RESEARCH ARTICLE

Agency through partnership in neurodiverse college learning communities

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the work of creating collaborative learning partnerships that fully include students with intellectual disabilities. The article reviews the scholarship of partnership as a starting point in discussing learning environments that support students with significant intellectual disabilities—a group that has only recently been encouraged to enroll in colleges and universities. The authors—a faculty member and two former undergraduate mentors in the University Studies program at Portland State University—offer reflections on their time partnering as facilitators of courses that include students with intellectual disabilities. They then analyze those reflections in relation to the scholarship of partnership and special education. The article presents evidence that the partnership approach to learning is more fully realized through intentional investment in universal design for learning principles and extended support networks invested in collaboration and interpersonal relationship. These approaches effectively bring students with disabilities into the center of educational environments and maintain their agency in shaping their learning communities.

KEYWORDS

students as partners, peer mentoring, intellectual disability, inclusion, student agency

According to existing scholarship on student-educator partnerships, partnership in education is "a process rather than a product," and conceives of learning exchanges as "motivated by a desire to enhance the student voice in higher education, to challenge traditional institutional structures, and to disrupt traditional student-faculty power relations" (Kehler et al., 2017, pp. 4–5). "Genuine partnership" (Cook-Sather et al., 2014, p. 3) prioritizes equity and reciprocity, which is very different from the common educational model that views

faculty as empowered with the knowledge they offer to students, receiving nothing in return. But how do we support partnerships with students with intellectual disabilities in an ableist society? For the sake of clarity, we should explain here that intellectual disability is a broad, clinical term used to identify persons with an intelligence quotient under 70 who experience "significant and pervasive developmental delays in two or more areas of major life functioning, occurring from birth and persisting into adulthood" (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). While this definition is less than ideal, especially in its controversial use of Intelligence Quotient testing to determine a student's cognitive potential (Naglieri et al., pp. 487-88), it is a definition that helps us to characterize the students with intellectual disabilities that are the focus of this study. Such students have not been included in the world of higher education for very long—at least not in an intentional way. Students with these disabilities might have entered college with significant help from family in the past. Only recently, though, have programs and institutions sought to accommodate these students within institutions of higher learning, and we are still in the beginning stages of exploring effective educational partnerships with them.

In this article we share our experience with educational partnership as instructor-student mentor teams who have in turn partnered with students enrolled in Portland State's Career and Community Studies program. This is a Portland State University initiative which has made possible the entrance of college students with significant intellectual disabilities into Portland State University courses for a 4-year college experience that leads to a pre-baccalaureate certificate. The pre-baccalaureate certificate program offers students with intellectual disabilities the opportunity to enroll in college classes and collaborate with college faculty and students while receiving academic support and access to meaningful employment opportunities on and off campus.

We explore here how theories of partnership apply to our experience working with students with intellectual disabilities, and we account for the gaps in the existing scholarship on partnership that does not adequately address that experience. We also reflect on what we have learned from the partnerships that have helped us to serve our students with intellectual disabilities. We consider how our partnerships have broadened our understanding of collaborative learning in general.

LITERATURE REVIEW

We achieve reciprocity in partnership when "the perspectives and contributions made by partners are equally valued and respected" and when "all participants have an equal opportunity to contribute" (Cook-Sather et al., 2014, p. 7). When students and faculty pursue partnership, students are more active agents. They take responsibility for their learning, and faculty relinquish their claims to authority. Students and faculty become "co-teachers, co-inquirers, curriculum co-creators, and co-learners across all facets of the educational enterprise" (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017, p. 2).

Partnership in education is thus aimed at bringing all voices into the process of education. One of the motivations for partnership identified at the Higher Education Academy's (HEA) Students as Partners Summit in September 2013 was "to make higher education more accessible and inclusive" (Healey et al., 2014, p. 19). This effort to realize inclusion is conceived of among advocates of partnership as the path to deeper, more worthwhile learning. For

example, Felten et al. (2013) write in their study of students and faculty who partner to produce scholarship of teaching and learning that "bringing multiple perspectives to bear on inquiry into teaching and learning practices can cause students and faculty to encounter dissonant, contested, and troublesome knowledge, provoking them to question their assumptions" (p. 65). They conclude that "such deeper questioning may lead to crossing thresholds of understanding, which allow fundamentally new ways of thinking that cannot be undone" (p. 65).

What about cases, though, in which some of the students in a learning community are from groups that do not have confident membership in that community as a result of their marginalized identity status? Theorists of partnership have considered this question broadly. Partnership practices, they acknowledge, though aimed at the goal of making education more inclusive of diverse perspectives by breaking down instructor-student hierarchies, might be more readily available to students who generally have more access to the freedoms of privilege. Bovill et al. (2016) suggests that when developing partnership projects, faculty or staff should "consider whose voices are heard and whose are not, whose participation is invited and whose is not, and what the implications are for co-creation projects, the larger institutions of which they are a part and the individual and groups of participants involved" (p. 203). For instance, it might be easier for faculty to share power when the capabilities of the students are familiar or recognizable to the faculty member. Faculty might more readily partner with students whose voices are already the sort that will be heard in an education system that has, for the most part, focused on narrow definitions of legitimate academic participation.

In our review of the current literature on partnership, though, we found that, as educators interested in exploring methods for casting the net of partnership wide to make sure we include students with intellectual disabilities, the existing scholarship offers very little on this topic. While identity and marginalization are explored in much of the partnership scholarship, the specifics of marginalization are limited to race, gender, class, sexualities, and physical disabilities. Felten et al. (2013), for example, when exploring barriers to students' partnerships with faculty in conducting and disseminating research, discuss race as a potential barrier to student participation in a project at a predominantly White institution. They also suggest that financial needs could create time constraints that interfere with partnership projects. They consider that some students with diminished confidence in their academic achievement might be less likely to pursue a partnership. Faculty, if selecting participants in a project, might select based on achievement, thus limiting the ability of less academically accomplished students to participate in the work of partnership. With this in mind, Healy et al. (2014) encourage faculty, when developing partnership conditions, to consider "how to reduce barriers to participation, especially among marginalized or traditionally under-represented groups (e.g. part-time students, international students)" (p. 9).

While this scholarship on inclusion and partnership is useful, it does not directly address the specific questions that came up for us as we developed learning communities using the partnership model that included students with significant intellectual disabilities. The reflections that follow record our experiences partnering with each other to support students with intellectual disabilities. Following these reflections we offer analysis of those reflections, with the intention to expand the discussion of inclusive partnership.

METHODS

The authors of this article are a faculty member and two undergraduate peer mentors who worked together in University Studies, Portland State University's general education program. In the year-long, theme-based, interdisciplinary Freshman Inquiry course called Health, Happiness, and Human Rights, taught by Lydia Fisher, undergraduate peer mentors Grace Piper and Hannah Werthman played a vital role, meeting with students in breakout mentoring sessions to review or prepare course material, collaborate, and build community. Freshman Inquiry courses focus on preparing first-year students for college-level academic work, with emphasis on effective communication, critical inquiry, social responsibility, and membership in a diverse academic community. Grace Piper served as the undergraduate peer mentor for all students enrolled in Lydia Fisher's Freshman Inquiry course in the first year of the Career and Community Studies Certificate program, and Hannah Werthman served in this same undergraduate peer mentor role in the following academic year.

Our research began with a meeting initiated by Lydia, who saw the value of recording the story of our partnerships. We began our work on this article when we concluded together that our discoveries supporting each other as we worked with neurodivergent individuals should be shared with others who are invested in creating collaborative and inclusive learning communities. Once we committed to this this study, we made a plan for research and writing. We agreed that the strength of our partnerships as co-facilitators for two very vital, collaborative learning communities was the organic, integrated way in which we worked together throughout the academic year in constant consultation with each other. As teaching partners, we met regularly to reflect on what we experienced and learned in the classroom and from students' work, and then we discussed next steps based on our observations and interpretations. We wanted to continue that fruitful practice in our writing process. We left our first planning meeting with the intention to write down our individual reflections about our faculty-peer mentor partnerships and then use those reflections as the starting point for our research and writing collaboration. In preparation for our second meeting we reviewed each other's written reflections and considered them in light of the existing scholarship on Students as Partners that deals with inclusion. At our second meeting we discussed the scholarship in relation to our reflections, which we treated as the data for our study. While we embarked on developing this article together, in collaboration, we also value the way in which theories of partnership have foregrounded the importance of multiple perspectives for the work of discovery. We wanted to voice our individual experiences of learning partnership in light of our different positions in relation to each other and to the students in our courses, so we offer here the raw data of our separate, personal reflections, followed by our analysis of that data.

REFLECTIONS ON PARTNERSHIP

Teaching in the moment for student agency (Lydia Fisher, faculty partner)

When I was offered the opportunity to include students from Portland State's Career and Community Studies program in my year-long inquiry course for first-year students, it aligned with my investment in making college learning communities accessible and welcoming for all. I did not know then how valuable the experience would be for helping me to more fully

embrace my partnerships with my students and the undergraduate peer mentors who help me to support those students.

As noted in our review of the literature on Students as Partners, others have written about the potential for learning across differences when educators approach their teaching as a partnership with students. Because programs that support students with significant intellectual disabilities in college coursework are relatively new, though, the scholarship that examines approaches to partnership with any specificity does not address some of the particular challenges of collaborating across intellectual differences. As a broader culture we still have not developed a good understanding of how people with significant intellectual disabilities can best be supported in developing their capabilities and interests and in claiming respect and autonomy. Some of the most significant challenges in my partnerships with neurodiverse students result from this cultural deficit. Many students who would be called "neurotypical" have attended primary and secondary school alongside students with significant intellectual disabilities; as a society we now acknowledge the value of bringing students in these early stages of learning together in all of their neurological diversity, and our public schools require it. The range of neurodiversity is so broad that the term "neurotypical" is problematic in itself, in that it seems to create a binary opposition between brains that align with an established norm and those that do not. Many studies have shown, though, that the traits of neurodevelopmental conditions such as autism and ADHD occur throughout all human populations in a spectrum (Posserud et al., 2006), so dividing students up in educational settings is fraught with seemingly arbitrary decision-making. Institutions of higher education have reinforced binary thinking in our culture that separates the neurotypical from the neurodiverse. Because students with significant intellectual disabilities have not been included in higher education in the past, their presence is still not normalized. As a result, many seemingly neurotypical students are unsure about how to approach college-level group work with, say, a student with Down syndrome. This is changing, though. Colleges and universities have recently begun to commit more fully to the idea that educational institutions should welcome everyone, developing learning communities that are designed for a broad range of students with diverse abilities.

The values of partnership are essential for fostering inclusion for all. Teaching students with intellectual disabilities has given me a better understanding of sharing learning support. I now trust more in the value of what students can teach each other, regardless of the course content knowledge they possess. My students self-grade their own group projects, for example, based not only on the quality of what they produced, but also on the quality of their collaboration across difference. When I approach a diverse learning community with a partnership mindset—with the belief that I will learn as much from working with a student with an intellectual disability as they will learn from working with me—I model to all students that education is a collaborative exchange and that controlling an educational situation to make it familiar and easy for those who have always had power in university classrooms is not the best way to learn and grow. To teach all students of all abilities I must be more present and take my cues from what is actually happening with students in the moment.

My collaborations with students in the Portland State Career and Community Studies Certificate program have also helped me to develop more fully my partnerships with the undergraduate peer mentors who facilitate the breakout sessions for my courses for first-year

students. Grace was the undergraduate mentor for my course during the first year of the Career and Community Studies Certificate program. We were simply figuring it out as we went along. We had support from the Career and Community Studies staff, and I consulted regularly with other faculty who had Career and Community Studies students in their classes as well. We all explored our practices together. Grace's fierce investment in equity and justice, combined with respectful, warm connections with all members of the learning community, was an invaluable resource for me.

In that first year we capitalized on our observation that one of the Career and Community Studies students in the class was helping to bring the class together with their excitement about learning and their willingness to enter wholeheartedly into discussions and activities. Because this student opted for creative expression rather than formal academic methods of demonstrating their learning, they helped to model in the classroom personalized ways of contributing. Once I saw the learning that happened in these personalized assignments, I ended up following the lead of this student and offered a wider variety of opportunities for everyone to demonstrate their learning throughout the year.

We also focused this first year on how to help another Career and Community Studies student who was extremely quiet to participate in learning exchanges. At the end of the year, we saw that this student blossomed during our community-based learning visit to a local public school learning garden where we traded volunteer clean-up for the chance to observe some garden education classes in session. For this Career and Community Studies student, the garden was a familiar setting associated with comfortable hours spent working and developing alongside a beloved grandmother. The opportunity to learn there gave this student a chance to feel confident and share prior knowledge and experience with other students. Grace and I gained by embracing in the moment what these two Career and Community Studies students had to offer as learning partners. We also gained by using our faculty-mentor collaboration to help us understand and capitalize on what we saw.

In the following year, when I worked with Hannah as the peer mentor for my course, the staff support for students with intellectual disabilities was more fully in place, and my year teaching in collaboration with Grace had given me a lot of ideas that Hannah and I further developed together. That second year, Hannah and I worked consciously on accountability and agency with all students, and especially with the Career and Community Studies students. This was a natural next step. We now understood what kinds of diverse learning options for students with intellectual disabilities could work in a college course; we were also discovering with the Career and Community Studies students how they could be responsible for their own education and to others in the class. Hannah's mother is a special education teacher, and, as a result, Hannah engaged with the Career and Community Studies students with a level of comfort that enabled her to encourage those students to strive for their full potential. This sort of challenging but still fully supportive environment was only possible with the sort of faculty-mentor partnership we had developed. I knew I could rely on Hannah to keep a close eye on the small break-out sessions for students who were struggling and needed one-on-one help to be successful in their self-determination or who needed some guidance to help their project group imagine the best ways to utilize their abilities.

In sum, working with students who faced learning challenges very different from college students I had worked with before encouraged me to depend more on those around me—my student mentors and the students themselves—to share in driving the learning process.

Intentional environment and rapport (Grace Piper, undergraduate mentor)

Coming into my work as a peer mentor for a learning community that included students with intellectual disabilities, I had a background in gender and queer studies, had worked with youth with intellectual and physical disabilities as an assistant to therapeutic horseback riding lessons, and had training in popular education. In exploring this work, the question of who gets to be the keeper of knowledge came up often. I wanted to consider how classrooms and engagement are defined. Lydia and I prioritized an intentional classroom environment, co-creating a culture of conscious vulnerability and community to benefit the learning experience. In utilizing many modes of retention and engagement, like regularly incorporating prompts for student engagement that allowed students to participate by writing, speaking, or drawing according to their preference, we developed welcoming routines and invited students to bring and honor their whole selves. Though Lydia and I came in without specialized training for working with college students with intellectual disabilities, we had a web of support and a partnership with each other. This working relationship led us to ask difficult questions necessary to our work: How do we help students draw upon and express their own knowledge? How do we make classrooms a space for everyone to explore their own and collective goals? How do we foster a sense of belonging in the classroom?

Intentional rapport emerged as a priority to help us answer these questions. We started this with one another via weekly meetings—we made space to have a relationship with each other, coupled with discussing our syllabus, student updates, and creating check-ins to gauge how students were doing and where they were with the materials. We used this time to co-create lesson plans, discuss students' progress with course materials, consider needs for additional support, and generally shape our plans in relation to the goals and pace of the students. The open nature of smaller mentor sessions created an environment of shared vulnerability. It is important to acknowledge that when we worked together, I was an undergraduate student and Lydia holds a Ph.D. and is a faculty member. To develop this partnership successfully, Lydia gave me agency and space to draw from my own understanding and experience, knowing that we functioned differently with the students and that our partnership worked best when we could share information and work openly together.

In order to develop partnership with students, it was important for students to feel empowered to bring their whole selves. This fosters a sense of belonging, making space for students to see the coursework in line with their lives and their goals. To do this, we practiced identity mapping, which involved talking about systems of power and how they show up in our lives and allowing students to name themselves for themselves. Likewise, I offered myself as an example of identity mapping, letting students know I was in this with them and that our working relationship was reciprocal. At the start of the week, I asked for rose buds (what is going well) and rose thorns (what is not going well). During our second session of the week, students shared what self-care they would do before we met up again the following week. Weekly, we did a drawing check-in for students to utilize multiple ways to express their thoughts; this particularly resonated with a Career and Community Studies student who was

primarily nonverbal, another student in class who identified on the autism spectrum, and several other students who were able to engage most comfortably through imagery. Such practices asked students to approach their learning in ways that are not common in academic spaces. We were supporting alternate pathways for expression.

The primary challenge to working with students with intellectual disability is that our higher education system was not created for them. To address this, each Career and Community Studies student is paired with an academic coach. With the help of an academic coach, one of our Career and Community Studies students discovered personalized ways to express engagement with the course material. Rather than preparing a research essay and presentation for their culminating project, this student made a board game rooted in research and then gave a speech, allowing them to determine how they would communicate their learning. In the case of another Career and Community Studies student who did not have significant support outside the university, I collaborated with their academic coach through weekly planning checks. Throughout the year, it also became clear that some students were more prepared more willing to work with students with intellectual disabilities. This meant we could offer these students chances to be designated classroom notetakers for the students who could benefit from that assistance, and we could look to these students to be models of peer support in the classroom. This web of people with a vested interest in student success and persistence created a stronger classroom.

Ultimately, we sought a student-centered classroom, working as facilitators and giving students opportunities to define their own education and learn from each other. Doing the work required to make a classroom into a learning community for diverse voices was the core of our work as teaching partners.

Drawing on diverse resources and networks (Hannah Werthman, undergraduate mentor)

During the 2017–2018 academic year, I collaborated with Lydia to co-create a learning community that was intentionally inclusive of diverse intellectual abilities. Through a mutually empathetic and respectful partnership, Lydia and I worked with 35 students as they developed academically and personally. I stepped into this work as an undergraduate student studying community development in my final year. Going into this experience, I had no idea how much it would impact my perspective on education, collaboration, and community building.

My mother is a high school special education teacher so I had previous experience supporting students with diverse intellectual abilities. Fortunately, I was able to draw on my mother's expertise when developing curriculum for mentor sessions and navigating communication challenges with students. My coursework in community development and my local community engagement experiences also motivated me to develop an educational space that was intentional and inviting to all students. I learned that how you welcome, support, and invite learners to participate directly influences their retention, engagement, and confidence to demonstrate their learning.

While two students from the Career and Community Studies program joined us, all students in the class worked through their own collection of abilities and challenges during our year together. An interdependent relationship between mentor and faculty partner was essential to the foundation of the entire learning community. By challenging the traditional

model of higher education, our partnership demonstrated to students the collective nature that we aimed to create.

While the individual learning plans of Career and Community Studies students often looked very different than that of other students in the class, collectively our goals were the same: to engage with new perspectives, to be challenged, and to grow. Most students felt very accountable to this collective mission and would go out of their way to support one another. The learning community itself made our partnership work. Lydia and I would lean on other students in the group, in particular when forming groups for projects and thinking about the flow of the classroom. However, we often circled back to question the boundaries and limitations of relying too heavily on one particular student or students to support our students with intellectual disabilities. It was important that the diversity in learning abilities was addressed by the whole collective.

The relationship between students and faculty and the students and mentor at times looked very different; however, this proved to be the most beneficial aspect of our partnership. I worked with students in small sessions, so I was able to build peer-to-peer relationships. Lydia had a much better picture of the students academically. Together, we had a well-rounded grasp of student needs as it applied to different personal and academic situations. Each mentor session (twice a week) began with a check-in. This is where I saw students of diverse abilities develop deep empathic and emotional connections. Shared feelings of excitement, stress, fear, and motivation were exchanged freely and without judgment.

While the work with students with intellectual disabilities is extremely rewarding, it can also present very new situations for undergraduate mentors, making partnership even more vital. On one occasion, one of our Career and Community Studies students had an intense, frustrated reaction when I asked them to work with a particular group of students. Apparently, they didn't trust my direction as a peer mentor and wanted to receive direction from their professor. While I was not entirely unprepared for this reaction—any student can be skeptical about taking direction from another undergraduate—I was surprised by their apparent emotion and worried about losing the trusting and respectful relationship that I had worked hard to develop with this student. Lydia helped me to approach the problem as an opportunity for learning and growth, though. We worked together with the Career and Community Studies staff to help this student to better understand my role as guide and facilitator of mentor sessions. The security and clarity this brought for both the student and me ended up strengthening our relationship and my approach to my mentoring work. I felt supported and reassured by Lydia throughout this process as well. After being treated as a respected collaborator and colleague even in a situation in which I felt unsure of myself, I then turned to Lydia more readily as I navigated the emotions and unforeseen challenges that came up throughout the year.

This unique opportunity to work with students who 5 years earlier would not have been able to be part of our class had a deeply personal impact on me, and it was an honor to build upon the work done by Lydia and Grace in the previous year. Lydia helped me to feel comfortable about meeting new challenges as a facilitator. I learned that everyone brings understanding and experience that is important and that we must continue to develop spaces where all can create, engage, and exchange.

DISCUSSION

As we examined our individual reflections in relation to each other and considered the implications of our observations, we developed general observations to share with others who want to create inclusive learning spaces that can serve students with disabilities. These observations will also serve educators more generally in their work of creating effective and welcoming partnerships within learning communities.

First, these individual reflections make clear that working with students with intellectual disabilities made us more aware and invested partners. We all found that working with our Career and Community Studies students helped us to develop and enrich our commitment to and understanding of partnership. We couldn't rely on our own habits and assumptions to help us support students with very diverse abilities. Committed to the values of partnership, we wanted to create an intellectually and emotionally connected learning community of co-teachers, co-inquirers, co-creators, and co-learners, as scholars of partnership have defined this work. However, adopting the intention to include all members of a community is different from making that happen.

We all realized, upon reflection, how important it is to do the work of helping students to discover what they can offer in a learning situation. Healy et al. (2014) encourage us to "reflect on who is and is not involved in current partnership work" and to consider whether there are "structural or cultural barriers to certain groups of people engaging" (p. 30). In our discussions of our reflections, we agreed that just cultivating a learning environment that gives students the sense that their thoughts are valued and that their opinions about shaping the course matter is not enough to achieve engagement and inclusion. We noticed that students with intellectual disabilities may have difficulties with identifying their needs and strengths. The challenge of guiding and encouraging these students, we found, helped us to see more clearly what fully embracing partnership requires. Some partnerships might be more difficult to develop than others. Some students will need more support to bring them into a partnership exchange. Students with intellectual disabilities, or students who do not in general fit the established expectations of academic success, must take active roles in shaping learning and research, but they are not in the position to do that if our methods of inquiry and exploration don't meet them where they are. We found that students with intellectual disabilities could better shape the direction of our learning when we moved away from traditional classroom habits and communication methods—for example, through artistic expression, or through community-based learning experiences that took us into the world outside the classroom. What we found worked through our explorations is consistent with the universal design principles that encourage instructors to adopt a "varied and flexible approach to teaching" with a diversity of methods, because every student has different needs (Pliner & Johnson, 2010, p. 107). To achieve the ideals of partnership, then, educators must invest fully in inclusive teaching practices that take into account different learning styles and abilities. The kind of diverse contributions that Felten et al. (2013) argue will "cause students and faculty to encounter dissonant, contested, and troublesome knowledge, provoking them to question their assumptions" (p. 65) are not always readily elicited. An inclusive approach to education requires that instructors and mentors invest in bringing variety and exploration into their pedagogy and make it a part of their facilitation work to help students find the forms of participation and collaboration that enable them to contribute and shape the community.

We also all found that the challenges of partnering with students with intellectual disabilities strengthened our relationships with each other as faculty-student mentor teams. This work necessarily, and with positive outcomes, broadened the reach of our support networks. Bringing students with intellectual disabilities into our courses vitalized our planning and demanded the highest levels of collegial support. In the early stages of working with students with needs we had not experienced before, we had to draw upon all the resources we could get. We stayed flexible when we realized something was not working, we looked to each other for ideas when we unsure about how to proceed, and we encouraged each other when things did not go as expected. We came to trust each other as creative collaborators in a learning endeavor. Grace and Hannah enjoyed the agency and respect that are key to the success of the University Studies mentoring program, based on the notion that modeling egalitarian learning partnerships between faculty and undergraduate mentors helps other students to engage in partnership themselves.

Our partnerships, as explained in our reflections, moved beyond our connections among instructor, peer mentor, and students in our classes as well. We cultivated important collaborations with Career and Community Studies program staff, other faculty teaching students with intellectual disabilities in their Freshman Inquiry courses, and even our family members with expertise and the families of the Career and Community Studies students. The productive defamiliarization of bringing students with new needs into the classroom made us broaden our conceptions of our learning communities and find insight and inspiration where we could get it. Such decentralized approaches to education can subvert the traditional, siloed and faculty-dominated university classroom. We found in our classes the membership, sense of shared influence, fulfillment of needs, and emotional connection that Healy et al. (2014) present as the defining elements of a successful learning community based on partnership. We also extended the reach of partnership in our dependence on individuals outside that immediate class community. This adoption of broad support systems is consistent with what progressive scholars of special education have argued offers agency for students with intellectual disabilities. Researchers have focused on the value of support systems for students with intellectual disabilities that utilize peer mentoring and emphasize facilitation of students' integration into dispersed support networks within a learning community (Brock et al., 2020; Hafner et al., 2011). Like students viewed as neurotypical, students with intellectual disabilities thrive when instructors treat them and their peers as partners who are responsible for educating each other. Making persistence rather than established levels of achievement the measure of a partnership's success, we learned about how to help students set their own goals and define what it would look like to reach those goals. In letting the needs of our students with intellectual disabilities help to determine the shape of our work together, we make steps toward helping our society to better understand and integrate the needs of all in daily life.

CONCLUSIONS

Our experiences learning from students with intellectual disabilities have helped us to see more clearly what is valuable in creating learning communities and what is a vestige of established educational methods developed for less inclusive student populations and more instructor-centered academic environments. Teaching students with intellectual disabilities helped us to engage more fully with each other and with the students in our learning

communities in what Palmer (2017) calls a "live encounter," understanding that competence is a product of surrendering authority and established habits to enable more productive connections in which all are empowered and engaged.

At the center of our work as members of the learning communities we shared was our determination to support students traditionally left out of the college experience. We wanted them to find a sense of belonging and become agents of their own education. If we want to, as discussed above, strive to "[cross] thresholds of understanding, which allow fundamentally new ways of thinking," we must assure that *everyone* finds true partnership in learning (Felten et al., p. 65). Our reflections and analysis make evident that the partnership approach to learning is more fully realized through intentional investment in universal design for learning principles and extended support networks invested in collaboration and interpersonal relationship. These approaches effectively bring students with disabilities into the center of educational environments and maintain their agency in shaping their learning communities.

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