

REFLECTIVE ESSAY

Faculty-student pedagogical partnership in the virtual classroom: Lessons from COVID-19

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The Faculty-Student Partnership Program (FSPP) at Lingnan University Hong Kong had its small but significant beginnings in 2014¹. Fitting into the “pedagogic consultancy” quadrant of Healey et al.’s (2016) Students as Partners (SaP) conceptual model, the program does not involve curriculum design, but rather aims to more directly enhance teaching and learning in the classroom. Trained and paid student partners (SPs) each work with a faculty member for a semester at a time, conducting regular classroom observations, writing post-observation reflection reports, and then dialoguing with their faculty partners (FPs) in weekly meetings, considering classroom dynamics, practices, and pedagogical issues from their differing teacher/student perspectives. SPs also meet regularly together with the program leader(s) throughout the semester for ongoing support and training. More details on how the program is run are outlined in Pounder et al. (2016).

The first semester of 2020 in Hong Kong threw out unexpected challenges for our team. Hong Kong was one of the first places hit by COVID-19. By the second week of the semester, local universities were suddenly and unexpectedly thrown into an online learning mode, with no warning or preparation time. Rather than hoping for a resumption of live classes, we decided to adapt the program to the online mode. SPs were initially very skeptical. After all, how could they perform their central role of observation and giving constructive feedback when there were no live classes to observe and when teachers were adopting a variety of

technologies and practices? Each SP was advised to meet up with their FP and discuss how they could work together in this situation. Ultimately, all SPs were able to come to unique agreements with their respective FPs and conduct a fruitful semester's partnership. Subsequently, it is possible that this was the first pedagogical student consultant program in the world to complete a whole semester in online mode. That being the case, five SPs in our team decided to share their experiences from this semester.

WHAT FORM DID OBSERVATIONS TAKE IN ONLINE MODE?

Ann

My observations were all virtual, from my computer at home. My FP added me as a student for his Zoom classes and as a moderator to access discussions in the breakout rooms in Big Blue Button.

Dayana

Instead of teaching her science lab tutorial live, my FP made up and uploaded a series of videos each week for the students to download at any time. So instead of observing classes, I was responsible for giving feedback and suggestions on these pre-recorded videos before they were uploaded.

Polina

Like Ann, my observations were conducted from an online student's perspective via Zoom. The professor was the only one using the camera and microphone; the students preferred to stick to the text-based chatroom, so on my screen I could only see and hear what the professor was saying and putting up online.

Ringo and Zara²

Our professor, likewise, was using Zoom. For the first three weeks, we sat in his office with him, so we could see the professor and his actions and reactions, although not the students. As the coronavirus situation worsened, we stayed in our rooms and observed his teaching online.

HOW DID THE ONLINE MODE AFFECT YOUR OBSERVATIONS AND YOUR ROLE AS AN SP?

Program leaders' note

All the SPs commented that the online mode considerably restricted their ability to observe the class, making it very difficult to ascertain student engagement and dynamics. As their observation reports play an important role in discussions with their FPs, which in turn form the basis for any subsequent teaching adaptations, the SPs unanimously agreed that losing touch with these facets was the most difficult aspect of their roles. To supplement their observations, the SPs fell back on their own personal experience as online students and the shared experiences of their fellow SPs in order to provide their FPs with constructive feedback.

Ann

Because I wasn't able to be fully immersed in the classroom environment as before, I felt that my role had become more passive, and my observation notes simpler than before.

Dayana

Because I was working on video recordings rather than observing live teaching, I could only assume the students' impressions based on what my FP would explain to me, so my reports may not have been as objective as I would have liked them to be.

Polina

I think my role was more technical this semester, according to my professor's needs. I helped him to understand how to use different functions and suggested what kind of app features might work best for the students and what kind of multimedia activities could be included in the lectures to increase the students' attention span and promote learning.

Ringo

I had not realized just how reliant we were on class reception in a regular classroom. We had to refocus our attention as Zara has described below. Other than that, my role and tasks remained the same in online mode.

Zara

Initially it was challenging to have to rethink my role as a SP, but over time I came to identify what was important to focus on. As my FP was working with technology seamlessly, I focused more on the lesson content and FP's explanations and interactions with students.

HOW DID YOU CONDUCT MEETINGS WITH YOUR FP? HOW DID THIS DIFFER FROM A FACE-TO-FACE CLASSROOM MODE? AND HOW DID THAT AFFECT YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH YOUR FP?

Ann

We conducted meetings via WhatsApp call. I regard discussing face-to-face to be essential to facilitate a conversation, so I do think that the relationship was less connected when compared to past FP relationships. It was not always easy to find a common time, and we tended to talk less when we were online.

Dayana

Two of our meetings were face-to-face, but due to the escalation of the virus outbreak, my FP conducted the rest of the meetings through phone call from her home. When we met in person I was able to go through every tiny detail; my FP would sometimes draw on the board and express her point of view, and meetings could take up to an hour. However, phone meetings lasted around 20 minutes at most and covered only the most important aspects. I think being able to see a person and observe their facial expressions and gestures helps you know how to approach them and give suggestions or express criticism. It's a bit challenging to establish a good trusting relationship with your FP when you've met only twice in person, but still possible.

Polina

My meetings with my FP were conducted in the usual manner, in his office. The main difference this semester was that some of the time was spent on discussing the app functions and online learning in general. My FP was already an above-average teacher who had already participated in a previous teaching enhancement program. I gave him much detailed feedback; he took it all seriously and implemented every suggestion I gave him. Because the spectrum of issues to work on was very limited to start with due to the online mode of teaching delivery, we had solved the major issues within about half the semester, so our partnership ended early, and consequently I did not develop a close relationship with him.

Ringo and Zara³

Meetings were at first the conventional way in the office. A few weeks in, we began meeting via Zoom, using the Zoom screenshare function to facilitate our discussions. For us, nothing really changed after switching to online meetings. Ringo had already worked with our FP the previous semester and already had developed a very good partnership with him. Near the beginning of the semester, the two of us had dinner together with our FP so Zara was able to learn more about his vision for teaching the course and became comfortable quite quickly with working with him. So in all, the partnership(s) kept evolving in a similar way to previous semesters.

HOW IMPORTANT WERE THE REGULAR SP MEETINGS TO YOU? DID THEY PLAY A DIFFERENT ROLE TO THE SP MEETINGS DURING FACE-TO-FACE TEACHING MODE?

Program leaders' note

During this semester, most SPs were living on campus. Ann was living a distance from campus and could not return for the meetings due to the COVID-19 situation. We pondered whether to switch from a face-to-face meeting mode to an online mode in order to include Ann, but it soon became obvious that the face-to-face meetings were filling needs outside the usual program needs, which is evident in some of the answers below. Sometimes we just relaxed and enjoyed some social time so the SPs could regain a sense of "normalcy" before getting back into our program roles.

Ann

The regular SP meetings in previous semesters were quite important to me, as we could get to discuss what key takeaways that we could observe in the lesson and to talk about the solutions instantly. Since I was not on campus this semester, it was regrettable that I could not join the meetings. I could only read the materials provided on the drive and to check if there was anything worth noticing for my own observations.

Dayana

Regular SP meetings played a significant role in my overall development as a student partner. We would usually gather together and give constructive criticism on each other's reports or share some of our insights. It taught how to handle criticism and pointed me to the

areas that I needed to work on. During this semester the meetings were especially important because they were also one of the few opportunities to interact with people due to the virus outbreak and social distancing implementation.

Polina

SP meetings were very important this semester since all of us were dealing with different types of issues because we were all new to this type of teaching mode. In general, these meetings give us an ability to learn from each other, find creative solutions to the issues we face, and ask for advice when we don't know how to handle communication barriers with our FPs. But I agree with Dayana—I think these meetings were different this semester. With online teaching and self-isolation, we all needed some human interaction, thus we were all very excited to be at the meetings and communicate with other people in person.

Ringo

The SP meetings were important, as usual. For me personally, however, they didn't play a role any different from the meetings when teaching was in face-to-face mode.

Zara

These meetings helped to get me more on track with how other professors were approaching their online classes and whether there's something I could do differently as an SP in the online mode. For example, learning from fellow SPs' experiences, I could understand more about the breakout rooms function in Zoom and consider how that could be utilized more frequently within our FP's class.

IN YOUR OPINION, WHAT WAS THE IMPACT OF THE ONLINE MODE ON STUDENTS' LEARNING? DID IT ENHANCE OR HINDER IT? HOW COULD IT BE IMPROVED?⁴

Ann

In the past I thought an online way would be more efficient. But after this semester, I feel that it hinders students' learning experience. First, students could not ask the professor questions on the spot or continue with follow-up questions if they didn't understand, as in a physical class. Second, students tended to be more passive. For instance, when they were discussing in the breakout rooms, they only texted short and simple messages rather than using the microphone to actually hold a discussion. Third, the professor could not track students' learning process as closely as before. Students could do as many things as they liked in front of the computer, simply being online but not actually attentive. This undeniably imposes adverse effects on their learning outcomes. Perhaps one of the things the lecturer can do to encourage students to participate more actively, especially in a language class, is require students to turn on their microphones to speak and nominate quieter students to talk and ask or answer questions.

Dayana

I think it greatly varies from person to person and among different departments and disciplines as well. I do not think that online teaching enhanced students' learning in any way, but it could have hindered it for some of the students. Learning classes that involve any kind of math were quite challenging, while classes that mostly consisted of verbal and written content and assignments did not differ much from face-to-face classes. The main point here is that online lectures should be implemented only if they are a good replacement for face-to-face classes. In the virus outbreak case, both students and teachers were left with no options, but when we do have options, I think professors who wish to continue with online teaching should carefully plan and map their course and seek feedback from students, for instance by conducting a questionnaire or a poll to figure out how students of that particular course prefer different forms of teaching. Overall, I would suggest that they make material as engaging and as comprehensive as possible and complement lectures/tutorials with a short recap in the form of lecture notes.

Polina

From my own personal experience and that of my peers, online learning hindered our studies. It cannot fully substitute for regular face-to-face education, as it lacks interaction between classmates and group discussions. It is also hard to implement any competitive elements into the teaching. Students refused to use microphones and cameras during the class, which made the lectures feel like we were just watching a YouTube video. The sound gets very monotonous, so it was very hard to concentrate on these lectures, especially with back-to-back lectures. If online courses were planned, it would help if teachers interspersed a variety of interactive activities and tools between shorter lecture portions to keep students' attention. They could use more polls and pop-up questions and share more personal experiences in order to bridge the virtual gap between teacher and students. It may be better if lessons were prerecorded and then made available for students to watch when it is more convenient for them. Professors should also cover less material during an online lecture than they would during the regular face-to-face lecture, since it is harder to comprehend content online.

Ringo

It hindered students. This was an uphill battle from the very start, which none of us—teachers or students—had adequate experience or training for. Should this mode become long term, then teachers will have more of a chance to think about how they can improve their students' learning outcomes. My advice would be firstly to realize that online teaching is nothing like face-to-face classes; the whole virtual classroom dynamics are very different. For instance, even something as simple as how to group students has to be managed differently, and it can also be done using software at the students' end. I would recommend putting more training into software for teachers, so they can plan ahead to make the best use of the various functions and get used to the different dynamics of an online mode.

Zara

I believe that it depended on the students who were taking the classes. Some are more disciplined and more comfortable with the online format than others. It also helps when

students can interact with class material in their own time either through YouTube links or recorded lectures and when screen-sharing is used for answers and essays. If the online mode has to be extended for a longer period of time teachers would need to make considerable changes to their outlines, assignments, and online tutorials. Students could be given options for online feedback sessions and have a greater variety of class materials presented in an interactive manner.

CONCLUSION

The student partners' reflections give much insight into pedagogical partnership practice. In the online mode, their roles shifted somewhat. Their field of observation shrank considerably, forcing them to find other ways to supplement their feedback. In some cases, their role extended to helping their FPs with technical issues (both practical and pedagogical) or online materials. Likewise, the online mode also affected relationships with faculty partners. Partnerships still developed and functioned reasonably well if they had been able to meet together face-to-face for the first two to three meetings before switching to a more virtual mode. This kind of relationship-building plays a pivotal role in any SaP endeavour (Matthews, 2017), and this principle can also be seen in the value the SPs placed on the regular SP meetings. Not only could they share and help one another with online teaching and learning issues, but these meetings took on the extra function of providing a more normal social setting where SPs could enjoy regular human interaction, which was lacking in their courses.

When it comes to overall student learning, the SPs were unanimous that the online mode hindered rather than helped. The virtual gap hinders meaningful social interaction. This discourages active participation, competitive activities, and group discussion while requiring more concentration and yet also allowing for unfettered distractions. Online learning should only be substituted for face-to-face learning where there are compelling reasons. Online dynamics are completely different to the face-to-face mode, so that if online learning was to be ongoing, teachers would have to rethink their teaching approaches and make considerable changes, as per the suggestions in the previous section.

In conclusion, as the pandemic continues, online and blended learning is becoming more commonplace, and no doubt perceptions of its effectiveness will improve as appropriate adaptations are made. This experimental semester has shown that faculty-student pedagogical partnership has an ongoing role to play in helping teachers adapt to the online classroom environment. It is hoped that our feedback is illuminating for others engaging in pedagogical partnership who are encountering similar situations.

The program and this paper conform to the research ethics guidelines of the institution.

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NOTES

1. Originally named the Student Consultant Program.
2. Ringo and Zara were working together with the same FP on a new compulsory core course.
3. See the previous note.
4. This answers a tweet previously on the IJSaP website about the implications for SaP of COVID-19 and moving to an online teaching mode.

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