

## REFLECTIVE ESSAY

## Exploring the importance of backstage conversations in student-faculty partnerships

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In the midst of ongoing global disruption, uncertainty, and loss caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, we embarked together on a student-faculty research partnership that developed as part of a larger multi-institutional research team. Our focus here is on the experience of the authors—a student and a faculty member. Drawing on two significant moments in our partnership, we use the concept of “backstage conversations” to explore how we handled uncertain/complex situations and the multifaceted dimensions of power in our research project. We suggest there is value in extending Erving Goffman’s (1959) idea of backstage conversations to explore experiences in student-faculty partnerships and understand how they can help develop partnerships that occur within larger collaborative projects. The concept of backstage conversations comes from Goffman’s (1959) dramaturgical framework, using the metaphor of theatre and performance to understand how individuals act and interact in different contexts. Goffman’s framework references positions on a stage (frontstage, sidestage, and backstage), with backstage conversations usually characterized as being private: a space where individuals can relax and drop what might be considered “formal” role performance.

Our process of reflection included us individually writing for 5 minutes to a prompt—What has this partnership been like for me?—and sharing with one another what we noticed (rather than what we liked/disliked) in each other’s writing, allowing us to see what resonated with us as readers. We did this at the end of our partnership experience, which enabled us to identify words, phrases, and ideas that we felt were powerful and piqued our curiosity to know more. We then engaged in follow-up freewriting for 20 minutes and shared what we noticed again. From this process, we identified the topic of this reflection: the importance of backstage conversations in partnership spaces. To preserve each other’s perspectives and voices, we approach this reflective essay by writing alternately in the first-person singular (“I”) and the first-person plural (“we”).

## CONTEXT: A PARTNERSHIP WITHIN A RESEARCH COLLABORATION

We came together to work in a partnership duo as part of a multi-institutional team of researchers investigating the impact of COVID-19 on fostering equitable learning environments. This research team consisted of faculty and students from six universities in Canada, all differing in levels of seniority and role, resulting in our partnership developing within a multifaceted context. There was our immediate partnership alongside our collaboration with other colleagues (at our own institution and beyond) who were part of the larger research team. We noticed there was a substantive difference in the nature and focus of the conversations we had between the two of us, which occurred in between the research team meetings. As our partnership evolved and unfolded, we shifted from conversations about *doing* the research to *being* and *becoming* a researcher in a partnership space. In discussing being and becoming a researcher, we had explicit conversations about the ways in which power and agency manifest in scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) research collaborations.

## ESTABLISHING OUR PARTNERSHIP DUO

### **Cherie**

Prior to this partnership, I had worked with student partners at other institutions. However, this was the first time I was establishing a partnership with a student while navigating my own and our collective roles in a larger research team. Not only was I paying attention to the power dynamics between Lori and me, I was also navigating issues of power and agency for myself and for us as partners in the research group. In retrospect, I was naive in thinking about the complexities of establishing a partnership within a larger research project and the logistical and emotional components of this.

While I felt confident in my experience of setting up partnership relationships, there were numerous other new dynamics to contemplate as I began working with Lori. I was conscious of the challenges of building rapport with her when working remotely and also being sensitive to the challenges we were navigating, personally and professionally, during the pandemic. A key part of my philosophy of working in partnership is to engage in holistic and transparent conversations about navigating academia as well as doing the actual research. This had an added dimension through the pandemic as I was juggling home schooling, caring responsibilities, and medical needs of a parent who lived abroad; my life was being lived on screen during our meetings, and I was conscious this was the same for Lori as well as our colleagues in the larger research team. This context led to conversations that were even more open and honest than I perhaps would ordinarily engage in with student partners but, ultimately, enabled a more open and reciprocal relationship to develop between Lori and me. Most importantly, I believe it laid the foundation for our backstage conversations.

### **Lori**

Upon hearing the term “partnership” in our initial conversations, I pictured a major investment of time and resources for both me and Cherie. I was uncertain of what came next, as I had neither prior experience nor knowledge of this way of working. However, Cherie created a welcoming impression where partnership would be a friendly space where support and collaboration can

truly happen, unleashing my curiosity and confidence to try something new. Working with a faculty member one-on-one for the first time made me realize the importance of maintaining a strong work ethic and proper communication with those I was working with. As our relationship and trust built with one another, I was able to see that “partnership” was more than the usual black-and-white supervisor-employee or faculty-student dynamic, as we held space to express our own authenticities and vulnerabilities towards one another while maintaining productivity.

## BACKSTAGE CONVERSATIONS

Roxå and Mårtensson (2009) have applied Goffman’s notion of backstage conversations to the higher education context, suggesting backstage conversations are particularly significant when talking about teaching and learning. Their research on significant networks found that backstage conversations about teaching and learning happened between people with high levels of trust where they explore common interests, share frustrations, and find solutions. Cole (2019, Back Stage Behaviour section, para. 1) notes: “When people are backstage, they often rehearse certain behaviours or interactions and otherwise prepare for upcoming front stage performances.” When approaching our reflection together, and in identifying the importance of conversations that happened between us as a partnership duo and the larger team meetings, we asked one another if there were particular backstage conversations that stood out for each of us. We draw upon two critical experiences that exemplify backstage conversations for us, and we reflect upon how they felt foundational to us advancing our partnership work whilst also navigating collaboration and power with the larger research team. The first conversation relates to the publication process of academic work and the second relates to presenting at an international conference.

### Cherie’s perspective

Attending to the multifaceted ways that power permeated our partnership and the research group has been instructive for both of us in different ways. We were part of a multi-member team made up of undergraduate and graduate students and postdocs, as well as senior and junior faculty. Working with the familiar power dynamics between me and Lori, I also found myself navigating and making sense of those who held more privilege and power than I did due to their seniority and social location. When considering Goffman’s idea of frontstage and backstage conversations, I noticed the different ways I performed my role as researcher, mentor, and partner. In the frontstage meetings (with the whole research team), I was very aware of conversation patterns that could include and exclude students in the team, and I made explicit efforts to draw Lori into the conversation, thus showing and legitimizing her views and opinions in this large group. At the same time, I was aware of my own feelings of hesitancy (and sometimes imposter syndrome) due to my being considered a junior faculty member in these meetings. I was equally conscious of not wanting to speak for Lori or create a sense of obligation to contribute if she did not want to at a given time.

Lori and I would routinely meet before and after meetings to (de)brief discussions. These meetings were originally scheduled with a task orientation in mind. Over time, I noticed these meetings shift into serving a more powerful and important purpose. As our working relationship developed, we began discussing different topics and exploring the rationale for decisions and

actions unfolding in the larger team in the way that they did. Our focus shifted to include discussions about being a researcher as well as doing the actual research. For example, we had explicit and intentional discussions about power and how it shows up in research team decision-making, and we shared our wins and struggles with trying to keep a large, complex research project moving during the pandemic. In these one-on-one meetings, I felt we were able to ask and discuss different questions and experiences and shift roles; they felt more “backstage” in nature because we were able to do emotional work. We expressed uncertainty and hesitancy, which became key elements of our relational work together.

One particular experience that illustrated this for me was when our larger team had to work through author acknowledgement on a publication. As is well understood within SoTL, there are different conventions about how and in what order teams acknowledge and list authors. We had failed in the larger research team to discuss early on what process we would follow, which then resulted in confusion and contestation at the point of submission. We had not had the opportunity to discuss our individual expectations and, as a result, had to engage in conversations that felt uncomfortable because some authors felt excluded and unrecognized in the process. We did not have time nor make space in these conversations to fully explore why this issue mattered so much. It was in our one-to-one, backstage conversations that Lori and I were able to explore more fully the personal and professional dimensions at play in the discussion about authorship and the different ways intellectual contributions are made and recognized in academia. Specifically, we unpacked the idea that publications are currency in academia, and that currency can count differently for individuals depending on their career trajectories. In that discussion, I was able to share with Lori the various things I consider in these discussions and how I was also learning about different expectations and conventions, for example, in disciplines different from my own. Similarly, I was able to answer Lori’s questions about the process and support her to voice her own opinions in the larger research team. We were able to discuss what she felt comfortable to say herself and what I could advocate and represent on her behalf, noting my own power and privilege in the discussion. This required me to step into conversations that felt a little risky for me, conscious that I was also, to a degree, offering counter perspectives to those of my senior colleagues about preferred ways to progress. Thinking about how this conversation was backstage helped me to further understand the nuanced and diffused way that power shows up in partnership spaces and the importance of explaining the underlying game of publications in academia.

Lori and I were journeying on a mountain with only a partial map. I was trying to navigate this new research space on my own terms (and the power differentials) whilst also showing the way for Lori. I felt like we were dealing with a cold front (due to COVID) which obscured our way at times, too. As we journeyed together, and built trust in our backstage conversations, I saw Lori bloom in confidence to lead.

### **Lori’s perspective**

Cherie and I routinely shared our joys, adversities, and stresses of working from home during a global pandemic, allowing us to connect on deeper levels by sharing our personal as well as professional/academic selves. This was different from what I imagined the typical supervisor and research assistant relationship would be. Although warmly welcomed by everyone on the larger research team, I initially felt intimidated within the group of highly educated and established

individuals as I was a mere undergraduate student without prior research experience. It was sometimes easier to have Cherie act as the main communicator on our behalf, as I felt she was an equal faculty member to them. However, our partnership space provided support, encouragement, and assurance, which helped me to feel increasingly confident and able to contribute to the project with everyone else. It gave me time and space to feel more ready to ask direct questions and equally collaborate. The backstage conversations I had with Cherie in those moments helped me debrief the larger project meetings and made space for Cherie to provide positive feedback and encouragement to continue speaking for student perspectives whenever I felt comfortable.

One particular backstage conversation that promoted my emotional growth and opened my understanding regarding what is important in a partnership dynamic occurred immediately after our presentation at my first online international conference, the annual conference of the International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (ISSOTL) in 2021. In the midst of the frontstage conversations taking place to prepare for the event, Cherie and I both were working asynchronously with unusually tight deadlines set by the larger team. The majority of that week was spent on navigating deadlines, choosing priorities to focus on, as well as planning ways to compensate for my schoolwork that still took place. As a result, my first opportunity to present at an international conference was very consumed by the rush of completing everything on time, with little time for reflection until the end.

I experienced performance insecurity and imposter syndrome from my worries of being inadequate compared to my faculty co-presenters. As the only student in the online conference room, I did not want to appear underprepared. I knew I was in a rare, privileged space of which many people can often only dream. In my eyes, failing in my role would make it appear that I wasn't taking my opportunities seriously, negatively influencing opportunities for other students in the future. I was surprised at how easily my teammates could professionally present their research findings in such a short amount of time. I got ahead of myself while speaking from my slides, forcing me to pause and reorganize my train of thought. My lack of formal rehearsal prior to the presentation contributed to my nervousness to the point of my being unable to share the information I initially planned to share. At the end of the presentation, I was only able to add concluding remarks and only realized the key information missed after the conference session ended. The pressure I put on myself to do well in conjunction with my perception of making a mistake made me feel insecure, which was heightened by feelings of social isolation in the pandemic. Being online made it hard to discern how others truly reacted to the quality of my work. I decided to make a seemingly bold decision to request a debrief call with Cherie after the presentation.

Surprisingly, I was met with confusion when I shared my feelings of inadequacy with Cherie, as I actually did well, and many had already sent emails to congratulate and thank me. As we exchanged our feelings of initial turbulence, relief, and victory, our backstage conversation provided me reassurance to feel less intimidated in moments of doubt, insecurity, and working situations I may not be fully prepared for as a first-time conference presenter. I didn't know what I needed at the time, but I received it through Cherie's reassurance and personal connection as a mentor-figure—a teacher in place of a typical supervisor/boss.

Beyond ISSOTL 2021, our backstage conversations continue to be highly valuable and personally developmental as Cherie continues to help me navigate my first research experience.

Akin to showing someone where to walk on a mountain summit, Cherie provides me a welcoming and open space to share perspectives and contribute equally. When needed, Cherie grabs my hand to help me feel safe to climb and help me up to certain checkpoints, as a form of mentorship, or lets me climb first and trails behind me, where I can reach out in case I need support as I develop as a researcher. This situation has led us to recognize that the performance of roles sometimes needs to change within our backstage conversations for us to navigate our contributions to the research project, or the larger mountain that we continue to climb together.

#### VALUE OF BACKSTAGE CONVERSATIONS IN SUPPORTING PARTNERSHIP PRACTICE

Drawing upon Goffman's notion of backstage conversations in partnerships has helped us to understand the nuances of our partnership experiences. In particular, it has helped us understand more deeply the way our partnership duo needed to develop the way it did whilst navigating issues of power, agency, and contribution in a larger research team context. Paying attention to front- and backstage conversations has led us to question: Where on the stage, at any point in time, is our partnership as we are navigating institutional structures, practices, and relationships? Examining our partnership experiences (explicitly through the two examples shared in this essay) enabled us to explore the tacit assumptions and practices that manifest in being and becoming a SoTL scholar; it revealed the underlying game in new ways for both of us. It has been particularly helpful in enabling us to have conversations about how power operates in a diffuse, complex way and challenged the assumption that power is binary (held by faculty and not by students). We shifted roles depending on the context of our backstage conversations and agreed on ways forward in our frontstage discussions in the larger research collaboration. Backstage conversations in our partnership allowed us to build trust and show vulnerability.

We hope this reflection highlights the value of paying attention to the positions on stage from which partnership occurs. By doing so, we think it can help us better understand the way our conversations and interactions continuously shape and reshape how a partnership functions between two people and beyond.

#### NOTE ON CONTRIBUTORS

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