

REFLECTIVE ESSAY

Navigating dynamic positions of power in a student-student research partnership

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Spring 2020 was disorienting and confusing. The COVID-19 global pandemic introduced new rules and practices like masking, social distancing, working from home, emergency remote learning, and an overuse of words like “pivot” and “unprecedented.” It was frightening and frustrating all at once.

With widespread laboratory closures interrupting PhD studies, I (Celeste) moved home to my parents' house, sharing a basement office with my mother (Theresa). As we coped with the lockdown and sudden disruption to our lives, we could not have imagined the academic partnership which would form in that shared space. This collaborative reflective essay explores our experiences as co-authors on a Canada-wide survey of junior researchers' experiences of laboratory closures (Suart et al., 2021), as well as a deeper understanding of how to navigate a student-student partnership with shifting power dynamics.

Ensnared at my parents', I (Celeste) felt like I was spinning my wheels. I had received some very negative feedback as part of a manuscript rejection right before the laboratory I worked in closed due to COVID-19. In the middle of trying to plan my next steps, everything shut down. I felt frustrated not being able to do any work from home, as the revisions I needed to do required in-person experiments. I had seen several research initiatives advertised on social media examining how undergraduate students were being impacted by the pandemic, but nothing about graduate students or postdoctoral fellows. Thinking that I couldn't be the only person feeling so adrift and frustrated, I thought someone should capture these lived experiences during the lockdown. That “someone” turned out to be us.

I (Theresa) spent the week before lock-down ostensibly on vacation but in reality in telephone meetings contributing to the logistics of shifting a medical school curriculum entirely online—learning Zoom right before coaching faculty on best online practices, for example. In the first week of lockdown, I set up a makeshift home office in the basement of our 1000-square-foot townhouse where I monitored and assisted classes for three different cohorts, while my husband set up at the kitchen table and our son hunkered down in his room to tackle Grade 10 curriculum via remote learning. A week later, Celeste joined me in the “basement bunker” and,

on one of what turned out to be many, many walks around our neighbourhood, she expressed her own frustrations as well as noting that nobody was thinking about grad students. Oh, yeah, I was also finishing my final course requirement for my part-time PhD program. I didn't feel like a "real" grad student since I was part-time and out of sync with students from my cohort, but I commiserated with her loss and tossed out: "I guess you're studying this chaos we find ourselves in. I'll provide brainstorming, witty commentary, and a bit of editing." How wrong I was!

This project had two other co-authors. One planned to be more involved but had to step back significantly because of complications arising from the pandemic. The other had signed on in a purely advisory role. Due to family commitments, they wouldn't be able to contribute to the primary data analysis. In day-to-day terms, the project was a collaboration between the two of us, and it became apparent rather quickly it wasn't clear who had seniority. Outside our primary relationship as mother and daughter, we have differing experiences that could potentially classify us as the junior or senior colleague. Celeste is a third-year, full-time PhD candidate in biochemistry, while Theresa is doing her PhD in education part-time while working full-time as an educational developer at the School of Medicine at Queen's University. We agreed Celeste was the lead or first author since she had more time to contribute to data collection, had more experience with laboratory research (a key aspect of the survey), and had more recent experience with ethics applications and academic publishing. However, Theresa had much more training with the qualitative analysis techniques being used and, as a former journalist and editor, had significantly more writing experience.

We had each been part of pedagogical and research partnerships before, primarily student-faculty or student-staff partnerships. Celeste had been hired as a student partner on multiple scholarship-of-teaching-and-learning research projects, where her work focused on data collection and analysis. Theresa, on the other hand, was more often in a staff role providing feedback, or being brought into other projects as a copy editor due to her writing background. The underlying power dynamic of these past partnerships seemed more explicit because of the positional power held by faculty or staff in academic hierarchies (Acai et al., 2017). Past student-student partnerships had informal assessments of seniority relying on academic hierarchies, namely program year or program type (e.g., undergraduate or graduate).

In our student-student partnership, concepts like seniority and power seemed more fluid and context-specific. Our partnership was dynamic, ever-changing, and grounded in our relationships with each other and our relationships with our data. This messiness of partnerships resulting from identity and personal experience has been described by other groups (Matthews et al., 2019; Ostrowdun et al., 2020). Most of these works are theory-driven or focus on the large-scale picture of Students as Partners. While this broader scale of work is an important contribution to the literature, we wanted to examine how the concept of messy partnerships could be interpreted within a focused, personal context.

We chose to reflect on our shared experience with the "When the Labs Closed" study to take a deeper look at how we negotiated our partnership roles given the dynamics of our pre-existing familial relationship. We think our situation is at once both unique due to our specific context but may also be instructive to others in student-student partnerships where traditional hierarchies are ambiguous. We negotiated these power structures and roles sometimes

deliberately, sometimes accidentally, but mostly successfully. We *are* still talking to each other and willingly collaborated on this reflective essay. That's a good sign, right?

In hindsight, our reflective process mirrored how we had planned and analyzed data from our "When the Labs Closed" survey. Our initial approach was free-form reflection and involved conversations—sometimes on 5 km walks, as well as through text and FaceTime when we were not in the same city. We then looked for frameworks we could use to structure our ideas, arriving at a series of guiding questions for reflective essays crafted by Healey, Matthews, and Cook-Sather (2020). After our initial conversations, we took time to reflect separately before reconvening to compare ideas and thoughts. Next, we looked for ways to combine our insights into a cohesive narrative. Most of this was done through Google Docs, which allowed for collaborative writing and mutual feedback, despite us now residing in different cities. After deliberation, we arrived at a series of vignettes. Using vignettes was particularly appealing for Theresa who is primarily using narrative inquiry in her doctoral research. As Clandinin and Connelly (2000) note, "people live stories, and in the telling of these stories, reaffirm them, modify them, and create new ones. Stories lived and told educate the self and others" (p. xxvi). We found using these narratives allowed us to offer a glimpse into the types of interactions that made up this partnership. Further, it allowed us to ascertain what made our partnership work: communication and compromise. Each illustrates a moment of clarity—or confusion—in our student-student partnership. Below we will explore each vignette, including our differing perspectives, stumbling blocks, points of strength, and what we took away from these experiences.

VIGNETTES OF PARTNERSHIP

Project planning: Juggling partners' capacities to contribute

When we started planning this project, one early discussion focused on capacity and hours of availability. With her PhD research on hold, Celeste had a lot of time to dedicate to the ethics application, data collection, analysis, and writing. Theresa had a full-time day job, meaning that she would mainly have time in the evenings and weekends to contribute. An additional complication to our partnership was (and is) Theresa's chronic migraines. In spring 2020 she was adjusting to a new daily medication which remains hit-and-miss on its effectiveness. We prioritized having explicit discussions around capacity early in project planning, as we both had previous partnerships where implicit assumptions led to confusion and communications breakdowns. However, sometimes things do not go according to plan.

Initially, Theresa was going to have a less involved, tertiary role. When one co-author had to step back significantly, Celeste (admittedly) played on our familial relationship to cajole Theresa into a larger, more active role in both data collection and analysis. We both recognized at the time that this early renegotiation of workload was eased considerably by playing the daughter card. The lesson from this is, yes, use your networking relationships, but know that they can't be used all the time. Also, sometimes it's both worth it and necessary to "rescue" a colleague to keep a project viable.

Data transcription: Navigating communication when feeling overwhelmed

As part of her responsibilities, Celeste assigned herself transcription duties. She had not had this role in the past qualitative analysis she had been a part of, but she thought that, as the partner with the most available time, she should take this on. In hindsight, this was a mistake. It took me (Celeste) about half an hour to transcribe 5 minutes of an interview. I was out of my depth and frustrated with my ineptitude.

However, I (Celeste) did not want to burden my partner with a task I had volunteered to take on, so I tried to keep transcribing for about 4 days. My experiences with other student-student partnerships, particularly in coursework, had been that once you agreed to do a task, it was solely your job to accomplish it. These previous partnerships had been short term with students I had no previous connection with, quite different from the working partnership I had with Theresa. In hindsight, my past experiences of partnership had led me to make implicit assumptions about my current partner's expectations (Ostrowdun et al., 2020). I never even finished the first interview. This frustration bottled up until it came out all at once, in a rather blunt way that I don't think I had used with a partner before. (Yes, there were late-night tears). When Theresa pointed out that we could pay for professional transcription services as she had done for her master's thesis data, I felt a weight lift off my shoulders.

While we were fortunate to have access to funds to pay for transcription, better planning (e.g., recognizing how long transcription takes) will save you from having a mini-breakdown mid-project. But more, this speaks to how capacity and availability need to be ongoing discussions throughout partnership—not something to be set in stone at the onset of a collaboration. Trust needs to be established between partners to communicate when they are overwhelmed. This combination of trust and communication allowed us to align what needed to be done to move the project with our expertise, but also the ebbs and flows of when we were able to contribute.

Emotional labour in data analysis: Validating and building space for discussion

We were taken by surprise by how we were affected by analyzing our survey data. We had both done qualitative coding before, but for Celeste, that data had been neutral or benign. Our dataset, on the other hand, was from respondents in various degrees of distress, often deeply personal about how COVID-19 had derailed their education and disrupted their lives. It was really hard to read sometimes.

In both of our separate reflections, we brought up how we saw ourselves in the data. As Theresa put it, one of the participant's narratives spelled out exactly how she had been unconsciously feeling about not having the emotional bandwidth to finish her final paper for her last course. Being upset by the data also led me (Theresa) to feelings of inadequacy because "I'm the mom, I'm supposed to have my shit together." But as pointed out by Celeste, I was also a graduate student, albeit without a lab, whose program had been disrupted by the pandemic. It was okay to be having these feelings.

We were able to validate each other's emotional responses and support each other through the rest of the data analysis. As Theresa had previous experience with emotion-laden data, she suggested we use shorter intervals for data analysis. This allowed us to continue working but gave us the space needed to process. We learned that when emotions run high during a project, these need to be acknowledged and validated rather than suppressed. By Suart, C. & Nowlan Suart, T. (2022). Navigating dynamic positions of power in a student-student research partnership. *International Journal for Students as Partners*, 6(2). <https://doi.org/10.15173/ijisap.v6i2.5110>

facing what we were feeling and reflecting on their underlying causes, it helped us better understand the experiences of our respondents.

Celeste brought this advice and analysis structure with her to another project examining student experiences of online learning in Fall 2020. She was able to suggest to her collaborators to build in breaks and check-ins to structure the analysis of “heavy” data from the outset of the project (instead of the retrofit done by Theresa and Celeste), which kept that project on time and minimized feelings of being overwhelmed by data.

Walk and talk: Intentional check-ins to self-monitor progress

In addition to the basement office, many of the key discussions that supported logistical and analytical decisions on the study took place on our lunchtime 5 km walks. The main goal of these walks was to get out of the house and get exercise, but they also became a huge stress reliever. As Theresa puts it: our walks kept others alive during the lockdown, mainly the other two members of our household.

But the walks also gave us an away-from-the-basement-bunker place to talk, think outside the box, brainstorm ideas, and problem-solve. Sometimes we took an entire walk to discuss one aspect of the project; other times it was a quick check-in about progress, and other times we didn't talk about the project at all. It was nice having a standing time where if we needed to talk about something, we could. We didn't need to try to coordinate yet another meeting into our schedules.

Although having a meeting with group members every day is a bit overkill (unless you are living with them full time during a pandemic), we did learn the importance of having an open dialogue and dedicated check-in times. If something came up, either of us could mark it down as something to discuss at the next walk. And if you don't take up the full meeting time, that's alright, go reclaim that time from your schedule. But having the space created already for these unstructured, spontaneous conversations helped us when other work got busy. It gave us time to prioritize our partnership.

Odd things happen while working from home: Highlighting logistical concerns

In addition to our survey, the “When the Labs Closed” study also included 18 semi-structured interviews (Suart et al., 2021). Most of these interviews were conducted by Celeste via Zoom. One issue that became apparent very loudly during the first few interviews was the buzzers on the washer and dryer. Celeste's desk was right next to the laundry room, and though she had learned to tune out the sound, it was loud and distracting to participants. In this instance, there was a clash between the role of daughter and lead author. On the one hand, the noise was making data collection more challenging, on the other, who am I to tell my mother not to do laundry in her own house?

When Celeste did bring this up, however, Theresa was open to quickly fixing the problem: abstain from doing laundry during interview times. Theresa had not realized it was a problem (she, too, had learned to tune out the sound—and her desk was further away from the noise), but once it was pointed out, she agreed it was an issue with a straightforward solution.

Although not all logistical problems are easily resolved as this, it does show the importance of communicating with other partners when issues are identified. This is especially necessary for junior colleagues, who may be more hesitant to speak up or worried they are

pointing out something obvious. If folks are not aware an issue exists, they cannot begin to start thinking of solutions.

LESSONS LEARNED

Through this partnership, we were able to pull together a nationwide study of laboratory research trainees' experiences during COVID-19 on a shoestring budget while working in a basement office during a global pandemic (Suart et al., 2021). In addition to academic accomplishments, what we gained was a deeper understanding of how to navigate student-student research partnerships. Similar to many things during the pandemic, the typical hierarchies we used to structure partnerships became disrupted and dynamic. The insight we gained about what is needed to navigate shifting roles is something we have taken forward with us to other projects.

What we realized is that strong research partnerships take work, communication, and compromise to be effective and productive. The strengths of each partner can and should be leveraged in order to meet goals. At the same time, we learned the necessity of making allowances for each other's changing circumstances, preferences, and foibles. No partnership relationship will be perfect, but like any relationship that matters, research partnerships need to be nurtured.

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to partnership that will guarantee success, and folks entering a new partnership will need to hold space for their partners' and their own lived experiences (Matthews et al., 2019; Ostrowdun et al., 2020). The traditional dichotomy of "senior" and "junior" roles can constrict the fluidity and transfer of power required to leverage the expertise of all partners. Through this project, we learned to navigate these shifting dynamics to make the most out of what we could each bring to our partnership. We hope what others can take away from our experiences are the benefits of open and ongoing discussions of partnership throughout a project to foster mutual support and understanding.

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