

REFLECTIVE ESSAY

Inspiration strikes: Partnering with experienced student consultants to prepare to partner with new student consultants

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As the proud family of a first-year undergraduate at Bryn Mawr College, we attended a Fall 2022 Family & Friends Weekend event, which included 15-minute faculty presentations. Alison Cook-Sather's (2022b) presentation struck us to our core: "Why 'Mattering' Matters: What Research—and Students—Can Teach Us." Professor Cook-Sather shared positive outcomes for college students when they feel that they belong and explained that equally important is mattering, defined by Rosenberg and McCullough (1981) as the feeling that others depend on us, that we are regarded as important, and that others are paying attention to us.

We are business partners and sisters, 30-year veterans in the education field, and the co-owners of Prepare Inc., which offers comprehensive violence prevention education. Our thoughts raced to all of our students, particularly those who navigate structural inequity. After classes end, we regularly solicit feedback and evaluations. However, we hadn't yet investigated if the course content and its delivery communicate to students that they matter. We hadn't partnered with students in a way that invited their voices, lived experiences, and varied perspectives to guide our curriculum development and enrich the work for everyone. Cook-Sather's presentation primed us to level up our game.

Karen read *Co-Creating Equitable Teaching and Learning* (Cook-Sather, 2022a) and Donna read *Engaging Students as Partners in Learning and Teaching* (Cook-Sather et al., 2014). Professor Cook-Sather introduced us to undergraduates Abhi Suresh and Van Nguyen, who work as student consultants in the Students as Learners and Teachers (SaLT) program at Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges. Abhi and Van agreed to partner with us as consultants to guide our project.

THE PROJECT

Our focus was an upcoming violence prevention education workshop for 7–12th graders who are part of a community-based organization that "[develops] future leaders by creating access for young people of color to first-rate educational, leadership development and professional advancement opportunities." Abhi and Van agreed to prepare us to partner with a group of seven 12th grade volunteers from within the community organization who would act as high school student consultants. The community-based organization acted as partners in the project as well by identifying learners from various backgrounds, races, ethnicities, genders, and cultures who were interested in the partnership.

THE PARTNERSHIP PROCESS: ROUND ONE, WITH BRYN MAWR COLLEGE SaLT CONSULTANTS

We viewed Abhi and Van's partnership with us as essential to our project's success. We sent Outline #1 of the high school partnership process to them for review and comment, overconfident that our plan was solid and would allow high school seniors to embrace and thrive in their role as student consultants.

Our first outline, we learned, skipped important foundational work to build the partnership with the high school students. Abhi and Van slowed us down and invited us to bring more process to the process, including first reflecting more explicitly on our goals, hopes, and fears. We shared with Abhi and Van that our goal was to ensure the curriculum primarily developed by white people would be relevant and feel current for young people of color. Our hope was that the partnership with the high school students would work, and they would feel valued and heard. Our fear was that we would have difficulty shifting from our usual role as teachers into a partnership role. Abhi and Van encouraged us to share our reflections with the high school students up front as well and to provide space for that group to share their goals, hopes, and fears with us. This introspective practice step with Abhi and Van readied us to move from teacher roles to collaborators.

THE PARTNERSHIP PROCESS: ROUND TWO, WITH HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT CONSULTANTS

The plan was to have the student consultants review an existing 2-hour workshop delivered to the student consultants via a mock class over 2 days. This 2-day schedule provided time for feedback, discussion, questions, and informal time together over lunch each day. This was an opt-in opportunity for the high schoolers, and everyone who opted in was welcome. Right away, we noticed a question in our minds about whether they would be the "right" people for the project. Even the question pointed to biases and preferences in service of short-sighted goals. For example, we had hoped that the teens opting in would already know about Prepare from programs at their high schools, reducing the time we'd need to spend building relationships and trust. We discovered that the time spent on building relationships led to the honesty and authenticity of the feedback we received. Since none of the students who opted in knew about us or the Prepare curriculum, none felt obliged to tell us what they thought we'd want to hear versus what we needed to hear.

The SaLT consultants had advised us to create rapport, trust, and clarity of purpose before we met the high school consultants in person. Guided by an example in *Co-Creating Teaching and Learning* (Cook-Sather, 2022a), we scheduled one-on-one Zoom meetings for "get-to-know you" conversations with each student. Each of these meetings' conversations flowed easily. Karen talked about her love of crafts and Donna spoke about her love of sports and hiking. The students shared about their interests in horoscopes, coding, mental health, education policy, and more. We solicited their lunch preferences, learning styles, and motivation to join the partnership, and we shared our experiences as high school learners and our deep passion for violence prevention education. These meetings facilitated a warm and collegial start to our in-person meetings and allowed us to demonstrate our commitment to listen carefully. For example, it helped us make the illustrative examples we offered more relatable. We planned lunches based on their

expressed preferences. The students commented on how moved they were to hear how much we cared about the work.

THE WORKSHOP

We introduced ourselves to the students consultants we hadn't yet met on Zoom and openly shared our goals, hopes, and fears about the project. The 2-hour workshop was parsed into three sections (about 45-minutes each) and we devoted 2 hours to each unit. Donna presented 2 sections and Karen presented the final section. Section 1 introduced us as workshop presenters, outlined the program, and described our approach to violence prevention education. It also included information about body, brain, and emotional responses to stress and fear. Section 2 detailed manipulation strategies and presented a fact pattern for students to spot these strategies in action. It also provided role-playing opportunities to practice problem solving, getting help, and interrupting a situation escalating in concern. Section 3 focused on accessing help post-incident and shared non-victim-blaming language for reporting an incident of abuse.

THE PROCESS: STUDENTS AS CONSULTANTS, CONSULTANTS AS STUDENTS

The student consultants wore two hats: we asked them to participate as a student would in the workshop and to imagine what changes they would make if they were creating a curriculum themselves. The workshop uses a slide deck for multi-modal learning; it contains key concepts, the fact pattern, illustrative graphics, and more. Prepare additionally uses role-plays as a key component of experiential learning.

We created worksheets for ease of notetaking and paused every handful of slides for the student consultants to reflect on both open-ended feedback and specific questions that Abhi and Van helped us shape. After we delivered each of the three sections, the consultants broke into two small groups and moved into other spaces without us to compare notes and discuss. After due deliberation, those groups convened to solidify what they would present to us. Then we all came back together to receive their collated feedback. They rotated who would be the spokesperson each time they shared with us to facilitate more equity within their partnership with each other.

We made it clear we were NOT looking for consensus but rather for each of them to express their unique perspectives and reactions. This eager group took to heart being in the shoes of a curriculum designer by making suggestions to ensure a well-constructed flow of information for future workshops. For example, "Why are you placing that graphic so late in the slide deck? Workshop attendees need that information in advance to be able to sit with their reactions to the material."

We sat alone in the main room after presenting Section 1, wondering what was going to happen next. Should we check on them to make sure they "understood the assignment"? Help them keep track of time? All the worry waiting to hear what they would say was unnecessary; they are competent 12th graders.

After the first round of feedback, we found it much easier to wait while they conferred because we began to trust the process. A natural back and forth began and together we shared

vulnerability and perspectives. For the students, they risked acknowledging the limited information they had about this subject matter in front of peers. They shared how emotional the topic was for them, in unexpected ways. Their vulnerability was expressed when they spoke of their own negative life experiences with violence. In turn, we spoke of our own experiences with violence and what we had to face during our own process of gaining expertise on this topic. Their varied perspectives helped us to understand that every future workshop attendee may relate in a unique way to our content. These first reactions were important for us to hear and likely to mirror how others would feel in typical classes.

One particularly insightful moment came during the discussion of how we would describe (in a hypothetical exercise) a peer offering recreational drugs to another peer. We asked if we should name the drug something currently in vogue. They suggested we say that the offer was of an “unknown substance” to ensure that the sense of increased risk was communicated. An offer of cannabis, now legal in New York, wouldn’t have carried that same weight.

One participant said that one of the most effective aspects of the partnership was “giving student consultants space to ruminate in small groups and as a whole before presenting.” Donna observed how much they benefited from peer-to-peer engagement after each section. She heard a lot of laughter coming from those breakout spaces and observed that they came back to us refreshed and eager to share.

After the students listened to intense material for over an hour, it was a relief for them to be able to chat together and give each other their “hot takes” and first reactions and then move into the specifics. Karen had focused on relationship building with them, but they also needed space to build trust in their relationship with each other. This project involved 7 consultants working as a team, distinguished from one consultant working directly with one professor. Their breakout group time strengthened them as partners to each other, which strengthened their partnership with us. This was an aspect of partnership we hadn’t considered.

When questions would arise during their small group work, we found hearing about those discussions was often as valuable to us as the more formal feedback. Those questions opened a window onto how the material sat with the students as a first, unfiltered reaction. Several students shared the kinds of tips and safety hacks well-meaning adults have provided to them. One participant told us that without the tips to rely on, they felt more scared. The concern about what to do instead helped us understand how critical it is to replace unhelpful information quickly with more helpful information. The students appreciated the time we took to break it down for them, share research, and validate both their concerns and the fears of their parents. We called these “transparency moments,” which often led to insightful feedback. This kind of candid exchange of perspectives is what characterizes partnership, and we felt ourselves leaning into that.

For example, during our presentation of options to interrupt inappropriate behavior, one consultant asked for clarification about why certain actions could be effective, politely expressing their own doubt and anticipating doubt from future students. The group agreed that the background information we shared with them would ease skepticism and we should include it in the slide deck. A lively discussion about television crime procedurals followed that ultimately provided valuable insight as to how much of their beliefs are shaped by their media reference points. Breaking these walls down was part of the enriching progression of establishing

partnership by ensuring that the students had the same knowledge and source material we used and that their insights, ideas, and lived experiences mattered as much as ours.

After the last round of feedback, the students completed written questions about their experience and then debriefed with us in a closing conversation. They noted how much they enjoyed switching the roles that they typically have with teachers. Reflecting the principle that teaching and learning is community property (Shulman, 2004) and students' investment in co-building the best workshop possible, one student consultant wrote:

being able to provide feedback in advance of student workshops (to the other students in my organization) was definitely a privilege. . . . I loved working with my peers and loved the nuanced, deep discussions we were able to have surrounding the curriculum and lessons.

Breaking down the power structure by inviting young people into our shoes was novel and valuable to the students and to us. One student reflected: "I would love to do this process again; it was very informative and allowed me to understand a little bit about the behind-the-scenes of a program like this which was really interesting." Another student emphasized how great the experience felt: "I really enjoyed the work I've done in the past few days! This has been a very fulfilling experience and can definitely see myself coming back."

We concluded the process by coming full circle in our first partnership and debriefing with our experienced SaLT partners, Abhi and Van. Karen gave our thanks for their insight, patience, and skill. Donna discussed the pros and cons of an intensive format vs a more typical semester long partnership. One positive was that the high school students could witness our immediate integration of their feedback into edited curriculum. However, they were tired by the end of the second day of work together.

CONCLUSION

We have implemented about 90% of the student consultants' feedback as permanent changes. We feared we might get too much or not enough useful feedback or need to make major overhauls to the workshop. We both felt that our preparation time with Abhi and Van was an excellent example of the value of experienced student consultant input (Cook-Sather, forthcoming). It further committed us to the process with the high school student consultants. Due to the successes of this first project, this practice will be repeated in the future.

We were heartened to know that, from the student consultants' perspective, the workshop was fundamentally sound. While some of the changes might appear minor—a tweak of language here or there, a change of order for a few slides— taken as a whole they added up to a more relevant and better-paced program. We learned more about what young people know and don't know about the topic—where they might have had resistance, doubt, or concern but for a well-placed caveat or piece of additional context or rationale.

The students highlighted to us the value of incorporating personal stories and examples to leaven the intensity of the topic and how engaging it was to hear our passion for the material. It was gratifying to be encouraged to continue to bring more of our authentic selves into the

room. The result of our vulnerability and authenticity was more of the same from them—reciprocity that strengthened the partnership step by step. This way of working together and sharing our passion demonstrated to the students that their perspectives mattered to us and their future safety mattered to us, and it affirmed for us that the work we were doing matters to them.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Our thanks to Alison Cook-Sather, who gave us a conceptual and practical framework to put our actions where our hearts were. We deepened our understanding of what it means to be educators and learners. This process reignited our commitment to excellence and to “always be learning!”

NOTE ON CONTRIBUTORS

Donna Chaiet, president of Prepare Inc., is an award-winning author in the field of violence prevention for young people and has co-created an evidence-based anti-bullying/anti-bias program. She holds certifications in crime victims counseling, support groups for adoptive families, substance abuse and prevention, mental health, and sexuality education.

Karen Chasen, vice president of Prepare Inc., serves on the boards of IMPACT Violence Prevention and Emerging Strategies for Learning and Leadership. Chasen collaborates on research with other experts in the field of violence prevention including trauma recovery interventions for sexual assault survivors and marginalized communities.

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