REFLECTIVE PIECE

Negotiating Informed Consent: A Students-as-Partners Perspective

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We co-author and co-research together: Emily Pridgen, an undergraduate student in the English department at the University of North Georgia (UNG) and Michael Rifenburg, a tenured associate professor also in the English department at UNG. We entered into our partnership to assess curricular changes a faculty-only committee implemented in a compulsory first-year writing course, called English 1101, at UNG. Michael served as co-chair of this faculty-only committee and helped implement specific revisions to English 1101 that instructors adopted in pilot sections. When it came time to assess the effectiveness of these pilot sections, Michael connected with Emily to design an assessment effort that involved undergraduate researchers interviewing undergraduate students in pilot English 1101 courses.

We chose to work in partnership because we both believed in the importance of faculty and students laboring together to understand better the effectiveness of a redesigned course. We believed in the power of a Students-as-Partners (SaP) approach to yield robust insight into the learning experiences of the many students learning and writing in these redesigned English 1101 courses. We are and were inspired by Bourke, Rainier, and de Vries's (2018) call to "reconceptualize both assessment and learning in higher education" (para. 1). Even though we were unsure of how to design a study together and even though we were unsure of how to navigate the institutionally embedded hierarchies that place faculty over students, we believed faculty and student partnership in research on assessment could help us arrive at these rich accounts of learning. The complex and unpredictable partnership we developed was particularly helpful in how we navigated the necessary US federal government regulations and local university regulations governing human subject research.

What we aim to capture in this reflective essay is our belief that undergraduates are better positioned than faculty members to navigate, again and again, the challenging waters of receiving informed consent from undergraduate research participants. Even after the ink dries on the signed consent document, undergraduate students are better positioned to continue checking in and listening and feeling for microwithdrawals wherein the research participant, even though the form is signed, may signal with their body, their breath, or their indirect words that they no longer wish to participate in the study. We unpack the reasons behind our belief in the following paragraphs.

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BACKGROUND

Following Bivens (2018), we use the term "microwithdrawals" to capture these embodied cues that indicate that students no longer wish to participate in studies. In her work on conducting human subject research in a neonatal intensive care unit affiliated with the University of Copenhagen, Bivens called on researchers to notice the "microwithdrawals of consent." She understood these to be "implied or partial halt of a person's willingness to participate in one or more aspects of the research process and the researcher's awareness of that withdrawal" (pp. 138-139). Bivens stated that researchers need to stay attuned to the participant's body language and vocal tone to notice when participants may want to withdraw consent but do not explicitly say so.

Through reading Bivens and reflecting on our partnership together, we arrived at two beliefs:

- We believe informed consent for in-person interviews is fluid and ever changing—not concluded once the research participant signs the consent document; and
- We believe undergraduate students working as partners with faculty on research projects are well equipped to listen for microwithdrawals during in-person interviews.

But how did we get here, to these two beliefs, during our year-long student-faculty partnership? What are the reasons for the claims we make? We have two memories that, in hindsight, we believe led us to our claims.

Memory 1: We are sitting outside of the library at a black round metal table, the chairs also black and metal. Our table is covered in papers. It's 1 PM. We can't remember what day of the week. Perhaps a Tuesday? We are talking about how to code our forthcoming interview transcripts. We haven't conducted the interviews yet; they are scheduled for next week. But we found a slice of time to talk in person amid our busy teaching and learning and parenting and working schedules. We are flipping through Saldaña's (2015) *Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*. We look at In Vivo coding, where the researcher makes use of the participants' own language to form coded themes. Michael is thinking about the coding method with which he is most familiar. Emily's voice breaks Michael's mental musing. She says, *if we are wanting to get students' voices in our project, it makes sense to let their voices form the themes*. Michael was stuck on what made sense to him; Emily was focusing on what makes sense for the research participants. The student was advocating for the student. This exchange allowed us to consider how advocacy enters into the informed consent process and enters into the interview itself where the student partner keeps the focus on the student being interviewed throughout the interview.

Roughly a month after this memory, Michael will read a book chapter about microwithdrawals in qualitative research. He will think of Emily's advocacy of the student research participants' voices and perspectives. He will think of informed consent. Roughly five months after this memory, Emily and Michael will write this reflective essay after their research has been conducted and offer a belief that undergraduate students are well equipped to listen for microwithdrawals during in-person interviews. But sitting at the black metal table during this conversation about coding, we cannot see into the future. Instead, we sit in this moment

and remember to keep the student at the fore of our work. The hot sun breaks through the clouds as we continue our work.

Memory 2: This time we are inside the library. The third floor. We are sitting in a glass-walled study room with a round table, two chairs, and a whiteboard. We are constructing our interview questions. Michael is struggling. For the first time in his research career, he is constructing interview questions with a collaborator. After a decade of single-author qualitative research, here he is working with a partner, an undergraduate student. Hesitant to take up the marker and take over the interview question construction, he sits. Wondering if he should take the lead, wondering if, by taking up the marker, stepping to the board, writing down a question that he will take the reins of this project, and push Emily back down the hierarchical chain. A student listening, yet again, to a teacher pontificating.

But to the board he steps anyway and writes "Who are you as a writer?" as a potential interview question. He asks Emily her thoughts on the question. Her exact phrasing is lost in our memories, but the core of her response stays with us. She says students may struggle to answer it, on the spot, during an interview. But, she believes, *if they look stuck, I can help them think through it*. Attending to the physical presence of our interviewees: *if they look stuck*. Noticing who they are and their embodied reactions will constantly send signals to us as interviewers—signals, Michael wonders, if he will be able to pick up. The student advocating for the student. Michael mentions that noticing how the participant is reacting will be important when it comes to having them read over and sign the informed consent. He then mentions a book chapter he just read, one about microwithdrawals of consent. Emily's response—*if they look stuck*—shapes our belief that students working as partners with faculty on research projects are well equipped to listen for microwithdrawals during in-person interviews. And the conversation goes on in the third-floor study room of the library.

These two memories are central to how we came to our two beliefs. When it came time to conduct the interviews with undergraduate students in the pilot English 1101 courses, we tried to enact the knowledge we came to together regarding informed consent and microwithdrawals. After receiving relevant institutional ethics committee approval, we designed the interview questions, and Emily led all the interviews, transcribed the interviews, and took the lead on coding the interview transcripts. What did this look like when Emily sat down one-on-one with undergraduate students for an interview? We turn to her words below. All participant names are pseudonyms.

THE INTERVIEW PROCESS: THE STUDENT-PARTNER'S PERSPECTIVE

Before ever receiving informed consent from the students I would interview, I felt like it was important that they fully understood what they were participating in and how it would affect the content of the course. I received informed consent from our students before interviewing them by sending them a recruitment email and asking that they read and sign an institutional review board (IRB) consent form. I brought up the fact that they had to sign the form as if it were just a routine thing and did not make a big deal out of it. I asked that they read and sign it before we began, and all of them read the form thoroughly and signed it when finished. When students were asked to sign the IRB consent form, their reactions varied. Some

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were confused as to why they had to sign a form for something as noninvasive as an interview. Some seemed to think nothing of the form and just signed it without a reaction or word otherwise.

I asked one student, Maya, to read over the form, and before I was able to tell her why she was being asked to read and sign it, she looked up concerned and confused. I reassured her that I really was just interviewing her even though she did have to sign a consent form. Seeing her react in a way that was unexpected to me allowed me to open my mind to the different kinds of microwithdrawals or expressions that students would have to this project. I felt like there was no reason to be wary of the consent document, but Maya allowed me to see concerns through the interviewees' positions. The other students, Alex and Jamie, took the form out of my hand, quickly skimmed through it, signed it, and gave it back without pause or expression.

I also looked for microwithdrawals throughout the interview. I paid attention to the interviewee's response tone and body language to make sure they were still comfortable during the time we spent together. None of the students blatantly asked to leave the interview, and for most of the time they seemed engaged in the whole process. Occasionally, they would check their phone for the time or would shift around in their seat towards the end. To me, this signaled that they were ready for the interview to be over soon.

After the interviews were over and I reflected on how different students showed or did not show microwithdrawals of consent, I thought about how often students express themselves in this way but are not heard or understood because those interviewing or working with students in other ways may not be looking specifically for microwithdrawals of consent. As a student, I have been in similar positions to the students mentioned here. I have been interviewed by faculty and staff members, so I understand their thoughts and feelings that may lead to signs of microwithdrawals.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR SAP PRACTICE

As Emily wrote, it's the body language we need to read. It's the body language Emily needs to see and hear and to which she needs to attend. Emily noticed Maya's "concerned and confused look." Emily took to reassuring Maya in a way that worked for their immediate context and in a way that attended to the ethical and legal concerns of human subject research. Emily noticed the nonchalant attitude of Alex and Jamie signaled when they signed the informed consent document without "pause or expression." While Emily did not have the knowledge of negotiating informed consent, she demonstrated the practice of such negotiation. She had not spent the past decade reading broadly on educational research methods and methodologies and the ethics of such work, like Michael. But she knew the practice of doing this work. Better than Michael, she could recognize the embodied reactions of young-adult college students; she could recognize embodied reactions that offered confusion, reticence, boredom, or disinterest on the part of these students. Through our partnership, we brought together the knowledge and practice of negotiating informed consent.

As we and the readers of *IJSaP* continue to explore the promises, possibilities, and even perils of faculty and students laboring together for the betterment of learning, we wonder how

students may help faculty pause during the seemingly perfunctory moment of receiving informed consent. We wonder how students can help faculty put aside the research agenda and questions and excitement and curiosity for just a moment, and see the interview participants before them and through the entire interview process keep this person in view, attending to the sights and sounds and body language that may signal to us that something is awry and that we need to check in with our research participant. We wonder how students working in partnership with faculty can help faculty better understand how informed consent is an ongoing and negotiated process that does not end when research participants sign a consent document. We wonder how pondering this question emphasizes the "messy, 'work in progress' nature of SaP" (Matthews, 2017, p. 4), which we believe should hold a central place in our Students-as-Partners publications.

In our local context, we accomplished this work by opting for undergraduate student partners to lead interviews of students. We believed, and still believe, that undergraduate co-researchers were better equipped than faculty researchers to attend to the embodied cues of undergraduate research participants transmitting important signals to the researcher. Through slowing down and noticing moments of microwithdrawals throughout the long research process, we ensure that the work we are doing serves all—particularly the research participants.

For us, as student-faculty partners, we are excited to continue our work together and to explore ways we might better design our data collection methods and interview questions to attend to the needs of our research participants. Emily was grateful for the opportunity to work with a faculty member as a partner in this research project. She felt encouraged to speak freely and to express ideas throughout the process, and she was excited that her university was accepting of her role as a student partner in the project. We often felt lost as we learned how to work together and truly share a project. But our passion for collaborating and hearing from the learning experiences of students drove us along. We are excited to continue to learn how undergraduate students can help faculty develop more robust and ethically attentive methods for learning about learning.

Our research with human participants was successfully reviewed according to our institution's research ethics committee guidelines.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

Emily Pridgen *is an undergraduate student pursuing her bachelor's degree in English-writing and publication. She has enjoyed working with her university as a partner, advocating for undergraduate voices, and learning to navigate the world of higher education. She eagerly anticipates using these valuable experiences in her future career.*

J. Michael Rifenburg *is an associate professor in the Department of English at the University of North Georgia where he co-directs the first-year composition program. He also serves as a faculty fellow for scholarly writing in UNG's Center for Teaching, Learning, and Leadership.*

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