

Designing and Facilitating External Partner-Based Pedagogy in Higher Education: Implications for Authentic Learning, Student Engagement, and Perceived Relevance

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The European Conference on Education 2026
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

Higher Education institutions are under increasing pressure to design learning experiences that engage students and demonstrate relevance to professional and societal contexts. Traditional classroom-based pedagogies have been criticised for limiting authentic learning and reinforcing a divide between academic knowledge and professional practice. External partner-based pedagogy, in which students collaborate with industry, community, or professional partners, offers a means of bridging this gap. Grounded in experiential and constructivist learning theories, such approaches require educators to act as designers, facilitators, and boundary-spanners between institutional and external contexts. This reflective study draws on the design and delivery of external partner-based learning activities across ten postgraduate life sciences courses in Scotland. Using reflection from staff observations, we examined student engagement during the course, the provision of authentic learning scenarios, and perceived relevance to learning outcomes. External partners contributed specialist expertise, real-world problem-solving activities, and employability-focused sessions, supporting a Trilateral Model of Benefits in which students, educators, and partners benefit reciprocally. Findings indicate that student motivation and attendance were highest when external sessions aligned clearly with module learning outcomes and assessments. When external speakers challenged students with real-life problems, engagement, participation, and depth of discussion increased. Exposure to diverse professional perspectives enhanced confidence, informed career decisions, and strengthened perceptions of curricular relevance. Overall, engaging external partners provides powerful opportunities for authentic learning and sustained engagement in postgraduate life sciences education. However, engagement becomes harder as cohort size increases, requiring integration, communication, and innovative approaches to scaling across programmes.

Keywords: external partners, higher education, authentic learning, employability

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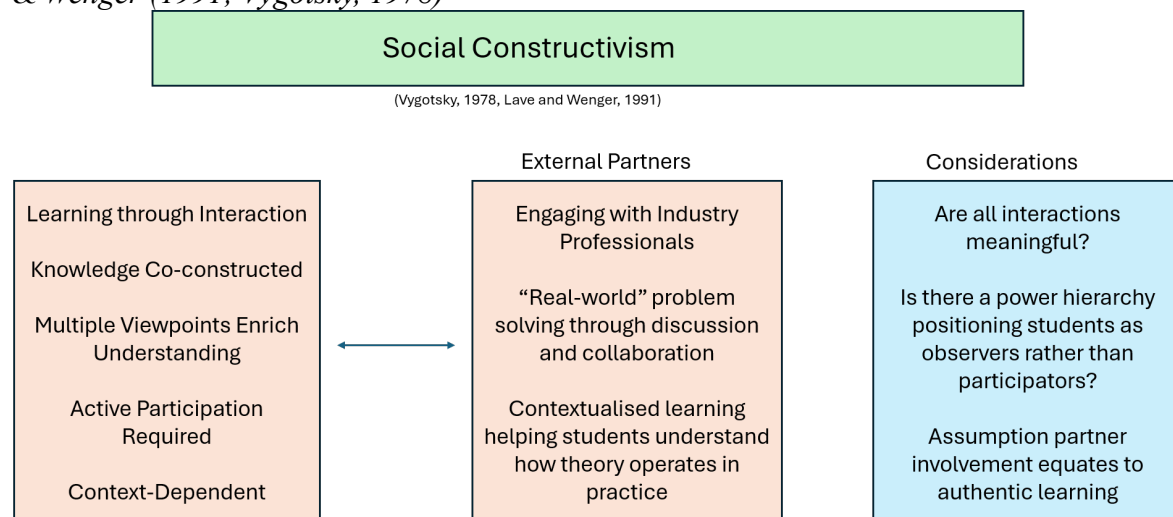
Introduction

Higher Education (HE) institutions are increasingly challenged to design learning experiences that meaningfully engage students and demonstrate clear relevance to professional and societal contexts. Traditional classroom-based pedagogies have been criticised for their limiting authentic learning and reinforcing a separation between academic knowledge and professional practice. External partner-based pedagogy, where students collaborate with industry, community, or professional partners, has emerged as a promising approach to bridging this theory–practice divide (Marshall, 2018). Grounded in experiential and constructivist learning theories, such approaches require educators to adopt expanded roles as designers, facilitators, and boundary-spanners between institutional and external contexts (**Figure 1**) (Kolb, 2015; Piaget, 1973). Drawing on the design and facilitation of external partner-based learning activities implemented across ten postgraduate life sciences courses, this reflective study explores the implications for authentic learning, student engagement, and perceptions of curricular relevance. Through critical reflection on teaching practice across multiple disciplinary contexts within the life sciences, the paper contributes insights into the opportunities and challenges of scaling and sustaining partner-based pedagogy in contemporary HE.

The aims of this study are to provide a reflection on the benefits and shortcomings of engaging with external partners in the provision of post-graduate teaching in Higher Education for authentic learning, student engagement, and perceived relevance. We also aim to provide suggestions for those wishing to engage with external partners in different capacities with regards to level of engagement, good academic practice and recruitment.

Figure 1

Social Constructivism Theory and Its Applications for This Study. Based on Studies by Lave & Wenger (1991; Vygotsky, 1978)



Methodology

British universities often engage with external speakers to provide specialist teaching and increase employability. Postgraduate (PGT) degrees are encouraged to provide real life-based scenarios to improve student engagement and employability options.

We reflect (Kane et al., 2004) on observations made by academic staff across ten different life sciences PGT courses in Scotland, and as former students. Using published literature on education, we inform and suggest applications to teaching in Higher Education PGT degrees.

We observed and compared student engagement during sessions and post-class, authentic learning scenario provision, and perceived relevance to student learning based on learning outcomes.

Reflection

How the Experience as a Former Student Influences and Affects Course Design

One author's previous experience in a collaborative programme as a student reported a consistently positive experience when engaging with external partners. This is based on external speakers bringing expert knowledge, non-traditional ways of presenting, and site-visits. This led to them feeling more comfortable in the knowledge they were receiving the best education possible, it helped inspire interests that would otherwise have remained undiscovered, and ultimately led them to where they are today with aspects of their education still actively influencing their own teaching practice and playing a role in their development as an educator. As such, we have looked into our experiences as educators in developing collaborative programmes.

Selecting External Partners

The process of recruitment and selection of external partners is crucial from the first engagement. We must state that some external partners were contacted by university staff due to expertise, but some initiated contact with the academic staff prior to recruitment. As such, reflections and suggestions for engagement will be done for both circumstances.

Recruitment of External Partners: Academic Staff Initiates Engagement

Engagement with external partners is more commonly initiated by the academic staff involved in content development and teaching, in our experience. As a course is being designed, staff develop expectations of what is being taught to fulfil the intended learning outcomes (ILOs). As such, staff may want to engage with support from experts in the field who can provide a level of depth and understanding based on real-life scenarios.

Reasons for initial approach may include previous knowledge of their work, previous collaborations, networking, web searches for field of expertise. Our selection criteria was based on current role and current employment and relevant experience in the field of interest. We also welcome previous experience in delivering academic sessions.

Recruitment of External Partners: External Partners Initiate Engagement

Less frequently, external partners interested in collaborative work may contact us. Previously they have shown an interest in engaging with academia for networking and promoting roles within their industry. Some have queried about engaging at a deeper level due to skills gaps they found in recent graduates employed within their industry, and recommend content they deem useful for future employability. Should interests align and the external partner be properly vetted, we then initiate the next stage of selection.

Initial Meeting

From our experience, we have found that it is important to have an initial meeting at least three months prior to teaching taking place. In this initial session, both parties (academic staff and external partners) agree in the content to be delivered in the context of the course and programme overall. It is important to ascertain that academic staff has control of the decision due to standards in academic practice needing to be maintained (see “*Ensuring teaching parity and academic standards*” below). Academic staff should highlight the ILOs for the session and the overall course to ensure all are met adequately. From previous experience and student reports, we have acknowledged the importance of presenting the intended assessments for the course to the external partner in medium and high engagement agreements (**Figure 2**). Where assessments were not previously discussed, students reported a disconnect from the sessions and, at times, a lack of understanding of where the session fitted into the overall course or its purpose as it did not contribute to the final assessment in any form.

Levels of Engagement

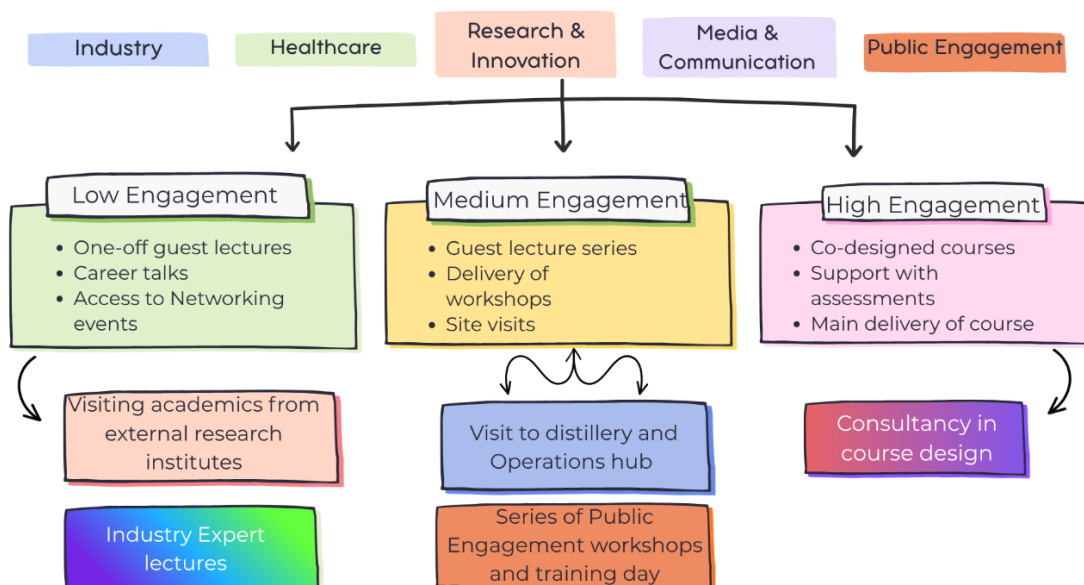
Our team established three levels of engagement from external partners through different collaborations (**Figure 2**). The most common is low engagement (**Figure 2**, green) where guests may provide a one-off lecture, a career talk, or access to a networking event. This is where we see visiting academics visiting from external research institutions or universities, or industry experts. In the courses provided by the authors, this was mostly done in industry-related, healthcare, and research and innovation courses.

Medium engagement (**Figure 2**, yellow) has external speakers provide 2 or more lectures, deliver workshops or provide site visits. As such, students have a higher level of engagement with the external partner and more opportunities for networking while querying about careers in the field. Our observations show that students have higher motivation in these sessions as they become more familiar with the speakers and have higher levels of confidence in their interactions. Examples of medium engagement in our courses were a series of Public Engagement workshops with an external partner, and a site visit to a distillery and operations hub following a lecture by an external speaker. This level of engagement was seen in courses related to industry field and Public Engagement.

The highest level of engagement (**Figure 2**, pink) we have experienced was where external partners supported the course design where these are mostly skills-based. Their advice helped create courses that promote employable skills, and create assessments that are similar and applicable to those experienced in professional careers, such as the creation of social media campaigns and interpretations of analytics from these. In some cases, the external partner may be the provider of the main content of the course in the presence of academic staff. The fields where we observed this were public engagement, and media and communication (**Figure 2**).

Figure 2

Level of Engagement From External Partners and Examples of Contributions to Teaching



Ensuring Teaching Parity and Academic Standards

The academic team from relevant courses delivers most of the content on the course, but to ensure teaching parity and academic standards, also attends sessions provided by external partners. We engaged with partners who could provide personal and professional experience, deliver teaching and student-centred, active learning experience (Marshall, 2018). This also contributes to a Trilateral Model of Benefits (Zou et al., 2019), promoting reciprocal benefits where specialised teaching is provided, students learn from real-life scenarios, and external speakers become potential employers. Two courses added specialised sessions for students to work on CVs and interview skills with employers.

“When working in partnership, the awarding organisation retains responsibility for the academic standards of its awards, ensuring that the threshold standards for its qualifications are consistent with the relevant national qualification frameworks” (UKSCQA, 2023). As the qualifying organisation, it is the academic staff’s responsibility to ensure there is compliance with the regulations.

As the qualifying organisation, we take the following steps to ensure academic standards and teaching parity: Follow the Quality Code for Higher Education; development of ILOs in line with Bloom's taxonomy guidelines (Adams, 2015) for PGT/SCQF degrees; set ILOs for individual sessions or multiple session contributions from External partners; conduct assessments (both formative and summative); attend all guest sessions to help field questions from students.

Real-Life Scenario Enactment in Class

Example 1: Editorial Meetings

In 2 of our courses in Media and Communications (**Figure 2**) we run weekly “Editorial Meetings.” These aim to mimic a real-life scenario presented in journalism and social media

communications fields. In the academic sense, these help support the students with their assessments and provide formative feedback (Beaumont et al., 2011). In both courses, students are presented with the assessment on the first session of the course to allow time to become familiar with the assessment brief, and to start thinking about their topic of interest. In the first editorial meetings, students pitch their idea as they would a story or a campaign to a board of peers and both academic staff and the external partner. Everyone is invited to provide constructive feedback and suggest changes where needed. We emphasise the importance of everyone being able to participate while maintaining cordiality and professionalism. Staff monitors and intervenes should there be any potential conflict.

In subsequent meetings, the time is used to show what the student has been working on, and receive constructive feedback. The benefits of this format, as observed by staff, are that the real-life simulation presents a low-pressure environment and more students engage and participate than when feedback is provided mainly by a member of staff. Students receive support with assessments from staff, but also from peers. This also provides an opportunity to network with a potential employer while displaying learnt skills throughout the course.

Example 2: Public Engagement Activity

In another course (in Public Engagement – **Figure 2**) the students work in collaboration with both an external partner and an internal partner over 10 weeks to design and deliver an activity for a public science event. Over this period, students have regular meetings with the festival organisers to pitch group activity ideas, and further to consider health and safety, audiences, materials needed, and so on. Members of academic staff are present in all meetings and communications to ensure activities stay aligned with the course aims and ILOs. It is worth noting that the assessments are the developed activity plan, and a reflection on the activity delivery to the general public while analysing feedback from participants.

The benefits we observed were that students develop valuable skills in event planning, science communication and project management, gain confidence in presenting complex scientific concepts, build professional networks, and reflect on the event and its effectiveness to support students in recognising and articulating skills they have developed.

Benefits of the Different Types of Collaboration

Reflective analysis showed that allowing students to apply theoretical knowledge in practical settings deepened understanding and engagement where external speakers play a nuanced role in motivation and influencing educational outcomes. Our experience has shown that, when external speakers challenge students with real life-based problems, the cohort engaged greatly and was participative, actively discussing possible solutions. The class was more active and proactive in conversations while being exposed to various teaching styles, points of view, and opinions from experts in topics that they would not have otherwise experienced. This helped inform and influence decisions regarding their future, allowing them to communicate with people with varied and interesting academic journeys and backgrounds.

Studies have shown that guest speaker sessions can impact understanding of the real world and improve motivation (Pepple et al., 2025). Our observations show student motivation and attendance fluctuates under unknown circumstances, even when sessions are deemed compulsory when not connected to the assessments, therefore it is important for speakers to be

aware of the module requirements. Career talks are also seen as valuable networking opportunities.

Future Directions

Our observations have greatly influenced our approach to teaching and engaging with external partners. The experience has been largely positive, and we will continue to do so. The next steps in our own learning are to investigate the student experience through surveys and determine whether our observations match their experience. We would also like to look into alumni employability to determine whether the presence and networking with external partners influenced the careers after graduation.

Suggestions for Other Educators in Higher Education

Our experiences have helped shape our programmes and courses, from development to delivery. We review the collaborations yearly and take into account student feedback from student-staff meetings with the class representatives and from end-of-course surveys.

We found that support from external partners is essential in providing real-life experiences. We also saw more problem-solving exercises being presented to students. Students get a good picture of what real-life meetings look like in industry. We observed more engagement in class, with students posing more questions and networking for potential collaborations and employment. Attendance was higher on days where external partners were delivering sessions – but only if advertised to students in advance.

Collaborations support teaching in a positive manner, but agreements have to be made in advance. It is important to discuss what externals will deliver and how it connects to assessments and ILOs, and the overall course. There has to be a willingness on both parts to meet frequently and discuss problems as they come. Educators should be aware of GDPR and data management regulations (HESA, n.d.), especially in medium to high levels of engagement as student information should remain protected at all costs. We strongly recommend a member of staff is present in all sessions to monitor the content, ensure it connects to the assessments, learn so that assessments can be marked to a high standard of knowledge.

It is also advisable that staff make it clear to students that assessments queries should be sent to academic team as they have the oversight needed. Where it was not properly communicated in what capacity students should contact external partners or academic staff, we saw a mismatch of information being provided in places. As such, it is important that students know to contact external partners about content and employment, but assessments, extensions, illness and so on should only be communicated to academic staff.

Conclusion

Engaging external partners in HE offers powerful opportunities for authentic learning and sustained student engagement. Our reflections across postgraduate life sciences courses show that when sessions align closely with learning outcomes, students connect theory with practice more deeply and develop a stronger sense of professional relevance. Collaboration with industry and community experts also broadens perspectives and nurtures confidence in career pathways. The difficulty of ensuring meaningful engagement scales with the size of the programme, smaller cohorts naturally able to have more contact time with external contributors

than larger cohorts. Therefore, to maximise impact, such activities should remain purposeful, clearly communicated, and inclusive. Future practice should explore how these approaches can be scaled sustainably, ensuring that the benefits of authentic, partner-based learning extend across programmes and disciplines.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

The authors declare that no AI or AI-assisted technologies have been used to generate, refine, or correct the content in the manuscript. The ideas, design, procedures, findings, analyses, and discussion are originally written and derived from careful and systematic conduct of the research.

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