



From tokenism to transformation: Acknowledging the missing voices of marginalised students in higher education, beyond box-ticking frameworks

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Abstract

We have recently been investigating inclusion for attainment with an intersectional gender perspective with a focus on co-creation strategies for inclusive assessment and feedback. This short opinion piece acts as a spotlight piece of shared thoughts and provocations for thinking about what effectiveness looks like for the 'inclusive curriculum'. We hope our piece stimulates debate and further engagement. This piece also allows a platform for discussions to allow practitioners to reflect and ask themselves questions around their own practice and this can be used to shape frameworks for inclusion to shine through.

Keywords

scholarship, learning, teaching, education

Student partnership, co-creation, inclusive learning, assessment and feedback, gender, marginalised students.

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It is well documented that assessment is an essential part of education where robust assessment processes are deemed critical for a rigorous evaluation of student learning. Beyond judgement, the modes of assessment we (the academics) select will shape not just what, but how students learn. Therefore, giving students a platform for engagement with assessment design and providing opportunities for dialogic feedback is central to learning and the student experience (Cook-Sather et al., 2014; Harington et al., 2014). Fundamentally, partnership is about relationships – meaningful learning relationships grounded in a commitment to the sound, power, and presence of student voices in higher education (Cook-Sather, 2006). By offering partnership opportunities in assessment we are advancing relational pedagogies in the co-creation of learning and teaching in higher education, allowing us to reconceptualise the nature of higher education (Bovill, 2020), and “consider new ideas about who the scholars are in universities and how they might work together in partnership to build inclusive scholarly knowledge-building communities” (Brew, 2007, p. 4, as cited in Healy, 2023, p. 4). But how do we do this? How do we challenge traditional teacher-student dynamics and break down hierarchies to reposition students and staff as colleagues and peers to one another?

While individual educators may see the value in co-creation of assessment and feedback, they are often constrained by institutional policies, accreditation requirements, and standardised procedures that leave little room for innovation. Universities are driven by metrics, rankings, and the need to meet external benchmarks. In this context, there is limited incentive to disrupt practices, even when research clearly shows the benefits of student partnership. Moreover, the decision to adopt student co-creation models is frequently top-down, imposed by personnel without necessarily engaging either students or frontline educators in meaningful dialogue (Boud & Falchikov, 2007). This creates a paradox: the very models that are supposed to empower students are being introduced in ways that replicate existing power imbalances. Even when institutions talk about partnership, they often retain control, limiting student participation to superficial inputs rather than inviting them into the deep work of co-creating curriculum, assessments, and learning environments. True partnership demands a shift in power dynamics—something that many educators and institutions are reluctant to take on or perhaps even aware of.

This mindset overlooks the value of students’ lived experiences and the rich perspectives they can bring to the learning process (Dunne & Zandstra, 2011). In this context, innovation and experimentation are sidelined in favour of practices that are easy to measure, replicate, and compare. Co-creation is inherently complex and demands flexibility, dialogue, and time—resources that are scarce in environments where educators are under pressure to deliver results quickly and uniformly, resulting in the space for authentic student partnership shrinking. Ultimately, the concept of students as co-creators in assessment and feedback is not new but an old problem unchallenged thus, remaining more of an idea than a widespread reality, resulting in an underutilised pedagogical approach despite decades of educational research emphasising its importance which advocates for participatory, learner-centred approaches where students have agency in their own learning (Li, 2020; Torres-Olave, 2020). The benefits are clear: when students co-create assessments and contribute to feedback processes, they are active collaborators in shaping how their learning is assessed and understood. This motivates, engages, and brings critical awareness of their own learning. For real change to happen, we need a cultural shift that goes beyond policy. This requires rethinking not just what we assess, but how we approach assessment design from the start. Rather than

seeing students as subjects to be measured, we should see them as partners in creating a more relevant and responsive educational experience. A potential call to action is to enact critical pedagogy in higher education – in the words of Smith and Seal is “a way of re-thinking about curriculum development that moves from seeing curriculum as a straitjacket, to a curriculum that builds on experiences and cultivates hope” (Smith & Seal, 2021, p. 2). Educators must re-think and reflect on their influence and position and how they approach curriculum development in a way that moves from seeing it as a constraint, to a something that builds on experiences and cultivates change.

But whose voices are we including and representing in these partnerships? Who is having this open narrative and working partnership with students? Who decides which students are included? Who benefits?

Marginalised student voices are often missing in the co-creation of assessment and feedback practices due to deeply ingrained structural biases, a lack of inclusive educational practices, and tokenistic framework approaches to diversity (Louth et al., 2019). Traditional educational systems are shaped by cis-normative perspectives, which overlook the unique needs and insights of our diverse student body. If we continue to maintain a homogenous staffing base and pipeline, we risk fostering groupthink, a stagnant culture, and a collective failure to perceive important nuances—resulting from narrow perspectives. Consequently, assessment practices are designed within a framework that assumes a homogenous student experience, ignoring the challenges faced by our diverse student cohort. Moreover, even when diversity initiatives are introduced, they tend to focus on broad categories without meaningfully engaging marginalised students in decision-making processes. This results in a disconnect between the lived experiences/needs of students and the assessment criteria used to support and evaluate their work. The absence of their voices in co-creation perpetuates educational practices that are not fully inclusive, limiting opportunities for equitable assessment and ultimately attainment.

How can we change the mindset rather than make a set of tick box rules, to truly implement inclusive assessment and feedback practices? What practical mechanisms can educators adopt to meet the call for change?

To address this, it is crucial for institutions to actively engage with and understand our diverse student cohort, include them as partners, ensuring their perspectives shape the design and implementation of assessments. This requires moving beyond tokenism to embrace genuine dialogue, allowing their voices to challenge and transform the traditional structures that continue to marginalise them in education (Healy & Healy, 2018). Assessment design is still largely controlled by educators and institutional policies rather than developed in genuine partnership with students. In many cases, students are consulted, but this consultation is often tokenistic, treating student input as a box to be ticked rather than as valuable expertise. Currently, in our own practice we work with a diverse student group who are an educational consultancy group for the University of Glasgow, who are redeveloping current assessment provision and redesigning new assessment types to offer as alternative assessments. This group has begun the process of not only building awareness for academics but offering a collection of alternative provisions to offer their students reasonable adjustment to their assessments. These practical mechanisms are the start of how we can meet the needs of our diverse student cohort. However, generally, the co-creation process, when it does occur, tends to be

limited to specific projects or progressive pockets within institutions rather than being an embedded practice. To avoid turning inclusive assessment initiatives into mere pedagogical exercises, assessment for inclusion should encompass practices that extend beyond only assessment design. In settings where assessment design already supports learning goals and sustainability, promoting inclusivity requires prioritising anti-ableist efforts over further redesign. Key work by Nieminen provides five principles that allow educators to rethink inclusive assessment in higher education moving beyond ableism (Nieminen, 2022). A shared dialogue between Dr Elliott Spaeth and Professor Stella Jones-Devitt, could not ring truer - Academics should question their own practice and evaluate what inclusion looks like in their context, once they can (honestly and openly) do this they will notice what is going on and then and only then identify and address change for others to follow (Spaeth & Jones-Devitt, 2024).

However, these concerns overlook the transformative potential of student partnerships. When students are engaged as equal collaborators, they bring insights into how they learn best, what motivates them, and what feels most relevant to their academic and professional aspirations (University of Lincoln, 2010). This does not mean lowering standards; rather, it's about making assessments more meaningful and aligned with real-world applications. Instead of treating students as consumers or products of an educational system, partnership approaches recognise them as co-creators of knowledge, capable of contributing to more equitable and effective learning environments (Chilvers et al., 2021; Cook-Sather & Matthews, 2021; Healy et al., 2019).

Student partnership itself can be exclusive, ironically reproducing the very inequalities it aims to dismantle. Co-creation often requires a level of confidence, language, and access that not all students possess. Those who are already marginalised within the education system—students from underrepresented backgrounds, those with disabilities, gender diversity, international students, or those balancing study with other responsibilities—can be left out of these opportunities. True partnership must be inclusive, but too often, it privileges the voices of those who are already empowered. Only by confronting these barriers head-on and changing our mindset can we unlock the transformative potential of student partnership and create learning environments that are truly equitable, inclusive, and dynamic.

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