

Students as Partners: How the Student-centred Active Learning Concept May Help Indian Pharmacy Education

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ABSTRACT

The growing healthcare industry and the demand for a skilled workforce in India lead many students to enroll in medical and healthcare professional programmes. Pharmacy programmes in India prepare the students to deal with emerging opportunities in healthcare. Being a country with a great diversity of approaches, and the expectations of students from Generation Z, pharmacy education in India has an opportunity for rejuvenation to engage students in active learning. Educationalists and policymakers can explore to engage the current generation of students, who have a motivation to intervene with institutions and authorities. 'Students as Partners' is an emerging concept re-positions students as active partners to enrich students' learning experiences. There are four areas of partnership within the 'Students as Partners' conceptual model; these are 'Teaching and learning including assessment', 'Subject-based research and inquiry', 'Scholarship of teaching and learning', and 'Curriculum design and pedagogic consultancy'. The perceptions and willingness of stakeholders toward student engagement through the partnership will be the key to the success of the 'Students as Partners' concept in India. To promote student-centered active learning in pharmacy programmes, institutions and academic staff can consider strategies to engage students in their learning process. This paper discusses how the students as partner concept can be implemented in the Indian Pharmacy education setting to enhance students' learning experiences.

Keywords: Student engagement, Partnership, Pharmacy education, Active learning, Adult learning, Teaching and learning.

INTRODUCTION

India, a developing country, has a population of 1.3 billion, with a median age of about 28, and produces millions of graduates every year.¹ The country faces a high disease burden,² and the fast-growing Indian healthcare industry is struggling to provide equitable health care access to its population.³ Major demand in the Indian healthcare sector is work-ready skilled graduates. In response to this, students in India are showing greater enthusiasm for medical and allied health professional degrees in their undergraduate and postgraduate education. Like other healthcare professional programmes, pharmacy is one of the choices for students every year.

Approximately 200,000 pharmacy graduates are produced in a year, as there are more than 1500 institutions offering pharmacy programmes in India.⁴ As pharmaceutical industries in India continue to evolve, and the professional roles of pharmacists in health care research are emerging, pharmacy education in the country has transformed and offers various undergraduate and postgraduate programmes.

This accelerated growth of pharmacy institutions with a growing proportion of students demands a new approach to delivering curricula that address students' career ambitions. There is a need to discuss the importance of students' existing

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knowledge and skills and incorporate active learning through engagement. The recent advancements in the healthcare sector and the demand for evidence-based and collaborative clinical practice now expect pharmacy graduates to have a patient-centered approach. Advances in educational approaches suggest that students should be engaged in playing substantive roles in their learning,⁵ and advocate active learning through a student-centered approach.⁶ These approaches focus on implementing an innovative pedagogy to engage students actively during their learning. To enrich students' learning experience at the undergraduate level, their academic experiences can be connected with their personal experiences with the help of technology-enhanced learning.

Effective student engagement in scholarly activities provides a great opportunity for the students to play an effective role in their learning and also creates a sense of belonging among the students to increase their academic achievement.⁷⁻⁸

To implement such an educational reform there is a possibility of reluctance from students and staff about the introduction of any new concepts in teaching and learning activities. Also, the number of students in each cohort/class may be a hindrance. The support from the stakeholders for implementation is also significant. However, these could be overcome by refining the teaching and learning delivery methods to engage in partnership practices.

As the diversity and size of the student population in Indian pharmacy education is large, there is a need to review the ways that students can be engaged in active learning. This article focuses on how the newly-emerging 'Students as Partners' concept can be implemented in the Indian pharmacy education setting.

Introduction to 'Students as Partners'

Student engagement is one of the defining characteristics of students' learning experience in higher education institutions. As a part of the student engagement strategy, the 'Students as Partners' concept has received much attention in many higher education institutions. It is an evolving pedagogical approach, providing a space for scholars and academic institutions to collaborate to enrich students' learning experiences.⁹⁻¹⁰ According to Cook-Sather (2014), 'Students as Partners' is a collaborative, reciprocal process through which all stakeholders have the opportunity to contribute to the process of learning. The contribution ranges from conceptualization towards curriculum and teaching methods, decision-making, operation, research, or evaluation.¹¹ Apart from teachers and students, this process also includes others, such as administrative staff, senior managers, students' unions,

to benefit from the process of learning and working together.¹⁰ This idea has bloomed in international policies and is practiced in many universities, primarily in the US, the UK, Canada, and Australia.^{8,12} A study from Australia revealed that the students go ahead of just consultation, participation, or representation in decision-making. When there was a partnership, students identified key areas for enhancement and identified their own ways to carry out improvement and implementation wherever possible.¹³ A study from UK stated that effective partnership practices recognised and supported the emotional well-being of both the student as well as the staff members.¹⁴ A study from the US stated that students as partners in the programme were interesting and spurred the participants to think broadly about programme-level teaching, learning, and assessment.¹⁵ A study from Canada revealed that staff-student partnership practice has been deployed in higher education contexts, which include curriculum design, pedagogic consultancy, teaching, learning and assessment, subject-based research and inquiry, and the scholarship of teaching and learning.¹⁶

The sequence of student engagement that includes student partnership is shown in Figure 1.¹⁷

DISCUSSION

Opportunities are given for students to provide their opinions and voice their trepidations

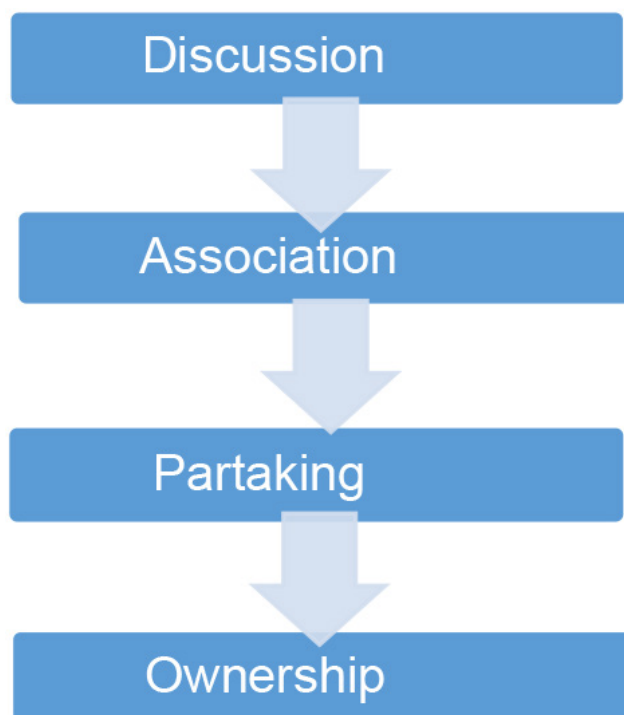


Figure 1: Sequence of student engagement.

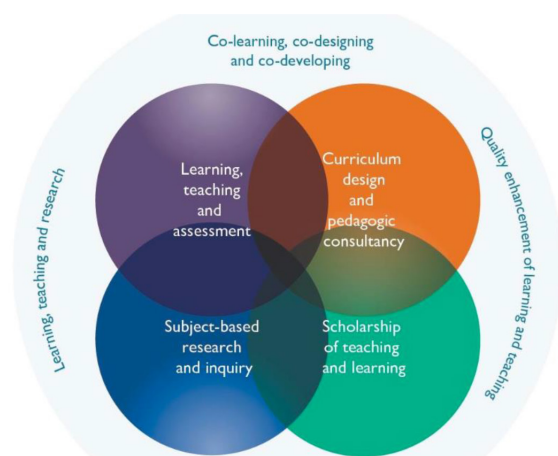


Figure 2: Engaging students as partners (Reprinted with permission from the author Mick Healey).

Association: Opportunities are given for students to take a distinct and active role

Partaking: Students can make decisions and actively participate in their role

Ownership: Students involved can take ownership of the process and outcome of the collaboration

According to Healey *et al.*, there are four areas of partnership within the ‘Students as Partners’ conceptual model, as shown in Figure 2.¹⁸

As per this model, all four areas are interrelated, and engaging students as partners is a complex activity. The three outer rings, ‘teaching, learning and research’, ‘quality improvement of learning and teaching’, ‘co-learning, co-designing and co-developing’ denote the ways to involve ‘Students as Partners’.¹⁸

TEACHING, LEARNING, AND ASSESSMENT

Student engagement is important to provide motivational support. Students who take part in their own learning through partnership with teachers may challenge the existing ways of being, doing, and thinking. It helps teachers to include learning contexts based on students’ interests. ‘Autonomy support’ and ‘structure’ provided by teachers promote students’ engagement in learning activities.¹⁹ Peer-teaching and peer-assessment are other effective approaches to involve students in their teaching and learning.²⁰

Academic activities are seen as interdependent activities, and students’ active participation in such activities creates opportunities for them to take ownership of their learning.²¹⁻²² The main factor in active learning is the link between the activities in which the students take part and their learning processes. Students are able to learn through building their individual knowledge,

linking new ideas, and applying new knowledge in their practices.

The multi-dimensional pharmacy curriculum in India provides a great opportunity for students to act as a partner. To encourage active learning and student engagement, in addition to the current collaborative learning practices, several teaching and learning activities such as role-play, flipped class, technology-enhanced learning, case-based learning, and gamification can be used. Providing students with pre-reading materials such as handouts, research articles, weblinks, and other educational resources may help them to be exposed to the topic prior to the actual teaching and learning sessions. This will create an opportunity to understand the topic and encourage them to discuss the related problems and concerns.

The growing importance of assessment in education has increased the assessment-related terminology and concepts.²³ Formative assessment, assessing students’ progress and their understanding of a subject will allow students to better understand the assessment. This may support students to learn better. However, the level of students’ understanding of assessment should be considered before asking them to become involved in the assessment. Students can be involved in designing the assessment criteria and marking schemes with staff members.²⁴ In addition to this, self-assessment and peer-assessment are types of student-centered assessments, which assist students to identify their strengths and weaknesses and the areas that need improvement.²⁵

SUBJECT-BASED RESEARCH AND INQUIRY

Students can be engaged through research projects to establish a partnership.²⁶ This may develop a link between teachers and students and promote student learning through inquiry.²⁷ Currently, the undergraduate and postgraduate pharmacy programmes in India include a research project as a part of the curriculum, where students are required to do a research project with a supervisor from their faculty members. Students are able to work with their research supervisors as co-researchers,²⁸ and find this opportunity valuable. The research projects are also providing students autonomy over their research and offer a reliable research experience.

The following are the various forms of the curriculum that may help to establish students as partners in research and inquiry.²⁸ In a *research-led curriculum*, students learn about the various research that contributes to the developments of their discipline; this will ensure that the students’ learning reflects current. In a *research-*

oriented curriculum, research competencies and techniques can be learned by students, which may help them to acquire knowledge and the capacity to undertake various research methodologies in their discipline. In a *research-based curriculum*, students become producers of knowledge, although this is probably applicable only at the postgraduate level. In a *research-tutored curriculum*, students and teachers can critically discuss the ongoing research in their discipline. As the pharmacy programme comprises different areas of expertise, institutions can decide on the most appropriate type of research curriculum in discussions with their stakeholders.

SCHOLARSHIP OF TEACHING AND LEARNING

The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) has been established as a practice that encourages inquiry in higher education and is usually undertaken by academic staff members. The research focus is on what and how students are learning within a discipline.²⁹ In order to have a successful teaching practice, SoTL must be transactional and steering in partnership with the students.³⁰ SoTL engages students as research participants, who can share their experience of teaching and learning activities. In such activities, students are considered as ‘change agents’ and are able to provide recommendations for the enhancement of teaching and learning.³¹ This effort to engage students in research related to teaching and learning helps them to develop new ideas and to co-create content for teaching in the future.²¹ Using SoTL, students may become evidence-based change agents and will receive an opportunity to get involved in decision-making processes. This may lead them to provide contextual cues about learning environments beyond the classroom. The teacher-student relationship in education is important in promoting active learning.³² There is a need for evidence-based approaches while making important decisions on the development and implementation of new teaching and learning activities.

CURRICULUM DESIGN AND PEDAGOGIC CONSULTANCY

At present, especially at the undergraduate level, the pharmacy curriculum consists of pharmaceuticals, pharmaceutical chemistry, pharmacology, and pharmacognosy. As pharmacists are currently extending their professional roles to meet the changing healthcare needs, the opinion of stakeholders from the various industries and academic experts can be incorporated in a student-centered pedagogical approach.³³ Co-creation in curriculum designing allows having a balanced control

for students and teachers over decision-making.³⁴ The levels of partnership between teachers and students depend on the perspective, study discipline, students’ and teachers’ experiences, and the professional bodies’ influence over the curriculum.³⁵

CURRENT CHALLENGES AND POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

Higher education institutions are aiming to provide a better learning environment for their students, especially in the current scenario, where students and parents are thinking about the value of the money they spend and are expecting a better quality of education. All the teachers are content experts and they are responsible to share their expertise with students; the role of students is to consume knowledge from teachers. This is based on the culture in the educational organisation. The students need to be trained to come out of their comfort zones and be able to think critically and receive feedback on their work, for active learning.³⁶

Working with a partnership approach, involving students as partners will be able to provide possible solutions through thinking and acting in a different way, adopting the problems as challenges, and learning from them. This will provide opportunities to create useful partnerships between teachers and students. The concept of ‘Students as Partners’ may lead the students to take more responsibilities for their learning.³⁷

With this partnership approach, there is a space for new learning, and there can be an educational transformation of higher education. Although such initiatives in higher education can bring fundamental change among students and institutions, in real life, it is a complex process.³⁸ Taylor and Robinson (2011) mentioned that student engagement is challenging and the best possible way to make it a reality is to practice it.³⁹

The differences in the perception of students and teachers about engagement, partnership, and practice. The willingness for a change may vary between each person and these can cause differences among partners to begin the process. A possible solution for a successful partnership may require awareness of professional sensitivity to the differences in opinions of different parties and by the complexity of conceptual change that is needed for the partnership in any activity.⁴⁰

‘Students as Partners’ in the learning environment may question the continuation of the partnership mainly due to the limited time spent by the students in their institution. Sustainability and transition are linked to the nature of the partnership that is established.⁹ If the partnership is implanted in the curriculum through pedagogies and research-based learning, then students

can be involved as a partner. A study from Canada stated the challenges in the staff-student partnership. In that study, participants mentioned time and funding as the two key deterrents while implementing partnerships. Though there is no clear solution for these issues, there are positive things reported by the study participants. The participants have mentioned that networking and exchange are valuable for professional development and student-staff partnerships endeavour to engage in and support.¹⁶ On the other hand, if the partnership comprises discrete initiatives, and depends on the efforts of individuals, then becomes challenging to sustain and mainstream these activities.

SCOPE OF 'STUDENTS AS PARTNERS' IN PHARMACY EDUCATION IN INDIA

The curriculum of pharmacy programmes in India has covered all major disciplines of pharmacy in various semesters/years. The delivery of the programmes mainly through courses/subjects and research projects. The current concept of 'Students as Partners', proposes that the students are co-producers and collaborators in pharmacy education. There were reports from various countries that supported this concept. A study by Martens *et al.*, observed that students indeed valued the presence of such partnerships, and felt that they could offer a unique perspective on educational improvement.⁴⁰ Cook-Sather *et al.*, (2014) mentioned that students should participate equally, although not necessarily in the same ways.¹¹

Curran suggested that the partnership between students and academic staff has the potential to enhance the skills, motivation, and self-efficacy of both students and staff.⁴¹ Therefore, in order to implement this concept in Indian pharmacy education settings, future studies to investigate students' and academic staff members' perceptions of student-staff partnerships in pharmacy education are needed.

CONCLUSION

To make pharmacy education more attractive, the traits of pharmacy education, in India need to shift from pedagogical to andragogical approaches. A fresh approach such as 'Students as Partners' to promote active learning among the current generation of pharmacy students could be considered to create an opportunity for teachers and students to work together to supplement their teaching and learning experiences. 'Students as Partners' concept could provide fruitful outcomes from staff-student partnerships such as engagement, awareness, and enhancement. Educationalists and

policymakers, need to identify current issues in the education system and in-depth research needs to be explored on the conceptions of 'Students as Partners' to transform the scenario of pharmacy education in India.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

ABBREVIATIONS

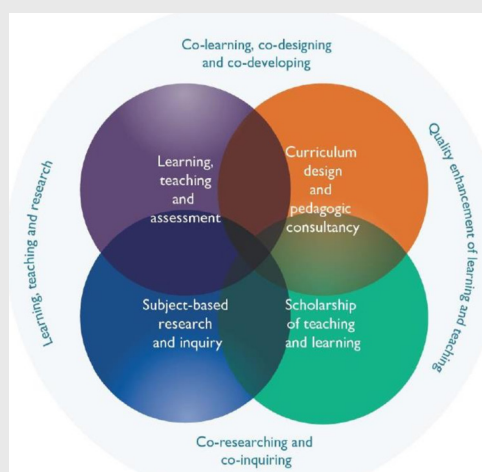
SoTL: Scholarship of Teaching and Learning.

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PICTORIAL ABSTRACT



SUMMARY

"Students as partners" is a comparatively new rationale for pedagogy in higher education. This method may re-position students as active collaborators in the distinct methods of teaching and learning, inspiring students to be actively involved in, and stake the accountability for, their own education.

About Authors



Kingston Rajiah is an educationalist and researcher with more than 15 years of experience whose research areas are public health, social pharmacy, health services research, determinants of health and pharmacy education. Under these themes, he is expertise in qualitative and quantitative methods. Much of his work has been on understanding perceptions and behaviours of the patients, public, healthcare professionals and health care students



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