

CASE STUDY

Cultivating student agency and responsibility through peer-to-peer teaching

***Angela D. Storey, Hannah Eckel-Sparrow, and Henrietta K. Ransdell**, Department of Anthropology, University of Louisville, USA

Contact: Angela.Storey@Louisville.edu

ABSTRACT

This case study explores an eight-semester Peer Educator Program in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Louisville (Kentucky, USA) that trains undergraduates in teaching practices, crafts spaces of partnership, and expands learning within large general education courses. Peer educators self-select from any major and gain knowledge on lesson planning and facilitation, working in small groups to decide content, plan, and teach bonus sessions for introductory courses. We argue that peer-to-peer teaching reworks lines of responsibility within and around classrooms such that student agency is cultivated both for students engaged in partnership activities and those taught by student partners. Peer education thus becomes a hinge around which authority is shifted and the educational agency enacted in Students-as-Partners programs extended to wider student populations. The authors are two undergraduate peer educators and the faculty coordinator.

KEYWORDS

student agency, responsibility, peer education, anthropology

What might it look like to collectively redefine responsibility and agency within college courses and curricula? This question sits at the heart of the Students-as-Partners (SaP) approach, guiding the programmatic, practical, and pedagogical considerations of projects that vary in scale from a single class meeting to a multi-institution network (Felton et al., 2019), and from a few students to many hundreds (Bovill, 2019). Building from literature exploring responsibility and agency in SaP programs (Cook-Sather & Luz, 2015), this case study explores the reworking of roles and the cultivation of student agency within the Peer Educator Program in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Louisville (Kentucky, USA).

In this case study we discuss programmatic foundation, structure, and impacts, highlight challenges, and offer practical suggestions. The authors are two undergraduates who each completed three semesters as peer educators (Eckel-Sparrow and Ransdell) and the faculty coordinating the program (Storey). Qualitative data was taken from author experiences and

reflections, utilizing an auto-ethnographic approach to examine educational experiences (Starr, 2010; Trahar, 2013; Dyson, 2007). We incorporate first-person narratives from each author (cf. Daniello & Acqueviva, 2019) to make clear that the program is a result of co-creation (Bovill, 2019; Bovill & Woolmer, 2019) and help fill a gap in published works (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017; cf. Manor et al., 2010). We argue that peer-to-peer teaching reworks lines of responsibility within classrooms such that student agency is cultivated both for students engaged in partnership activities and those taught by student partners. Peer education thus becomes a hinge around which authority is shifted and the educational agency enacted in SaP programs extended to wider student populations.

Literature review

The SaP framework is predicated upon respect, reciprocity, and shared responsibility (Cook-Sather et al., 2014). Indeed, shared responsibility defines much of the “threshold” nature of partnership, identifying the irreversibility of thinking and being in new ways once experienced (Cook-Sather & Luz, 2015; Dwyer, 2018). This transformative potential does not mean partnership is easy; the challenges of reworking roles, responsibilities, and educational discourses hold possibilities for resistance and failure (Ntem & Cook-Sather, 2018; Goff & Knorr, 2018). However, addressing such challenges is rewarding and critical, as it results in more democratic spaces defined by co-labor (Cook-Sather & Luz, 2015). Such shifts in relations of power and positions of authority redefine spaces of partnership and extend into participants’ wider educational experiences.

In educational literature, student agency may be conceptualized through various theoretical traditions, from Bourdieu’s *habitus* to Foucault’s biopolitics (DeJaeghere et al., 2016). Broadly, agency names not only action but the capacity to act within, against, or beyond structural conditions. As Felton et al. (2019) argue, positioning students as actors contrasts with viewing students as docile objects or consumers (p. 194). When students are positioned as educational actors they have the possibility to shape or create learning processes, to challenge expert-novice dichotomies, and allow space for productive failure. We address agency as a form of situated practice that reinforces students as actors, instead of as consumers or objects.

The Peer Educator Program (PEP) positions students as course co-designers (Felton et al., 2019; Bovill & Woolmer, 2019) while also providing students with a way to intervene directly in teaching and learning spaces. In doing so, peer educators (PEs) engage in partnership with the faculty lead and with each other. We see PEP as a hinge—a space of partnership around which the agency of both PEs and the students that they teach can be heightened. Below we explore how students in both roles enact agency through PEP, thus highlighting the possibilities of peer-to-peer work to extend agentic qualities within SaP programs beyond immediate participants.

This discussion of agency places students within various positions of potential hierarchy, encouraging collaborative re-workings of interaction within faculty-student and student-student partnerships. In the following sections we explain the foundation of the program and explore how student agency and responsibility is re-shaped through partnership.

Background of the program

PEP is comprised of students who have successfully completed an introductory, general education course in cultural anthropology (ANTH 201),¹ and who in subsequent semesters enroll in an upper-division course (ANTH 430, “Practicum in Anthropology Education”). The six to 10 practicum students per semester are self-selected, may be from any major, and may enroll in the course for one to three semesters.² These students—the PEs—meet once a week with the faculty lead to acquire knowledge on active learning, lesson planning, and facilitation. Students work in small groups to plan and lead additional teaching sessions, called “bonus sessions,” for students enrolled in that semester’s ANTH 201.

Importantly, faculty do not attend bonus sessions; these are spaces designed and led solely by students. PEs create lesson plans through a collaborative and iterative process, obtaining feedback from peers and faculty. Bonus sessions are offered six weeks each semester and linked topically to course segments; attendance provides ANTH 201 students with extra-credit. Each week the same lesson plan is offered twice, allowing ANTH 201 students multiple attendance options and allowing PEs to refine lesson plans and to see their plans in the context of two different groups.

After teaching each week of bonus sessions, PEs reflect in class and in writing on the process of collaboration, execution of sessions, and development of teaching skills. Reflection becomes a critical way for students to recognize themselves as agentive pedagogical partners, and collective processing provides opportunities to learn from each other. As of Fall 2020, 40 students from 22 majors had served as PEs across eight semesters, with 19 students completing multiple semesters.

PEP was created by author Storey, inspired by the work of mentor Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and the collaborative of students, faculty, and community members who taught SUNY-Buffalo’s long-standing course, “Women in Contemporary Society” (Leder et al., 1999). As Storey reflects:

As a larger (60 to 140-person) class that meets two general education requirements, ANTH 201 is usually about 95% non-majors. Many students select it to meet their schedule and not out of an interest in—or even knowledge of—anthropology. Creating PEP allowed me to reconfigure my interactions with students and to shift the role of students within learning processes. I started with major challenges—a big class of non-majors—that I also saw as opportunities—a wide variety of students whose ideas and experiences generated impactful discussions. PEs span many majors (engineering, history, biology, computer science, etc.), showing me that students are seeking opportunities for connection, growth, and responsibility.

PEs rework the dynamics of learning spaces and the roles held within them. Using active learning pedagogies in bonus sessions places a further emphasis upon the need to rework educational roles in order to deepen learning (Weimer, 2013).

FINDINGS: CULTIVATING AGENCY

This section explores how the partnership work at the core of PEP encourages and builds agency for two student audiences: PEs in ANTH 430 and students enrolled in ANTH 201.

Outcomes for ANTH 430 students

PEP's environment fosters a transformative approach to teaching and learning centered in collaboration with other students and the instructor. It attracts students with varying backgrounds and majors, incorporating diverse perspectives and encouraging students to learn from each other. ANTH 430 builds student agency through responsibility for researching, creating, and leading bonus sessions.

PEs gain a wide range of practical skills which can be applied throughout their academic careers and in future professional roles. Students explore how concepts discussed in the classroom apply to real-world events, deepening content knowledge and cultivating a deeper cultural awareness. Through experiential learning, ANTH 430 provides an opportunity for students to explore how teaching might be part of future career trajectories and to explore how teaching skills translate into other spaces.

Peer-to-peer and instructor feedback play a pivotal role in ANTH 430. The class is structured as a round-table discussion which fosters a constructive exchange of ideas between students and instructor. As Storey reflects:

Coordinating ANTH 430 is a very different experience than most undergraduate teaching. It resembles a graduate seminar, as students take a central role in shaping conversations and sharing knowledge, but the comparison is not complete. As students may take ANTH 430 three times, they build a sense of ownership over the bonus sessions and the dynamic of our ANTH 430 class. It does not feel like I am the only one responsible for the class, or that I even should be the authority within the space.

In planning bonus sessions, two to three PEs work together to research, create, and execute their lesson plans, which encourages teamwork. Co-leadership of bonus sessions ensures that each student is accountable for their part, while also encouraging collaboration. PEs participate in planning meetings with the instructor, which facilitates a focused exchange of ideas and constructive criticism. As Eckel-Sparrow reflects:

Through my participation in PEP I learned to reframe how I think about mistakes. One example is a session I co-led where we discovered what we thought was a whiteboard was actually a Smartboard. We had to quickly adapt our lesson plan to fit the resources we had. I learned from this experience to always double-check the materials needed in advance. Beforehand, I had participated primarily in academic environments where mistakes were something to be vilified; the supportive, constructive environment cultivated by the class encouraged me to instead treat mistakes as opportunities for growth. I came to appreciate constructive criticism as helpful feedback and now feel better equipped to respond productively and learn from error.

PEs build a variety of practical skills. Working in small groups promotes time-management and professionalism. Executing lesson plans requires skills such as event planning, public speaking, and problem-solving. As Eckel-Sparrow highlights:

In one of the bonus sessions I co-led, we decided to utilize the Speed Art Museum, located on campus, instead of a classroom. We formatted the bonus session as a scavenger hunt; the topic was gender, so students were instructed to locate pieces of art in the museum and describe how different concepts appeared in the art. I felt that this session provided students with a unique opportunity to apply information they had learned about in class. Additionally, we were able to introduce students to the museum, which has a variety of events and resources that may be interesting or helpful to students, which they may not have thought to visit otherwise.

PEs also build skills in adaptability, problem-solving, public speaking and organization. Students are encouraged to think critically and approach familiar content in new ways through teaching, ultimately developing a heightened awareness of teaching as practice. The smaller class size provides a space for open and constructive discussion and opportunities for validation, vulnerability, support, mentorship, and growth through peer solidarity and collaboration without hierarchy; this environment encourages PEs and ANTH 201 students to cultivate meaningful connections in their interactions with the material and with each other. Often, the benefits of bonus sessions for ANTH 430 students overlapped with those for ANTH 201 students. We examine this further in the following section.

Outcomes for ANTH 201 students

Students in ANTH 201 have a variety of motivations for attending bonus sessions: extra credit, practice with content, and advice on studying. Attendees gain benefits in how they process class material and develop agency in learning.

Varied, durable learning keeps students challenged and engaged, including case studies, presentations, games, multimedia, and group-work. PEs foster a sense of connection by inviting discussion, questions, and peer-work and by drawing upon students' lived experience. These qualities make students feel valued, rather than silenced or treated like consumers. Further, when a student identifies ties between their own life and class content, they can better conceptualize the content and apply the lessons to life around them, including critical topics like gender, race, and class. This engages a level of personal agency and involvement and encourages practicing empathy when encountering unfamiliar topics.

Students attending bonus sessions often work amongst themselves to derive solutions and answers, taking learning into their own hands by asking questions, sharing ideas, and fulfilling tasks that require direct participation. As Ransdell reflects:

During one session we played a game with a beach ball (covered in topical and icebreaker questions) to instigate lighthearted and class-related conversation. My peers wanted to play all session long, sharing memory tricks for terms and creating mnemonic devices together. The way we engaged with the material inspired collaborative and communicative learning. In another session, we showed students the differences

between methods in anthropological research through video examples. When we broke into discussion groups, my group recognized differing qualities of research by the first video. This was a consequence of group work; as each member built off of the others' thoughts, they collectively came to the conclusion of the week's lesson without the direct guidance of an authority.

A critical advantage of small bonus sessions are connections between ANTH 201 and 430 students. As sessions are led by peers, the barriers that may intimidate students and prevent them from speaking with professors are less likely to inhibit engagement. With the credibility of having taken the class before, PEs are approachable, resourceful points of contact. The bonus sessions create a comfortable atmosphere where students can ask questions, make mistakes, and receive criticism with less risk of embarrassment. PEs also provide individual attention, validating ideas and learning journeys. The smaller group sizes and focus on participation help students break the ice and form relationships with other people in class. Anecdotally, students often shared on surveys the importance of bonus sessions for expanding content knowledge and asking questions they wouldn't necessarily ask in class.

PEP also connects students to campus and student life. By hosting sessions in various locations, such as the art museum, students are challenged to push their comfort zone and investigate campus resources. With a reason to spend more time on campus and engage with other peers, PEP furthers the student experience and builds a sense of belonging. Although attendance varies between semesters, a significant portion of the ANTH 201 class usually attends at least one session. For example, in Fall 2019 the 201 class consisted of 90 students: 51 students attended at least one session and 32 of these attended three or more sessions.³

Challenges and suggestions

At the University of Louisville, the program catalyst was one interested and willing faculty member. This allowed for relative autonomy but also created challenges with regard to limitations in time, energy, and resources. Ideally, more faculty stakeholders would provide sustainability.

In our experience, eager students like authors Eckel-Sparrow and Ransdell often approached the faculty lead excited for this opportunity, envisioning how the experience may be utilized in future education and employment. PEP is promoted to all ANTH 201 students, with specific invitations to those who participate or express deeper interest in class content. Incentives could include class credit (as we use), compensation, internship experience, or volunteer hours.

Participation and logistics often present challenges. Over time, attendance at individual bonus sessions has ranged from three to 40 students, and this variation dramatically alters lesson plans. However, with an ANTH 201 course of 100–140 registered students, attendance at each bonus session hovers within a generally predictable range of 12–15. As in routine classes, PEs encounter challenges with participation. Some solutions our team has discovered include prioritizing activities and movement, working in small groups with PEs, asking that technology be put away, and, at times, providing candy! Logistical difficulties include securing space with proper technology and/or layout for sessions and finding accessible resources for lessons. While these challenges may seem insignificant, these are sometimes the best opportunities for

PEs to help individual students develop agency in their learning. Addressing educational apathy can take a student from passive learning into active participation in this peer-led space. These differences also challenge PEs' flexibility and quick-thinking to accommodate circumstances while still providing a quality learning experience. This can reaffirm their self-confidence and agency in resolving challenges.

For accessibility, we hold bonus sessions at varied times to accommodate non-traditional students' schedules and work to ensure classrooms are navigable. We use varied presentation modes and formats to allow for multiple kinds of participation. Open conversations about the need to create equitable classroom spaces have helped us build this topic into the program as a constant point of conversation and action. In 2020 we offered online bonus sessions for the first time.⁴

As in other SaP programs, team dynamics and relationship building present challenges (Coombe et al., 2018). Some faculty may be reticent to place students in charge of delivering class-related material. This transition of power may be difficult but is a valuable moment in awakening student agency and pushing faculty to see the importance of partnership. With frequent meetings and reliable communication between the faculty and PEs to build trust, this transition can be confidently made, as we have experienced. This shift not only rewrites the dynamics within ANTH 430, but also spills over into students' wider educational experiences. As Ransdell writes:

Starting as a PE, I didn't feel confident to teach others the content taught to me. I'd always seen myself as a recipient of knowledge through school; I thought to "give out knowledge" you had to have a PhD or specific teaching position. In this program I became more critical of the constructs of "teacher vs. student" and how these definitions held me back from engaging with my own education. While just words, these classifications gave me imposter syndrome in leading my first bonus session. Over three semesters I found my confidence and recognized the faults of this hierarchical thinking!

CONCLUSION

PEP is predicated upon seeing students as responsible actors and intentional partners (Weimer, 2013; Lubicz-Nawrocka, 2019). Culturally responsive, democratic learning opportunities (Cook-Sather, 2019) develop agency through strong interpersonal connections, both student to student and student to faculty, and all involved benefit from cultivating a greater sense of belonging.

PEP builds student agency and breaks down barriers within too-often hierarchical educational spaces. Analyzing the experiences that we shared as authors, we recognize a myriad of benefits for students and faculty that could be reflected within various disciplines. We hope that this model and the solutions we developed can be translated across institutions.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are deeply grateful to the editors of *IJSaP* and two anonymous reviewers for their thoughtful comments on this case study and for the formative feedback of our colleagues and friends Marie Kendall Brown, David Johnson, Megan Sheehan, and Barton Christmas. This paper

only exists as the result of the incredibly hard work, creativity, dedication, and interest in collaborative experimentation of every peer educator from 2017 through 2020: thank you.

NOTES

1. ANTH 201 is required for anthropology majors and minors.
2. The class counts for one credit; repeating three times is equivalent to the majority of major courses. The largest proportion of students are anthropology majors; they usually make up between one-third to one-half of PEs each semester.
3. To date we have not conducted thorough analysis on the impacts of attendance on course grades or performance. In end-of-semester surveys, ANTH 201 students often self-report that bonus sessions helped them understand concepts, reinforce learning from class, and improve their grades.
4. In 2020 we experimented with offering both synchronous and asynchronous online bonus sessions. Participating ANTH 201 students self-reported that the sessions were helpful and engaging, and PEs identified new skills that were learned—and new challenges faced—by teaching online. PEs also reported that the sessions encouraged empathy for what their instructors were facing in making instructional changes necessary during the pandemic.

NOTE ON CONTRIBUTORS

Angela D. Storey is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Louisville, examining the politics of the built and natural environment in cities, with research in Cape Town, South Africa, and Louisville, USA. She is also engaged in research about teaching with ethnographic methods and in collaborative practices of scholarship.

Hannah Eckel-Sparrow is an undergraduate student at the University of Louisville majoring in anthropology and criminal justice. She participated in the Peer Educator Program for three semesters, which fostered her interest in student agency in educational spaces. She plans to pursue further studies in anthropology following graduation.

Henrietta K. Ransdell is an undergraduate student at the University of Louisville majoring in anthropology, sustainability, and English. She participated in the Peer Educator Program for three semesters, furthering her interests in other peer education groups and service initiatives. She is interested in sustainability, social justice, advocacy, and community development.

REFERENCES

- Bovill, C. (2019). A co-creation of learning and teaching typology: What kind of co-creation are you planning or doing? *International Journal for Students as Partners*, 3(2), 91–98.
<https://doi.org/10.15173/ijpsap.v3i2.3953>

- Bovill, C., & Woolmer, C. (2019). How conceptualisations of curriculum in higher education influence student-staff co-creation *in and of* the curriculum. *Higher Education*, 78, 407–422. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-018-0349-8>
- Cook-Sather, A. (2019). Wrestling with the languages and practices of pedagogical partnership. *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education*, 27, 1–4. <https://repository.brynmawr.edu/tithe/vol1/iss27/1/>
- Cook-Sather, A., Bovill, C., & Felten, P. (2014). *Engaging students as partners in learning and teaching: A guide for faculty*. Jusey-Bass.
- Cook-Sather, A., & Luz, A. (2015). Greater engagement in and responsibility for learning: What happens when students cross the threshold of student-faculty partnerships. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 34(6), 1097–1109. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2014.911263>
- Coombe, L., Huang, J., Russell, S., Sheppard, K., & Khosravi, H. (2018) Students as partners in action: Evaluating a university-wide initiative. *International Journal for Students as Partners*, 2(2), 85–95. <https://doi.org/10.15173/ijsap.v2i2.3576>
- Daniello, F., & Acquaviva, C. (2019). A faculty member learning with and from an undergraduate teaching assistant: Critical reflection in higher education. *International Journal for Students as Partners* 3(2): 109–117. <https://doi.org/10.15173/ijsap.v3i2.3771>
- DeJaeghere, J. G., McCleary, K. S., & Josic, J. (2016). Conceptualizing youth agency. In J. G. DeJaeghere, J. Josic, & K. S. McCleary (Eds.), *Education and youth agency: Qualitative case studies in global contexts* (pp. 1–26). Springer International Publishing.
- Dwyer, A. (2018). Toward the formation of genuine partnership spaces. *International Journal for Students as Partners*, 2(1), 11–15. <https://doi.org/10.15173/ijsap.v2i1.3503>
- Dyson, M. (2007). My story in a profession of stories: Auto ethnography – an empowering methodology for educators. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 32(1), 36–48. <https://doi.org/10.14221/ajte.2007v32n1.3>
- Felten, P., Abbot, S., Kirkwood, J., Long, A., Lubicz-Nawrocka, T., Mercer-Mapstone, L., & Verwoord, R. (2019). Reimagining the place of students in academic development. *International Journal for Academic Development*, 24(2), 192–203. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1360144X.2019.1594235>
- Goff, L., & Knorr, K. (2018). Three heads are better than one: Students, faculty, and educational developers as co-developers of science curriculum. *International Journal for Students as Partners* 2(1), 112–120. <https://doi.org/10.15173/ijsap.v2i1.3333>
- Leder, S., Plotnik, M., & Venkateswaran, P. (1999). Changing concepts of activism in women’s studies: Women’s studies in a community college. *Women’s Studies Quarterly*, (3&4), 185–202.
- Lubicz-Nawrocka, T. M. (2019). “More than just a student”: How curriculum co-creation fosters third spaces in ways of working, identity, and impact. *International Journal for Students as Partners*, 3(1), 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.15173/ijsap.v3i1.3727>
- Manor, C., Block-Schulman, S., Flannery, K., & Felten, P. (2010). Foundations of student-faculty partnerships in the scholarship of teaching and learning. In C. Werder & M. M. Otis (Eds.), *Engaging students voices in the study of teaching and learning* (pp. 3–15). Stylus.
- Mercer-Mapstone, L., Dvorakava, S.L., Matthews, K.E., Abbot, S., Cheng, B., Felten, P., Knorr, K., Marquis, E., Shammas, R., & Swain, K. (2017). A systematic literature review of students
- Storey, A.D., Eckel-Sparrow, H. & Ransdell, H.K. (2021). Cultivating student agency and responsibility through peer-to-peer teaching. *International Journal for Students as Partners*, 5(1). <https://doi.org/10.15173/ijsap.v5i1.4478>

- as partners in higher education. *International Journal for Students as Partners* 1(1), 1–23. <https://doi.org/10.15173/ij sap.v1i1.3119>
- Ntem, A., & Cook-Sather, A. (2018). Resistance and resiliencies in pedagogical partnership: Student partners' perspectives. *International Journal for Students as Partners*, 2(1), 82–96. <https://doi.org/10.15173/ij sap.v2i1.3372>
- Starr, L. J. (2010). The use of auto-ethnography in educational research: Locating who we are in what we do. *Canadian Journal for New Scholars in Education*, 3(1), 1–9. <https://journalhosting.ucalgary.ca/index.php/cjnse/article/view/30477>
- Trahar, S. (2013). Autoethnographic journeys in learning and teaching in higher education. *European Educational Research Journal*, 12(3), 367–375. <https://doi.org/10.2304%2Feerj.2013.12.3.367>
- Weimer, M. (2013). *Learner-centered teaching: Five key changes to practice* (2nd ed.). Josey-Bass.