

## REFLECTIVE ESSAY

**Reflections on a student-faculty partnership on task design**

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In this reflection, Kalyani Alagappan, an undergraduate student, and Lee Hwee Hoon, a faculty member, both from Singapore Institute of Technology, share their thoughts on their new experience of student-faculty collaboration on a project. Their project aimed to create a case task for Year 1 engineering students in a lesson on interpersonal communication. This partnership was the first student-faculty collaboration experience for both parties.

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## BACKGROUND

The project was conceived by me, Hwee Hoon, in my search for activities for Year 1 engineering students in the interpersonal communication skills module I was teaching them in 2020. To this day, many materials I consult during course preparation contain historical and cultural references of other countries, and these references are foreign and unfamiliar to my students. Therefore, that year, I wanted to create locally contextualized material that would appeal to my undergraduate students and engage them in discussions on potential conflict situations they might encounter when working on team projects.

A note at this point might help explain the origin of the case scenario that Kalyani and I eventually developed for use in a lesson on interpersonal communication. For one of the assignments, teams were required to develop a problem-resolution scenario with an interpersonal or work communication focus. The assignment resulted in several excellent stories that could be tapped. This realization motivated me to use a student-generated story as new material for the next cohort studying the module.

I decided to begin with one such student-generated case on intercultural conflict. I needed to know the problem scenario would be engaging and meaningful for other undergraduates. Hence, I approached Kalyani, who had shown great interest in the subject when she was in my class, to help me start the process. I had observed her to be diligent and dependable. Coupled with her interest in interpersonal communication, I felt that was sufficient for us to begin work. Together, we decided to base the new learning material on her team's story. I then invited Kalyani to work with me to turn her team's story into a case

(i.e., problem scenario) and to conduct a survey with her peers to gauge the appeal of the new material.

Research on topics related to intercultural conflict, such as team building, conflict management, and intercultural communication, conducted primarily by Kalyani, and writing of the case and case notes completed by both of us took place over 3 months, from July to October 2020. The next stage was piloting the case with Kalyani's peers, who had attended the interpersonal communication module the year before this research. With feedback from the pilot study, we proceeded to revise our case discussion questions for the actual study. Kalyani was instrumental in conducting the pilot and the actual study (with Year 1 students in 2021). We both analyzed the data collected.

Following the completion of the project, we reflected and wrote about our partnership in this research collaboration. We asked ourselves questions about various aspects of the research and student-faculty partnership experiences to explore our perceptions of the student-faculty partnership process and identify factors contributing to collaboration—or hindering it. Through this reflection, we realized that our understanding of the term “partnership” at the beginning of the project had slowly evolved as we worked on the project together, particularly in terms of how each of us grew into the role of a partner in an Asian context, where the teacher-student relationship is typically one of unequal power.

We decided this paper would take the form of questions and answers.

## REFLECTIONS

### **Experience of the research project: What have I learned from participating in this research project?**

*Kalyani*

From this project I learned about the research process, particularly the steps of writing and editing. Turning our notes into a case showed me the process of how a case can be developed.

Along with learning the technical process I also developed my communication and thinking skills through the conversations that I had with the professor, the process of communicating with my peers to collect the data, and thinking of how to organize and analyze them, as well as thinking through different perspectives to look at things (like when we had to frame questions for the case study). Being a student leader, I have participated in many outreach events, which helped me develop communication and thinking skills. So when asking my classmates to help with the trial for the case study, I was able to apply these skills. I was like the bridge between the participants and the faculty. It meant that I was responsible for the information being communicated between my peers and professor. This sense of responsibility made me even more involved in the project, and I was able to demonstrate my organizational skills when collecting the data. It gave me confidence, and the trust that the professor had in me motivated to bring the best out of myself. I reached out to the participants to collect the data and then collated it and shared it with the professor to discuss further.

My writing too has improved, especially my summary writing skills. As a university student, I have written many assignments, but summarizing topics in small paragraphs can be tricky. To prepare notes for the case study I tried to summarize the important topics

from the research, and this helped me to improve my writing skills. When preparing the notes, I learnt how to think from the teacher's and learner's perspectives. It gave me a better understanding of how learning materials are created. Being able to create something for future students along with my peers gave me a sense of happiness because I was also able to share my knowledge with future students.

*Hwee Hoon*

This project offered me a new experience in working with students on a research project. Customarily, developing learning materials is the teacher's responsibility. But, in this project, students' voices played a huge part in how we crafted the case and discussion questions. I learned that students do have great ideas that teachers should want to listen to.

In drafting and revising the case scenario, which was about intercultural conflict, I gained a greater appreciation for how survey participants shared their opinions regarding what additional information and how much information they needed to understand and analyze the case. With the students' input, we were able to improve our writing. For example, I had not noticed gaps in the original case description, and the students' feedback through the survey helped me see where those gaps were. Survey participants also suggested more background information to contextualize the case and a clearer description of the existing relationship between the two protagonists in the case. Following the testing of the case, students gave feedback, which again helped to confirm the appropriateness of the case description and case notes. For example, students commented that the scenario was "believable" and "easy to read" and that the case notes provided "an excellent backgrounder" with "necessary and sufficient information for comprehension." When the case was finally used in class with the cohort from the following year, their feedback indicated the case material helped them learn about potential workplace intercultural conflicts. Students commented on what they would consider should they face a similar scenario, such as "the factors impacting behavior," "mitigating strategies to reduce such conflict," and "the backgrounds of people (which) can affect their thinking." From this experience, I realize that I should talk more often with my students about the learning materials I create for them. After all, they are the recipients of these materials, and I should want to know whether they find the materials useful.

### **Experience gained from the student-faculty partnership: What did I learn from this partnership with a faculty/student?**

*Kalyani*

I was very excited to embark on my role as a co-researcher in this partnership because of the new opportunities and experiences I would be gaining. It also helped me to understand the methods to build a case study. Initially I was more of a listener than a speaker during our meetings. I would wait for the professor to give me instructions on what to do next, and then I would get the task completed. For instance, in the initial phase, the professor had asked me to draft a script for our case study, and I did so accordingly and then handed it over to the professor. At this point, I simply followed instructions to complete the task. It was only after a few meetings that I learnt to open up and voice my opinions during discussions. The reason for this is that during classes we usually wait for the professors to go through our work with us and tell us what to do next. But here, as a

partnership, the setting is different. Both of us had to contribute and discuss our ideas for the case study. We progressed bit by bit and had all the components ready, like getting the script ready, forming a case study, doing a sample run, and editing the case study. I really enjoyed working with the professor as I was able to learn from her. She asked for my input in every step, and we discussed till we both agreed on it. For instance, we discussed how we could group the answers in an orderly manner to understand how the participants had responded to the case study. Having the professor ask for my input helped me to be more confident in sharing my thoughts during discussions, and it made me gradually open up.

I felt there was equal importance given to each of us. The reason for this was that the professor always wanted to know what I felt for every decision and wanted me to take on some responsibilities like communicating with peers, collecting data, and analyzing it. But, decision-wise, though I had my input, most of the time I tended to want the professor to make the final decision. This is because in our day-to-day classes we usually ask the professor for the final decision and comments in terms of class discussions. Also, I felt the professor's decision-making would be better than mine because she would have had more experience than me. So, when I had to give my opinion, I had to always ensure that what I said was relevant and a valuable input useful for discussion. For instance, when the professor suggested grouping the answers in themes, I liked the idea and didn't think of an alternative and just proceeded with it. So, my input here was not much as I felt the professor's idea was great. A similar instance would be when we drafted the survey questions. The professor's initial draft of questions was good enough, and I did not add anything much to the survey portion. Being completely new to this research process, I leaned towards the professor's decisions/ideas as I felt that they would be better than mine. But there were times when I suggested an idea and we proceeded with it, like using Google Forms to draft the survey, and this made me feel like a valuable member of the partnership. An ideal partnership would sound like a 50–50 partnership, but, as a student who was completely new to the process, I wanted more of a 60–40 partnership (where the professor takes up the 60 percent and the student takes up 40 percent). The reason is that I wanted some decisions to be made by the professor and more guidance from her so that I was able to learn along the way.

The professor was very understanding about my schedule (as a student I had both academic and personal commitments) and always checked with me and gave me the choice of choosing the meeting times. This helped me as I was able to find free time and fix the meeting. The professor guided me throughout this research process, which made me feel comfortable in learning. I was able to also understand that a professor-student relationship was not only about the professor giving information and the student just absorbing it. Instead, it's something where both collaborate together.

#### *Hwee Hoon*

From this partnership, I learned that balancing the student partner's needs and mine is an act of give-and-take. Working with a student during their term of study requires sensitivity and consideration to their needs, particularly regarding demands on their time. I was conscious of my partner's academic commitments as an undergraduate and the fact that this research was additional work to her. At the same time, I had to manage my own workload and the project's progress. While I did not want to pressurize my student partner with deadlines, we did have to set those to maximize the limited time we had for data collection with her classmates. I was fortunate that Kalyani was committed to the project,

and she successfully carried out her role as collaborator. She suggested using an online platform to post the participant information sheet and consent form (required by the Institutional Review Board) and the survey form. She was also patient and persistent in engaging her peers during the piloting of the case material, as it took place during the COVID-19 lockdown, when all interactions took place online. The progress of the project was slower than it would have been in pre-COVID conditions. During the lockdown, Kalyani emailed her peers with an official invitation to participate, and she reached out to each invited person to ensure that they had read the email request. When her peers missed the submission deadline, she suggested extending it. We ended up extending the deadline a few times while she patiently reminded her peers to submit their responses. I must admit that as the lead researcher, I was anxious about having to extend the deadline more than once. I struggled between making do with what data we had at that time and giving Kalyani the space she needed to do her work. I eventually decided to follow her cue because I realized that she had a better picture than I did of what her peers were going through at that time. I thought we could recover some lost time later on in the research process. I'm glad that I took Kalyani's advice on those occasions. It was certainly refreshing and encouraging to see Kalyani step into the leading role.

From this experience, I realize that I need to learn how to effectively manage the tension between fulfilling my roles as faculty partner and as principal investigator accountable to the funding agency to see the project through. On the one hand, I was mindful to communicate with Kalyani as an equal. I did not want her to think that as the faculty, I alone held the decision-making power. This surrender of the "teacher as sage" stance in an Asian environment could be a struggle not only for the faculty but also for the student. I was aware of the potential difficulty, as this position might be an uncomfortable one for my student partner. Typically, in an Asian classroom such as ours, students would defer to the teacher as the one who knows best. Students generally do not openly question or disagree with faculty, because the culture of respect to authority is widely practiced in our educational institutions. Teachers, then, are used to taking charge. Hence, I would frequently reiterate to her that she was free to speak her mind and that her views mattered. I hoped to show her that we both owned the project. I believe she did gradually step out of her comfort zone by sharing ideas and counter suggestions. As we proceeded in this collaboration, I reminded myself to seek her views, and we made decisions based on consensus. For instance, we discussed and agreed on ways in which we could approach her peers during the pilot study, as well as means of recording and storing the data. On the other hand, I was aware of my responsibilities as the principal investigator. This meant that I had to ensure the research was completed within the stipulated time frame and the research was of good quality. Therefore, at times, I had to make unilateral decisions, such as identifying the themes for data classification and setting the deadlines for completion of work. Whenever I made such decisions, I was in control of the research. I was comfortable knowing how the research was turning out. But being in a partnership means no one is in total control. Knowing when to let go of the reins is rather difficult for me, but I believe that if I can do that, I can allow more equity in the partnership to develop.

**Dynamics of working together: Could this partnership have been different? If we could undertake this partnership again, what would you like to retain? What would you like to change?**

*Kalyani*

I feel that our partnership was a good one in terms of communicating with each other, understanding what the other one is trying to convey, and having the same mindset (clear direction) for our project. If something different was to be done, then I could have perhaps made more decisions or tried to lead discussions as it would have been a good experience. For example, I could have tried to be less quick to accept the professor's suggestions and instead try to think of alternate solutions. The reason why I did not take the initiative to lead discussions is because I was very conscious of what I spoke, and I had to make sure what I said during a discussion was something that made sense. I knew the professor always had a good impression of me, and I wanted to maintain it. So, I initially hesitated to voice my opinion, fearing I might do something incorrect. In a classroom setting, it would usually be the professor prompting the students to share their answers and giving instructions to students. But here, I was a partner in the research process. It meant I had to be trustworthy and do my part for the project. I found it different to look at myself as a partner in this project as the scenario was different, and I had to give my input and take part actively rather than just listen to my professor. With the professor guiding me, asking me for my input, I was able to open up, and gradually I considered myself as a partner. Other than that, experience-wise or task-wise, the communication between us was really good as I always had clarity on what I was doing.

*Hwee Hoon*

We started well, I think, having known each other for 6 months as tutor and student, which helped smooth the partnership process. Even though we had a brief discussion initially about what the research was about, we did not specifically talk about what our partnership would look like. As mentioned, I tried to involve Kalyani in as many decisions as I could manage. For example, she completed data collection in the way she thought worked best. I think that my not micro-managing her work helped, as she proved that she could solve the problem of late responses. Kalyani did a great job in involving her classmates in the pilot study, as well as her juniors in the actual study. The invisible power line between tutor and student could have been managed better, though. What I mean is that I could have given my partner more opportunities to make decisions. One example would have been to give her time to think about how the data could be analyzed. I could also have given her more support by referring her to resources on research methods so she could learn about analyzing and interpreting data. Kalyani had told me that she lacked experience in data analysis. Equipping her with some information about qualitative analysis methods could have helped increase her confidence to work independently with the data. But then, I had convinced myself that she might not have the time to do more reading, and so I refrained from adding another task to her workload. Now I see this should be changed in future partnerships with students. Rather than assume I was right, I could have checked my perception with my partner.

Perhaps partners could explore the concept of "partnership" at the beginning of the process. Some expectations could be shared, for practical reasons, so that each party is aware of the other's views and needs. In our case, at the start of our collaboration, we did

not share with each other what we thought a “partnership” meant to us individually. In fact, I started with a vague idea of what it might take to conduct research with a student partner. I knew I would involve Kalyani in every step of the research process. I also thought there might be moments of discomfort for Kalyani when she was asked to express her opinions, because in my experience of the Asian classroom, many students would look to faculty for direction and answers. Maybe this has to do with the idea that the teacher is assessing their work and so the teacher’s answer is the best. Or maybe it has to do with the perception of the teacher as the knowledgeable, experienced one, and therefore again, the one with the best answer. So, to strengthen the partnership process, I would suggest an attempt at a shared understanding of what the partnership process entails to create a safe space for both parties to have their say (Bovill & Felten, 2016; Poon et al., 2022) throughout the process.

### **Dynamics of working together: What advice would you give to a peer seeking a student-faculty research partnership?**

*Kalyani*

When I embarked on this journey, my aim was to learn the research process step by step and also to improve my communication, thinking, and writing skills. To achieve that we need to be organized and take note of everything we do.

Firstly, we need to have frequent meetings in a periodic manner (like once a week or two weeks) to update each other on our progress and clarify doubts, if there are any. Also, as a student, we must be aware of our schedule and manage our time to avoid clashes. Secondly, we need to establish a good bridge between faculty and ourselves. Only then will the communication be smooth, and it will be easier to work with each other. This bridge means that we are able to discuss the information like the data I gathered from my peers after trying out our case study. In a traditional student-faculty relationship, the professor would usually give us instructions and next steps to follow, and we as students would only interact with our professor when we had doubts or we needed to clarify something. In a partnership, we are interacting frequently with our professor, and there are a lot of discussions where there needs to be input from both sides. So, here we, as students, need to do some thinking, contribute, and have a sense of responsibility towards the project. Thirdly, we need to take notes during discussions as we may forget in future what we were supposed to do. Taking notes acts like reminders, which helps us to complete our work on time. Lastly, it is important to be prepared to learn and look into new content like research papers and articles because reading these materials takes up a lot of time, and if the student is not interested, it would be a waste of time for both sides. So, the student must be clear on what they are expected to do before they start the student-faculty research partnership. As a student embarking on this student-faculty partnership journey, there may be a nervousness at the start about how things will proceed, but rest assured once we are able to talk to the professor and we are comfortable in our working style, things will be smooth. The student and professor can have a few meetings before the start of the discussion to get to know each other, on a personal level, and to talk about expectations and working styles. This will help them in future meetings to be comfortable speaking with each other.

*Hwee Hoon*

When I started this project, all I wanted was to create a case as learning material. I knew there was value in getting students' perspectives on the material. What I did not realize at that time was the extent I would need to consider my student partner's needs, particularly in giving directions and assigning tasks. I think at the start of the journey, a common understanding of what is involved in the partnership would help to set the tone, so both parties can negotiate this give-and-take that I mentioned earlier. Faculty could, for instance, highlight that the student partner is an equal in this collaboration, and as such, they could voice their opinions and ideas as the faculty partner would (Matthews et al., 2019). For me, assuring someone they are free to speak, that their voice will be heard, is a powerful way of bringing the other person into this shared space we call "partnership." Agreeing on the project goal is important, and so is understanding each other's expectations of ourselves, the work to be done, and the partnership. Again, communicating with each other can lead to this understanding. These strategies could help the partners know each other's strengths and constraints, plan how they might manage their workloads, and decide how to reach their goal together, including ways to navigate potential difficulties.

Something else that helped me was learning to let go of control so that my partner could try out her ideas. Who knows what new perspectives could come from that. As we saw from the results of our data collection, this turned out to be a successful strategy. But for release of control to happen, respect for the student's views must be present, by listening to the student and considering their perspective. Also, communication between both parties should be open and non-threatening. For me, letting go and showing respect are about having trust in the other person; it's when we don't insist on our way but allow the other person to have a say or, when the time is right, take the lead. Letting go is easier said than done, especially as faculty with experience of research—we know the importance of rigor in conducting a study and the risk of failing is not an option. Here, I'm thinking again of the challenge I mentioned before, of how I juggled two roles at the time. But from this experience, I realize that for the partnership to work, a good place to start is trust.

Faculty might ask how I knew whom to approach to be my student partner. My criteria of strong interest, diligence, and dependability served me well. Without the student partner's commitment to the project, we would not have accomplished as much. At the end of the day, both parties must be willing to work hard towards their goal while maintaining trust and respect for each other.

### **View of student-faculty partnership: If you could use a metaphor to describe student-faculty partnership, what would it be?**

*Kalyani*

To me, student-faculty partnership is like a cream biscuit because the cream glues the biscuits together to achieve the result. In a cream biscuit, all the components are held together, and them being separate would not give the final look. The two biscuits are the student and faculty while the cream symbolizes the content, data, and process that they have gone through to give the final product. So, here, I am one of the biscuits and my professor is the other one. Together we are able to put our input and thoughts together, which gives us the cream. The final product, which is the cream biscuit, represents the final look of our case study. The professor and I combined our findings, did data collection, and



analyzed data to shape the final version of the case study. For example, I was able to reach out to participants for feedback and the professor made the edits after we discussed and analyzed the data. Our communication played a key role in this partnership.

#### *Hwee Hoon*

The student-faculty partnership process is like fishing, where the outcome is unknown. Regardless of their skills and knowledge about fishing, or their equipment and amount of preparation, the angler does not know if they will catch a fish when they throw in the bait. I think a research partnership with students is a similar experience, in that some variables, like time and the interpersonal dimension, are not within our control despite our planning. Unlike a solo study, in a partnership, not knowing the outcome of this partnership poses a kind of risk, especially to the relationship between student and faculty (Felten, 2017; Snijders et al., 2020). A partnership with students requires faculty to exercise patience to see the process through the trying times, as anglers do.

#### FINAL THOUGHTS

We are thrilled to have created a case that can be used with future groups of students. We are confident this learning material is suitable for classroom use, as it has been tested by students for students. More than that, our appreciation for the student-faculty partnership has deepened. Overall, we have found our partnership refreshing and enriching, as we discovered something of ourselves in the process. We wish anyone embarking on a student-faculty partnership a meaningful journey of exploration and discovery, as ours was.

*Approval to conduct the research was granted by the university's ethics review board.*

#### NOTE ON CONTRIBUTORS

**Hwee Hoon Lee** teaches critical thinking and communication courses to undergraduates and adult learners. Her research interests are in teaching and learning issues in higher education.

**Kalyani Alagappan** recently graduated from the Systems Engineering programme and is currently pursuing a Master of Engineering (by research) at her alma mater. She developed an interest in writing and research in her first year at university and embarked on the student-faculty partnership to learn more about research.

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