

Students as Partners workshop 2020

Lundmark, Anders Mattias¹; Schomacker, Anders²

¹Institutt for geofag, Pb 1047, Blindern, 0316 Oslo, e-post: mattias@geologi.uio.no

²Institutt for geovitenskap, UiT The Arctic University of Norway, Pb 6050 Langnes, N-9037, Tromsø

ABSTRACT

To strengthen geoscience education in Norway iEarth aims to engage geoscience students in all parts of the education process. We invited Dr. Catherine Bovill to hold a ½ day workshop to introduce iEarth staff and students to the Students as Partners vision, in which students and staff share responsibility for teaching and learning. The workshop was held in November 2020, with 19 participants. Despite a long tradition of student involvement in Scandinavian higher education, it became clear that much of the potential in Students as Partners remains untapped at our institutions. Much of the workshop was spent discussing Students as Partners examples, at home and abroad. The workshop participants were mostly very positive to implementing various aspects of the vision. We aim to build on the workshop to adapt Students as Partners to the local and disciplinary context of iEarth, and implement a partnership between staff and students.

INTRODUCTION AND AIMS

Higher education in Norway has lately been intensely occupied with student active learning, partly in response to demands from the Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research (Kunnskapsdepartementet 2018). Active learning shifts the focus from what the teacher does, to what the students do. By designing the teaching to emphasize active problem solving and discussions, the students are encouraged to analyse, hypothesise, argue for and against, and reflect on the material. This is commonly contrasted to more traditional teaching, where solitary note taking and memorization may come to dominate the teaching and learning experience for many students (Biggs and Tang 2011).

The Students as Partners vision embraces student active learning, but aims to extend student engagement beyond the classroom. Descriptions in the literature of students as change agents, as co-researchers, co-creators and as partners express this aim (e.g. Harrington et al., 2014). Student involvement in all aspects of the educational process, from curriculum design, choosing and implementing teaching activities and examination forms, to Scholarship of Teaching and Learning research, lets the students take responsibility for their own learning, and develop and apply collaborative and organizational skills.

In addition to applying student experiences to improve teaching and learning, this approach also lays the groundwork for lifelong learning, and gives the students tools for both workplace and civic engagement. The benefits have been shown to accrue to both teachers and students (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017; Bovill 2019).

iEarth wishes to strengthen higher geoscience education in Norway by engaging geoscience students in all parts of the education process. A first step towards this goal is for teachers and students to explore new perspectives on their respective roles at the university, consider potential strengths and challenges of closer collaboration and partnership between staff and students, and discover ways in which they can implement such collaboration locally.

To this end, we invited Dr. Catherine Bovill, senior lecturer in student engagement at the Institute for Academic Development, University of Edinburgh, to hold a workshop on Students as Partners.

IMPLEMENTATION AND METHODS

A brief description of the workshop and an invitation went out to all teaching staff and students at the iEarth institutions. Five students and 14 staff signed up (Table 1).

Institution	No. of participants
Oslo University (UiO-CEED)	9
Bergen University (UiB/GFI)	7
Tromsø University (UiT)	2
University Centre Svalbard (UNIS)	1

Table 1. Workshop participants.

Due to COVID restrictions, the workshop was held digitally via Zoom at 9:00 – 12:30 on the 16th of November 2020.

The workshop centred on outlining the Students as Partners vision, providing international examples of Students as Partners in action, examining some evidence for the effects of Student as Partner work, and on how to build good relationships between students and between students and staff. In between short presentations by Catherine, much of the workshop was spent discussing in small groups in randomly assigned breakout rooms.

Two days after the workshop, the participants were asked for feedback in an online questionnaire consisting of four open-ended questions, and one Likert scale (grade from 1 to 5) question (see below). Five responses were submitted by participants. The responses will be used to present some impressions from the workshop.

RESULTS FROM THE QUESTIONNAIRE

The aims of the workshop were distilled into five questions in the online questionnaire. To evaluate the impact of the workshop a brief summary of the answers are presented.

Q1. Did the workshop change your perspective on the roles and relations of teachers and students?

The four submitted answers to this question were all yes. The answers stressed that the workshop was inspirational (n=3), and emphasized the value of seeing examples of Students as Partners work (n=2). One respondent wrote “*Yes! Because it made me realize that my perspective wasn't actually what I thought it was*”.

Q2. Do you think you will change how you act as a student or as a teacher as a result of this workshop?

Three of five submitted answers were yes. Two examples of intended changes given by staff were to involve students more in decision making, and to discuss with students how best to use lecture time. One student respondent felt that change needed to be initiated by the teachers (“the system”). The fifth response was “*no immediate changes, but I will keep some things in mind for the future*”.

Q3. Was there anything you thought was particularly good about the workshop?

The feedback emphasized the format (good mix of presentations and discussions; n=4), the ½ day format is relatively easy to fit into a busy schedule (n=1), praise for good presentations (n=3), and good discussions (n=2).

Q4. Was there anything you would like to change about the workshop?

Go into more concrete questions (such as the effect of paying students vs. relying on volunteers; n=3), make the workshop longer (n=2), put more emphasis on follow-up (an action plan, a follow-up seminar; n=2), ask the participants to prepare beforehand (n=1).

Q5. Overall, how happy are you with the workshop? (from 1-5)

All the respondents gave the workshop the highest possible score, 5.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Students as Partners has mainly been developed in the US, the UK, and Canada, and responds to challenges in higher education in these countries. In Scandinavian countries, students are fairly well represented in university and department bodies, and already have some say in teaching and learning activities. Even so, it was clear from the workshop that a considerable distance remains between the iEarth goals of student involvement in curriculum decisions, teaching development, teaching research (SoTL), and choice of assessment methods, and the everyday reality of our study programs at the iEarth institutions.

The impression from the workshop, and from the questionnaire responses, is that Students as Partners does represent a change in perspective for many of the workshop participants, and one that is appreciated by the respondents.

Will this iEarth workshop bring about change? The five respondents were divided. Three of them intend to implement aspects of Students as Partners. However, it is known from postgraduate teacher training programs that to produce changes in teaching and learning it is important to give the teachers tools to implement change, echoed in the call to address concrete issues and challenges in responses to Q4, and to sustain interventions over time, i.e., the follow-up suggested in responses to Q4 (cf. Capps, Crawford og Costas, 2012; Luft og Hewson 2014; Kennedy 2016).

Concrete tools and sustained interventions lie beyond the scope of a ½ day introductory workshop. However, given the excellent mark for the workshop by the respondents (Q5), we regard the workshop as a promising start on the road towards a teaching and learning partnership between staff and students where both parties contribute to a better education.

We also conclude that the ½ day workshop format appears to be a workable compromise between allowing potential participants to find the time to attend, and the time to introduce a new and far-ranging concept. It is clear that we would have been wise to include a pre-assignment to make the best possible use of the workshop time.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We'd like to thank Cathrine for an excellent introduction to Students as Partners, and all participants for exciting discussions. iEarth is acknowledged for funding the workshop.

REFERENCES

- Biggs, J.B. (2011). Teaching for quality learning at university: What the student does. McGraw-hill education (UK).
- Bovill, C. (2019). Student – staff partnerships in learning and teaching: An overview of current practice and discourse. *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, 43(4), 385 - 398.

Capps, D.K., Crawford, B.A., and Conostas, M.A. (2012). A review of empirical literature on inquiry professional development: Alignment with best practices and a critique of the findings. *Journal of Science Teacher Education*, Vol. 23, No. 3, pp. 291-318.

Harrington, K., Flint, A. & Healey, M. (2014). Engagement through partnership: Students as partners in learning and teaching in higher education.

Kennedy, M.M. (2016). How Does Professional Development Improve Teaching? *Review of Educational Research*, Vol. 86, No. 4, pp. 945–980.

Kunnskapsdepartementet (2018). Kultur for kvalitet i høyere utdanning. Meld. St. 16. Retrieved from <https://www.regjeringen.no/contentassets/ae30e4b7d3241d5bd89db69fe38f7ba/no/pdfs/stm201620170016000ddpdfs.pdf>

Luft, J.A, and Hewson, P.W. (2014). Research on teacher professional development programs in science. In S.K. Abell and N. Lederman (Eds.), *Handbook of Research in Science Education* 2nd ed., pp. 889-909. Taylor and Francis.

Mercer-Mapstone, L., Dvorakova, S. L., Matthews, K. E., Abbot, S., Cheng, B., Felten, P., Knorr, K., Marquis, E., Shamma, R. & Swaim, K. (2017). A systematic literature review of students as partners in higher education. *International Journal for Students as Partners*, 1(1).