CASE STUDY

Student pedagogical partnerships to advance inclusive teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic

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ABSTRACT

The current health crisis brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic not only had a global impact, it also exacerbated the inequalities experienced by students of diverse backgrounds in the United States. Implementing inclusive and anti-racist pedagogical practices has gained a heightened and overdue sense of urgency, especially during the period of emergency remote teaching. At Lafayette College, a small liberal arts college in Pennsylvania, USA, the Inclusive Instructors Academy is a semester-long program aimed at supporting faculty from all disciplines to develop and incorporate inclusive practices that promote equity and belonging in their teaching. A critical aspect of the Inclusive Instructors Academy is its employment of student fellows under the Student-as-Partners model. The student fellows who participated in Fall 2020 and Spring 2021 provided feedback to their faculty partners on inclusive teaching approaches. This case study highlights how student-faculty partnerships can be a highly effective strategy for fostering more socially just learning environments.

KEYWORDS

students, partners, inclusion, pandemic, social justice

The global health crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the inequalities experienced by students of diverse backgrounds in the United States (The Healthy Minds Network Report, 2020) during the period of "emergency remote teaching" (ERT) (Hodges et al., 2020; Petillion & McNeill, 2020). Instructors became more aware of the inequities students faced with remote teaching given lack of access to technology and Internet, family job loss, trauma, deaths, anxiety, fatigue, as well as strains of racial injustice such as George Floyd's murder and other cases. Implementing anti-racist, decolonial, and inclusive pedagogical practices gained a heightened and overdue sense of urgency. The Inclusive Instructors Academy (IIA) at Lafayette College, a small liberal arts college in Pennsylvania (USA), focuses on developing a cadre of instructors who implement equitable, socially just, and decolonial teaching practices. Initially conceived as an in-person academy, the IIA shifted to a synchronous online modality via Zoom for its inaugural semester due to the college's response to the pandemic. The student-faculty pedagogical partnership model used within the IIA is one way that instructors obtain feedback on their courses and teaching approaches. The guiding principles behind such partnerships are mutual respect, reciprocity, and shared responsibility (Cook-Sather et al., 2014). Partnership can advance the equitable teaching efforts of instructors, as students are critical informants as to whether a classroom is equitable and promotes belonging (Cook-Sather et al., 2021). This case study describes the structure of the IIA and foregrounds IIA student and faculty reflections on their partnership experiences during the pandemic.

Each faculty cohort participates in the Inclusive Instructors Academy for one semester. Tenure-track and non-tenure-track faculty members are welcome to apply. The key program goals for instructors are to enhance their knowledge of inclusive teaching by immersion in the literature and other resources focused on inclusive teaching, develop a plan to enact inclusive teaching approaches during the semester, work with a student partner to obtain feedback on their inclusive teaching efforts, and engage in discussions with a community of colleagues who value and dedicate time to growing in their inclusive teaching efforts. Faculty members apply to participate in the academy the semester prior to their course to provide sufficient time to develop preliminary inclusive teaching plans.

During the academy, faculty partners meet monthly for 1.5 to 2 hours in stable, small groups. During the monthly meetings, faculty members share updates on the progress of their inclusive teaching efforts and discuss current research articles on inclusive teaching. The meetings are also a space of affirmation and encouragement that the faculty members are doing important and good work with their students given the vulnerability that can be experienced when obtaining feedback on teaching.

Students are partnered with one or two Lafayette College faculty members. The goals of student partners include enhancing their observational skills relative to the implementation of inclusive teaching, developing skills to successfully work collaboratively with their faculty partners, and developing resources that can advance the teaching efforts of faculty partners. Students receive compensation for their work in the academy and are generally selected through references based on their professionalism as well as interest and engagement in other

initiatives focused on social justice and equity. During Spring 2021, one student partner piloted a program to extend the student-partnership services to the wider campus community.

Student partners meet regularly with staff from the center for teaching and learning. At the beginning of the semester, students meet roughly weekly, and this schedule is adjusted as needed. The content of the meetings is adapted from the book *Pedagogical Partnerships: A How-To Guide for Faculty, Students, and Academic Developers in Higher Education* (Cook-Sather et al., 2019) and affords student partners opportunities to reflect upon the teaching efforts of their faculty partners, strategize how they can best provide support, and learn various skills such as giving feedback and the usage of various observational tools. Center staff validated the efforts of the student partners and affirmed that their perspectives were valued.

STUDENT-FACULTY PARTNERSHIPS

The student-faculty partnerships foster an environment of collaboration and collegiality among faculty and students. The partnerships include a preliminary meeting where the instructors share their inclusive teaching plans and schedule classroom observations. In collaboration with the instructors, student partners develop surveys to assess inclusive efforts in the classroom and conduct observations using the classroom observation protocol for undergraduate STEM (COPUS) (Smith et al., 2013), and general observations of teaching. They also conduct focus groups without the instructor present; these are a valuable opportunity to speak with the students directly about the instructors' ways of teaching the class. Student partners are also trained in tools such as the transparency in learning and teaching framework (TILT) (TILT Higher Ed, Brandeis University) to provide feedback on equitable assignment design. The classroom observations and the assignment design consultations create a window not only into the classroom but also into the conscious work that inclusive teaching requires to be comprehensive and effective.

In conjunction with the other elements of the IIA, the student-faculty partnerships contributed to the collaborative construction of more equitable spaces in the (virtual) classroom during ERT. In particular, faculty and student partners focused on three areas of inclusion: (a) deconstructing and visibilizing systemic barriers and biases, (b) decolonization and representation, and (c) building classroom community.

DECONSTRUCTING AND VISIBILIZING SYSTEMIC BARRIERS AND BIASES

Partners worked together to expose the systemic barriers and biases that affect who is able to do disciplinary work.

Chris Ruebeck (Economics)

My work with a student partner during the Spring 2021 semester helped highlight that "rigor" is less of a concern than connecting the mathematical models to current or historical events and asking students to provide examples of their own relevant experiences. These modifications build on findings in STEM pedagogy showing gains from discussion topics that resonate with students (Rainey et al., 2018). My student partner's observations helped me focus on these inclusive behaviors in my hybrid courses, though there were limits to that

student's involvement during this one semester of work. I look forward to continued collaboration in future semesters to see if there has been improvement originating in my changes motivated by the observations.

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Mike Butler (Biology)

In Spring 2021, I added new modules to my course that explicitly investigated biases in grant-writing, variation in quality of mentorship for graduate students, and unequal access regarding who gets to participate in the scientific process. After conducting observations on these modules, my student partner's feedback was useful in all categories, but two main areas stood out. First, having a student's perspective when digesting the results of the mid-semester survey helped me focus on the broader patterns, rather than giving an inordinate amount of weight to the most negative comment or two. Second, her suggestions on a redesigned assignment ensured that I ended up applying the TILT framework properly. This real-time guidance from my student partner resulted in a course that was more socially just in both content and execution.

Hamna Younas (student partner)

As a student partner, I worked with professor Butler to open a communication channel between students and instructor through mid-course surveys and a focus group to address students' concerns, especially while learning remotely. We worked to ensure all students were learning the content and were aware of the real-life inequalities associated with grant writing by including articles dedicated to social justice in science every few weeks followed by a class-wide discussion closely facilitated by the professor. While perhaps it might have been more meaningful to have these conversations in person, given the pandemic, this was difficult to achieve, and I feel that my role as student partner helped facilitate these communications and discussions.

DECOLONIZATION AND REPRESENTATION

Partners exposed gaps in representation and the lingering effects of colonialism by addressing how legacy is presented in elementary-level language courses. Within the field of mechanical engineering, partners addressed gaps in representation by providing examples of lesser-known practitioners and through classroom assignments aimed at skill development.

Annie deSaussure (French and Francophone Studies)

One of my goals this semester, to adopt a decolonial approach to Elementary French, required stepping outside textbook content which presents Francophonie as a celebration of the diversity of the French language around the world. This perspective often omits any reference to the colonial past, of which Francophonie is an enduring legacy. Fatimata Cham's patient observations reminded me to continually search for new perspectives and voices to include in class and to challenge France-centric approaches to language education. Her presence also fostered greater trust among students who were more likely to feel that their voices mattered and were heard.

Fatimata Cham (student partner)

As a student partner, I gained a nuanced perspective and understanding of equity in the classroom. Once a month, I organized focus groups for students to share their concerns and

suggestions for improving the classroom space. Coupled with the perspective of professor deSaussure's lesson plans I realized that in order to create a healthy and successful learning environment, students needed to be asked what their needs were. In doing so, we can help to build equity within the classroom and make students feel comfortable. However, it can be difficult to fully assess if students are enjoying the class or learning from the class when circumstances like lack of access to technology or an unstable environment can impact their engagement and learning. Ultimately, professor deSaussure and I were able to employ different methods of observation and collaboration to meet the needs of the class to the best of our ability and in ways that promoted more socially just language learning.

Tobias Rossmann (Mechanical Engineering)

As exquisitely highlighted in *Hidden Figures* (Shetterly, 2018), a wide range of voices is present in most modern engineering triumphs. Student-led problem-solving sessions coupled with collaborative and low-stakes laboratory projects promoted a sense of community and belonging through the feeling that anybody in the class can be an expert and share their findings with the group. Central to the creation of this technical community was the students' impression that they can do the work and handle the challenging math expected in upper-level courses. The student partner used focus groups to assist in building a classroom environment where mathematical pressure was reduced and students were comfortable making mistakes and developing a growth mindset. While remote learning negatively affected classroom discussion, students were still able to learn difficult engineering concepts without being discouraged by their perceived lack of "hard" math knowledge, largely due to the inclusive transparency created by the focus groups.

BUILDING COMMUNITIES AND ETHICS OF CARE IN THE CLASSROOM

Especially because of the challenges exacerbated by the pandemic, partnerships were used to develop and sustain an ethics of care that fostered inclusion and social justice in the classroom community. Because building rapport online can be more difficult than in person (Glazier, 2021), some IIA participants chose this as their inclusive teaching goal.

Annemarie Exarhos (Physics)

Partnership played a key role in providing me with a more objective view of how my pedagogical choices were being perceived by the students in real time, giving me rapid feedback into what did and did not work regarding student perceptions and engagement. This feedback was particularly helpful to make my classes more socially just during remote learning, where the student partner was able to observe the class dynamic as a whole while my attention was spread between lecture slides, student video screens, Zoom chat, Zoom polls (interspersed throughout the lecture for interactive, zero-stakes assessment), and my notes. Remote learning significantly reduced my ability to "read" the classroom, something the student partner's observations helped mitigate, improving the overall course experience both for myself and the students.

Mark Mancuso (Mathematics)

My student partner for the semester conducted a detailed survey early in the semester and visited Zoom breakout rooms while students were working in class. Subsequent discussions and analysis of the data led to useful discoveries about the students and course structure, upon which I was able to act. Based on the data, my student partner suggested that I allow for more time during lectures in which I am directly asking students questions or otherwise encouraging individuals to engage in the discussion. This paved the way to a more socially just environment in the classroom; students from whom I had previously rarely heard were exhibiting more confidence.

Ethan Berkove (Mathematics)

A student partner can be invaluable in the process of establishing a community of scholars in the classroom. Students in this community have a central role in shaping the classroom discussion and they recognize that they have a responsibility to support each other in mastering new material. A classroom built on these expectations leads to a more equitable experience, which all students deserve. This issue was magnified during the pandemic, when blank video screens and the loss of physical interactions made it harder for me to assess my students' understanding as well as my effectiveness. In multiple classroom visits, my student partner reported on how students were interacting in break-out rooms, analyzed my teaching via the COPUS protocol, and provided concrete suggestions for improving overall student engagement. The changes I subsequently made resulted in better interactions involving a greater proportion of students in class. This immediately improved the overall environment and provided everyone with a more constructive and inclusive virtual classroom.

One IIA student fellow partnered with faculty who wished to consult on specific inclusive aspects of their course, thus enhancing partnership and campus community outside the scope of the IIA.

Monica Rizk (student partner)

One IIA student fellow partnered with faculty who wished to consult on specific inclusive aspects of their course, thus enhancing partnership and campus community outside the scope of the IIA.

As a student partner working with instructors outside of the IIA, one of the main challenges that hindered the partnership's ability to be most effective is that all strategies and tools that student partners use were made under the basis of in-person learning. Since learning through a screen takes away some degree of the human experience, students' and faculty's comfort levels in Spring 2021 resulted in an overall different environment. However, I was still able to foster a collaborative relationship with several faculty members. Each intervention with faculty was very hands-on and individualized. Whether that meant using already established tools such as COPUS or creating a more specialized assessment, each strategy was used to progress towards faculty goals in fostering a more inclusive classroom.

CONCLUSION

The combination of a student pedagogical partnership model with a learning community as exemplified in the IIA saw many successes with regards to faculty members' inclusive and socially just teaching efforts, captured in this case study in the voices of student and faculty partners. Faculty partners exceedingly valued their experiences in the Inclusive Instructors Academy. In particular, faculty reported benefiting from working with a student partner especially during the pandemic, engaging in monthly discussions with faculty colleagues, and enhancing their knowledge of inclusive teaching through the monthly sessions. Similarly, student partners expressed that their input was valued by their faculty partners and that they accomplished the individual goals of the academy.

The partnership model served to reassure and affirm faculty during the ERT period when uncertainty about the pandemic and about teaching via Zoom was elevated. Because of its positive results at Lafayette and potential for fostering inclusive teaching during ERT, we believe that the student pedagogical partnership model can be implemented into faculty learning communities at a variety of institutions to enhance inclusive and socially just teaching both during and after the pandemic. For instance, the IIA can be held in person instead of online, and student partners can follow up with faculty in future semesters to gauge whether their recommendations have continued beyond the partnership. Student partners can also be trained on other pedagogical tools and they can conduct in-person observations. Given the sensitive nature of the topics that can arise, we recommend that discussions are kept confidential. Additionally, while the student partners noted feeling empowered to provide feedback to faculty on their teaching, it is important to remember that there still exists a power differential. Finally, scheduling should be done in advance as busy schedules can negatively impact the smooth running of the IIA. Adaptations are certainly possible within the goals of the institution and each partnership's particular objectives.

NOTE ON CONTRIBUTOR/S

Tracie M. Addy *is the associate dean of teaching & learning and Director of the Center for the Integration of Teaching, Learning, and Scholarship at Lafayette College where she partners with faculty on their teaching efforts and integrates students as partners. She is an expert on inclusive teaching and other learner-centered approaches.*

Ethan Berkove *is a professor in the Department of Mathematics at Lafayette College who specializes in algebraic topology. He arrived at Lafayette in 1999 and has taught pure and applied courses at all levels. He enjoys finding new ways to engage all of his students in class.*

Manuela Borzone *is a visiting assistant professor of Spanish at Centre College and specializes in 19th and 20th century print culture in Argentina, the global Western, and national identity.*

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