On the 14th of November 2014 we (Mark Kerrigan, Anglia Ruskin University and Duncan McKenna, University of Greenwich) delivered a keynote presentation on behalf of the Change Agents’ Network to close the 19th Annual SEDA conference. This was an exciting request as only a few weeks before we had heard the SEDA committee had approved our new Course: Institutional Change Leader. The timing was perfect.

The keynote, entitled: Where do we go from here? Meetings the challenges through partnership’ was written to explore some of the work of the network and discuss challenges the sector is facing and how we can work to overcome these. The talk focused on two core areas:

- Working in partnership to support the student experience
- Working in partnership to enhance staff and student digital literacy.

As well as activities from the network, the keynote also drew from experiences from the Jisc Summer of Innovation and the Digital Literacies in Transition project from the University of Greenwich.

The first part of the keynote explored some of the drivers of working in partnership, the work by the HEA, NUS & QAA and the journey institutions are taking from listening to a ‘voice’ to working together as academic communities. It struck me when writing the keynote that some of the work we are doing now is trying to recapture the spirit of the past when student groups were smaller and this supported academic partnership and engagement. The work we as a sector are doing now is transitioning to beyond purely academic partnerships, but it made me smile to see the pattern and visualise one possible image of success. Linked to this and how institutional-student partnerships are developing was the concept of what a true partnership looks like. Indeed, this was recently discussed in the HEA’s recent publication on partnership and the following few points (there are eight in total), identified on page four of the document resonate for me:

1. Authenticity
2. Inclusivity
3. Reciprocity
4. Trust

Having set the scene, we wanted to make the keynote interactive and generate ideas, which could feedback into the work of CAN and also SEDA. We therefore poised two challenges and asked people to share their ideas using #hashtags. These have been pulled together and recently circulated as a storify. We also risked the use of TwitterFall, which I have been hesitant to use since the ALT incident a few years ago but I am pleased to report everyone was very well behaved :-). So, what were the comments and ideas we received?
There was a strong indication of the potential of partnership around the co-design of the curriculum, including assessment and students taking responsibility. It was noted that this should be a true partnership and in the toolkit developed by Peter Chatterton there is a section on how to develop partnerships to ensure transparency and clear communication for all involved. Peter says, ‘We have captured good practice from a wide range of student partnership initiatives that have been running over the last few years. We’ve then distilled these into a series of hints and tips to support institutions to design and implement their own initiatives thus avoiding ‘re-inventing the wheel’.

From challenge 1, one of the most poignant comments for me was from Deena Ingham ‘...Do students want to be partners? This was a great question and the NUS have highlighted in their recent publication (The Principles of Student Engagement: The Student Engagement Conversation 2014) the importance of partnerships: ‘Students will invest substantial commitment and time into getting the right qualifications and building their life pathway so it’s critical they are able to make informed choices before and during their study programmes. It’s essential that their voices are heard and not just by means of a survey at the end of their course. Education is personal and the university experience should be enhanced through radical, inclusive and transformative learning experiences. For the first time, students’ unions too now carry a clear expectation that they will support, facilitate and participate in engagement activity thus bringing them into the formal academic process in an unprecedented way’ (Megan Dunn, Vice-President Higher Education National Union of Students).

We then moved onto digital literacy and this is where I personally see a lot of potential for working in partnership. Indeed, some of the work we undertook showed that students expect DL development from the curriculum but are staff confident to ensure this? In a tweet by Elaine Swift, ‘partnership approach can help overcome of those confidence and competence issues with digital literacy’– was great to see. What I liked about this is that it did not say who needs this development - staff and students are a mixed bunch and there is a lot of potential for co-development. One person in the audience (Phil Race) went as far as to say, we cannot achieve digital literacy without working with students. I couldn’t agree more; with the rate that technology changes, and how students apply it to education, constant work is needed to ensure the system is agile enough to maintain currency.

So, what next? A tweet from Claire Taylor summed it up nicely: ‘Honesty is the best policy - things may not work but, hey, let’s journey together and explore!’

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