CASE STUDY

Student and faculty as pedagogical partners

*Michelle Briegel, Department of Child Studies and Social Work, Mount Royal University, Canada.

Bria Scarff, Mount Royal University, Canada.

Contact: mbriegel@mtroyal.ca

ABSTRACT

This reflective case study describes the benefits of a pedagogical partnership between a student and a faculty member of a professional practice child and youth care counsellor program. Reflecting on data collected from their pedagogical partnership experiences, the authors present a case study of the process they used and draw data from their reflective journals. This case study aims to provide insight into a pedagogical partnership through reflective evaluation of the method used, key learnings, results, and unintended results resulting in a significant positive outcome.

KEYWORDS

students, partners, pedagogical, partnership, co-create

A senior student in the Bachelor of Child Studies: Child and Youth Care Counsellor (CYCC) program and a faculty member in the Child and Youth Care Counsellor major participated in a pedagogical partnership examining a first-year foundational child and youth care counsellor course. The Profession of Child and Youth Care Counsellor course is a first-year course taken as part of a bachelor's degree. It is a foundational course for the Bachelor of Child Studies: Child and Youth Care Counsellor major at Mount Royal University, a mid-sized university in Alberta, Canada. The study examined the course materials, assignments, exams, and course lectures for alignment with professional competencies in child and youth care counsellor practice, appropriate academic rigour, and ease of understanding for first-year university students in a cohort professional practice program. The student partner was granted access to all course materials, recorded lectures, and student evaluations of instruction for complete transparency, and the partners conducted a course evaluation. Included in the case study description are reflective statements captured from the journals kept by the pedagogical partners.

BACKGROUND

Bria Scarff, a fourth-year student in the CYCC program, participated in this study with Michelle Briegel, assistant professor in the Bachelor of Child Studies: Child and Youth Care Counsellor (CYCC) major, as a partner. As pedagogical partners, we (Michelle and Bria) looked back at the curriculum's design and implementation through the lens of a senior student looking back at the needs of first-year students. This reflective case study looks at the process and experiences we noticed as we worked together to create the study and the unintended results that the partnership generated.

This study originated when Michelle participated in a scholarship of teaching and learning development program hosted by the academic development centre at the university. The program involved learning about students as partners in the scholarship of teaching and learning. Inspired by the work of Cook-Sather (2016) to "consider student-faculty partnership models as part of a more fundamental rethinking of academic development" (p. 162), Michelle developed the idea of having a fourth-year CYCC student work with her on a first-year foundation course. In one of Michelle's reflective journal entries written at the start of the project, Michelle reflected on the challenge that led to developing a study proposal. Michelle thought students had trouble retaining information from the first semester to the second semester and wondered why.

Michelle was wondering if a different approach from the traditional model of teaching and learning, which has its merits and works well for many, might closer align with the relational practice of child and youth care. Bria was the successful partner based on her recently completing the CYCC program and her previous experience working with Michelle on other projects. In this case, the student partner needed to be familiar with both the program and the professional standards of competency needed in child and youth care counselling.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Considering this study, we looked at the theoretical framework of the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL), specifically, students as partners. We found that the students-as-partners framework offers the unique opportunity to capture student voice in co-creating a curriculum and assessment that is meaningful and relevant to both the student and the faculty member. The theory of student voice is a

> set of practices that positions students as active agents in analyses and revisions of education . . . and is premised on the notions that students have a unique perspective on teaching and learning and should be invited to share their insights, which warrant not only the attention but also the response of educators. (Bovill et al., 2011, p. 134)

Bringing student and faculty voices together allows for increased legitimacy and broader perspective when co-creating curriculum, assessment, and pedagogical approaches; co-creating becomes a pedagogical partnership in this way (Cook-Sather, 2020). According to Cook-Sather (2020), a pedagogical partnership is "a collaborative, reciprocal process through which all participants have the opportunity to contribute equally, although not necessarily in the same ways, to curricular or pedagogical conceptualization, decision making, implementation, investigation, or analysis" (see also Healey et al., 2014). Mathews et al. (2018), cited in Liang &

Mathews (2020), helped us understand that "pedagogical partnerships call into question assumed power arrangements in higher education that disrupt taken-for-granted identities of learners and teachers" (p. 552).

Pedagogical partnership process

The students-as-partner model has four categories for pedagogical partnership: classroom-based practices in learning, teaching, and assessment; curriculum design and consultation; subject-based research co-creating disciplinary knowledge; and teaching and learning research (Healey et al., 2014). This study primarily used a combination of classroom-based practices in learning, teaching, and assessment; curriculum design and consultation; and subject-based research co-creating disciplinary knowledge. Bria examined the entire first-year course through the eyes of a fourth-year student. Having completed the core courses of the CYCC program, she could look back on the whole program to see where the first-year foundational curriculum fit within the program outcomes and the core competencies of the CYCC major. Bria looked at the course outline, textbook, additional readings, videos, assignments, and tests. Michelle had conveniently recorded all of the previous year's lectures to accommodate virtual learning during the Covid-19 pandemic, and Bria was also able to review each recorded class. Bria reviewed the teaching materials and independently collected notes and suggestions for curriculum revisions without faculty influence.

METHOD

We met virtually on Google Meet and recorded each meeting for data collection purposes. In addition, we each kept a journal where we recorded our thoughts, observations, and experiences as data on a bi-weekly basis following each student-faculty partner meeting. We did not use prompts in our journaling, instead choosing an open-ended reflective writing style to capture our thoughts. Throughout the project, we discussed the importance of student voice in pedagogical teaching. Bria was onboarded to this project knowing her role was not a research assistant but a partner to Michelle. The students-as-partner model works with students as colleagues instead of subjects (Cook-Sather, 2014) and renegotiates traditional positions, power dynamics, and ways of working (Matthews et al., 2018).

The process of establishing a partnership started with Michelle approaching Bria to ask about her interest in working on this project as a partner. Michelle had worked with Bria on another project related to child and youth care counsellor regulations, and a trusting relationship had already been established. In the initial conversation, Michelle identified the difference between partner and research assistant and provided Bria with a couple of students-as-partner articles for Bria to read to understand the difference. Finally, Michelle explained to Bria that the project would be created together, within the parameters of the initial funding and ethics proposals put forth by Michelle before receiving the authorization to move forward with the project and find a student partner.

Decisions about all aspects of this project were made together as co-creators while respecting our different skill sets, agreed-upon areas of responsibilities, and unique voices. As Michelle was the principle investigator and responsible for the budget and reporting, we used the budget, reporting expectations, course outcomes, and degree criteria to guide us. There will always be a certain amount of power dynamics in a student and faculty relationship. Identifying

them and determining how decisions will be made are essential considerations to discuss upfront. The critical aspect of our success was open communication and dedication to the importance of the partnership.

At the beginning of the course review, we intentionally decided that Bria would review the current course and make suggestions about what she saw without Michelle's involvement. Bria shared her opinions with Michelle from a student lens and advocated for changes and adjustments based on her independent review of materials. Then, we went through the suggestions and changes offered by Bria to determine the best course of action.

Once our course revisions were complete, we shared our journals to look for themes. Individually, we identified and coded themes from our pedagogical partnership data and shared them for comparison. Emerging themes were noted and recorded. Using a thematic narrative analysis of our reflections and experiences, we identified that the key noteworthy themes of our pedagogical partnership were (a) developing a perspective that is inclusive of both teaching and learning, (b) the interrelatedness of the classroom experience, (c) willingness to remain open-minded and flexible, (d) vulnerability, and (e) relational teaching and learning in the partnership and the classroom.

Developing a perspective that is inclusive of both teaching and learning

Working in a faculty-student partnership, we considered our roles as faculty and student in a post-secondary environment. We ensured the content was delivered that met the needs of both students and faculty. We considered program objectives, course objectives, discipline competency content needs, new student support, the variance of learning needs, and academic rigour.

The interrelatedness of the classroom experience

Our combined perspectives in our distinct roles (as faculty and student) have lent a perspective we would not have otherwise obtained. Discussing our roles and responsibilities in a post-secondary environment has resulted in modifications to support students in the classroom and encourage them to be responsible for themselves, their learning, and their educational goals. There is a shared responsibility in teaching and learning between faculty and students.

Willingness to remain open-minded and flexible

This project initially started with specific goals around the course redesign. Throughout the co-construction of the course, elements of the project changed, and we adapted our work to the evolving course materials. Like teaching and learning, the course redesign was not linear. Conversations between Bria and Michelle led to sharing our unique perspectives grounded in our roles as learner and educator. We compiled information from current child and youth care (CYC) practice literature and classroom experiences (including feedback from student evaluations of teaching) to address issues around clarity, organization, student classroom readiness, and CYC core competencies. Remaining flexible allowed the scholarship of teaching and learning to take us in different directions, resulting in the incorporation of CYCC history and examining CYCC pedagogy in post-secondary education.

Vulnerability

Being willing to be vulnerable was an essential aspect of this project. In a journal entry, Michelle wrote: "As a faculty member, asking a student to look behind the curtain of my work was vulnerable. I felt nervous and vulnerable, exposing my flaws and oversights to a student. It was indeed a different and worthwhile experience." Bria wrote of her vulnerability in the partnership, noting Michelle's accomplishments and experience as an established professional in the field as a child and youth care counsellor and professor in the CYCC major:

> I was afraid at the beginning of this project [that] my insights and contributions would not be significant or identify anything Michelle was not already aware of. However, throughout the course redesign process and [through] being vulnerable in my partnership, I learned my insights, constructive comments, and feedback aided the process, not hindered [it]. My perspective was valued and I impacted this project's outcomes and contributed meaningfully to the redesign of the course.

Relational teaching and learning in the partnership and the classroom

A unique aspect of our work as child and youth care counsellors is developing strong professional and relational roles with individuals. Michelle expressed her gratitude for Bria's contribution in a journal entry, writing that "Bria inspires me to find new ways to deliver and present information in the course/classroom and encourages me to continue with what I have been doing by explaining the positive impact it had on her as a student." Bria also spoke about how this relational opportunity impacted her, stating that

> working with Michelle has allowed me to apply the knowledge and skills I have gained throughout my undergraduate degree in a meaningful way that will impact future students. In addition, working with Michelle has strengthened my professional relationships with faculty.

Bria also noted, "the project provided a more in-depth perspective about the intricacies of teaching and learning." The relational nature of CYC and our pre-existing professional relationship as faculty and student partner enriched the outcomes of this project by setting the foundation for trust and respect. This foundation allowed us to move into more profound, vulnerable conversations quickly.

RESULTS

Pedagogical partners

The results of the pedagogical partnership in curriculum design are multifaceted. From the course perspective, the partnership enriched the material as it was co-created with the knowledge of student experience, the understanding of student capacity as it pertains to workload, and the responsibility of student involvement in their post-secondary experience.

From the faculty perspective, partnering with a student who is open and honest about what they see in the course, their experience regarding how the course fits into the broader scheme of the degree program, and student experience of the program was valuable. The

faculty partner reflected on the material and teaching methods through a new lens because of the student partner's perspective. The student partner saw the course and curriculum development behind the scenes, offered their knowledge, built confidence in their competency, and built a professional working relationship with faculty. In a professional practice program where students may work alongside faculty in the field outside of the institution, this can be a transformative experience. During the study of our pedagogical partnership, we encountered an exciting unintended result, which presented a unique and impactful opportunity for the course. We noted that students had difficulty learning and retaining the information presented in the course about academic writing and APA structure. As a result, we connected with the library and student learning services to design an experiential online learning module that connects directly to course assignments and scaffolds academic and APA writing techniques, significantly improving the course and curriculum.

Key observations identified by identifying themes in our journals

A need for clarity

There was a need for clarity around seemingly simple theories in CYC. Certain concepts, terminology, and frameworks in CYC appear straightforward or self-explanatory to those immersed in the discipline or a layman to the profession; however, in reality, CYC theory and practice are complex and multifaceted. Students needed more clarity, multiple examples, and nuanced explanations to better understand foundational CYC practice and application of key ideas and frameworks within various contexts and therapeutic roles where CYCCs may work. In a journal entry reflecting on course content, Bria noted that "further defining CYC concepts beyond the base description the textbook provides, as well as giving a variety of diverse examples, may aid students' understanding."

Supporting students in meeting academic expectations

Reviewing the course materials and lecture recordings evidenced how students struggled with comprehension of scholarly reading in class and the mechanics of academic writing for assignments required as a first-year post-secondary student. Learning to write academically and synthesize information are essential skills for a student's future success in the CYCC program (or any program in a post-secondary environment). Providing structured opportunities to use academic skills, more time for synthesizing knowledge, and guided scaffolding opportunities will enrich the classroom experience and better prepare students to meet scaffolding expectations in subsequent years of the degree program.

A focus on citation style, comprehension and synthesis of educational materials, and application of theory should be contemplated, deliberately discussed, and planned into classroom learning. Bridging this gap for students should also include consideration of and conversations with students about their accountability in the learning process and meeting academic expectations. There is a reciprocal relationship between teaching and learning; however, post-secondary students must be responsible for their education; it requires them to be self-accountable and independently engaged with course materials and content.

Once Bria completed her review, we met regularly to review what Bria noticed. We examined the course schedule a couple of weeks at a time, co-creating curriculum adjustments as we went along. Michelle changed the course materials after each meeting, preparing to deliver the newly revised course. An unintended outcome was discovering that students needed more support in writing, and we were able to work with student learning services to develop a writing module.

Limitations

As pedagogical partners, we met regularly virtually during this study; we could not meet in person due to the global COVID-19 pandemic. Also, the ability to come together as often as imagined in the study's initial planning phase was more challenging. Busy schedules became a limiting factor regarding the length of conducting the research and writing the results. At first, we thought we would have a lot of time to dedicate to the study, but then the busyness of classes, meetings, homework, studying, grading, and other work quickly took over our schedules.

CONCLUSION

This reflection sought to provide insight into a case study where students as partner was the model used. Participating in a pedagogical partnership such as this allowed for a deep and critical look at the course material and teaching methods used in a first-year classroom. Michelle often wondered how her teaching resonated with students in the first year. Having a student impart personal experiences and perspectives on teaching strategies and the material within the curriculum was helpful. It validated her teaching methods and made her feel even more confident in the value of what she teaches. Bria found that the experience has enriched her knowledge about teaching and learning, allowed her to apply the knowledge and skills she has obtained throughout her degree, and build strong professional relationships with faculty. This opportunity has helped further her emerging career as a child and youth care counsellor, gain confidence as a project partner in pedagogical research, and tap into her love of teaching and learning. We highly recommend this process to faculty members and students considering a project involving a pedagogical partnership.

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NOTE ON CONTRIBUTORS

Michelle Briegel *is an assistant professor teaching in the Department of Child Studies and Social Work at Mount Royal University. Michelle's research interests are in the profession of child and youth care, child and youth care practitioners, the scholarship of teaching and learning, and students as partners.*

Bria Scarff *is a graduate of the Bachelor of Child Studies: Child and Youth Care Counsellor major and is a research assistant in the Department of Child Studies and Social Work at Mount Royal University.*

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