

REFLECTIVE ESSAY

University work-study programs transitioning from student employment opportunities to student-faculty partnerships

***Erica de Souza**, Department of Anthropology, University of Toronto, Canada.

Sherry Fukuzawa, Department of Anthropology, University of Toronto Mississauga, Canada.

Contact: erica.desouza@mail.utoronto.ca

Cook-Sather (2014) describes student-faculty pedagogical partnerships as a reciprocal collaboration where partners contribute equally, albeit in different ways, to the investigation, analysis, and implementation of curriculum or pedagogy. This partnership can vary in different contexts from curricular consultation to extra-curricular projects, and collaborative pedagogical research (Cook-Sather, 2014). The goal of student-faculty partnerships is to move away from the hierarchical nature of post-secondary institutions to engage students in a more collegial and holistic understanding of education and research (Healey et al., 2016). Students benefit from relationships outside of the classroom to support their personal and professional success (Tobolwsky et al., 2020). However, not surprisingly, power-sharing relationships between faculty and students can be difficult to navigate due to the institutional roles inherent in post-secondary institutions (Marquis et al., 2016; Seale et al., 2015).

Student-faculty research partnerships are different from work-study programs, where post-secondary institutions across Ontario, Canada give undergraduate students an opportunity to get paid to work on campus while continuing their studies (University of Toronto, 2023). Pedagogical research projects offering undergraduate student work-study positions are generally considered to be employment positions where faculty and staff maintain a supervisory position over students. In 2020, our project transitioned undergraduate students from the Jackman Humanities Institute's Scholars-in-Residence (SiR) program at the University of Toronto (UofT) into work-study positions. This led to a convoluted journey where institutional guidelines led to ambiguities in expectations and roles for both the faculty and students. This student-faculty partnership is now entering its third year. As our work-study research student partner Erica de Souza is getting ready to graduate, our reflection on the journey from supervisor/student and employer/employee to research partners has been an insightful experience that we hope will inform other faculty, staff, and student relationships in post-secondary institutions.

PROJECT

Our pedagogical research project developed and implemented an undergraduate community-engaged learning (CEL) course, ANT241H, entitled Anthropology and Indigenous Peoples of Turtle Island (in Canada), under the direction of the Indigenous Action Group (IAG)

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with the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation (MCFN) (see www.mncfn.ca). The IAG is a grassroots group that is made up of Indigenous and non-Indigenous members focused on maintaining Indigenous education within education systems, and this course is accessible at UofT Mississauga which is located on MCFN territory. The research team conducted a mixed methods longitudinal study to examine the effect of CEL with a local Indigenous community on students' academic learning, personal growth, and civic activism. After the first iteration of the course, five undergraduate students joined the research team through the SiR. This month-long summer residency trained students in qualitative analysis involving open data coding of student reflections and interviews conducted before, during, and after the course. The student researchers met with a faculty member every day to discuss coding methods and collaboratively create the codebook and general themes from student reflections, surveys, and interviews (Fukuzawa et al., 2020; de Souza & Watson, 2021). After the student residency finished, the student researchers were offered work-study positions to continue their work on the project. Two students continued with the project and eventually transformed into research partners and presented results at conferences and published a paper (see de Souza & Watson, 2021). Through the COVID-19 pandemic, Erica de Souza was the only student research partner to remain with the project. She has continued to conduct the post-course interviews, revised and collaborated on the codebook, and contributed revisions and feedback on the implementation of the CEL course.

Erica de Souza (student partner)

My relationship to the IAG, who facilitate AN241H, first began with my acceptance into the SiR program. SiR is a competitive research program, training students as research assistants in specific supervisor-led projects relevant to their fields. I applied directly to Dr. Fukuzawa's project and was accepted to join a small research team of five undergraduate students. I was completing my majors in Indigenous studies and sociocultural anthropology. This project was ideal because I was interested in the impacts of an Indigenous CEL course, and it was an opportunity to understand the educational goals of Anishinaabe elders and scholars. Our SiR experience was conducted remotely because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Although it was Dr. Fukuzawa's project, the SiR research was co-managed and led by Dr. Laliberte. As a team we were taught over Zoom to build a codebook and analyze qualitative data generated by the CEL course using NVivo software. My colleagues and I did not have any experience as research assistants for an Indigenous-facilitated CEL course. We were coding student interviews from the 2019 course iteration before we could pursue our own research interests. This wasn't really a partnership. It was similar to an internship, but with our own group research. However, it did have aspects of partnership. For instance, we had a lot of freedom to change the codebook after analyzing patterns in student responses in partners and by ourselves. In group discussion, we would bounce ideas off each other freely to check if we had the same findings. We collaborated everyday during that month, which gave us feelings of support, trust, and mutual understanding. We felt an amount of trust from our supervisors with this dynamic.

SiR is research focused and we completed it remotely, but we were able to meet Indigenous scholars and elders over Zoom who facilitated the course, and they shared their teachings with us. We were given time to hear the facilitators' lessons, their journeys, and ask questions. This helped our understanding of the course, which has a land-based learning

approach with reflexive methodology (Fukuzawa et al., 2020). Students taking the course in the 2019 iteration had in-person experiences, so having conversations with IAG facilitators and reading ANT241H student responses helped us to understand their experiences. As well, it felt like we weren't missing much experientially—besides walking along the Credit River.

In the Zoom meetings, I learned concepts I had not learned prior from my Indigenous studies courses, and I was glad to have that opportunity. Although it was a student-teacher hierarchical relationship during the SiR program, I was never frustrated or less connected compared to being in-person. We had open conversations and got to know each other as a collaborative team. Through the project I witnessed the positive effects of CEL on ANT241H students. I wanted to stay with the project because I felt I was doing something worthwhile to support Indigenous-facilitated education. My choice to continue with the project also stemmed from a personal responsibility I felt as a first-generation Canadian settler.

Transitioning to a work-study position involved another sort of hierarchical dynamic as I was now paid for my work. As an employee I was not expecting a real partnership. I thought I just needed to complete specific tasks. The work-study position changed the team membership as only one other SiR student continued with the project. My work-study responsibilities included coding, interviewing, sorting and analyzing statistical data, and participating in upcoming conferences. I wasn't expecting to be involved with conferences, and I became overwhelmed and depressed during the transition. The goal of presenting at conferences was announced to us in the first work-study Zoom meeting, and I wasn't sure what to expect. I was also juggling multiple responsibilities as a student with other work and academic obligations. I discussed my mental health with Dr. Fukuzawa as I was not in a healthy state to contribute to the first conference. She was very supportive and understanding.

I ended up joining that conference at the last minute. My mental health had improved about a month before the conference. I became more confident as I adjusted my schedule to manage the stress better. My first conference responsibility was to present data for a virtual recorded presentation, and it ended successfully. However, as the first work-study contract ended, we had never openly discussed what we learned from the research. We followed the university's work-study policies and completed our learning goals separately, but discussing our mutual project goals wasn't prioritized in the last meeting. Instead, we would discuss what we completed briefly, and what we were doing post-work-study before signing out. Leaving without a conversation at the end of the first work-study felt anticlimactic. I'm sure the remote Zoom communications also contributed to that feeling. Yet, I understood that the professors were preoccupied with their own schedules and may have been too busy to have that conversation.

The next work-study contract I recommitted to was more manageable as I stepped back from my other jobs. I decided to make this commitment after the first successful conference because I could see how dissemination of the project was supporting Indigenous CEL research. Our student research team continued to turn over but I felt I was trusted more because I was almost solely working with the data and provided feedback about the course for my supervisors. I was starting to feel like a partner in the longitudinal study, holding the level of responsibility and trust it entails. This amount of trust and respect in partnership with my supervisors made me feel relaxed, understood, and more socially open with my supervisors where we could laugh and ask about each other's personal lives.

Since I was familiar with the project, the newer students looked to me to explain what we were doing with the qualitative data and how we analyzed it. Communication remained remote and role focused. At the time I didn't believe there was an issue with this dynamic. In retrospect, I see maybe it was unbalanced with the other students, as I had the responsibility of a graduate student, and I admittedly enjoyed it. There were benefits to being with the project from the beginning, such as having student interviewees relax when they recognized me before conducting their second interviews. Yet after each term I didn't form collaborative relationships with my newer colleagues compared to the SiR team. I knew the interviewees better than I knew my team. The perspective of the new work-study students seemed to be that the project was temporary before they graduated or that they were just there as an employee. They would finish the work-study but without communicating that their tasks were unfinished, which would create more work. The work they didn't complete fell to me in the next term, and I had to figure it out by tracing their last emails. This pattern continued even though they could've communicated this over email if they didn't feel comfortable in the last meeting. It left me feeling that I needed to be a stable member of the project when others were leaving or going through different personal issues.

I suspect that the other undergraduate students' perception of the CEL course wasn't the same as mine. New students only worked with qualitative data from one term of the course. I wonder, if students had worked more collaboratively with me would they have committed to the project longer? They didn't get to see the long-term impacts and there weren't any in-depth discussions of the data with them. Analyzing qualitative and quantitative data can easily become isolating with rushed Zoom meetings and a lack of in-person connections. This reflection has been the first time I have had a conversation with Dr. Fukuzawa about these issues. I was hoping to pass on my responsibilities to a capable student with the same passion and hopes for the research, but it's not a realistic expectation.

I became a student partner due to my commitment to CEL Indigenous research. It is deeper than a hierarchical employer-employee relation, but this power structure does hang overhead. Yet at the heart of it, this partnership is based on a relationship. We have the same goals and were able to connect over time. Time is important. It took time for me to develop a positive relationship with my faculty partners. Other undergraduate students either did not have that opportunity, level of commitment, or time before they graduated. I will always be thankful to the IAG for giving me opportunities to nurture this partnership. I'm sure our experiences will contribute to developing future student partnerships that are afforded the time it takes for a deeper and more balanced relationship between research partners.

Sherry Fukuzawa (faculty research partner)

As the faculty supervisor in the work-study program, the transition from the SiR program to the work-study position was difficult to navigate. I felt uncomfortable asking the students to do menial tasks after they had contributed through the SiR program to the qualitative analysis and collaborated on the CEL pedagogy of the course. SiR is a highly competitive program and we selected applicants based on their academic achievements and experience living in or working with BIPOC communities. We hired more work-study students who had not participated in SiR. This set up a hierarchy where it felt like we had student

researchers supervising the new work-study students. However, according to work-study policies they were all getting paid the same.

This transition was easy for the new work-study students who were anonymizing data but was complicated for the former SiR student researchers who were coming to meetings with community partners and engaging in conferences and course revisions. As the faculty researcher on this growing team, I felt obligated to make sure the student researchers were getting recognition for their contributions. However, in retrospect I think this put pressure on the students and that I acted as a supervisor rather than a partner. It is easy to forget as a faculty member that time management is just as fraught for students balancing full course loads, other jobs, and personal responsibilities on top of the partnership project. In addition, the SiR program and transition to work-study positions collided with the COVID-19 pandemic, and it was challenging to maintain a consistent relationship and support system for the students during weekly Zoom meetings. I felt overburdened with my obligations transitioning to online teaching, supporting colleagues and students, and dealing with personal challenges due to the pandemic. The other faculty researcher left on a medical leave and the former SiR student left the project for personal reasons. I felt like we put too much responsibility on Erica to provide continuity to the research. She's been developing and revising the codebook independently, and I relied on her as a partner in the research process.

A long-term project such as ours is best served by a long-term student commitment. The turnover of students complicated our ability to maintain stable research partnerships. CEL with Indigenous communities is based on relationships built on respect and reciprocity (Judge et al., 2021). This is grounded in trust, and it takes students' time, effort, and engagement. We prioritized hiring students' who either identified with or had experience in Indigenous studies. They deserved to be paid for their contributions, and as research partners it should be up to them to determine their role. However, when the institution is paying them a wage, we are required to clearly delineate their tasks and submit learning objectives at the end of each term. This instills barriers to faculty-student partnerships based on arbitrary institutional policies such as student status (e.g., full time versus part time). I believe that over time Erica has established herself as a true research partner in this project, but it took 3 years and multiple work-study contracts to achieve this stability. Similar to partnerships with Indigenous communities, student partnerships are built on respect and reciprocity, and this takes much time to navigate under the institutional hierarchy.

DISCUSSION & CLOSING REMARKS

Healey and Healey (2018) emphasize the importance of context when examining student-faculty partnerships (aptly called "students as partners," or SaP). They suggest that there is no universal guideline or policy to determine a successful transformation of students from learners to collaborators (Healey & Healey, 2018). It is important to keep in mind that like all relationships, student-faculty partnerships are unique to the individuals involved in a particular project. It is a process that takes time and effort to nurture. How success is determined may also be individual to a particular partnership. The success of the project can even be viewed differently by each partner, so it's important to prioritize certain conversations to promote a partnership.

Understanding the emotional state of our partners, be they faculty or students, has been an important issue underlying the project and all communications. For long-term student-faculty partners, developing respectful reciprocal relations is part of navigating each other's needs while managing their own emotional state. Although partnership wasn't in mind when undergraduate students were brought into the longitudinal study, partnership became key in maintaining it steadily throughout years. In our case, that conversation came later but was always needed.

We have begun shifting away from faculty making decisions to benefit students towards making decisions together through open communication with faculty partners on an ongoing and as-needed basis (Healey & Healey, 2018). This is how we will go forward with future students to create partnerships in order to be equal collaborators together. Students will be given the opportunity to make choices, with consideration for what they're ready to participate in. To have that conversation takes a level of trust and an understanding of their level of commitment and interest in the project. Future students will be able to work in small teams to ensure that student knowledge is passed on to other students rather than faculty always maintaining a teaching relationship. Students brainstorming and reflecting together fosters cohesive partnerships. Faculty partners will prioritize conversations near the end of the work-study about their learning experience and goals. Future opportunities will also be discussed so students graduating can also find ways to still participate in the study, becoming community partners. In doing so, these relationships will have more opportunity to develop, creating a culture of community partners (Gravett et al., 2020). When students are empowered, they can guide their own knowledge-making as equals (Matthews et al., 2018).

NOTE ON CONTRIBUTOR/S

Erica de Souza is an undergraduate student at the University of Toronto.

Sherry Fukuzawa is an assistant professor at the University of Toronto. She teaches in the anthropology department and incorporates active learning and community-engaged learning into her course structure. Prof. Fukuzawa is a founding member of the Indigenous Action Group, a grassroots group focusing on Indigenous facilitated education.

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