

REFLECTIVE ESSAY

Students and academics in dialogue: Experiences of two Students-as-partners projects in a health and physical education teacher education program

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Life by its very nature is dialogic . . . to live means to participate in dialogue.
(Bakhtin, 1984, p. 293)

The three of us are sitting around a small circular table, chatting; there's Grace and Jacinta, two final-year students, and Leigh, a lecturer. We are all connected to the Bachelor of Health, Sport and Physical Education (Honours) (BHSPE) program, a health and physical education teacher education (HPETE) program in the School of Human Movement and Nutrition Sciences at The University of Queensland, Australia. We first met at the beginning of 2019, when Leigh was a lecturer for a second-year BHSPE course that Grace and Jacinta were enrolled in. This course became the focus of two Students-as-Partners (SaP) projects. The first project took place in the second half of 2019, where Grace and Jacinta co-(re)designed the course with Leigh. This project led to a second one in the beginning of 2020, where we then co-evaluated the redesigned course.

In this reflective essay, we share our lived experiences of these two SaP projects. It is important to acknowledge that our SaP projects are part of a growing movement in HPETE programs to recognise student voice (e.g., Enright et al., 2017; Enright et al., 2018) and that we are building on other student voice initiatives in the BHSPE program (e.g., Monsen et al., 2017). As our experiences together have been through dialogue, and because we resonate with the opening quote, we decided to continue this approach in our reflective essay. More specifically, we are sitting around this table to ask each other questions about why we are writing a reflective essay, why we entered the partnership, how our partnership changed over time, whether the partnership was productive, and what we learnt from it. An edited version of this conversation is presented below. We conclude this reflective essay with key messages from our conversation.

WHAT PROMPTED OUR REFLECTION?

Jacinta

Although we reflected at the end of each project, I wanted to take a step back to understand how both projects were productive from a relationship point of view as well as to consider what skills and qualities enabled our projects to be successful. For me this

reflection was important to identify strategies I can embed in future collaborations to experience this success again.

Grace

I thought this opportunity would help me reflect on what I've learnt and allow me to be a part of a different process—that is, the world of research.

Leigh

My reason is similar to Jacinta's in terms of stepping back but less about the success and more about the process itself. I find that a lot of my job is outcomes-focused, so it's nice to have an opportunity to just take a moment and reflect on my experiences of something.

WHY DID WE WANT TO GET INVOLVED IN THE PARTNERSHIP?

Leigh

I'm a graduate of the BHSPE program, and maybe it's my memory, but I don't recall having any opportunities to give feedback about courses other than the end-of-semester anonymous surveys where you don't get to see if that feedback is implemented. When I transitioned to teaching in the program, I was suddenly being asked questions in meetings about what it was like to be a student in particular courses. That was the first time I felt my feedback was actually being heard and actioned in some way. Also, if I was teaching a course I'd been in as a student, I was always thinking about what I would have wanted from the course. As I got further away from being a student in those courses and as I started realising that my teaching philosophy is that students are my "colleagues" (Cook-Sather et al., 2018), I knew that I needed to give students the opportunity I didn't have when I was studying: to be actively involved in the construction of courses. So that's why I ended up advertising the first project that the two of you responded to. Jacinta, why did you respond to that advertisement?

Jacinta

Initially I saw the project as an opportunity to give back to the BHSPE program. During many of our courses in 2019, we had informal discussions as peers questioning "why are we doing this?" or "why doesn't Leigh do it this way instead?" As a result, I saw the first project as an opportunity to have our voices heard and allow future students to engage in courses reviewed and refined by previous students who had been in their position. For me the second project was about wanting to analyse and understand why our first project was successful with the course changes in action.

Grace

I remember Leigh prompting the class to apply. So when Jacinta approached me and said, "hey look I'm doing this project. I think you should do it too," I took that and applied. I also applied because I thought that this project would help me become more familiar with university and the BHSPE program. It would help me to be more confident with my studies, speaking to lecturers, and building relationships within the program itself.

HOW DID OUR PARTNERSHIP DEVELOP OVER TIME?

Grace

The partnership started very calmly for me. I went in with the mindset of whatever happens, happens. Although we knew Leigh as our lecturer, the initial project induction¹ was the first moment where we met Leigh as a partner. The academic-student relationship changed a lot over the first project as we got more comfortable speaking freely and working together. As I started to work with you, Leigh, the dynamic shifted and you became less scary and more approachable to me. How about you Jacinta?

Jacinta

For me, as we only knew Leigh as a lecturer, the beginning of the partnership still felt very hierarchical. I wasn't as calm as you, Grace, because I still wanted to make a good impression. Then over time, I felt the dynamic changed because I began to feel more relaxed working with Leigh as she was always welcoming our opinions. I can't really pinpoint a particular time where I thought, "I can now think of Leigh as a colleague, not only a lecturer," but I think this shift happened slowly where I started to feel more like an equal to Leigh. This allowed me to feel more comfortable to share my ideas and thoughts, just as much as Leigh. This made the second project feel easier and more collaborative because the hierarchy was mostly removed. What about yourself Leigh, did you feel calm approaching this partnership?

Leigh

I don't think I was calm at all for the first meeting because I spend that first little period of time in any SaP project overthinking whether I'm accidentally taking the lead too much as an academic, and I'm really conscious about that student/staff power hierarchy you talked about. But I do think we got to the same point. I agree that we settled into this nice dynamic where we were able to share things, and we had kind of broken down those barriers. It was easy going into that second project because we picked up where we left off from. We already had this dynamic where we knew how to work with each other, which is a big part of a partnership. This was useful when we had to shift to online meetings in 2020 because of COVID-19 restrictions. It would have been very different if we didn't have that comfort level in terms of how we communicated with each other.

Jacinta

Yes, we knew what we were all like as people rather than a title of "you're a student" and "you're an academic." Each time we met online we would discuss "how are you?" and "what's been going on?" and talk about life in general before even getting into "okay, let's now talk about today's agenda." There was a deeper relationship than just focusing on the project.

Grace

I remember feeling comfortable enough in the second project to video call you two from North Queensland while I was a passenger in a car. I wouldn't have done this in the first project, but because of our developed relationship, I knew you two would be okay with this.

HOW DO WE KNOW THE PARTNERSHIP WAS PRODUCTIVE?

Jacinta

Looking back on the first project in 2019, I only realised how productive it was when we reflected at the end. Although there were points along the way where we agreed, “oh this worked really well because of X, Y, and Z,” at the end we were able to go back through all of our stories of what happened and what we did to join the dots of why we were so successful. A moment where I really knew we were productive in our first project was at that professional development day we attended at the start of 2020. As we were sitting there at our own little table with another partnership group, I couldn’t help but overhear other conversations and notice they were starting from scratch as they hadn’t worked together before, whereas we were able to jump straight into the activity because we knew already what we all stood for as individuals in the partnership and how we could facilitate a productive partnership. What about yourself Grace?

Grace

I think our partnership was productive because we came back for a second project, and now we are writing a paper about it. Also, because I view interactions with academics and people in higher positions to myself differently now. An example of this is when I was on professional teaching experience and I could very easily approach the senior leadership in the school to ask them questions as well as collaborate well with my supervisors and other teachers.

Jacinta

I had a similar experience. When I reflect on my time as a high-school student or even my part-time job, I was very afraid of people in a higher position because I thought, “oh, I fall below them, I’m not entitled to have an opinion or to raise my concerns because it’ll just get shut down.” Having this partnership was an eye-opening experience because it was the first time I’ve ever had a teacher or lecturer interested to hear my perspectives. Our partnership has enabled me to feel confident in having a voice and sharing my thoughts with people above me in a respectful manner. So similar to yourself, Grace, during my professional teaching experience, although I acknowledged people of a higher position, I felt more confident in my ability to approach them and see them as another human being who is on my team, rather than someone who is scary.

Leigh

I thought maybe when you went on your professional teaching experience that it would change how you approach working with students in that you might embed more student voice activities in your own classrooms. It’s totally unexpected that instead it was more your relationships with your supervisors that changed because of this partnership.

For me, I know it was productive because the students are enjoying the course much more and I enjoy teaching it a lot more knowing that it’s been co-constructed with students for those students. I also find it so much easier now to justify why I do SaP projects. At the start I was maybe a little bit hesitant doing them because there was the potential that within the university I would be perceived as an early-career academic who needs SaP projects to help them with their teaching rather than being seen as someone who is confident enough in their teaching that they open it up to students. Now I have two tangible

projects that show the value of SaP projects to justify why I do them. This really came out when I got the following comment on my end-of-semester anonymous survey in 2020:

I'm unaware of how long Leigh has taught this course. However it would be nice to see her back herself as a lecturer. Asking for feedback and responding to it is a great characteristic of her teaching. However it seemed like she was pushing for feedback a lot to justify her teaching.

In the past I would have taken that comment to heart more, whereas receiving it after our first project, I was able to rationalise it a lot easier because I knew the benefits of getting student feedback in the moment to refine my course.

WHAT DID WE LEARN THROUGH THIS PARTNERSHIP?

Grace

Working with you two has taught me a lot about collaboration and how to interact in a professional sense. Leigh, you taught me that academics are actually very approachable, which has helped me become a lot more confident with speaking to lecturers and in class. Jacinta, you have given me a lot of insight into different perspectives as in our meetings we nearly always have different perspectives and we're almost always surprised at the other's perspective. It's a very good collaboration process having the three of us together.

Leigh

Touching on that, I remember a conversation we had about the assessment in the course and how differently you two approach making comparisons about a task's weighting and the workload involved. This reinforced just how different perspectives can be but also the different expertise that students can bring in your classroom and through these partnerships.

Jacinta

If I go back to the idea of being afraid of hierarchical positions, something I've learnt from our partnership is that different perspectives from different positions add value to the development of a project. Although I may fear that different ideas will cause controversy and discomfort, I don't think we ever came across a particular conflict because we approached each other's opinions with open minds. We may have had different perspectives that needed to be sorted through conversation, but when I think back to our meetings, in particular when we were completing the second project online, we would always have a dedicated amount of time to ask how everyone felt about the partnership. I recall at one point bringing up something that was very small, and, even though at the time it felt insignificant, if I hadn't ever addressed it, we may not have known if it would have snowballed into something bigger.

So for me I learnt that, moving forward in other collaborations, I should aim to set time to talk through concerns and just ask my partners or colleagues, "are you okay with how we're going?" as this is a valuable tool in making sure I'm not disregarding or missing anything that's important to my partners, no matter how big or small the issue may be.

Grace

I think that's also a very good point because I know that Leigh would always check with us before scheduling a meeting to make sure it worked around any assessment we had and that the time suited us, and I think that being able to speak about that openly was very beneficial to having a respectful partnership.

Leigh

I find that's something that's really important in partnership. You need to actually take the time to talk about the partnership—what's working and where the pressure points are and how to solve them.

Jacinta

Is there anything that you would have done differently?

Grace

Honestly nothing stands out to me. It's been a very positive experience and I've learnt a lot throughout it.

Leigh

I don't think there's much I would do differently. Maybe going into the projects having just enough structure to know what they are going to focus on but not pre-empting anything so that I can be open to what happens.

Jacinta

Similar to both of you, I don't think that there's anything I would do differently. I perceive it as being so positive that a part of me wanted more. For example, when we finished our second project halfway through 2020, we then had almost a whole year before we actually came together to do this reflective essay. But if we're sitting here thinking about how can we help other people moving forward, it's a consideration to keep in mind that even if you do collaborative work and an end comes, keeping in touch with those people can still be of value.

Leigh

That's a really nice thought in that projects may end but partnerships are not just something that you do and then they're done. They have a lasting impact.

CONCLUSION

After reviewing our conversation, we believe there are three key messages. First, partnerships take time and effort to develop. Although the three of us have been part of two projects, we have had one partnership that has developed since 2019. Second, people enter partnerships for different reasons and bring different perspectives. We, similar to others (e.g., Cook-Sather et al., 2014; Matthews, 2017), believe these differences can be a strength if you have clear processes for how to negotiate them. Underpinning both these key messages is the importance of dialogue and reflection. Throughout both our projects, we had formal and informal check-ins to discuss how our partnership was progressing. This allowed us to develop effective communication methods, including how to compromise and listen to other perspectives (Cook-Sather et al., 2014). Importantly, every meeting started with a conversation about us as people, instead of going straight into details about the

project. This brings us to our final key message, that partnerships have a lasting impact; for whatever you're working on (e.g., a course), for those involved (i.e., the partnership team), and for those who experience its impacts. We particularly want to draw attention to the impact that partnerships have on those involved, as there is the potential in higher education for the focus to be on outcomes (Matthews, 2017). Our partnership has transformed how each of us views teaching and learning, we think, for the better. Overall, we strongly encourage others in HPETE programs to begin the dialogue between students and academics through SaP projects.

NOTES

1. At The University of Queensland, SaP projects commence with an induction session where you engage in activities with your partnership team to get to know each other more and plan your project.

NOTE ON CONTRIBUTORS

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