OPINION PIECE

Students as Partners: Challenges and Opportunities in the Asian Context

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Over the last twenty years, I have been working in three culturally, racially, and religiously diverse countries: India, Thailand, and Malaysia. While working in these diverse countries was an enriching experience in itself, I was also fortunate to work at places that were not only diverse within themselves but also provided me the opportunity to work with hundreds of people from around the world. One of my workplaces was a K-12 international school in Thailand that followed curriculum grounded in Western philosophy where teaching and learning practices were more student-centered as compared with most traditional schools in Asia that are predominately teacher-centered. As a result of the student-centred approach, which facilitated constructive learning and amplified student agency, I began to value students' voices. Thus, when I first came across the idea of Students as Partners (SaP) five years ago while conducting a literature review for my scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) project, I could instantly relate to it and decided to adopt it. Since then, I have been engaged with a number of SaP collaborations (e.g., Kaur, Awang-Hashim, & Kaur, 2019; Kaur, Noman, & Nordin, 2017), and I derive immense satisfaction from its outcomes.

Encouraged by my positive experiences with SaP collaborations, I tried to promote this practice and began sharing this idea with my colleagues as a way to engage students actively. I experienced perplexity as well as resistance from them. Many of my colleagues responded that "students can be partners with peers but not with faculty as they have nothing much to offer me" or "teaching development is for the faculty, and students have no role in it." While I felt disappointed, I reflected upon the reasons for their reluctance to make sense of this idea or willingness to give it a try. I spoke to several of my colleagues, went through the literature, and concluded that this predicament is the result of social and cultural norms that determine roles and expectations for different positions. Liang and Matthews (2020), in their recent publication discussing the state of SaP in Asia, also highlighted that Confucian heritage culture (CHS), which is a philosophy that drives thoughts, beliefs, and societal norms, can be a barrier in the shaping of such teaching and learning practices that call for role revision. It is difficult for individuals to adopt practices from other cultures that are incongruent with their own culture.

As a result, in this opinion piece, I discuss the underlying reasons for staff and student resistance to appreciating and embracing SaP at its face value in Asian contextnd argue that by adapting the language and accommodating the assumptions of SaP, individuals in Asian culture can enact the same values in culturally appropriate ways. I use illustrations from personal

experiences to affirm my viewpoints. While there exist multiple cultural conceptions that constrain teachers and students to be seen as partners in teaching and learning activities, two seem to have a profound effect: (a) the teacher-student dichotomy and (b) the belief that the teacher is always right. I would limit my opinion piece to these two cultural conceptions because sometimes they may appear contrary to the basic assumptions of SaP. It should also be kept in mind that within the umbrella of CHS culture, there are multiple subcultures; however, these two concepts run across these subcultures.

TEACHER-STUDENT DICHOTOMY IN ASIAN CULTURE

In Asian culture, the perceived gap between student and teacher, in terms of knowledge, is represented metaphorically as "the teacher is the first letter and the student is the last letter" (Cenkner, 1995, p. 15). Only after the student has achieved self-realisation can "he and the teacher. . . stand as equals" (Cenkner, 1995, p. 17). Learning represents the wisdom that the teacher passes on to their students, who are like empty vessels. This norm may come across as incompatible with the foundational assumption of SaP, which is based upon the tenet that students, through their positionality of being learners for years, their multiple ways of learning and interpretative frames, and their past experiences (Cook-Sather, 2019) can contribute meaningfully in knowledge construction. While SaP practitioners seek collaboration, co-construction, and co-inquiry to make teaching and learning a collective praxis, the process of teaching and learning in the Asian context is sometimes understood as the passing of knowledge that comes from the wisdom of a teacher and books. This incongruity between the SaP ethos and Asian social and cultural norms seems insurmountable and calls for a sustained, context-specific adaptation on the part of SaP to make headway.

THE TEACHER IS ALWAYS RIGHT

Confucian values regard the teacher as an authority figure and as a "purveyor of authoritarian information" (Stevenson & Stigler, 1992, p. 188) who is wise, always right, and never to be contradicted (Hofstede, Hofstead, & Minkov, 2010). Therefore, questioning or challenging a teacher's knowledge and assumptions in such a society would be odd and disrespectful. Classroom discussions are primarily for clarifications, not debate. Tan (2017), while emphasizing the value of dialogue in Xueji (texts from the Confucian canon, *Record of Learning*) states that "Xueji includes a caveat that although students are encouraged to ask questions, novice learners are dissuaded from doing so,"(p.8)indicating that there is little room for questioning, discussions, disagreements, and voice out of humility. This is in sharp contrast with SaP's expectations of open and honest dialogue, where even contradictions arising from such dialogues are perceived to be of enormous pedagogical potential (Abbot & Cook-Sather, 2020).

PARTNERSHIPS IN NEW SPHERES

SaP currently is predominantly an Anglophone phenomenon, emerging as a collaborative and democratic pedagogical practice which is disrupting the traditional hierarchy and reducingthe power distance between students and faculty. SaP practitioners are not only partners in designing curriculum, class instruction, and assessment (Woolmer et al., 2016) but also in research, governance, and pedagogic consultancy (Healey & Jenkins 2009, Cook-Sather,

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2011) where traditionally students had no presence. It would require a tremendous amount of courage and conviction on the part of faculty and students in Asian countries to step out of their cultural norms in order to embrace SaP in its original form. The interplay of these beliefs is extremely complex; for example, a teacher who is a "sage" will find it unfathomable to share the "stage" with students in a way collaborative partnerships in SaP strive for. In such circumstances, having faculty relinquish power, share authority with students, or ask students to assume agency to work along with faculty can come across as extremely uncomfortable for both parties. This happens because the issue of authority, the student's position as a novice, and the faculty's position as the source of knowledge are at the heart of faculty's teaching and learning philosophy, and denigrating any of these is unimaginable. Teachers become anxious at the prospect of a reduced role, position, and identity to become a "peer at the rear" (Biesta, 2019, p. 549) who is unrecognisable by becoming partners with non-expert students. Likewise, students are apprehensive of voicing their opinions and do not wish to transgress their cultural boundaries and come across as disobedient. Students occupy their positions more as knowledge seekers and less as creators. Faculty's awareness of students' expectations of their position and expertise also dissuades them from seeking critical opinions and input from students.

A WAY FORWARD: CULTURALLY-SITUATED SAP PRACTICES

In conclusion, for SaP to thrive in Asia, there are two major considerations for SaP practioners from the region. One, I have come to understand that ideas originated elsewhere other than an individual's own culture are prone to serious scrutiny for suitability and compatibility with local values. Therefore, the idea and the language of SaP comes across as intruding, even threatening, for faculty and students in my culture. I concur with Green (2019), who calls for stretching the cultural and linguistic boundaries of SaP to enact its values grounded in a specific cultural context, which would be more palatable to its population. Thus, adapting the language and accommodating some of the assumptions of SaP in culturally appropriate ways would appeal to both students and colleagues who would be less inhibited. Given the dichotomy of novice and expert, the word "partner" may come across as intimidating to both students and faculty; therefore, an invitation to partner can be sent out as seeking assistance from each other in enriching teaching and learning experiences. The term "assistance" indicates that the teacher who is an expert is seeking students' support, which in turn reinforces students' competency beliefs. Nevertheless, the other expectations of partnership can be gradually introduced with explanations. I have noticed that once students enter a partnership, they intentionally learn to develop a culturally suitable language to communicate their viewpoint to faculty, which is equally powerful in serving the purpose of partnerships.

The second consideration would be the need for more exemplars of successful SaP collaborations from the Asian context that would guide Asian SaP practitioners towards a cultural variation of SaP practice. For example, my student partners prefer giving their feedback in private rather in front of the whole class, which is fine with me as long as both sides benefit from it. The faculty in partnership function from a higher vantage point from where they can demonstrate humility, empathy, generosity, and equity for students as they reinforce the key

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values of CHS (Tan, 2017) and exercise their authority by empowering students. This could facilitate more partnerships in the Asian region.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTOR

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