

## CASE STUDY

## Building institutional capacities for students as partners in the design of COVID classrooms

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## ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 posed several challenges to post-secondary institutions, including the move to online learning in a short amount of time. In June 2020, Bishop's University hired 23 students as online learning and technology consultants (OLTCs) to help faculty prepare for Fall 2020. They underwent training about Students-as-Partners literature, empathetic design, pandemic pedagogy, high-impact practices, and authentic learning design. After their training—which included online modules, simulations, faculty mentorship, and technology training—the program launched in July 2020. In this case study, we deploy SaP literature to solve pedagogical challenges posed by the pandemic, analyze the data collected in the program's developmental assessment, and share the program's impact on students, faculty, and the institution more broadly. This program is a key intervention in building institutional capacities for SaP work in a post-COVID higher education context. The outcomes of this case study demonstrate that working with students as partners in the design of COVID classrooms increases students' social and emotional intelligence, technical and digital literacy skills, critical thinking, project management skills, and other significant learning gains.

## KEYWORDS

innovative pedagogy, student engagement, experiential learning, threshold concepts, online education

The pandemic has posed several challenges to post-secondary education (PSE) in Canada and around the world (cf. Darling-Hammond & Hyler, 2020; Openo, 2020). The move to online learning in a short amount of time in Winter 2020 was disruptive to many institutions,

with particular pressure on institutions whose model prioritizes an in-person, immersive experience; in these cases, the global pandemic posed fundamental challenges to institutional, professional, and student identities. At Bishop's University, with 178 years of experience in liberal education, the change from face-to-face instruction to online and remote teaching raised many questions about how technology could be harnessed to enhance Students-as-Partners work to aid in student engagement and inclusive virtual learning communities in the midst of COVID-19.

In this case study, we share an intervention in pandemic pedagogy (cf. Smith and Hornsby, 2020) that aimed to engage students as partners in the design of COVID classrooms. The rapid move to online instruction caused a shift in traditional positions of expert and learner, whereby faculty members moved from mastery of their field and teaching space into learner positions. In the middle of the global pandemic, we were guided by Paulo Freire's (2018) advice in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* to "begin with the solution to the teacher-student contradiction" (p. 5). In the design of this program in the context of COVID, we saw an opportunity to deploy students as partners in the co-design of COVID classrooms; we were informed by the work of Students as Partners (SaP), including spaces where the reversal of traditional paradigms would lead to student-centered innovation. The model of co-design was informed by Students as Partners Research that interrogates different levels of power and authority: "Reciprocity in partnership is premised on dialogue, negotiation, and exchange of ideas between partners. This model of relationship interaction positions both students and staff as having essential expertise to contribute to the goal of furthering education" (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017, p. 14). The global pandemic encouraged us to re-think traditional modes of design and delivery, and in doing so advanced our thinking about how to deconstruct notions of expertise and authority in productive ways. Authority and expertise were important lenses for this project, and we were informed by the following challenge to value students as experts:

The term "expert" is reserved for faculty, when, in fact, students are experts in one very critical area: the experience of learning. It is surprisingly easy to overlook what seems to be an obvious connection: no one understands the student experience better than the students, themselves. (Pallant, 2011, p. 519)

In June 2020, 23 undergraduate students from all five academic divisions at the university (education, humanities, social sciences, natural sciences, and business) were hired as online learning and technology consultants (OLTCs) to help faculty prepare for Fall 2020. These students were hired for their communication skills, creative problem solving, and social and emotional intelligence—all skills necessary for building successful relationships with faculty as they teach and learn during a pandemic. These skills were particularly important in overcoming the challenges of the traditional hierarchical relationships between students and faculty; sensitivity to emotional labour and cognitive dissonance in the middle of a global pandemic was a crucial design feature to ensure this program was a collaborative and transformative experience for both parties rather than a transactional one. Approximately 35% of courses scheduled to run in Fall 2020 were OLTC-supported (this number includes full-time and contract faculty teaching loads). The program was also assessed for (a) impact on the OLTC students' perceptions of teaching and learning; (b) the faculty experience in the OLTC program, with a

particular focus on community-building and student engagement; and (c) the student experience in OLTC-designed courses. For the purposes of this Students-as-Partners case study, we will focus primarily on OLTC student experiences and their reported perceptions around developing competencies such as social and civic responsibility and the development of social and emotional skills, which employers often identify as skills gaps in new graduates (National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2018). We measured OLTC perceptions through focus groups and team meetings, ongoing critical self-reflection in the form of learning journals, and an exit survey.

### THE GENESIS OF THE PROJECT

As COVID-19 spread across Canada in early March 2020, universities moved rapidly to online and remote learning: decisions were made quickly about choice of platforms, alternate assessment, and compassionate grading in the final weeks of the Winter 2020 term. Once it became clear that the global pandemic would impact Fall 2020 and beyond, a series of institutional taskforces were struck to navigate the complexities of this world-wide health crisis and how it disrupted the fundamental functioning of the university. Taskforces were organized around topics and themes as diverse as compliance with public health guidelines to securing extra digital storage and curating professional development for faculty around online teaching. Members of the Information Technology Services (ITS) department engaged in discussions about how to expand ITS client services by hiring student assistants for the help desk. The IT client services manager initiated conversations with the Stephen A. Jarislawsky Chair of Undergraduate Teaching Excellence and an elected student from the Student Representative Council (SRC) to explore how they might together design a program that was less focused on transactional “help-desk” interactions and more aligned with Students as Partners in instructional co-design.

### THE DESIGN PROCESS

The three members of what became the OLTC design team—a faculty member, a senior ITS staff member, and a student, each of whom co-authored this case study— immediately engaged in an environmental scan to assess available resources, which included a pool of underemployed students seeking summer jobs, a culture of teaching and learning that values “relationship-rich” learning experiences (cf. Felten & Lambert, 2020), an institutional prioritization of co-curricular programming with an abundance of academic and experiential learning activities (cf. Bishop’s University, 2020), and access to communities of practice and professional development in teaching and learning through inter-institutional collaborations, most notable through the Maple League of Universities consortium, a group of four primarily undergraduate, liberal education universities located in rural/regional areas in Eastern Canada.

### PROGRAM GOALS

The OLTC program goals were threefold: (a) assist faculty members in their adaptation to this new teaching context, (b) provide students with work-integrated learning (WIL) experiences and skill development through the OLTC program, and (c) help re-imagine a 21<sup>st</sup>-century classroom with students as key collaborators. The design and implementation of the

OLTC program was informed by SaP research with evidence-based benefits because, as Dunne and Zandstra (2011) show,

students who have the opportunity to research the learning and teaching environment in which they are studying not only acquire valuable skills that enhance their employability, they also make an important contribution to social and community engagement within their institution. (p. 15)

Furthermore, we were convinced by the research on faculty engagement, where faculty engaged in SaP work report that students are “instrumental in advising faculty members about ways to improve or strengthen course work” and “become ‘critical friends’ of their professors,” creating a situation in which “both parties. . . become co-learners” (Parker et al., 2002, p. 1128).

### THEORETICAL LENSES

The OLTC orientation was inspired by the principles of authentic learning environments (cf. Herrington & Herrington, 2006); research indicates that this type of learning environment “encourages and supports learners in their development of skills in self-regulation and self-learning, factors which have been seen to inhibit other forms of online learning” (Reeves et al., 2002, p. 285). Hence, the development of a “more collaborative. . . , inclusive, innovative” system of online learning that is “based on care” (Smith & Hornsby, 2020, para. 1) seemed more urgent in the time of COVID than ever before. The OLTC design team deployed the emerging theoretical approach of empathetic design, whereby the OLTCs developed critical empathy in the orientation and training process. Critical empathy asks participants to critically reflect on the discomfort for both instructor and learner in a learning environment radically disrupted by a global pandemic. Critical empathy is defined as “the ability to occupy, appreciate, and responsibly interrogate the perspectives of others” in order to “make space for collaborative, consultative spaces while also juggling the urgency of making sound and strategic decisions [in the time of COVID]” (Riddell, 2020,2).

The OLTC design team focussed on three guiding questions:

1. What does an online COVID classroom look like based on our institutional vision, mission, and values?
2. How do we provide students with transformative work-integrated learning?
3. Can we help faculty move through their discomfort as they occupy the position of learner and novice in digital platforms through Students-as-Partners collaboration?

These questions helped us center the design, adaptation, and assessment of the program and informed how we deployed formative resources and reflective exercises for the OLTCs and faculty participating in the program.

### INTEGRATIVE HUBS

One of the innovative elements of the OLTC program was the composition of the OLTC design team. While the project started as a conversation in the Information Technology Services (ITS) department, it was clear from the outset that replicating a traditional model in which the students would work as help-desk employees in a transactional manner was less

appealing than a transformative and reciprocal approach. Therefore, the design, implementation, and quality assessment of the program was divided into three equal leadership roles: (a) a faculty member to provide pedagogical support, mentorship, and evidenced-based design principles, with access to professional development opportunities through inter-institutional networks; (b) a senior member of ITS coordinating the technological and logistical aspects of the program; and (c) a student member, elected to the Students Representative Council, representing student perspectives. The intersection of these three points of view provided the program's design with a more dynamic approach to support for faculty as they prepared for Fall 2020. Furthermore, the distributed roles and responsibilities also engaged in critical empathetic design: the faculty partner provided a faculty lens and could help find faculty mentors for the OLTCs, the IT partner integrated these perspectives more effectively in designing technology to fulfill these diverse needs, and the student partner provided key perspectives and advocacy in order to design for and with students. This design is supported by literature on the importance of building small "hubs" in embedding projects within institutional cultures. Success in teaching and learning initiatives are often developed in small, and yet trusted networks of trusted and like-minded colleagues from different disciplinary or professional perspectives (cf. Roxå & Mårtensson, 2009a). Furthermore, hubs are individuals or groups that "energize cross-connections, improve knowledge flow, enhance learning across small clusters of expertise, and play critical roles in building and sustaining robust integrated networks" (Taylor et al., 2).

#### RECRUITMENT AND TRAINING

The values of critical empathetic design and SaP informed the recruitment and hiring of the OLTC students. Once funding was secured, Bishop's University distributed a call for applications to current or eligible-to-graduate students from any year and program. The situational time pressure allowed for a looseness and inclusivity in the recruitment process. The call for applications was open so as to maximize the academic diversity of the applicants. The funding agency had stipulations which required any funded hires to be Canadian citizens, but a conscious choice was made to hire international students as well if they were the selected candidates, and those hires would be funded wholly by the university. A total of 63 students submitted a short (2- to 4-minute) video about why they would be the ideal candidate for this role. While the application also required a cover letter and a CV, the video was a significant factor in prioritizing candidates for interviews since it allowed the OLTC design team to evaluate the applicant's engagement, basic technical skills, storytelling, social and emotional skills, and creativity. Important to note also was that the hiring criteria was not based on technical proficiency but rather social and emotional skills. Interviews were conducted as group discussions—approximately 20 applicants per session—and were facilitated by the members of the design team with the following prompt distributed in advance: "What does your ideal Fall 2020 classroom look like?" This resulted in very animated exchanges using both the audio and video features of a Zoom call as well as the text chat backchannel where applicants could expand on their ideas or the interviewers could ask clarifying questions.

The OLTCs participated in 80 hours (2 full-time weeks) of training prior to the program's official launch. Orientation unfolded as follows:

- Pre-orientation preparation: Videos and texts about Students as Partners, empathetic design, and active learning, as well as asynchronous resources—that had been produced at Acadia University and the Maple League Virtual Teaching and Learning Centre—to review before the training started.
- Ongoing professional development: Attendance and participation in thrice weekly professional development sessions about classroom design, inclusion, accessibility, and accommodations, etc., organized by the Maple League.
- Technological training: Extensive training sessions on the three major technologies supported by ITS and used on campus (Moodle, Ensemble Video, and Microsoft Teams).
- Online course modules: A six-module asynchronous course called Adapting Your Course for Online Delivery (developed at Acadia University and available through our membership with the Maple League).
- Faculty mentorship: OLTCs were given divided into working groups (called Student Working Groups – SWG) to explore a problem-based learning (PBL) scenario. Each small working group was paired with a faculty mentor model (FMM). The FMM chose a course they were planning to teach and the SWG worked closely with the faculty member on the course.
- Critical self-reflection: Engagement in critical reflective practice based on a series of thought prompts in daily journal entries and daily “round up” discussions with the OLTC design team.
- Final capstone project: Group presentations in which each student working group present their case study with the FMM on the PBL. Presentations included best practices in online student engagement and the digital artifacts that they created in consultation with their FMM.

During the 2-week orientation, there were also several smaller information modules covering a variety of subjects, including copyright, accessibility within online platforms, high-impact practices, empathetic design, and more. An image of the schedule for the first week of the orientation is shown below (Figure 1) to better illustrate the general schedule that the OLTCs followed during this time.



**Figure 1. Week 1 training/orientation schedule**

	Monday July 6	Tuesday July 7	Wednesday July 8	Thursday July 9	Friday July 10
9-10	Intro/Welcome/Objectives of the program	Group A: Advanced Moodle part 1	SWG meets with FMM program/values/intentions	Creative Commons & Copyright Session	Open Office hour
10-11	Group A: Moodle Basics	Group B: Intermediate Moodle	Acadia Module 1 (Remote Learning Syllabus and Learning Objectives) + Acadia Module 2 (Creating Community)	Individual work on Acadia Module 3 (Pre-Recorded Lectures and Course Content)	Individual work on Acadia Module 4 (Live Sessions)
11-12	Group B: Microsoft Teams	Better Together Series: Course Planning I	Maple League Student Success Panel High-Impact Practices (HIPs).	Better Together Series: Course Planning II	Accessibility in online and hybrid classes (TBC)
12-1	Lunch Break	Lunch Break	Lunch Break	Lunch Break	Lunch Break
1-2	Group A: Intermediate Moodle	Group A: Advanced Moodle part 2	SWG time - Acadia Modules 1 and 2	SWG time - Acadia Module 3	SWG time - Acadia Module 4
2-3	Group B: Moodle Basics	Group B: Advanced Moodle part 1			
3-4					
4-5	Group A: Microsoft Teams  Group B: Ensemble Video	Group A: Ensemble Video  Group B: Advanced Moodle part 2	<p><b>End of day goal:</b>  <u>For the SWG:</u> have three recommendations for the FMM on the things learned in Module 1 &amp; 2</p> <p><u>Individually:</u> Write in learning journal: how are things going for you?</p>	<p><b>End of day Goal:</b>  <u>For the SWG:</u> have three recommendations for the FMM on the things learned in Module 3</p>	<p><b>End of week deliverables:</b>  <u>For the SWG:</u> provide the FMM with a Moodle Landing page, welcome video, navigation, Moodle set up depending on the needs of the FMM</p> <p><u>Individually:</u> Write in learning journal: (writing prompt)</p>

## CO-DESIGN WITH STUDENTS AS PARTNERS

One of the program's goals is to empower students through partnership, not to merely reproduce the traditional relationship that a teaching assistant or help-desk employee may offer. Therefore, the OLTCs were encouraged to assume a more consultative role with faculty. They were trained to have extensive knowledge on technology and techno-pedagogy and were able to suggest the best course of action for a particular class need, but also to identify problematic areas of pedagogical pain points that might not work well or be clear for the learners in online/remote learning environments. Empowerment informed many aspects of the orientation and the implementation of the OLTC program. For example, the program began under a different name (technology teaching assistants), but the students were given the opportunity to determine a name that they felt was representative of the breadth of their work and role. They were co-designers throughout the design and implementation process: they designed the logo, contributed to a communications strategy, built the program's website, created application forms, managed assessment and metrics, and much more.

OLTCs were divided into five divisional student working groups. In each SWG, one member was chosen by the group as the project coordinator and became responsible for

tracking the workload, coordinating meetings, collecting statistics, monitoring progress, etc. This alleviated potential administrative bottlenecks when supporting 77 faculty members across 132 classes with a large team. The project coordinators met twice a week with members of the design team: these “pulse checks” made space for candid and even difficult conversations and also troubleshooting team logistics and technical impediments. Additionally, the entire OLTC team met twice weekly on Monday mornings and Friday afternoons. Monday meetings allowed for continuous refinement of the needs assessments and communication pathways with faculty while Friday meetings were a time to decompress, share high points of the work that had happened throughout the week, and ensure that we were continuing to build communities of support.

#### PROGRAM DELIVERY

Once the orientation was complete, the program and its website were advertised to faculty via email. Professors who signed up to receive OLTC support were paired with a student working group that was divided into five divisions: business, education, humanities, natural sciences and mathematics, and social sciences. Students were, for the most part, pursuing degrees in the same division within which they were assigned. During the first meeting with the faculty member, the SWG conducted a needs assessment with the professor for a 1-hour session. The SWG then worked on solutions and propositions to answer the professor’s concerns and ensured that their recommendations aligned with the learning objectives of the course. In 3 to 4 working days, the SWG delivered a list of recommendations, suggestions, tips, tutorials, and similar resources that corresponded to the specificities of the professor’s course, teaching style, and desired classroom experience. The professor and SWG then engaged in regular meetings. Throughout the process, OLTCs workshopped any thorny questions or challenges with support from ITS, a contract instructional designer, or the three members of the OLTC design team. While the OLTCs were working with faculty, the design team also collected frequent feedback from both the OLTCs and faculty through meetings, analyzed quantitative and qualitative data from testimonials, and, after the completion of the program, designed and analyzed the OLTC exit survey.

#### PROGRAM ASSESSMENT

To measure the program’s short-term impact on participants—both the OLTCs and the FMMs who participated during orientation—we collected testimonials via an exit survey (different surveys were developed for OLTCs and FMMs) after the program’s completion. We surveyed faculty about their experiences with the program and will share those results in a future publication.

##### **Impact on students**

Results from the OLTC exit survey suggest that the participating students learned several skills and acquired new aptitudes. Their answers also indicate that the initial program goals were met: most of the OLTCs reported feeling “engaged” to “highly engaged” in the different design aspects of the program (question 31) and all of them reported that the program challenges students’ ways of thinking and makes space for different points of view through collaboration. They also highlighted that they better understand the challenges faced



by faculty in preparing for the upcoming year (e.g., emotional labour of course design and delivery, challenges with technology and platforms, student engagement, building student communities, etc.) and their central role as student partners in the co-design of this year. The responses to “What skills and competencies have you developed?” are as follows (the amount in parenthesis indicates the number of OLTCs reporting a development in a given competency): technical skills training (21), empathetic design (20), social and emotional intelligence (20), critical thinking (19), project management (18), and software proficiency (18). According to the OLTCs, the top three factors that fostered this development were the orientation, working with their SWG, and autonomous learning. They were also provided with opportunities to submit comments. One OLTC reported, “The OLTC program absolutely challenged my way of thinking. My SWG is made up of strong personalities and creative minds, so there was never a meeting that didn't involve compromising and discussions.” OLTCs also commented on the space created by the program:

Engaging in a Students-as-Partners position allows for a brighter space for discussion and development without the worry of a power dynamic. The pandemic affected everybody and we, as students, must keep in mind that our professors are learning and growing along with us.

Students also discussed outcomes in relationships and identity development: “It has been a great addition to my life. I love my SWG and consider them good friends, I have become closer with multiple faculty, . . . and I have learned more about myself as a learner.”

### **Impact on faculty**

The program has also had a positive impact on the faculty members who participated both as faculty mentor models and as faculty accessing the OLTC program. They reported that the students helped them visualize what their course would look like online, provided them with creative ideas and brought solutions that they would not have considered otherwise. Some also reported that being learners and allowing themselves to be vulnerable helped them step outside of their usual position of authority, and that the students' enthusiastic support and genuine care helped them overcome their insecurities. A faculty member reported, “I highly recommend [the program], . . . and you'll find that [the OLTCs] will really expand your mind in terms of what's possible in your classroom this fall and beyond.” Another faculty member remarked, “Be enthusiastic! . . . Sometimes it doesn't seem feasible, then you realize that . . . we tend to limit ourselves in terms of what we know, but [the OLTCs] know an awful lot more than we know, so don't be afraid to ask!”

### **Impact on the institution and beyond**

Although we are in the early stages of collecting data, and the long-term impact of the program on Bishop's is not yet known, early feedback has already demonstrated how it has influenced the quality of course delivery during the Fall 2020 semester. The program received an Impact Award, the highest honor given to an individual or group in the 2020–2021 Student Representative Council Awards. The program has attracted a great deal of national and international interest. Our work has been cited in reports on innovation in the time of COVID

(cf. Gibbs & Wood, 2020), and we received early indications of impact on professionals and institutions from the teaching and learning domain when we presented at a virtual convention in collaboration with the University of New South Wales in Australia. Some attendees commented on the program, calling it “fabulous” and “inspirational,” and expressed that they hoped it “continues and spreads worldwide.” Furthermore, the project has just received federal funding to scale the project across three other universities in order to place students at the heart of co-designing post-COVID classrooms.

#### REFLECTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This is a time-intensive program that required a tremendous commitment from many partners and stakeholders across the university. While the salaries of the OLTCs were largely covered by external funding (through the federally funded Information and Communications Technology Council), the human capital of three full-time leaders and the support staff to administer and support the program was intensive. However, the outcomes for students through work-integrated and experiential learning were extraordinary, as were the high levels of satisfaction reported from faculty who participated in the various stages of the program. The three members of the leadership team worked beyond the regular work hours as a passion project, but for this to be sustainable in the longer term there should be a program coordinator, especially if this can be embedded at other universities.

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