

REFLECTIVE ESSAY

P.O.W.E.R. and *The Privileged Poor*: Reflections on co-facilitating a virtual professional learning community

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In this essay, we will reflect on a student-staff partnership during the facilitation of a virtual professional learning community (PLC) which read *The Privileged Poor: How Elite Colleges Are Failing Disadvantaged Students* (2019) by Anthony Abraham Jack. The partnership aimed to centre student voice and to use equitable facilitation practices to ensure learning for both participants and facilitators. Throughout the partnership, we explored themes of exclusion, belonging, and power in higher education.

Before beginning our reflection, we would like to acknowledge the labour, time, and effort that our other co-facilitator provided in this project. They were unable, through structural barriers, to contribute to the reflection and authorship of this paper. At the time of writing, two of the authors are employed full time in higher education, and one is a student. The other co-facilitator has graduated and is unable to continue their paid role within the institution. We believe it is important to acknowledge this—the temporality of the student role in Students as Partners and that paying racialized folk for their labour is rarely prioritized by institutions—as a fundamental limitation to our work. Had our other racialized co-facilitator been afforded the opportunity to be paid for their labour in writing this paper, we believe it would have been stronger.

INTRODUCTIONS

Tiffany: At the time of the PLC, I had recently graduated from my undergraduate degree and was completing a postgraduate internship with the PLC hosting organization. Throughout my time as a low-income, first-generation student at one of the participating institutions, I participated heavily in student politics advocating for a more accessible, affordable, and high-quality higher education system both internal and external to the institution.

Tanisha: I am a first-generation, Black, female, able-bodied student pursuing a second undergraduate degree when I was presented with the humbling opportunity to facilitate this PLC. It was an honour and joy to create a safe space as well as lead discussions on issues surrounding equity, diversity, and inclusion as a BIPOC scholar.

Heather: In this partnership, I was a staff member working in teaching and learning. I am a young, able-bodied white woman. I did not attend the hosting institution as a student, and I was not a first-generation student. I have a passion for educational equity and student success in higher education.

THE PRIVILEGED POOR AND FIRST-GENERATION STUDENT STATUS

The idea behind this PLC was collaborative. In the summer of 2020, Tiffany and Tanisha presented a workshop for faculty and staff on facilitating student success for first-generation students, drawing on their experiences as first-generation students at their respective institutions. A few months later, Heather and Tiffany were discussing the ramifications on first-generation students throughout the pandemic, and how the “hidden curriculum” of higher education would be even more hidden for first-year, first-generation students than ever before. Having both read *The Privileged Poor* (2019), Heather and Tiffany believed this text could influence positive change for first-generation students through co-facilitation of a book club PLC for faculty, staff, and students. We sent an email to the other student partners at our teaching and learning centre, and Tanisha, along with one other student, enthusiastically said they wanted to be involved.

As a team, we decided that we would be open to faculty, staff, and student participation in the PLC. We divided into five groups, each having 10–20 participants, which each met five times, totaling 25 total sessions for this PLC. At each meeting, student facilitators led discussions on one segment of the book while Heather was present to oversee the technical logistics. Facilitators all visited each other’s sessions to learn from one another and provide feedback to one another. Each meeting happened over Zoom and took place for 1 hour. For each meeting, the facilitation team met in advance to share their experiences and structure their upcoming sessions. The facilitators all agreed to set norms for the virtual space and to use Singleton and Linton’s (2014) *Courageous Conversations About Race* guidelines as a base for their group’s norms: stay engaged, expect to experience discomfort, speak your truth, and expect and accept a lack of closure.

There were many *aha* moments across the twenty-five meetings of the PLC, ranging from themes in the book to participants showing up and wanting to do better and the exploration and exposure of unintentional exclusionary practices. The expertise of the student facilitators, combined with the implementation of norms, provided an opportunity for the student facilitators to guide participants to draw parallels between the examples of exclusion present in the text and those experienced by the student body at their home institutions. For example, student facilitators exposed the obfuscating nature of the term “office hours” as a structural barrier to first-generation inclusion in higher education. As stated in our anchor text:

Professors and administrators alike need to ensure that all students know what office hours are. By outlining the basics of office hours instead of leaving them largely undefined, we might be able to help more students get the support they need and develop social relationships that will help them in the future. (Jack, 2019, p. 129)

Not only were such insights garnered from reading the text and the facilitation, but also from our experiences of reflecting and writing together.

THE P.O.W.E.R. FRAMEWORK: REFLECTIONS

In order to aid our sensemaking of this partnership, we turn to the P.O.W.E.R. framework (Verwoord & Smith, 2020) to guide our reflection. With the use of questions on the topics of positionality, openness, willingness, ethnocentrism, and reflexivity, we endeavour to reflect deeply on how these themes played out in our partnership, but also share our experiences with higher education practitioners who endeavour to facilitate a similar PLC.

How has *positionality* played a role in this partnership experience?

Tiffany: Positionality played an interesting role for me within our partnership experience. I fell somewhere between Heather and Tanisha. I recently graduated from university but was working through an internship program and still identified primarily as a student as I hadn't known many other worlds. Initially, I wasn't sure how my quasi-employee/student position would affect the partnership and was worried about treading between participating in a student partnership as an employee and as a student. At one end of the spectrum, I was worried about potentially being overbearing compared to Tanisha. On the other end, I was concerned about not speaking up enough to ensure the partnership worked for me as well. This worry, however, was removed almost entirely during the first meeting as I felt we quickly came to a respectful dynamic right away.

Tanisha: The contextual and temporary role of leading a discussion on a topic that drew from my tacit knowledge was intrinsically motivating. As a facilitator, I approached the notion of power as a fluctuating element since the exchange of ideas and information was my main focus. The notion of sharing the power manifested as we wanted to share the space and make it so that everyone felt free to speak and to not dominate the conversation.

Heather: I was keenly aware of my positionality and social location when we entered into this partnership. When reading *The Privileged Poor*, I reflected on how my lived experiences as a student were in stark contrast to those presented in the book. I was not a first-generation student, and I am white. Therefore, in the partnership, I tried my best to listen first and use my facilitation experience to minimize potential harm to my co-facilitators. I also tried to emphasize to everyone involved that I was not an expert and that their voices were crucial in connecting the concepts and examples in the book to their local campus context. That responsibility takes an immense amount of vulnerability and emotional labour. So I struggle to know if my attempts to minimize my position within the institutional hierarchy helped the students feel more empowered or actually just increased the amount of work and burden placed on their shoulders.

How has *openness* manifested in this partnership experience?

Tiffany: As the organizer of the PLC, Heather exhibited an openness that helped foster an openness for the entirety of the partnership. During our preparation meetings, facilitated by Heather, she made me feel confident about the partnership and co-facilitation. At the same time, she gave genuine feedback that was helpful in the partnership and helped me, as a co-facilitator, avoid basic mistakes that I likely would have learned the hard way.

Tanisha: The focus on openness seemed to occur behind the scenes amongst the facilitators during our bi-weekly meetings. The mindset of wanting to collaborate, share, and grow collectively seemed to be a mutual understanding without it being mentioned.

Punctuality, open communication, and appreciation for critical feedback were but a few of the ways in which openness manifested. We also received feedback reports from participants and this bolstered our growth process. Our pre-existing levels of professionalism and past opportunities of working with one another seemed to allow for openness to enhance our group dynamic.

Heather: Openness and trust, in my opinion, were what made our partnership so special. At the point where we began the PLC, we had all worked closely together for around 6 months, all during the pandemic. We were comfortable with communicating and conducting work virtually. For me, our previous relationship and candour allowed me to approach this process with openness.

How has *willingness to invest time in the process* been a consideration in this partnership?

Tiffany: As both a student or as a young professional, time is a valuable resource. The time commitments from our partnership were simple:

- Read the chapters in your own time.
- Do a 1-hour prep/debrief meeting.
- Do the 1-hour PLC sitting.

While the time commitments were simple, our group needed to establish trust to ensure that we did not waste each other's time. Luckily, for each meeting, we were prepared. Even in a preparation meeting when someone had not yet been able to read the chapter due to school or work, they had skimmed enough to be able to participate actively in creating a plan and conversation guide for the next session. Overall, one of the things that made this partnership most successful was the commitment to the time requirements and respect for the time of others.

Tanisha: Taking the time to share the power and acknowledge differences or echoes in opinions created a very cohesive and, at times, entertaining session as we often discussed serious topics. As the sessions progressed, the ease and comfort in addressing certain participants influenced the quality of the discussions as well as the group's motivation and involvement. At times, I would be approached by certain group participants to further discuss relevant concepts outside of our scheduled sessions. This was reassuring and indicated to me that there was a mutual willingness to build networks and to grow.

Heather: My personal willingness to invest time was the greatest source of tension for me. As the staff partner, professional learning fell under my formal, full-time, role. For the student partners, this was an element of a part-time role that had to be juggled alongside coursework. By definition, I always had the time to invest in the partnership. In addition, while we were all working as a team, there was a huge disparity in pay between my role and the student hourly wage. This also contributed to my discomfort, as we were participating in the entrenchment of inequality. I will always be reminded of this whenever we try to flatten hierarchies—some things aren't within our will to flatten and will be controlled by institutions who devalue students, their credentials, and their knowledge garnered through lived

experience. This was extremely salient as we discussed the barriers that low-income and/or first-gen students face.

Do you have any thoughts on *ethnocentrism*?

Tiffany: When discussing a book like *The Privileged Poor*, relying heavily on your own lived experiences is easy. In many cases, it is good to contextualize the points from the book in our own institutions and the lives of real students. On the converse, as a co-facilitator, it is sometimes hard to take a more neutral stance, especially regarding things that profoundly impact your university experience. During our prep meetings it was easy to see what things or stories we related to, both good and bad. These conversations helped to provide additional context between facilitators that deepened our understanding and helped us to figure out what to lean in on and what to back away from before we moved into a more public discussion in the PLC. For my and Heather's co-facilitation, I believe our experiences and knowledge played well off of each other. I was able to discuss my experiences as a low-income first-generation student on one of the campuses participating in the PLC. I wasn't able to discuss best practices for teaching and learning with an equity focus or contextualize from a university outside of my own. Luckily, Heather was able to pick up on areas I lacked seamlessly. However, as two white women facilitating a primarily white group on a book focused on low-income Black students, we were limited in discussing all of the book topics in the personal way the way we were able to with other topics, such as class.

Tanisha: Pertaining to the topics brought up during the sessions, ethnocentrism was an already understood theme within the group and would often come up during our discussions. By being able to openly discuss the issues in higher education, we would often elaborate on the scale of said issues and reflect on our roles in each of these scenarios. Making personal connections and feeling comfortable enough to share our stories and identities helped to dissipate a few assumptions and misunderstandings around our professional positions (i.e., students, professors, faculty) as well as helped us be more cognizant and attentive to certain details in the spectrum of our experiences.

Heather: Our work on identity and our vulnerability with sharing our identity markers and lived experiences not only amongst ourselves but also with the PLC participants allowed us to challenge ethnocentrism when it arose. Tiffany and Tanisha, when visiting each other's virtual spaces, acknowledged that there were multiple ways of looking at the same issue and debriefed how their groups read and approached the same chapters yet focused on different takeaways.

How has *reflexivity* been an important practice in this partnership?

Tiffany: *The Privileged Poor* can be an incredibly personal book. The first time I sat down to read it, I stopped after the first chapter out of frustration with (a) my own negative experiences as a student but (b) the recognition and empathy of the challenges other students faced. My experiences as a first-generation student played a big role in my ability to be a partner. I knew that I would not be able to be a neutral facilitator as my experiences formed both my interest and my knowledge on the subject matter. Still, I also knew that to be a good partner, there may be times where I had to accept that my experience was not universal and that other discussion points needed to be prioritized. This was not always easy—though it was

often easier to navigate within our partnership than in the larger PLC. Our partnership became incredibly valuable when navigating complex, interesting, and sometimes purely frustrating conversations within the PLC sitting. When I reached the limits of my objectivity, Heather was able to pull the conversation back to constructive dialogue. Without our partnership, the discussions within the PLC likely would have been much less of a learning opportunity for all participants.

Tanisha: Taking these new revelations and taking a critical look at how everything connects made for interesting PLC sessions. Toward the end of the session, I noticed certain participants becoming a lot more agitated and wanting to take action. This solutions-focused drive sparked many ideas on how we could make the theoretical into applied plans of action. Though the sessions were primarily focused on the occurrences in the book, the discussion would often course over to how these issues manifest on a personal level and then to how we could address those real issues on our own campuses. The reflexivity of the group seemed to only be limited by the time allotted to our meetings.

Heather: My role as a “fly on the wall” when I was co-facilitating with Tiffany and Tanisha allowed me to position myself as a learner. Our debriefing and planning sessions (which we held between every sitting of the PLC) were crucial in being reflective and reflexive and in allowing us to learn from the experience as well as from one another.

LESSONS LEARNED

Together, through practice and reflection, we understand that partnership, and most importantly, centering student voice, is an avenue to expose unintentional exclusionary practices in higher education. By exploring and exposing these unintentional practices, we hope that PLC participants and readers of this essay will be motivated to move forward in their professional practice in a more equitable and inclusive manner. Drawing from Crant’s (2020) study on first-generation Canadian students, we argue that partnerships like this are crucial to raise consciousness, as “institutions need to be aware of the implications of implied messages . . . especially to students like first-generation students who may be sensitive to these (perhaps unintentional) implied messages that project very real consequences” (p .137).

Our partnership and reflections highlight a variety of similarities and differences in our lived experience as students in higher education, which led to divergent experiences facilitating and partnering in the PLC. Some of the biggest differences related to our lived experiences and perceived level of power in the PLC. For us, often these differences worked as complements as we learned and led at different points throughout PLC. Our awareness of our positionality allowed us to navigate complex topics and build a strong partnership centred on openness and trust, which ultimately led to a successful partnership and PLC. Further, our familiarity with one another led to this being a successful partnership, as we had known each other for several months before undertaking this project.

NOTE ON CONTRIBUTORS

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