REFLECTIVE ESSAY

Three models for embracing student expertise in the development of pedagogical partnership programs

Alison Cook-Sather, Education Department, Bryn Mawr College, USA

Contact: acooksat@brynmawr.edu

Nearly a decade ago, two colleagues and I defined student-faculty (student-staff) pedagogical partnership as premised on the notion that students have expertise to contribute to processes of preparing for, reflecting on, and revising teaching and learning practices (Cook-Sather et al., 2014). This expertise is based in part on students' experiences as students. It is also informed by unique intersections of socio-cultural identities and lived experiences that students bring to educational contexts and analyses (Brown et al., 2020; Cook-Sather et al., 2021; Doktor et al., 2019; Matthews, 2017) and by students' engagement in sense-making about their identities and life experiences. As pedagogical partnership work expands around the globe, I am seeing undergraduate students at my own and other institutions develop another form of expertise: in pedagogical partnership work itself.

I embarked on developing student-faculty pedagogical partnership work in 2006 at Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges, two liberal arts institutions in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States. With student, faculty, and staff collaborators and several generous grants from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, I co-created Students as Learners and Teachers (SaLT), the signature program of the Teaching and Learning Institute (TLI) in this bi-college consortium. Through SaLT, undergraduates take up semester-long, paid positions as pedagogical partners to faculty members. As pedagogical partners, these students are neither enrolled in nor necessarily have knowledge of the subject matter of the course on which they and their faculty partners focus. They conduct weekly classroom observations, meet weekly with their faculty partners, and meet weekly with me and other student partners to discuss how best to be in dialogue and collaboration with faculty partners. Hundreds of faculty and students have participated in the SaLT program, and options for participation have expanded beyond this basic model (for a list of other programs, visit the <u>TLI's Programs and Opportunities</u> page).

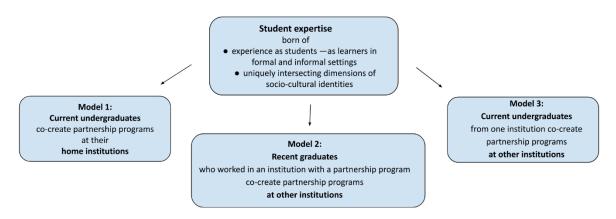
Because of my decades of experience directing SaLT, I have been invited to support a wide range of colleges and universities around the world in developing partnership programs (see partial lists at <u>TLI's Pedagogical Partnerships at Other Institutions</u> page and <u>Developing Pedagogical Partnerships</u>). Since staffing budgets are always limited, I have begun in this consulting work to recommend hiring students—while they are undergraduates or soon after they graduate—into limited-term roles to conceptualize, facilitate, co-create, or otherwise support the development of pedagogical partnership programs. This approach not only acknowledges student expertise, it also builds institutional structures that affirm that CC-BY Licence 4.0 This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons – 181 Attribution License 4.0 International (<u>https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/</u>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly attributed.

expertise. It does so through creating liminal roles within which participating students and faculty explore and practice ways of engaging that build personal confidence and professional capacity that can be carried beyond the spaces of partnership (Cook-Sather & Alter, 2011; Cook-Sather & Felten, 2017).

In this essay, I reflect on how three models that affirm and situate student expertise in the development of pedagogical partnership programs emerged in my own context and in other institutions. While contributing to the professional development of faculty partners, all three models also constitute a form of professional development for student partners (Cook-Sather et al., in press) and offer new professional pathways for students. In particular, these models develop affective as well as organizational/project management capacities in students. These are sophisticated leadership skills, as my colleague Cherie Woolmer notes, that need to be fostered in ways that do not replicate cycles of privilege in access to positions and modes of engagement in student partner leadership (personal communication, 3 January 2023). Figure 1 briefly describes the models, representing how

- all draw on students' expertise born of their experiences as students and of the intersections of their socio-cultural identities,
- each situates students differently in relation to the institution in which the partnership program is being developed, and
- moving from the first to the second and/or third expands student expertise into new contexts and nurtures connections among partnership programs.

Figure 1. Three models for centering student expertise in the development of pedagogical partnership programs



I know that, in many institutions, master's and doctoral degree students work with faculty and staff in developing partnership work. In addition, variations on these models might exist or emerge; for instance, for Model 2, recent graduates of an institution could co-create a partnership program at that same institution. My focus here is on the models I have personally co-developed. I hope my reflections resonate with or serve as clarifying contrasts to what others experience and co-create.

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EMBRACING STUDENT EXPERTISE WITHIN STUDENTS' HOME INSTITUTION

Since systemic racism is prevalent in many US institutions of higher education, including my own, I focused on honoring the identities, lived experiences, and associated expertise of students who experience this and other forms of inequity as I was co-conceptualizing SaLT with student, faculty, and staff collaborators. I listened to these students describe experiences of navigating our predominantly white campuses, of suffering the biased and discriminatory practices of faculty and other structural issues, and of struggling under the weight of the emotional labor required simply to be in this context (Cook-Sather & Des-Ogugua, 2019; Cook-Sather, Krishna Prasad, et al., 2019). As a white, socio-economically privileged, able-bodied, cisgendered woman, I have not experienced directly most of the forms of epistemic, affective, and ontological harms that these and other equity-denied students experience (de Bie et al., 2021). I followed these students' recommendation that the first cohort of student partners to pilot the SaLT program be BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) students, and as a result the SaLT program retains a reputation for being one of the few "counter-spaces" on the campuses "where deficit notions of people of color can be challenged and where a positive collegiate racial climate can be established and maintained" (Solórzano et al., 2000, p. 70).

SaLT student partners continue to draw on their expertise as we develop new areas of focus for partnership work and new structures to support the work. For instance, student partners and I expanded SaLT in the Fall 2021 semester to offer the Pedagogy Circle for BIPOC Faculty, co-facilitated by two experienced BIPOC student partners and in which two cisgender women faculty members who had previously worked with student partners participated. Our aim was to help counter the stressors of systemic inequity and imposter syndrome that many BIPOC faculty experience (Barber et al., 2020; Dancy & Gaetane, 2014). It was also to provide additional support and compensation to cisgender women BIPOC faculty, who are already unfairly burdened (Pittman, 2021) and who experienced a disproportionate increase in emotional labor during the pandemic (Berheide et al., 2022).

Students' expertise keeps SaLT attentive and responsive to the diversity of students who attend Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges—and the diversity of faculty who teach in these institutions. The capacities student partners develop to, in one student partner's words, "speak to larger, institutional structures" and "on the complex dynamics between institutional practices and student experiences" (Eze, 2019, p. 4) both contribute to student expertise and draw on that expertise to catalyze necessary change through "seeing institutionally" (Peseta & Bell, 2020). One faculty participant in the Pedagogy Circle for BIPOC Faculty noted how "hearing the experiences and perspectives of BIPOC students felt like permission to try new things, specifically approaches that push a different set of values in the classroom, a new type of cultural consciousness—for all students (BIPOC and non-BIPOC)" (Cook-Sather et al., 2023, p. 70).

While I focus here on my experience of developing SaLT, other institutions have also embraced current undergraduate student expertise in co-creating pedagogical partnership programs at their own institutions, as described in reflective essays authored by student partners in the United States at Davidson College (Hernandez Brito, 2021; Hossain, 2021), Syracuse University (Drake, 2021), Tufts University (Impastato, 2021; Topper, 2021), and Vassar College (Bala, 2021) and at Lahore University of Management Sciences in Pakistan (Iftikhar, 2021).

EMBRACING FORMER STUDENT PARTNER EXPERTISE

The impetus to co-create a model of pedagogical partnership development that centers the expertise of former student partners came from my work with students who were partners when they were undergraduates at Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges and who wanted to continue partnership work after they graduated. The problem was that there were no clear pathways or opportunities to do so. It struck me that perhaps institutions hoping to start or further develop pedagogical partnership work might be willing to consider hiring recent graduates with partnership experience into temporary staff positions. I thought these positions might appeal to institutions because they would be short term, they would be less costly than permanent staff positions, and they would provide an opportunity to draw on students' "transferable skills, relevant experience, and thoughtful perspectives" (Ortquist-Ahrens, 2021, p. 193).

Colleagues at two institutions—Trinity University in Texas and Berea College in Kentucky—were the first to take up this approach in 2015 and 2017, respectively. Sophia Abbot (Bryn Mawr College class of 2015) conceptualized and launched a pedagogical partnership program at Trinity in what we call in the United States a post-baccalaureate (post-bac) fellow position (Cook-Sather, Bahti, & Ntem, 2019a), which she held until 2018. Similarly, Khadijah Seay (Bryn Mawr College class of 2016 and the first post-bac fellow at Berea College) was able to "take a leading role in the instructional, administrative, and logistical work" (Ortquist-Ahrens, 2021, p. 193) of co-developing a partnership program at Berea for the 2017–2018 academic year. Like Khadijah, Mia Rybeck (Haverford College class of 2017) "brought keen skills of observation, facilitation, and engaged reflection to the program" as well as other "unique expertise and gifts" (Ortquist-Ahrens, 2021, p. 194, p. 195) while she was the second post-bac fellow at Berea for the 2018–2019 academic year.

Co-creating these new positions required developing the idea and working to convince colleagues to embrace it (conceptually) and make it happen (structurally). I had to build (on) trust—through ongoing dialogue and making explicit that this was co-creation work in which all contributions were valued. I had to ask people to take risks and, also, to take a risk myself, since I believed that student expertise could be translated in this way, but I had not seen it do so. Even colleagues who respect and value student perspectives can find themselves initially "baffled," to use Ortquist-Ahrens' (2021) term, by the concept of positioning a recent undergraduate as someone with expertise in partnership program development. Worried that she might simply end up mentoring a recent graduate in such a position, Ortquist-Ahrens (2021) found instead that the post-bac fellows "could not only participate in and often lead the programmatic and managerial heavy lifting" but also "teach us how to be in partnership with them not as junior staff members but as colleagues" (p. 193).

I was further inspired by the way former student partner expertise could expand beyond this newly created role. For instance, as a result of internal staffing changes during Sophia Abbot's tenure as a post-bac fellow in Trinity University's Collaborative for Learning and Teaching, Sophia took up responsibilities such as running the Collaborative's signature teaching speaker series and collaborating on visionary planning towards the Collaborative's offerings (Cook-Sather, Bahti, & Ntem, 2019a). I learned from Sophia that student expertise could inform practices in part because it had been recognized as legitimate. Furthermore, both Trinity and Berea ended up institutionalizing their post-bac fellow roles as permanent staff positions to be occupied by recent graduates with partnership experience. This experience showed that what might begin as a "pilot" liminal position can become permanent, and thereby a potential new career pathway for former student partners.

These developments were not automatic, however, even once the post-bac positions were established. As Sophia, Khadijah, and Mia took on these roles, we had occasional lengthy phone conversations in which we talked through the challenges as well as possibilities of taking on such new roles that defied categorization and were co-created as they came into being. I supported these former student partners through these informal conversations and learned anew from them about how to exercise expertise when some members of the campus communities did not recognize that expertise or simply assumed these post-bac fellows were students. These conversations led to the creation of two resources on developing post-bac fellow positions (Cook-Sather, Bahti, & Ntem, 2019b, 2019c) and to the idea for a less intensive version of this approach: to hire former student partners with other, full-time jobs as independent contractors—an approach several colleagues have taken up at their institutions.

EMBRACING CURRENT STUDENT PARTNER EXPERTISE AT A DIFFERENT INSTITUTION

The success of Model 2 described above inspired me to consider other ways that student partners could bring experiences and expertise to those hoping to develop pedagogical partnership work at their institutions. In the Fall of 2020, I asked Nandeeta Bala, then an undergraduate at Vassar College with whom I had collaborated as Vassar launched their pedagogical partnership program (see Bala, 2022b), if she would be interested in supporting another institution in launching a partnership program. She enthusiastically agreed, and colleagues at Emmanuel College in Massachusetts to whom I had suggested this approach hired Nandeeta as an independent contractor for a set number of hours during the Spring 2021 semester. According to the two faculty members who developed the pilot at Emmanuel, Nandeeta "played an instrumental role as an external student coordinator," providing "a personalized program structure" that aligned with the faculty members' goal and serving as an advisor for both Emmanuel student consultants and faculty partners. The student partners "reported how beneficial it was to develop the program with a peer student," and the faculty partners greatly appreciated Nandeeta's expertise in pedagogical partnerships" (quoted from Pàdraig Deighan and Anupama Seshan in Cook-Sather, 2022, p. 80; see also Bala 2022a.)

The success Nandeeta had in supporting Emmanuel College faculty and student partners encouraged me to propose this model to a colleague at McGill University in Canada. With grant support for launching her program, my collaborator there hired four undergraduate SaLT student partners to facilitate weekly meetings of groups of student partners in McGill's pilot partnership program in addition to doing their own partnership work at Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges. I used the existing structure of the weekly SaLT student partners meeting at Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges to support both the student partners doing this work and the development of partnership work at another institution.

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I was excited about this new approach to "building partnership through partnership" (Ortquist-Ahrens, 2021), although it carried the same sense of risk that I felt when arguing for the new positions at Trinity and Berea. If the positioning of students in this new role to leverage their expertise had not been successful, it would have called into question the potential for translation of student expertise. It is well established that context matters in the development of partnership work (see Healey & Healey, 2018), but my experience has thus far suggested that co-created structures and confidence in the expertise of students carry across contexts. Will this continue to hold true? Cross-institutional collaborations and the creation of new roles offer challenges as well as areas for growth and development I continue to consider as I work to situate student expertise in new contexts and expand and nurture connections among partnership programs—variations on the foundational risk of embracing pedagogical partnership as a form of educational development (Ahmad & Cook-Sather, 2018).

CONCLUSION

As Melanie Bahti, a former student partner who co-authored <u>Pedagogical Partnerships:</u> <u>A How-to Guide</u> with me and Anita Ntem, another former student partner, argued, there is a foundational trust and leap of faith in beginning partnership work, and that trust in students is strengthened through trusting them (personal communication, 21 December 2022). As Melanie noted, the only way to build trust in students' capacity is to start by trusting them enough to try, and the only way that students will be able to demonstrate their capacity is if they are given an opportunity to rise to the occasion. The liminal spaces of partnership provide that opportunity.

As someone who has advocated for and facilitated partnership work for close to two decades now, I want to use the experience I have, the structures and practices I have cocreated, and the insights I have gained through collaborating within and across contexts in developing pedagogical partnership work to shine a light both on the expertise all students already have and on the deepening and widening of student expertise through their partnership experiences. I have seen how partnership with current students and recent graduates, who are closer to the current reality of being a student and young person, can help faculty and educational developers keep up with changing trends and generational characteristics among students. And while some forms of expertise are used to reinforce hierarchy and reinscribe power differentials, I have found that recognizing and embracing student expertise in partnership work does the opposite: it can contribute to a new level of sharing responsibility that makes this work more doable and more empowering for everyone involved. This includes supporting peer and near-peer mentoring as a way to build institutional capacity and exploring ways that temporary liminal structures, such as post-bac fellow roles or independent contractor positions for recent graduates, can lay foundations for more permanent structural support for this work. All of these constitute professional development opportunities for students, some of whom, in the SaLT program anyway, are taking on leadership roles for the first time.

Establishing and drawing on expertise is always a risk; it assumes the valuing of sources and kinds of knowledge—particularly of equity-denied students (de Bie et al., 2021)—that can easily be questioned, challenged, or (re)dismissed. As one student partner explained: "It's really

tough for women, for women of color, for LGBTQ folks" who do not typically, this student asserted, have access to roles like "consultant" and "fellow" (quoted in Cook-Sather, 2018, p. 929). Taking on a student partner role, however, contributes to confidence and capacity both during and after partnership experiences, supporting and further fostering expertise. My awareness of the precarity of student expertise, coupled with my deep confidence in that expertise, compels me to continue this work, both of centering student expertise in the further development and expansion of partnership programs and of the continued careful, critical reflection on these efforts.

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NOTE ON CONTRIBUTOR

Alison Cook-Sather is Mary Katharine Woodworth Professor of at Bryn Mawr College and Director of the Teaching and Learning Institute at Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges. She has developed internationally recognized pedagogical partnership programs, published over 100 articles and nine books, and consulted widely on pedagogical partnership. See: <u>https://www.alisoncooksather.com/</u>

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