Students as Partners in a Business subject

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Learning and teaching context
I teach second and third year undergraduate business in the Tasmanian School of Business and Economics. My Student as Partner (SaP) approach has so far involved students in a third year unit I teach.

What we did
In week one of each semester (during the first lecture), I introduce students to SaP and invite them to participate. Those who wish to be student partners remain behind at the end of the lecture and I organise times and dates for a training session and four formal meetings throughout the semester. Students are trained in the theoretical underpinnings of SaP and in how to give and receive feedback; they then agree to a set of ground rules for SaP. Student partners are given 5-10 minutes at the end of tutorials (with a particular focus on the first few weeks of the semester), to talk to other students about the unit, teaching style, assessment, learning platform and any issues that they have; this is confidentially fed back to me during SaP meetings. In 2017, I have asked student partners to pay particular attention to international students because in my previous experience, I have found that this cohort rarely volunteer to be part of university projects and are less likely to speak out about their concerns to their lecturers. At each meeting we discuss the changes I have made as a result of SaP feedback, reasons why some changes may not be able to be made, and new issues or concerns raised that the student partners would like me to address.

Aims of our project/intervention
- To improve teaching and learning.
- To develop knowledge of student needs and wants in education
- To develop beneficial and two-way relationships with current generation of students

What happened?
Student partners are asked to comment on the SaP project at the end of each semester and so far comments have been very favourable. In 2017 the student partners will be surveyed (as will the whole cohort) and have been invited to continue on as partners in second semester in a different unit; all but one student (out of 7) has indicated that they would like to continue. Past SaP students have used SaP as a springboard for joining the Vice
Chancellor’s Leadership Program and as a way to meet the ‘service to the university’ criteria for overseas study applications.

Aspects of units changed because of SaP include:
- Assessment timing
- Assessment instructions
- Lecture structure
- Online content structure
- Amount of online content including notes on the more important aspects of content
- Introduction of Q&A sessions in lectures and tutorials
- Feedback focus

**Reflection**

Each time I run a SaP project it becomes easier and more effective because I learn more about student cohort nuances. I build on my knowledge and skills as a teacher and am able to focus on student characteristics (student characteristic analysis seems to rarely be done in universities/faculties). I am particularly interested in feedback from international students in 2017 so I can better understand their needs and ways of learning.

In each iteration of SaP in a single unit, the feedback from students has been invaluable in improving the unit and my teaching. More importantly the development of a partnership relationship between myself as the unit coordinator and students has given me a greater understanding of the way a new generation of students see the world (different to the way I see the world) and their learning needs.

The approach works best when you practice and improve your use of SaP over time. I think of it as an action learning cycle. Have underpinning knowledge of SaP, reflective learning and action research is also helpful.

**Key outputs**
These are still being developed and include a SaP guide and information pack for students.
1. Student as Partner Observation Form

### Points to consider:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Understand purpose of class</th>
<th>Time used effectively</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lecturer verifies students understand content</td>
<td>Students are engaged and stimulated to learn</td>
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<td>Learning activities included – related to content and relevant to students</td>
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<td>Content delivered in a variety of ways and methods that suit students, the content and the lecturer’s personal style</td>
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<td>Content or learning is pitched at the right level considering student cohort and year level</td>
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<td>Lecturer appears to be following a plan (learning is structured)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Learning principles are used such as; use of personal experience, use of students experience, practice opportunities, student centred learning, and reasons for learning explained</td>
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<td>Lecturer demonstrates interpersonal skills and presentation skills</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class or online practice</th>
<th>Observations</th>
<th>Reflections</th>
<th>Notes for discussion</th>
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2. Student as Partner Handout

We will share insights, knowledge, and experience and will support and challenge each other.

Student as Partner is learning from, and with, each other in a mutually supportive environment. The Student as Partner group is a group of people who come together with a shared interest and who form a community of learners. The group gathers for confidential sharing of experiences and challenges and draws on the collective experience and wisdom of the group to further unit or course development and teaching/learning quality.

Student as Partner members reflect on classes and MyLO and participate in and conduct reviews and then report on progress at subsequent meetings. Group sessions focus on questioning, feedback and reflective conversations. Groups are confidential, supportive and focused on learning and action.

Student as Partner will meet 4 times during the semester to identify, discuss, and take action upon issues related to their class or course. Suggested meeting structure:

- Opening — welcome & review of ground rules
- Discussion of goals and reporting on goal outcomes
- Critical reflective dialogue
- Setting new goals and discussion
- Closing

Ground rules:
- Confidentiality
- Respect for opinions and active listening
- Honesty
- Time for each other
- Balance between the general and the specific, the good and the not so good

Student as Partner “evokes reflection that results in learning” (Haigh, 2005, p. 8). Reflection:
1. Requires active engagement on the part of participants
2. Triggered by experiences and practice
3. Involves examining practices, beliefs and premises
4. Results in the integration of the new understanding into practice. (Rogers, 2001, p. 41)

While reflection can occur in conversation with ourselves, it is enhanced through conversations with others because the full realisation of the value of reflection “occurs only when others are involved” (Brookfield, 1995, p. 140). Clarke (2001, cited in Haigh, 2005, p. 10) suggests benefits of reflective conversations include seeing the world through the eyes of others, developing a sense of personal and professional authority, reducing isolation, reaffirmation of individual learning and teaching-related ideals, developing specific ways of working with learning and teaching “issues”, and learning to engage in similar sorts of conversations with students.

Student as Partner is based on action-research. Action research involves trialling strategies, gathering data, collaborative diagnosis and adjusting strategies based on findings. Student as
Partner provides students the opportunity to learn from their own and others’ experiences, and to offer their lecturer perspectives from the point of view of the student body.

References