REFLECTIVE ESSAY

The healing is mutual: Students as partners in anti-oppressive education

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In this essay, two students and one staff member reflect on our surprisingly healing experience developing anti-oppressive education at one postsecondary institution. Our approach to anti-oppressive education connects with French et al.'s (2020) "psychological framework of radical healing for People of Color and Indigenous individuals (POCI) in the United States" (p. 14) because it shifts the focus from surviving to thriving. Instead of teaching students how to survive in an institution where they experience oppression, we teach staff and faculty how to create opportunities for students to thrive by acting as change agents. These students-as-change-agents learn how to:

- identify oppression and dehumanization as the problem, rather than perpetuate a deficit narrative about students who are already marginalized in the academy;
- connect with their communities or create new ones where they raise their critical consciousness; and
- engage in proactive, collective resistance to restore dignity, foster hope, and prevent harm for future generations of students at the institution. (French et al., 2020)

When we discussed how we might build a conceptual model to represent our healing, we realized that it was situated within the mutuality of our student-staff partnership. Therefore, to develop our conceptual model of mutual healing through student-staff partnership, we chose to connect concepts from French et al.'s (2020) framework with Healey and Healey's (2019) descriptions of five points along a continuum of student partnership (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Conceptual model of mutual healing through student partnership

We offer reflections on each stage of our conceptual model to describe how we arrived at mutual healing. As we were challenged to push our pedagogical practice to change "students and society" (Kumashiro, 2000, p. 40), we also allowed ourselves to be changed by it.

CRITICAL COLLECTIVE AWARENESS

We model this stage after French et al.'s (2020) explanation that healing "occurs when POCI gain critical consciousness about their oppression and seek to resist the associated racial trauma" (p. 19). We add the term *collective* because of French et al.'s recommendation to move healing "away from the individualistic focus that coping relies upon" (p. 19) and instead help students discover that "their experience [is] part of a 'common collective struggle' . . . versus one that emanates from, and therefore should be solved by, individuals" (p. 19). We also extend this critical consciousness into becoming aware of mental illness stigma and discrimination.

Erin

When I first heard Melanie-Anne speak, I was captivated by the power, vulnerability, and conviction of her words which activated new realms of possibility for me. This was the first time I considered the fact that someone could struggle with their mental health *and* be a respected leader working to break down walls that leave so many sitting outside. In fact, her

presentation gave me a whole new outlook on walls, as she described the recently established Wellness Education Centre (WEC), with its glass walls eliminating barriers to access and inclusivity from the outset. The WEC provided a glimpse into a space where our influence could prove transformational. As Melanie-Anne described wanting to recruit students with lived experience at the WEC, I started to envision myself working there . . . until she announced that first-year undergraduate students were not eligible to apply.

I decided to indicate my intentions anyway.

"I'm a first year . . . ." I said hesitantly. "But I'm a mature student!" I added, as if that afforded me some credibility.

"I don't usually hire first-years like I said, . . . but since you have personal experience, perhaps we can make an exception."

Yuelee

Before I encountered the WEC, I was a facilitator for an English conversation circle for international students. Hearing one student share his story took me back to the initial years after I immigrated to Canada in Grade 11—the excitement, followed by feelings of culture shock and yearning to reunite with friends and family back in Asia. I was also reminded of the mental health issues I coped with at that time. I found dealing with anxiety challenging because cultural stigma and a lack of awareness made it difficult to name.

I was fortunate to have family members in Canada who supported me, but how about the students who were dealing with these struggles in a new country all by themselves? What about the students in our campus community who recently ended their lives? How could I raise awareness to prevent these kinds of tragedies?

Melanie-Anne

With the memory still tender in my heart of dropping out of university because of mental illness stigma, I set out to raise awareness of a false narrative I had initially internalized in the academy: that students who experienced oppression were on the margins because of some inherent deficit. Instead of perpetuating pedagogical practices that left already marginalized students asking, "What's wrong with me?," I wanted to create education that challenged us to collectively ask, "What's wrong with this environment, and what can we do about it?" Therefore, I designed the WEC to model how staff and faculty could partner with students to raise their critical consciousness and work as a collective to produce more socially just outcomes that help resolve longstanding inequalities in higher education.

CENTERING LIVED EXPERIENCE

The next stage of the model is illustrated by the way the WEC used a recovery-oriented approach, which Piat & Sabetti (2012) describe as

> privileg[ing] the needs and aspirations of people with mental illness over other population groups, to acknowledge the expertise of individual lived experience, and to support the various collective efforts of mental health consumer-survivors to promote their own recovery services and supports. (p. 25)

In other words, the WEC centered the lived experience of students who were diverse in many ways, but who shared a common experience of having struggled with their mental health.

Yuelee

After my conversation circle experience, I noticed a volunteer posting from the WEC. I had been there before—a brightly lit space with large glass walls and a "*No Wrong Door*" policy prominently displayed. The student staff seemed friendly, and the space felt like a judgment-free zone. I thought this could be an opportunity to support international students, so I quickly submitted my application. Soon after, I was sitting in the office of the WEC's coordinator—Melanie-Anne—for an interview, with a student staff member by her side. My heart was pounding, but it ended up being the best interview I ever had!

What made it special was the way Melanie-Anne centered my experience. I was moved because nobody had responded so affirmingly to my lived experiences as a newcomer with mental health challenges. My story mattered to her. My desire to serve the international student community mattered to her. I mattered. Just the feeling of being heard was already a healing experience for me, but she also recognized my potential, which helped me recognize it in myself. This increased my confidence that I could become a change agent in the campus community. I started to envision possibilities.

Erin

In the January after joining the WEC staff team, I shared my lived experience on the largest platform I ever had—the university's social media channels, for an annual mental health anti-stigma campaign. It was unnerving to be so open in such a public way, but I received so many supportive comments and private messages from members of the university community, friends, and family members. That experience opened a door to inclusion for me: I learned that I could be my true self at school without fear of rejection or further shame.

No one should be forced or compelled to share their story, but as a person who'd been socialized to believe that mental illness was something to feel ashamed of and keep hidden, sharing my story was empowering. It provided an example of how centering students' lived experience allows postsecondary institutions to initiate conversations about mental health that can decrease the stigma that persists in campus cultures and in society.

CO-CREATION OF KNOWLEDGE

To demonstrate this stage of the model, we describe our experience co-creating knowledge as staff-student partners. However, we do not claim that our approach is the "best" kind of student-staff partnership.

Melanie-Anne

In my current work as an educational developer, I have observed an unfortunate consequence of assuming that co-creation is better than all other forms of partnership: when unavoidable constraints prevent students from driving change, staff and faculty—especially those with anti-oppressive values—can feel discouraged from attempting Students-as-Partners work at all. I have learned that institutions can benefit from a diverse array of student

contributions (e.g., see Figure 2), depending on who is driving the change and how students can realistically be involved.

Figure 2. Four options for institutional Students-as-Partners work
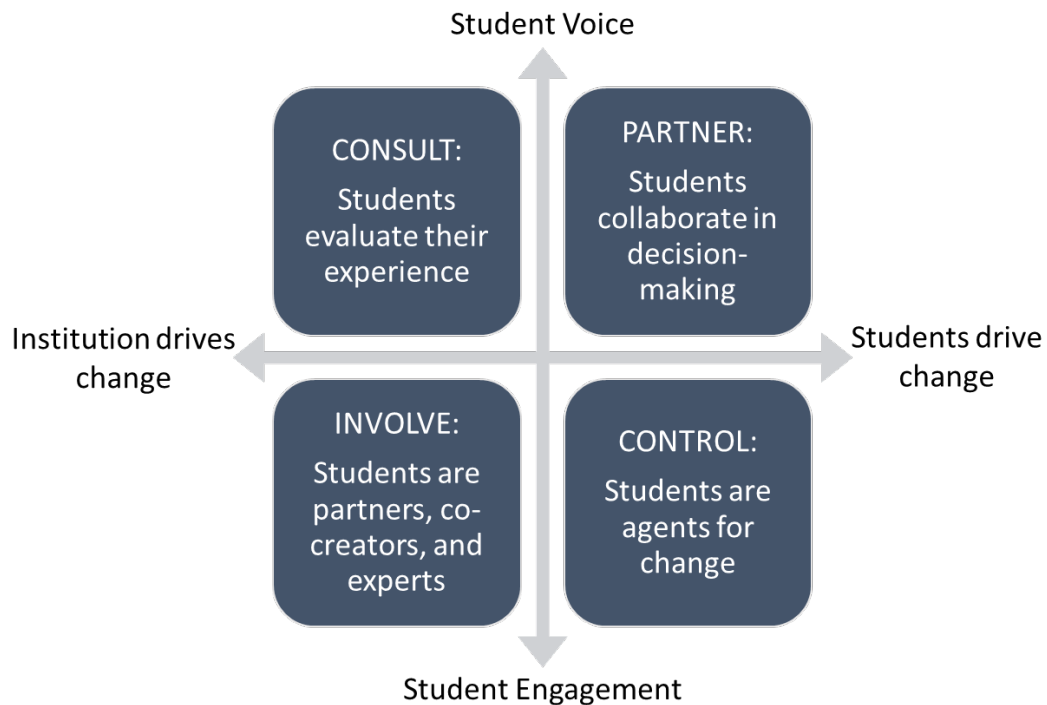
Four ways for students to be involved in Students-as-Partners work at postsecondary institutions, based on students as partners models from Healey & Healey (2019) and Healey et al. (2014).

For example, in my current role I help professors use the results of consultations with students to drive curricular and programmatic change. In my past role at the WEC, I had more autonomy to allow students to drive change when they believed they were ready to do so, or to partner with me to co-create something they found meaningful.

Erin

If you're used to being on the margins as a student, it can be hard to imagine yourself leading any sort of initiative at a large postsecondary institution. So, at the beginning of my time at the WEC, it was hard for me to believe that my actions could have any real impact. But Melanie-Anne listened to students' wellness knowledge, ideas, and interests, and encouraged us to take ownership of the health promotion initiatives we wanted to try. We learned how to champion a cause, plan and execute projects and events, and advocate for changes we wanted to see at the university. Inviting us to become co-creators gave us agency and hope. We felt empowered to give and incorporate feedback on each other's ideas, which made our work stronger and helped us recognize our peers as fellow experts. Seeing our ideas come to fruition

felt exciting and validating because we could see how we were helping others and that we had never been alone in our struggles with mental health.

SOCIAL PARTNERSHIPS
In this stage of the model, we highlight the learning and growth that can happen when students are empowered to build bridges with partners beyond the boundaries of the initial project, or in our case, beyond the reach of the WEC.

Yuelee
What I loved about the diversity of the WEC team was the way that our lived experience and community connections provided key insights into what our communities needed as well as opportunities for partnership with organizations outside the WEC. Building social partnerships allowed me to serve international students by creating bilingual brochures, presentations, and weekly wellness discussion circles for international students. We offered students a non-judgmental, private environment to vent out stresses in their native language, and a place to learn new wellness skills.

It was not just the participants who learned. I learned that the WEC was not the only place students could go to receive wellness support. Some Chinese international students pointed out to me that they already had their own wellness initiatives that focused on building "brotherly, sisterly" types of close friendships. This family away from home provided social support and better suited their cultural preferences. What I learned surprised me, but why? It made me reflect on my own preconceived biases. Perhaps I had been taught to look at this community from a deficit lens, focusing too much on their problems instead of also recognizing their strengths, their wisdom, and their culturally affirming approach to healing.

Melanie-Anne
Reaching this stage of the model represented the most drastic shift in my thinking. Previously, I assumed that my goal should be to find students who could thrive at the WEC—either as clients needing assistance finding mental health resources or as student leaders providing education—and bring them to the WEC. What I learned was that it was not equitable to demand that everyone come in contact with us to access the knowledge and resources we had developed. An anti-oppressive approach required me to yield control so that partners could reach those I could not in order to fulfill the WEC's mission of creating sustainable change in our wider communities.

AUTONOMY AND LEADERSHIP AS CHANGE AGENTS
Healey and Healey (2018) assert that Students-as-Partners work "involves a radical rethink of the power relationships between staff and students, which encourages them to co-create knowledge, co-design the curriculum, and to learn together" (p. 6). For this stage of the model, we describe how rethinking power relations in student-staff partnerships allowed students to embrace their autonomy and step into leadership roles as change agents, or what Healey et al. (2014) describe as "collaborative partners in pedagogic knowledge acquisition and professional development, with the purpose of bringing about change" (p. 46).

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Erin

In my later years at the university, I embarked on a new partnership with Melanie-Anne after she had moved on from the WEC. This time we were co-developers—rather than student employee and staff supervisor—of a university-wide 3-hour mental health literacy workshop. One of my contributions was revising the case study materials to help student leaders, staff, and faculty view students through a strengths-based holistic lens that considered the social determinants of mental health, rather than from a deficit perspective. This presented an opportunity to wrestle with a lesson I would need to learn as a white person with privilege aspiring to be an agent of change rather than a virtue-signaling student. Writing the case studies, I had to stretch myself to imagine: *How might my life be different if the things that cause me to feel alienated were visible on the outside?* This gave me a tiny sliver of insight into the barriers that BIPOC individuals must contend with, including my co-authors. I learned that anti-oppressive work for people who are used to being comfortable requires them to strip themselves of that sense of comfort, knowing full well that they can hide under the safety of their privilege at any time they choose, while others aren't afforded the same luxury.

Yuelee

After starting a wellness discussion circle through the WEC, I was invited to present about international student wellness to ever expanding audiences. I even shared my experience with our national radio broadcasting service! I began to educate the public about the importance of providing culturally relevant services that responded to students' unique needs. In 2 years, I went from watching other people take the lead to speaking out on my own. I had transformed from being filled with self-doubt into someone who was much more fearless. Because I had experienced the power of feeling heard, I shifted my focus to making sure that other students' voices and perspectives would also be heard.

Melanie-Anne

At the WEC, my leadership style was to offer students an intentional balance of education, challenge, reflection, and support. While my students described the WEC as a safe space to return to after engaging in outreach beyond our walls, I always hoped that my students' impact would vastly outlive my tenure at the WEC. For some students the post-WEC transition from supported student to autonomous work colleague was easy, but for others it was more difficult. Some struggled to learn how to translate what they had learned at the WEC to communities that did not value mental health literacy and anti-oppressive practices, or to lead in environments that did not support recovery-oriented strategies. If I were to lead another WEC, I would spend more time preparing students for the transition to "the real world" post-WEC so that more could find their footing as change agents as successfully as Erin and Yuelee did.

MUTUAL HEALING THROUGH STUDENT PARTNERSHIP

At the center of our model of student partnership is what French et al. (2020) call radical healing, or "being able to sit in a dialectic and exist in both spaces of resisting oppression and moving toward freedom" (p. 24). And the healing we unexpectedly experienced was mutual.

Melanie-Anne

As an anti-oppressive educator, I strive to design educational experiences that are both challenging and healing for the students who participate. I expect to be challenged by my students too, but I never expected to receive healing—after all, it is not about me. Yet I would not have lasted this long doing work in education about mental illness stigma, racism, and decolonization if I did not allow myself to accept the healing that emerges from moving ever closer to the freedom of making more room for my authentic self in postsecondary spaces that were not originally designed for people like me.

Erin

When I consider the trajectory on which I have been travelling since I decided to attend university as a mature student with family responsibilities, no one is more surprised than I at my successes. While my efforts were praised by well-meaning acquaintances who told me how brave I was to consider taking on full-time studies with a two- and five-year-old at home, I did not feel brave—I felt exposed. While my personal identity challenges are not necessarily visible to others, I felt branded as a failure—something I was sure people could smell on me, even. My cohort of undergraduates was 10 years my junior, with high school as fresh in their minds as midnight feedings and diaper changes were in mine. I had yet to do much of the healing that has propelled me forward despite the obstacles I would face. This would include graduating into a global pandemic and finishing my undergraduate career while supporting my children's abrupt shift to remote learning. It is only a year later that I am able to recognize my experience as a grieving process, in which the radical healing-through-partnership cycle has repeated itself in the most beautiful and serendipitous of ways. I get to share my story, take what I've learned and experienced, and apply it to help solve problems that I used to believe could never be solved.

Yuelee

The healing that I experienced through my work in anti-oppressive education was possible because of a mutual partnership. My lived experiences were affirmed, healing me to the point where I could envision possibilities. As a staff member, Melanie-Anne invested deeply into my training, raising my critical awareness of the inequities happening in our community. She valued my wisdom, entrusting me to build social partnerships and co-create knowledge that sent ripples of healing into our community. These Students-as-Partners memories serve as monuments in my life that continue to heal me to this day. The lasting impact this work produced is a testament to why I believe that it should be adopted by university staff and faculty interested in healing through their anti-oppressive education work.

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