

REFLECTIVE ESSAY

Respect, reciprocity, and responsibility: Principles for successful partnerships and sustainable communities

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The goal of this reflection is to explore the transformation each of us experienced through our pedagogical partnership. We begin with a description of our undergraduate experiences and the contrasting pedagogical approach Brenda uses today. Next, we explore our partnership, one which led Brenda to the implementation of a negotiated curriculum. Next, Brenda will outline the process of negotiation that she undertakes with her sustainability students. Finally, we reflect on the principles of respect, reciprocity, and responsibility necessary for building sustainable communities as well as effective partnerships within and beyond the classroom.

OUR EDUCATION AND CURRENT CONTEXT

Brenda

My 1980s undergraduate experience looked very traditional. I sat at a desk and listened while an authoritative professor decided what the class needed to know. I did well in that environment, but I was not a partner in the learning process. Teaching was something done to me, not with me. Learning was relegated to the classroom rather than integrated with my life beyond.

Caroline

As a student today, my educational experience looks very similar to Brenda's. In the typical classroom environment, the learning material is provided and notes are taken. Consequently, most of my learning happens on my own outside of the classroom without collaboration with the instructor. There are times when I see efforts to explore the student experience, such as end-of-semester feedback surveys. But more often than not, these surveys are followed by little change. This leaves these efforts feeling more performative than authentic.

Brenda

Today, when I tell colleagues I partner with students to co-create the curriculum in my introductory sustainability classroom, the typical response from peers is skepticism. A common comment I hear is, "That works in your classroom, but it wouldn't work in mine. I have content that I have to cover." My colleagues' responses reflect the educational paradigm they probably experienced during their undergraduate education. That paradigm

features a learned college professor enthroned behind a podium pouring the knowledge he identified as important into the empty heads of his passive, ignorant students. That podium clearly delineated who was in charge and who was not.

Although active learning strategies draw me from behind the podium, the nature of my sustainability course acts as a barrier to learning. First, the course is a graduation requirement. Requirements infer hierarchies of power and frequently engender resentment from students helpless against that power. Second, many students outside of STEM disciplines struggle to see how a course about sustainability, frequently perceived as solely about the environment, is relevant to them. To break down these barriers and increase students' engagement, I began partnering with my students to negotiate curriculum in the fall of 2019.

As I expected, partnering with my students to co-create learning helped me build a collaborative classroom environment, integrate students' knowledge into learning, improve engagement, and enhance the course's relevance to students' lives. What I did not expect was the connection I would discover between working with students as partners and creating sustainable communities.

OUR JOURNEY INTO CO-CREATION

Brenda

I was introduced to pedagogical partnerships through the Student-Faculty Partnership Program (SFPP) at Florida Gulf Coast University's Lucas Center for Faculty Development. SFPP faculty participants work with students who serve as classroom consultants, providing faculty with an understanding of enrolled students' experiences in their classrooms. To accomplish this, the student observes their faculty partner's class each week, then the pair meets to discuss the student's observations. In fall 2018, Caroline and I engaged in such a partnership.

Operating outside of the traditional teacher-student relationship requires trust that takes time to develop. It took several weeks before a shared connection to Pittsburgh surfaced for Caroline and me, bridging the relational space between faculty/student and collaborators. Each week as we practiced the principles of respect, reciprocity, and responsibility that Cook-Sather et al. (2014) maintain are foundational for a successful partnership, I watched Caroline become increasingly invested in the class. We had lengthy conversations regarding issues related to pedagogy and class dynamics. She joined the community of learning as it formed within the class, engaging with course content and group discussions. As I watched Caroline's growing engagement, I wondered if practicing partnership principles with my students would enhance their engagement as well.

Caroline

There is a quote from Brenda that remains with me 4 years after our partnership: "Learning happens through relationship." Stated during the introductory lecture of her sustainability course, this established the collaborative learning environment that she wanted to create. It was during this first class that I saw the kind of instructor that Brenda was. She asked students to call her by her first name to break the student-professor barrier. She explained that she didn't want the teaching to be reliant on her. She wanted to foster a co-instructor environment. This encouraged class participation, creating a space where

individuals felt comfortable sharing their thoughts, allowing students to learn from each other as well as from her. She made herself more approachable in the classroom by learning everyone's names, relating sustainability to each student, and elaborating on every point of discussion. I remember intentionally observing students' engagement in the first class. Throughout the period, everyone's attention remained on the task at hand. This was indicative of the collaborative and engaging environment she created on the very first day.

Throughout the semester, we continued to meet our pedagogical goals as our relationship continued to grow. My growing respect for her inspired me to actively participate in her classroom. Interestingly, this inspiration carried over into the classes I was enrolled in. Seeing the dedication and purpose that she led her classroom with, I couldn't help but relate this to my other instructors. Through our interactions, I realized the intentionality and commitment that goes into teaching. This encouraged me to become more interactive with and appreciative of the content being taught to me. I couldn't help but wonder what a partnership like ours would look like if the student was enrolled in the class.

Brenda

Brainstorming with Lucas Center colleagues about enacting partnership in a classroom led me to the concept of agentic engagement, students' proactive contribution to the flow of instruction to enrich their learning experience (Reeve & Tseng, 2011). Agentially engaged students ask questions, offer feedback, and voice their needs and interests throughout instruction. Teachers enhance agentic engagement by supporting students' expressions of autonomy, creating a reciprocal flow of learning and teaching. While I recognized value in this level of engagement, I wanted to accomplish more than supporting students' autonomy. I wanted to partner with them as I was partnering with Caroline, giving students the authority to craft their learning.

Exploring literature on agentic engagement led me to negotiated curriculum, a pedagogical approach that does more than encourage students to ask questions during class or offer feedback in end-of-semester surveys. A negotiated curriculum puts students in the driver's seat, empowering them to make curriculum and pedagogical decisions (Boomer et al., 2005; Fitzpatrick et al., 2018). The process I use that includes more than the relational pedagogy Caroline observed is described below.

PARTNERING THROUGH NEGOTIATION

Brenda

I begin each semester by encouraging students to think outside the green-washed "eco" box that constrains sustainability conversations, recognizing that achieving sustainable communities requires caring for people as well as the planet. In addition, I build a community of learning by learning students' names, listening to their stories, and telling them my own stories. I use active learning strategies that require students to get to know each other and that encourage them to practice their agency. Next, we hold a planning day modelled after Fitzpatrick et al. (2018). First, students reflect individually on what concerns and interests them about sustainability within the context of their career goals. Next, they form small groups to look for commonalities in concerns and interests. Then the entire class compiles and prioritizes a list of topics to explore more deeply. Finally, students can opt to

teach some of these topics in place of a lengthy writing assignment, an option recently added in response to students' enthusiasm.

As someone who plans the entire semester in detail at least 1 week before the class's first meeting, I approached negotiation the first semester with trepidation. Partnering with students to make curriculum decisions meant a lot of schedule spaces marked "To Be Determined." Plus, my inner environmental scientist wanted to reserve space for experiences in nature, a land ethic, and ecosystem services: the things I think are important in a class about sustainability. Some students expressed concern over the empty spaces as well, preferring to know in the first week what the entire semester would require. But because I was committed to trying negotiation, I allowed students to fill the blank spaces with what related to their career goals. The fact that I am still a committed negotiator as I write this essay 3 years after my first implementation reflects the positive results.

THE THREE RS: RESPECT, RECIPROCITY, AND RESPONSIBILITY

Brenda

As I reflect on negotiation with my students, I am reminded of the foundational principles of pedagogical partnership. Respect, reciprocity, and responsibility are diminished in traditional classrooms that grant power to the teacher, squashing students' autonomy. Co-creating learning with students embraces all three principles. Through curriculum negotiation, I show respect for the identities, knowledge, voices, and capacities that students bring to the classroom. I encourage reciprocity by giving up my power, becoming the learner while students become the educators. Finally, students and I share responsibility for building a community of learning.

As stated, when I was a student, I experienced a traditional paradigm that separated me, the "ignorant" student, from the professor doing the educating. As an environmental educator, I have tried for 3 decades to eliminate separation from nature for people of all ages. Today as a sustainability educator, I strive to overcome separation between my students and the social and environmental crises that plague the globe. The common thread that runs through each scenario of separation is an imbalance of power. The professors held the power in 1980s classrooms. Humans exercise destructive power over nature to support consumptive lifestyles. Individuals with power and privilege exploit those without. In short, a students-as-partners paradigm fits organically with the conceptual outcomes I hope to help students achieve.

My journey towards pedagogical power-sharing began by applying the principles of partnership to work with my student partner. We respected each other's expertise, she as the authority on the student experience and me as the authority on the faculty experience. The rewards from our relationship were reciprocal. I came to see students as knowledgeable co-contributors to the educational process, not just empty buckets to be filled. She was granted a behind-the-curtains view of a teacher's preparation that gave her insight into why teachers do what they do and agency that empowered her to advocate for herself in her own coursework. Both of us found a shared responsibility for creating quality learning for our classroom of students.

Caroline

When building a relationship with students, respect is key. Despite her ongoing success as an educator, Brenda utilizes the resources around her to provide her students with a fulfilling educational experience. After working beside her for a semester, I attribute this to the respect that she has for her classroom. As a student, I work harder when I respect the instructor and my classmates. When I do not feel heard in the classroom, motivation declines. In my partnership with Brenda, I had respect for her, of course, but it was the respect and support that she offered me that really broke the student-professor barrier. It was after breaking this barrier that our relationship became reciprocal. With mutual respect, we were able to collaborate on ways in which her classroom could be improved. With both of us on an equal playing field, I gained an educational insight that could not be found anywhere else. As our partnership grew, I felt responsible for the outcomes in Brenda's classroom. I remember feeling the need to actively participate during her class periods. I no longer wanted to sit back and idly observe because I played a role in the development of her curriculum.

Brenda

Just as it took time to develop a collaborative relationship between Caroline and me, it takes time to do the same with my students. As passive recipients for most of their academic career, they react with puzzlement when I explain our planning partnership. I remind them that as an environmental scientist, I experience sustainability differently than they do. I challenge them to explore the way they experience sustainability in their disciplines. By planning day, most have come to trust my intentions and their own capabilities. Additionally, because I show trust in their capacity to teach, my students have taught me about the social and environmental implications of fast fashion, cryptocurrency, and other topics important to them.

My students' words, captured in the university's end-of-semester surveys, indicate that co-creating helps them achieve the learning objectives I envision:

- We all knew each other well enough to respect each other's opinions and work with one another.
- I got to hear other people's opinions and it helped me further develop my own opinions.
- I learned to widen my lens. When I gather my thoughts and opinions on topics now, I have more to contemplate. This makes it more challenging to be confident in my outlook, but that's the point. There are no easy solutions.

The respect, reciprocity, and responsibility reflected in these students' words will be necessary to build a sustainable future.

CHALLENGES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Brenda

While I believe in the benefits of co-creation, implementing this pedagogy can be difficult. Determining the form of co-creation, turning control over to students, and making the time for implementation are among the challenges I have experienced. Sustainability's

interconnected components lend themselves well to empowering my students to negotiate the semester's topics. I recognize that giving students the degree of decision-making power that I do will not work in every classroom. Some instructors truly do have "content to cover," although learning-centered pedagogies are always possible.

My greatest challenge is letting go of control. Part of my need for control is genetic. Scots-Irish genes make it difficult for me to leave decision-making to others. The other part is conditioned by experience. Sharing power with students contradicts the educational and cultural paradigms in which I was raised. In the 1970s and 1980s, midwestern educators commanded students, employers commanded employees, men commanded women, and adults commanded children. Therefore, I must remind myself that my job is to facilitate student learning, not to dictate it. Doing so defies the systems of oppression I experienced as a young person and models the respect, reciprocity, and responsibility I hope my students adopt in their own lives.

An additional challenge is the workload negotiation requires. Because students are making curriculum decisions, each section requires new course prep. Even during semesters when the students undertake much of the teaching, I serve as a resource for lesson planning. However, the feedback I receive from students, as reflected in their words above, rewards my efforts.

Giving students autonomy over their learning in any capacity can increase their engagement and agency while modelling democratic dialogue (Bovill, 2020). I advocate for the benefits of co-creating with students regardless of how it is implemented. Those interested in incorporating co-creation into their classrooms may want to start small. Perhaps the format of a final assignment, the class technology policy, or ground rules for discussion could be drafted together. Small initial steps would also avoid overly burdensome time commitments while testing this pedagogical approach for the first time.

CONCLUSION

Caroline's reflection on our partnership reminds me that a relational pedagogy is authentic for me. Indeed, learning in relationship with my students is why I love to teach. While co-creation with students is relational, it goes one step further. Co-creating with students requires a sharing of power that acknowledges the assets they bring to the classroom and trusts them with their own learning. Working with Caroline as my pedagogical partner offered me a window into the possibilities of partnering with all students this way.

For the students of sustainability with whom I partner each semester, the three Rs typically refer to reduce, reuse, and recycle. I propose that the three Rs of respect, reciprocity, and responsibility are a more effective triad in helping society achieve that end. Rather than focusing sustainability efforts on our waste stream, imagine what we could accomplish if the principles of partnership were our focus instead. Kimmerer (2012) cites the same principles, foundational to Indigenous ways of knowing, as being "key to cultural transformation to sustainability" (p. 320). What if we respected difference regardless of race, ethnicity, ability, socio-economic status, gender, sexual orientation, or species? What if societal norms included reciprocal relationships in which we cared for human communities as well as the non-human communities that provide flood protection, carbon storage, and pollination? What if we recognized our shared responsibility to practice these

principles so we could leave the world a better place than we found it? Giving students ownership of their learning engages them in respectful and reciprocal partnerships with classmates with whom they share responsibility for healing our ailing world.

NOTE ON CONTRIBUTOR/S

Brenda Thomas is an instructor of sustainability and environmental science in the Department of Integrated Studies at Florida Gulf Coast University and the Director of the University Colloquium.

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