

Students as partners in academic placements

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REFLECTIVE ESSAY

Students as Partners in Academic Placements

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THE ACADEMIC PLACEMENT SCHEME

For the last nine years, I have been working in partnership with students in a way that was new to our field and is still emerging in all its implications. I introduced, to all modules in the Department of English Literature at the University of Reading, UK, the chance for students to undertake an “academic placement.” Within this academic placement framework, a student studies on the module just like any other student and takes the exam, but does not write an assessed essay at the end of the term as other students would. Instead, I work with a self-selecting group of students from a range of modules to support them as they design, organise, and then carry out an independent research project in the professional world, usually lasting two weeks, that is linked to the learning on one of their modules. These students then produce an academic placement report as the credit-bearing piece of module coursework.

The academic placement report is not a reflective journal on their experience; instead, it contains a brief description of the research project they have undertaken on their placement, a discussion around the outcomes, an analysis of how this links to the learning on their module, and an examination of how their understanding has developed as a result of their placement. This can be a difficult concept for our students, who are used to personal reflective learning journals and can find this more highly analytical approach challenging.

As a department, we do not provide any of these placement opportunities, and a placement is never a compulsory part of a student’s degree programme. Instead, students convert one of their standard modules into a placement module. We discuss possibilities and shape ideas, and then the student engages in discussion with potential placement providers. The module convenor will discuss, scrutinise, and agree on the placement to ensure that the report will be as academically rigorous and relevant as the standard module coursework. This can be unsettling for academics, who are used to providing, and keeping control over, every learning opportunity offered to students.

Within my university, we work on Principles of Partnership that have been evolving in recent years and that define partnership as involving “negotiated responsibility” between stakeholders (University of Reading, n.d.). The responsibility in this context rests for much of the time with the student partners to put themselves forward for a placement against a module, and to source and secure the most appropriate placement. Working with me as placement tutor, they are the lead partner, as they craft the placement. As they secure the placement, they are offering a project that is of value to the placement provider, and so

there is a level of equality in that negotiation between student and placement provider (and certainly far greater autonomy than is found in a work experience placement).

Despite my university's recent work on partnership, making this scheme a true partnership (and recognising how that might look) is one of the challenges we have faced: How can this truly be partnership, if the module convenor makes the final decision on whether or not an academic placement can go ahead? This is not an isolated problem, nor is it new: It was addressed in a slightly different form in the very first issue of this journal, by Conner and Vary (2017), when they wrote about the need to recognise the "apprenticeships of observation," a term introduced by Dan Lortie in 1975. Connor and Vary considered the potential problem of student-faculty partnerships that are based on students' perception of teaching that is, if left unchecked, limited by individuals' learner profiles and learning experience. They then goes on to consider the same challenge within the lecturer. It is the latter of these that I have had to address. Students on academic placements shape their learning with their placement providers and are ready to stretch their learning experience; I see significant value in this and appreciate the challenge to my perception of teaching and learning that it raises. The growth and change are long term and on both sides of the partnership.

Working with the module convenor as the placement idea develops involves equal and open discussion between student and academic. However, at the point of approval the partnership becomes unequal. This is inevitable. The convenor seeks to protect the student by approving the placement based solely on whether, in the academic judgement of the convenor, that placement will allow the student to fulfil the module marking criteria as a result of the placement. Students have told me that this is an especially satisfying part of the process: to work alongside an academic, creating a placement that is both academically sound and professionally exciting, safe in the knowledge that they are not compromising their chance to gain a good grade.

This lengthy and at times uneven partnership journey only works well if it is recognised as such by all stakeholders, and much of my work as placement tutor for our department has involved detailed and long-lasting discussions with both staff and students to consider what we all mean by the term "partnership" and how this might apply to academic placements. These placements have been a key feature in our developing understanding of learning partnerships.

Some examples of academic placements might offer insight into the types of activities that interest our students:

- Redesigning marketing material for a school ("Persuasive Writing" module)
- Developing promotional material for visitors to a literary museum ("Eighteenth Century Novel" module)
- Promoting "World Book Night" ("Women's Writing" module)
- Redesigning a website for a publisher ("Packaging Literature" Module)
- Producing a series of theatre reviews for a newspaper ("Modern Drama" module)
- Depicting madness on stage in a local theatre ("Shakespeare on Film" module)

When I first devised this scheme, I expected that students would want to talk through their ideas in face-to-face meetings, as that is how I like to work, but I soon discovered that some students prefer to email whenever that is possible; some leave placement ideas in my mail tray and wait for me to contact them; many of them, in the early stages, will grab me in passing to make a "30-second elevator pitch" to test their idea with

someone (sometimes, literally in an elevator). Later, some students have told me that they were anxious about whether their placement idea was valid, and so needed a quick initial response before talking it through in more detail. I have had to be ready to respond to these ideas in the moment, which is a skill I have been pleased to develop.

The move to partnership

The academic placement scheme requires a level of partnership that has taken me beyond my experience of mentoring as a personal tutor. In many ways it is more demanding, because it requires the transfer of agency from tutor to students, and that is what takes this scheme beyond simple student engagement.

Students have to work hard and be brave in their efforts to secure a placement, and that is why a partnership relationship needs to be developed. I have had to ask myself some hard questions: How much time would I have to spend with each student? How could/should I make myself available? Too little support, and students might simply abandon the scheme; too much support could lead to students failing to take ownership and become partners, either with me or their placement providers. It took a while to get this right, and I am grateful to those students who persevered despite probably feeling either smothered or neglected as I navigated my way through this new type of partnership.

I came to see that the best way to approach this was to recognise the steps towards partnership, which are outlined in Table 1, below.

Table 1. Steps towards partnership

STEPS	ACTIVITY	RESPONSIBILITY IN THE PARTNERSHIP
Student expresses an interest in academic placements.	One or more brief meetings, either in drop-in sessions or elsewhere.	Me — to explain the process. Student — to share ownership of the project from the outset.
Student returns, having decided within which module to take a placement.	A longer meeting, either at a drop-in session or at a prearranged one-to-one session.	Student — to identify what he or she wants to get out of a placement and to identify both possible projects and potential placement providers. Me — to inspire students as we think together about what a placement might look like. Module convenor — who might already have offered some general placement ideas to a module cohort.
Student and I devise a draft of the placement idea and identify one or more potential placement providers.	This is often achieved by email, perhaps with brief, informal conversations.	Student takes the role of lead partner here.
Student contacts the potential placement	This is usually by phone, occasionally by email.	The student leads again here. I am encouraging but avoid direct involvement if I can.

STEPS	ACTIVITY	RESPONSIBILITY IN THE PARTNERSHIP
providers that we have identified together.		
Student and placement provider review the placement idea and may refine it, or change it radically.	This is usually in a meeting (or several) with the student and the placement provider.	The student and the placement provider work alone at this point, developing their own partnership away from the university.
The case for placement is submitted to the module convenor for approval.	Submission is by email, and negotiated changes might be made to the case prior to approval.	Student and module convenor, with involvement from the placement provider in some cases.
The student undertakes the placement and I am available for support throughout.	This might be by phone, email or in person.	Student and placement provider, occasionally with my involvement.
Student produces an academic placement report.	The report is based upon the assessment criteria of the module, combined with the case for placement details.	I offer instruction on report writing in regular sessions that students can attend if they wish; the module convenor marks/grades the report.

The benefits to the students of the partnership are clear to see from their testimonies, such as this one from an academic placement student who undertook a first-year placement with us:

I really enjoyed (my academic placement) research project as I led it almost completely on my own. I learned a lot about myself in how I learn and study best as well as how I best organise my own working deadlines and report writing—something I'd never done before. These are key wider skills that have been really helpful for me to learn and practice so early on . . . , and I've gone on to continue to develop and perfect them.

The phrase the student uses here, “almost completely on my own,” is important. Students on placement are not working in isolation; they are working in partnership with their placement providers. The student is always the lead partner in that relationship, because it is the student who has designed the project. This expectation is not always easy for a student, but they often tell me in retrospect that it was a key part of their personal and professional development on placement.

Quality assurance

Students have to ensure, of course, that they are creating research projects on placement that fulfil the quality criteria for their module and degree programme, so they need to engage fully with all aspects of the process. In this we were guided by an awareness of the importance of students being engaged in all aspects of their placement, including its assessment, as set out in best practice codes. (QAA, 2018). I work with placement students

for many months co-creating both learning and assessment requirements, an SaP practice that is advocated by Bovill and Bulley (2011).

However, although the system provides some quality assurance, there has been, so far, no systematic collection of student responses to their experience beyond the comments they make in their reports.

The placement journey

Quite early on in the process, I decided to be bold and simply refused to pre-arrange any placements. At first, this approach was surprisingly difficult to sustain. As a personal tutor I was used to doing all that I could to help a student, taking on my shoulders a sense that any difficulty my tutees encountered must be solved by me wherever possible. As I developed the role, being a placement tutor became very different. This has been achieved in three ways:

1. Giving students enough information (through weekly drop-in sessions, noticeboards, group emails, lecture shout-outs, and our virtual learning environment) so that they can make informed decisions about whether an academic placement is the right choice for them.
2. Using my experience to offer students ideas for research projects with placement providers that link to the learning outcomes of a module in a way that makes sense to them.
3. Being available, but within the confines of the steps set out in the table above. In this way there is a staged move towards partnership, and each person involved is able to extend to best effect his or her expertise.

The drop-in sessions that usually begin the process are often large, noisy, and friendly, and students form informal support partnerships with each other. This atmosphere offers me the chance to direct my efforts to where they are most needed as we share ideas. Very often family and friends join the process to help secure interesting placements, and this helps students to see the long-term benefits of undertaking an academic placement, which can be seen in the following student comment:

This placement taught me how to use previous contacts in order to obtain a placement as well as broadened my knowledge about SEN [special educational needs] children and how specific their needs are in the classroom. This knowledge is something that I will have forever and though my placement was specific to a visually impaired child, I can apply this knowledge to other SEN pupils in the future. (Academic placement student on our "Literature, Language and Education" module)

I also always keep my office door open. A minor point, perhaps, but I tell students that they can pop in and ask a quick question about academic placements at any time. In reality, this does not happen as much as I had expected, but students tell me that they find the open door reassuring as they walk past.

Sharing the role of expert

The creation of partnerships away from the university is crucial to the success of academic placements, as students work with professionals who are expert in their field. However, this means that I have to recognise, alongside the module convenor, that we are no longer the only authorities in a particular placement and in a particular field. I teach

modules on Shakespeare, for example, but I have never directed a Shakespearean play. So, when one of my students undertook a placement assisting a director in a reimagined version of *Twelfth Night*, my role became one of well-informed and interested observer, rather than the only expert in the room.

Benefit to academics from their student partners

The module convenor will use assessment criteria for the placement report based on a combination of the module criteria and the case for placement that has been approved, so even that most fundamental of roles—judge of the work—ends up being a partnership role between academic and student (Healey, Flint, & Harrington, 2014). This process of marking a placement report is interesting in terms of reciprocity. On the surface, it might appear that the academic is merely judging the work of a student, but in reality the placement report provides an opportunity for convenors to see the learning on their modules come to life in the wider community. This brings with it a reassessment moment for the convenor. It is impossible not to reflect on how a student has applied the module learning to an entirely new situation.

Convenors have shared with me their sense of anxiety when facing a placement report. A student has produced work outside the academic's comfort zone, so grading it will require reflection on the module as well as the academic placement. In the example offered above (the depiction of madness in a local theatre), the student undertook the placement as part of one of my modules, in which we consider the impact of film making on the works of Shakespeare. Since that placement, I have revised the focus of the module, and we now work with a far more integrated exploration of theatre practice and film making. I am grateful to my student partner for that development of the module.

The partnerships that I have described here have been genuine, long term, and fruitful. The very act of creating and securing a placement is a transformative moment in a placement student's development, and it has thrown up surprising and often challenging questions for me as an educator. Once the student returns from placement, of course, the challenge continues. I find myself working alongside my newly accomplished students, more confident in themselves as individuals and as learners. As one finalist, who had been offered a job by her placement provider, put it: "I now have much greater confidence in myself and my professional skills so that I leave university with much more than just a degree. . . . Taking part in two academic placements has been an amazing journey."

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NOTE ON CONTRIBUTOR

Lucinda Becker is the Director of Teaching and Learning in the School for Literature and Languages at the University of Reading, UK, and a Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy. Her work has led to the embedding of academic placements across several disciplines at the university, and her latest project, a Student Impact Network, recognises the continued importance of developing strong partnerships between students and educators.

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