk about this idea of vulnerability. They say because for them one of the key parts of assessment is not actually doing the assessment, it's the whole feedback process that happens around it.

And that it's through the feedback where we can have these critical conversations, yet it's an opportunity where a lot of people are actually feeling vulnerable and they ask educators to demonstrate that vulnerability. To talk about what it felt like when they've gotten feedback that wasn't what they expected or what they anticipated. How they felt and responded. To also kind of bring that aspect for students that acknowledges they're going to have a response. And that hearing feedback can be invigorating and energising or it can be almost humiliating and horrifying. It's an emotional reaction to it, and bringing those emotions back into those conversations. Oisín, what did that provoke for you?

OH: Just drawing on your point, Kelly. I think the different worlds of students as partners or student engagement sometimes don't meet and sometimes avoid each other *(laughter)*. I think the world of student representation and building student representation through governance and quality assurance and all of those elements of student engagement and decision making, yes, they don't always quite translate into the students as partners approaches within the teaching and learning environment. I think sometimes we've probably taken a step back and been afraid of doing that. We do a lot of work here with the student

reps because we recognise that building on strong systems of student representation is key. There's a big reason I think for that in that for real student partnership to flourish and for students to really influence and shape higher education, they need to be able to navigate higher education the way the rest of us do. If anything they need to teach us how to navigate it. And that means building a sense of shared knowledge. Co-creation can't come from a space where some of us have more access to knowledge than others, more access to power than others, more access to the way in which decisions are made.

And it's the exact same for assessments. There are lots of elements of assessment that seem so critical that we've not let students into those elements. We don't tell them how they work or we've been afraid of telling them how they work. So demystifying the way higher education works is crucial. I think creating that dialogue as you say happens through feedback, happens through the teaching and learning environment. If anything unlocking that system of governance in higher education requires us to have these conversations in the classroom, not the other way around. We need to empower students through their learning and through their learning experience in order for them to shape the wider way in which our institutions work. I think through that we can navigate it together. And often academics I think feel disempowered within the life of the institution as well. I think this is a crucial way in which that co-creative approach to higher education emerges and the way in which we can shape policy and practice and lived reality for people. So I suppose my clarion call is maybe the worlds of student engagement need to interact a lot more and we need to recognise there are strengths of students as partners approaches through assessment. And through those touchstone moments in the learning experience in order to shape higher education itself.

KM: And as you were speaking, Oisín, I was thinking about one of the potential barriers that people might see around engaging students as partners in assessment. It is that the idea of students as partners recognises the expertise or contributions that students can make because of their lived experiences as students. And in assessment we're normally focused on very traditional ideas of knowledge and knowers and what knowledge looks like and how it should be represented. And it's not normally a sphere where we think what students have to contribute to that. They're there to demonstrate their learning. And so it's also going to ask us to think differently about how we understand knowing and knowledge or knowledges. Jennifer, you've given this area a lot of thought as well. I want to invite your thoughts around what this means for the ways that we need to think about the expertise that students can bring around knowledge, not just their lived experience of being a student.

JF: Thanks Kelly. I think that's such a crucial consideration. That's something we need to give deep thought to. I think we need to think a lot about the very specific context that we're working in when we do that. I'm in London and I work in an institution that has a very large, more than half of our student body come from what HESA would call BAME backgrounds,

so black and minority ethnic backgrounds. Or what we might say, that they come from communities of colour. And you think that that's incredibly important in this moment that we're living through, in this moment when we're thinking about what it might mean to engage in anti-racist pedagogies in our classroom. When our institutions are openly saying that they are anti-racist institutions, as mine does, what does it then mean to say that students have knowledges, they have experiences. Lived experiences, community experiences, community knowledges, that they're bringing with them into institutions that weren't necessarily built by them or for them. So we're operating in this sort of structural context that isn't designed for racially minoritised people. But actually that's who our colleagues are, that's who our students are. So we really need to think about, what does that mean in terms of what is happening in our curriculum? How do we assess that curriculum and how do we assess people's work in that context?

One of my colleagues, Moonisah Usman, has done really interesting work. Her work is around our foundation year and it's around biomedical science as her disciplinary background. But she's done really great work with students in terms of saying which parts of this curriculum can we co-design so that we can then start to think about how we assess it together? So how do we create assessment that engages you and engages the lived experiences and community knowledges that you're bringing in? That this discipline perhaps has not traditionally taken account of, but that's not because it shouldn't be taking account of it, it's because we haven't known how to do that, because we're working in a structure that wasn't built to take account of that. I think sometimes I'm not answering your question quite as directly as I would like to. But I think that all of these things require thinking about what is the context we're working in? Who do we work with? And how do we ask those questions? How do we make ourselves vulnerable to say that perhaps the knowledges we have aren't perfect? And that we need to rebuild knowledge with students and colleagues who are in the institution with us.

KM: And that for me is one of the most exciting opportunities of stretching the conversation around partnership. I think in some many ways it can bring a level of coherence around connecting what's happening in the curriculum with our pedagogical approaches and with our process of assessment and feedback. In a way hopefully that can mean the values that we're talking about kind of permeate across for students and staff. In a way that just reminds us of the importance of the relationships that happen and that at the end of the day it's a process, it's about people. And so while there's a lot of excitement around all the technologies, and probably like you two I'm very grateful for Zoom, that during this last year and a half we can stay connected. But it's not the answer, it's just a platform. I know there's a lot of excitement about technologies. But partnership just reminds us to come back and ask these very human questions every time, all the time, in every classroom. Oisín, what's making you kind of feel like, oh, I've got to go and do this now that we've had this conversation? This is for me my next step with students as partners in assessment.

OH: We're currently kind of entering a new phase of NStEP as a programme here in Ireland and we're actively thinking ahead. Obviously we've all gone through a very different couple of years than we thought we were going to have. And for me the last couple of years were supposed to be all about developing that cultural ethos and improving understanding of students as partners at all levels of higher education for both staff and students. And building that sense of shared knowledge and shared understanding and allowing people to understand how their lived experiences and their lived realities and their expertise, because everyone has that expertise, like we say students are experts in their language. How they could bring that to the table and collaborate. And communicate on a deeper level, we talk about dialogue as a principle of student engagement, because communication will always come up. How were we going to get people beyond that just, you know, improving communication and transparency in higher education.

And for me, I think after the last couple of years is moving beyond the tokenistic is going to be very important. I think we often talk about tokenism in student engagement or students as partners practice as pretty crucial. But how do people understand what that is? How do people recognise that? And I think that can happen with the assessment conversation in that tokenism is emerging because everything has changed and changed utterly. And we're now talking about varied assessment practice and continuous assessment and we finally, finally grappled with the idea that we need to move away from the end of year exam. And everyone's thinking about, how do I make assessment really exciting but navigable and manageable within my environment? The students are having the exact same conversation, just from a different perspective. I think tokenism can creep in there and that we make the changes and probably in a few years' time we might reflect and say, 'Well, actually, we didn't talk together about how to do that'.

And I think in terms of the changes in assessment practice we need to empower one another to now utilise the year ahead, the academic year ahead, to work together. Not to go and make the decisions based on what we learnt and just go off into another room and go, 'Right, we learnt a lot from all of that, we're going to go change X, Y and Z and come out with a better programme at the end'. The better programme at the end isn't because you've gone through the checklist and changed everything, it's that you've I think set out to change the culture of how students and staff engage in that environment and develop the assessment practices from there. I think that's going to be very important. Particularly reflecting on Jennifer's point. When we look at the structure of higher education, I think the conversation of tokenism and tokenistic practices will empower us to tackle even bigger and more engrained issues. I think that will teach, particularly in a country where I think we haven't just got to grips with what anti-racism means within the structures of higher education and we need to have that deeper conversation. I think if we miss opportunities like the ones that we have with students as partners in assessment, we're absolutely going to miss some of the opportunities that come from that in terms of the structural problems that we have in terms of discrimination and lack of inclusivity in our practices.

KM: And as you were talking, I was just reminded that this is such a journey and that people are at different places in that journey. And our listeners will be in very different places, as Jennifer highlighted, with different contexts. My university is a research intensive university. It's got very strict definitions of what counts as research which then flows on to what counts as knowledge. So we have to kind of think about the places we're in and the context. Yet for me one of the things that also draws me to keep having this conversation about partnership and the sound and the power and the presence of student voice in all of the work that we're doing around teaching and language and assessment in higher education is that we're doing it together. That there's this community around you where we can have these types of conversations. Where we can draw on each other for support. So I want to thank you both for just being a part of this conversation that reminds us all that we are on a journey. And that there's going to be challenges and opportunities and vulnerability and all of the things that we talked about. Yet we have this group that we can reach out to and use people we can have these conversations with.

That's why I think it's wonderful that Advance HE has been able to bring us together to have this podcast conversation. I want to thank you both so much for being a part of it with us. And I want to invite you just to imagine the listener. They're like me, they're doing the dishes or taking a walk while they're listening to this podcast. What parting words would you like to leave with them. Oisín, I'll start with you.

OH: Be open to change is obviously a bit of a cliché. But I think if you're on this journey or trying to go down that road or trying to create more inclusive practice in terms of developing that culture of student partnership or develop some change within assessment practice. Like I said, you know, you're grappling, you've probably learnt a lot from the past year, you're grappling with it. The way you approach things should change as an individual after this because it is so empowering. It's not about giving up space, it's not about giving up knowledge. It's actually about finding new spaces and new frontiers and developing a greater collaboration and a greater knowledge with the students you interact with every day. And for students as well, to be open to change within your learning environment means that you can actually genuinely begin to shape it yourself.

So I think be open to change as an individual. Because as an individual who changes and learns from that journey the difference that you can make on your colleagues and those around you and on the institutions that make up higher education, make up such a crucial part of our society, you can actually genuinely influence a more democratic, a more participative and more open sense of education and what it means. So it's a bit blue skies but genuinely I think assessment is something we've all had to face at some point in our lives. I think that's a really crucial part of that journey.

KM: Thank you Oisín. Jennifer?

JF: Oisín, it's quite a challenge to follow that answer. I think that it's important to begin where you are and to begin small. So change doesn't need to be a full throttle revolution. It can be something that you begin, that you rethink, that you try again, and that you then have a different outcome. So you build that through dialogue. So I think the thing that I would say is to be in conversation, create change through conversation, do it incrementally. And think about your why. So why are you trying to do this different thing? What's important and meaningful about it to you? And make that clear to the people you're in conversation with, be that your colleagues or your students. And I think that that will move us towards a place where we slowly can build a different type of education. Then for those of us who are really invested in social justice and education I don't think we can do that without moving towards more just assessment practices. So all the sorts of things that we've talked about today and that I know in these larger conversations that Advance HE is having about partnership and assessment, I think those are all really important parts of that. But to build slowly, to build incrementally, to build from where you are. Those are really important things as we move towards something different.

KM: Yes. I will add to that. You start with where you are and to reach the goals we've been talking about, which are big goals, I think we also have to spend a good amount of time being curious about our own beliefs and assumptions about the roles of students and teachers and staff. And particularly in this case, what we think assessment is for and what it's meant to do. And have we got space that we could imagine something really different? Because we've become so habituated to a system of assessment in higher education. Can we actually imagine that assessment becomes joyful for students and staff? That it becomes a place where it builds a sense of pride and a sense of inclusion and a sense of joy to actually show people and share and showcase your knowledge in conversation with other people. And to be a part of supporting other people's learning and knowing along the way so it's not this single, solitary act anymore. There are so many different ways that we can imagine that. But I do think it takes a really hard conversation with yourself to really unearth some of those really engrained assumptions as part of this.

So I look forward to you all being on this journey, I look forward to the ongoing conversation. And from Australia, Ireland and London, this is Kelly, Jennifer and Oisín signing off and saying thank you, enjoy your day.

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