

REFLECTIVE ESSAY

The potential of systematic reflection on one's positioning: A feminist perspective on the Students-as-Partners approach

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Our collaboration as student (Marie-Theres) and educational developer (Anita) or cultural scientist and educationalist was characterized by a dialogical principle: in a constant, close exchange with consideration of each other's perspectives and biographies, we developed the course Students As Partners: Rethinking Collaboration with Students for teaching academics. Our reflective essay also follows this principle. We make the respective speaker visible, so that viewpoints and positions become clear for the reader. Our key is transparency regarding one's own position and a self-reflective analysis of one's own background to think about the Students-as-Partners (SaP) approach from a feminist point of view. We based our collaboration on Donna Haraway's theory of situation knowledge. In her text *Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective* (1988), she explains how learning, teaching, and research are shaped by one's own point of view. Therefore, she shows how the inclusion of one's own point of view is necessary to take responsibility for one's own perspective and to point out dark spots in scientific discourses. The application of feminism as a reflective foil for our collaboration is based primarily on its nature of approaching relevant phenomena in a power-sceptical, unbiased, and open manner that is self-reflective and does not shy away from internal conflicts (Sieben, 2010). Based on these assumptions, it is necessary not only to work with each other in terms of content, but also to create space for the personal point of view. Such a space arises, for example, when following the idea of the three-way partnership model of Fitzgerald et al. (2020). They recommend a more intensive collaboration of students, teachers, and academic developers within courses to create participatory learning spaces.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUNDS OF STUDENT PARTICIPATION

To begin, we would like to make transparent some of our theoretical considerations that have guided us in the practical implementation of a Students-as-Partners approach. To do this, we first take a look at the origins of universities. Their origin stems from the Enlightenment in the 18th and 19th centuries, the effects of which are still structuring our world. Immanuel Kant, German philosopher and Enlightenment thinker, and thus an important figure in Western scholarship, stands for having the courage to step out of immaturity and to use one's own intellect without the guidance of another. Oriented to what we recognize as the guiding principle of the Enlightenment ("Sapere aude!"—"Dare to be wise!") we would like to ask who is actually allowed to use his own mind and in what way? In our opinion, some concepts on the topic of student participation seem to be fundamentally oriented to this guiding principle of the Enlightenment.

For this reason, antiquated authoritarian teaching methods are at odds with it. At the same time, according to Haraway (1988), the principles of the Age of Enlightenment have written a history of science that goes hand in hand with “militarism, capitalism, colonialism, and male supremacy” (p. 581). This problem goes even further: in *Reflections on Gender and Science*, Evelyn Fox-Keller (1985) elaborated on how masculinity and science are closely linked and how the myth that science is masculine is fundamentally repelled. In her book, it becomes clear how stable and domineering the scientific system is. (Fox-Keller) (1985) laid the foundation for the debunking of this myth, which has been followed by a number of feminist theories in recent decades (Blome et al., 2005). For us it is important to add that the structures of the scientific system carry racist, colonial, classist, and sexist factors that are further reinforced without critical reflection. By implementing personal positioning, it becomes possible to overcome the hegemonic constitution of rigid knowledge structures which is the standard for knowledge discourses (Haraway, 1988).

This is why the term “student participation” is often found in patterns of interpretation that reinforce traditions instead of fostering critical thinking: students are often involved in committees and teaching evaluations only, while the fundamental discourses in knowledge remain untouched. For us, the idea of structural equality is a tool to stimulate these discourses (Breuer et al., 2019). Structural equality is the fundamental assumption that our value, our experiences, and our knowledge are fundamentally equal. This would mean a radical implementation of the principle of meeting on equal terms between students and all other actors of the university. This idea, or perhaps even this conception of humanity, we believe, would liberate our thinking. More details can be found in the section “Thoughts of an Educational Developer.”

INSTITUTIONAL BACKGROUND OF OUR WORKSHOP

Against this theoretical background and the social conditions in higher education, we began with the development of our workshop concept. Based on a collaborative understanding of knowledge and our perception of learning, teaching, and research as processes based on partnership, we conceptualized our workshop. By a collaborative understanding of knowledge, we mean treating our theoretical and experiential knowledge assets equally and combining them in such a way that we emerge with valuable, participant-centered knowledge assets to student partnership. For this we questioned the antiquated, hierarchical, and discriminatory structures along social and feminist lines as well as lines of teaching and learning in higher education and dealt with different authors like Donna Haraway, bell hooks, Evelyn Fox Keller, Kerstin Meyrberger, Rudolf Tippelt, and Maria do Mar Castro Varela.

The potential for change regarding working in partnership arises not only from the criticized structures, but also from the very practical observation that student partnership usually only occurs extracurricula: for example, in the form of peer-mentoring or peer-teaching as a supportive form of teaching by students to students in addition to the regular teaching. Student partnership within teaching in the direct interaction between teachers and students has hardly been discussed so far. Our main task was therefore to initiate this discourse and to ask questions about attitudes and values that go along with working in partnership in the classroom.

Of course, we are also part of these criticized structures and cannot free ourselves from them. This is shown, for example, by the fact that there has never been such an intensive partnership between students and academic developers for the qualification of

lecturers at the institution we work for. Therefore, we saw a great need to also serve as an institutional role model ourselves and to enter into the process of working in partnership.

However, our offer can at best stimulate change on an individual level, working only for a short period of time in the format of a workshop. As a melting pot of different universities and disciplines, the Center for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education Saxony (HDS) offers some potential for political change in this regard: the HDS qualifies and accompanies teachers of all disciplines in all phases of their academic careers from a total of 13 universities in Saxony. The goal of the HDS is to promote teaching competence development and to initiate teaching development and teaching innovations at the universities. The specific target group for our workshop were teaching academics who are already advanced in terms of higher education qualifications and in positions of power. Our offer was open to all interested teaching academics and the number of spots was limited to 16 participants. The workshop took place asynchronously and digitally on the local learning management system. The workshop was divided into four sessions on different topics:

- perceptions of one's own positioning,
- getting to know Haraway's situated-knowledge approach and its relevance for teaching and research,
- identifying situations of student participation that are successful and need to be developed, and
- developing a short concept for individual lessons with participative approaches.

The design of the sessions followed the E-Tivities framework by Gilly Salmon (2013): (a) title—schedule and time, (b) purpose, (c) task summary, (d) spark, (e) individual contribution, (f) dialogue begins, and (g) e-moderation intervention.

PERSONAL BACKGROUND OF OUR COOPERATION

If there is one thing to describe our collaboration, it's probably the unknown. The two of us were collaborating for the first time. We started without any knowledge of our respective professional backgrounds, our working methods, or previous experience. There was hardly a foundation to build upon for both the workshop concept and the collaborative partnership between the research associate and the student. Another complicating factor was that we had to switch from face-to-face communication to digital communication during the planning phase due to the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020. During this time, all social contact had to be radically restricted in order to stop the spread of the virus. The first lockdown can be seen as a historic event, marked by uncertainty and a lack of knowledge. At that time, we could not have guessed what the next few months would look like. Therefore we decided on an asynchronous online format—this also meant new territory for both of us in terms of conceptualization. Fundamentally, our working and living conditions changed drastically due to the COVID-19 pandemic. At the HDS, we worked remotely from the start of the first lockdown in March 2020. Childcare ran parallel to the job at home. Lockdown-related layoffs eliminated alternative income sources. Work and personal lives increasingly merged with ever-increasing stress from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Our collaboration was therefore only possible by recognizing our own respective positions and the conditions given to us. It was no longer possible to collaborate by working separately on content as before. Our cooperation could only function with constant reflection and mutual support in our weekly discussions. Only by engaging with each other's

positions, we believe, does it become possible to learn and work together. So we automatically put Donna Haraway's concept of situated knowledge into theory and practice: the confrontation with other perspectives clarifies one's own limited perception and enables the inclusion of differently pronounced forms of privilege and oppression of each positioning (Haraway, 1988). This, according to Donna Haraway, is feminist objectivity, which again points us to the slogan from the Enlightenment: "Have courage to use your own mind!" In other words, have the courage to use one's own mind in specific social, institutional, and personal conditions and to make it part of the cooperation.

THOUGHTS OF A STUDENT OF CULTURAL STUDIES: REDEFINING CONFLICT

Donna Haraway's theory of situated knowledge has accompanied me (Marie-Theres, student partner) for a long time in my life and studies since my undergraduate studies. My master's studies especially showed me that I want to use it in an interdisciplinary way, so the workshop was a formative experience to test this. Now I am also writing my master's thesis on the extent to which situated knowledge is suitable as a different concept of objectivity. So I learned quite a lot. Overall my personal key insight is simple, but significant: SaP is not only about new ways of thinking to establish new forms of collaboration between students, faculty, and staff, but also about the need for a new definition of conflict. Bell hooks' conceptualization of "speaking freely" resonates with me: that we are not in safe spaces when everyone agrees on everything, but rather we must strive to feel safe even in situations where there is incomprehension and conflict (The New School, 2016). It is precisely in these situations that we stand up for our individual positionings, recognize the positionings of others, and negotiate them with each other (The New School, 2016). For bell hooks (2015), speaking freely is a political practice in which people listen to each other and take each other seriously, so that they no longer talk about differences but fight together against all discrimination.

In our collaboration, the conflict at the beginning of our project has stayed in the back of my mind. We were in the typical initial state of uncertainty because roles, methods, or views had not yet been negotiated. After a telephone conversation in which Anita (educational developer) and I exchanged our respective preparations and approaches for the workshop, we agreed that Anita, as an educational developer, would also take another look at my prepared workshop content and round off the workshop as a whole. Following the phone call, I felt a certain discomfort that I can only come to terms with now with some temporal distance. I would divide this uneasiness into three categories: personal, professional, and political. First, professionally, coming from a cultural studies background and from personal experiences, I had a concern about method. I understood myself to be radically critical of pedagogical methodology at the beginning of our collaboration. After speaking with Anita on the phone, I felt that my approach to this workshop was undermined by her teaching perspective. Second, I personally felt insecurity due to other's strong positionings. I have often had the experience of being quickly overpowered by other people and their opinions, losing self-awareness of my own positioning. Even before Anita and I started working together, I had set a goal to improve and empower myself in this project so that I could also personally benefit from it. This cue brings me to the last point, the political reason behind my uneasiness. Overcoming structural hierarchies is possible. If we talk about the special influence of the individual factors of one's own situation in our project (gender, habitus, experience, etc.) and address these in both form and content, then it also had to be

possible to overcome them. It was my goal to prove exactly this and to stand up for myself even as a student.

After the phone call I sat down at the desk and wrote a long message to Anita to explain and reinforce my point of view. In the manner of a cultural scientist, I thought that a well-constructed message in which I stood up for my critical perspective could quickly solve the problem, because at that point we were under time pressure. I thought that Anita would certainly understand this direct method to solve the problem especially quickly—but I thought wrong: Anita reacted with uncertainty about the further planning of our workshop. In addition, she reflected to me that this news reached her in a situation where she was not only involved in this project, but also in the transition into home office and care work because of the COVID-19 pandemic. My discomfort had abruptly turned into a guilty conscience. Why had I assumed that I was in the right with my discomfort? Why had I never asked if she was doing well and what was bothering her in this pandemic? Why had I assumed that a written text with basic criticism of our joint workshop was the right way to go, instead of talking directly to each other? I realized here for the first time that my position is not weak—an impression that had become solidified through many university seminars and private situations—but rather strong. Strong in the sense that I deal intensively with concepts, formulations, approaches, and theory due to my cultural studies. Thus, I have a very specific way of viewing the world. Before our conflict, I was not aware of what this meant in relation to other ways of viewing the world, or what the implications were. Today I would say that it was primarily through this conflict that I came to know both of our perspectives.

Afterwards, we took the time to talk about the overall situation again and to implement our new insights. From this day on, we tried to let our perspectives stand on their own, so that we could develop them and learn from each other. Only in this way could we recognize commonalities and differences that facilitated our collaboration in further workshop sessions and publications. This did not always work out, but should be seen as a long-term process.

Confrontation with one's own situation cannot only take place in solitary reflection. This is exactly what Haraway and hooks mean when they say that one's own point of view must become part of a collaboration, and, only in this way, hierarchies, discrimination, or injustice can be broken down. In conflicts where we stand up for our positions, we get to know how our approach to the world distinguishes itself from the approach of others and to find common ways to deal with it. Conflict is a central part of human coexistence that does not divide but rather unite. For this, time is needed to manage these disturbances appropriately, because contradictions, uncomfortable feelings, boundaries, and challenges will arise in the process. Giving time and space for conflict also creates a space for people with different perspectives to stand up for and learn from each other. I would like to refer to how Donna Haraway (1998) talks about situated knowledge as a "successor science project that offers a more adequate, richer, better account of a world" (p. 578). Our workshop was a good start for this.

THOUGHTS OF AN EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPER WITH AN EDUCATIONAL SCIENCE BACKGROUND: THE ASSUMPTION OF A STRUCTURAL EQUALITY

I (Anita, educational developer) would like to introduce my thoughts on our collaboration with a thesis: the key to realize a SaP approach is the assumption of structural equality in principle between the participants, taking into account their respective positions and the power structures at work.

I know the principle of structural equality stems from reflexive grounded theory methodology (RGTM). In this context it is assumed that scientists and their research partners are fundamentally structurally identical with regard to their anthropological characteristics: “On both sides, they are incarnate, emotional, and rational, historically and socioculturally shaped, and reflexive persons-in-their-lifeworld.” (Breuer et al., 2019, p. 77, translated by the author). In other words, as researchers, we are not fundamentally different from our research partners in anthropological terms. The distribution of roles in the research contact is based on a temporary agreement and can be reversed in principle. To put it bluntly, I could also say: I play the researcher and you play the subject being researched, and in principle we could also reverse these roles. I, as a researcher, attribute the abilities that I claim for myself to my research partners as well:

- the ability to think about one’s own social world,
- the ability to develop one’s own subjective theories and to make them explicit, and
- the ability to perceive and reflect on one’s own positioning in the world.

Thus I—as a human being in the research context—appear twice: on the one hand as an object of research and on the other hand as a subject, as an author, as a bearer of science and a part of a cultural practice. Peter Janich also calls this the anthropological principle (Breuer et al., 2019).

I move in the field of teaching and learning in higher education as both a practitioner and a researcher. I inevitably draw parallels between phenomena I encounter in practice and in research and look for synergies. For me, the idea of humanity formulated in the context of RGTM primarily means a certain way of relating to individuals in the context of research and higher education.

As we have already described, the SaP approach means partnership, positioning, and equality for us. All these features are also included in the anthropological principle described. And all these features are also crucial for Marie-Theres’s call for more courage for conflict. So, to use the image of role reversal for the SaP approach as well, what would happen if Marie-Theres and I reversed roles, where she were an educational developer and I were a student? I am aware that this is at best a thought experiment. We are operating within certain positions and power structures at the HDS and the university, respectively. But after this thought experiment our further collaboration changed my view: it made me more open to Marie-Theres’s theses and thoughts. I began to take myself less seriously and let myself be carried through our workshop more by curiosity and the joy of experimentation. As a special situation, I remember our opening conversation. We had a very detailed conversation with biographical aspects and the mutual desire to understand each other’s motivation, attitude, positioning, and concerns. And because we revealed so much to each other and left hierarchical restrictions aside for the moment, our collaboration was characterized by very cooperative, transparent communication right from the start.

In future, however, I intend to carry out the described role reversal even more strongly and explicitly in such a kick-off meeting. For me, this extreme change of perspective is the key to mutual understanding, to awareness of each other’s respective positioning, and to successful cooperation at eye level.

According to my personal summary, our workshop concept as well as the workshop implementation were characterized to a special degree by cooperation, in which everyone

could contribute their respective skills and knowledge (and also deal with conflicts). In the context of RGTM, one speaks of the possibility of cooperative data production between researchers and research partners. In our case, I would probably speak of a cooperative teaching development between educational developer and student or educational scientist and cultural philosopher.

CONCLUSION: COMBINING PERSPECTIVES

In this reflective essay, we focused on our two perspectives as a student and an educational developer. We have agreed that conflicts are an expression of partnership and that we assume a structural equality in principle. For us the problems that hierarchy-sensitive cooperation entails could be actively resolved through open communication. Consequently, we recognize here the starting point for a change of discriminatory structures in higher education. Our conclusion is that we as stakeholders of the university actually have good resources to apply the SaP approach if we actively include the impact of different power positions, personal experiences, or other unspoken factors. That is why we felt it was important to acknowledge this partnership in the form of a reflection. For a truly sustainable change, however, we are convinced that a three-way partnership model is needed, as outlined by Fitzgerald et al. (2020) in their article. Students, faculty, and educational developers are each, in their own way, equal agents of good teaching. We therefore recommend creating spaces and structures in which these three stakeholders constantly come together to think about good teaching and learning. We would like to draw on our initial credo once again: "Sapere Aude!"—have courage to use your own mind—in a participatory sense.

NOTE ON CONTRIBUTOR/S

Anita Sekyra works as a higher educational developer at the Center for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education Saxony (Germany). Her work focuses on curriculum development, student participation and Scholarship of Academic Development (SOAD). In her PhD project she investigates the role of uncertainty in the professional actions of educational developers.

Marie-Theres Lewe has meanwhile submitted her master's thesis on situated knowledge according to Donna Haraway. She is now working at the Center for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education Saxony (Germany) as a research assistant on the topics of digitization in higher education, digital testing, student participation, discrimination-sensitive teaching, and feminist critique of science.

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