CASE STUDY

Transforming teaching assistant roles into co-creators of instruction

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ABSTRACT

This case study explores the implementation of a collaborative initiative that transformed the traditional role of teaching assistants (TAs) into student-faculty partners in two psychology courses. The objective of the collaboration was to leverage the insights and contributions of undergraduate students as co-creators of instruction for students' engagement and meaningful learning experience. The case study highlights the processes, impacts, and challenges of these partnerships, revealing opportunities for student partners to develop pedagogical and assessment literacy, enhance communication and leadership skills, and gain insights into student behaviors and preferences. Pedagogical and curricular gains were observed, including the incorporation of student insights into instructional activities and improved teaching materials. However, challenges related to power dynamics and student perceptions of privilege were also identified. The findings emphasize the importance of careful navigation and the creation of meaningful opportunities for student engagement in higher education.

KEYWORDS

student-faculty partnership, student engagement, empowerment, pedagogical gains, power dynamics

Student involvement in outside-of-class activities is seen as a catalyst for student engagement (Kuh & Hu, 2001). These opportunities are often provided to students through student development or academic development offices. Among these opportunities, hiring teaching assistants (TAs) is one that provides interested students a chance to practice their content and pedagogical knowledge. North American universities have a pioneer history of effectively utilizing graduate teaching assistants (GTAs), a mutually beneficial practice for students and faculty that has contributed significantly to the success of higher education in the region (Park, 2004). The responsibilities of GTAs primarily include helping prepare teaching materials, providing one-on-one or small-group support to students, grading assignments, leading discussions or lab sessions, and assisting with classroom technology (Wise, 2011). Traditionally, these positions are often open to graduate students and are advertised as graduate teaching assistants, mainly for those who are planning to pursue a career in academia and seek lecturing experiences as teaching interns with their professors. Moreover, these positions are paid. Students are recruited through

advertisements based on specific criteria, such as excellent communication skills and organizational abilities. In several institutions, teaching assistants are given specialized training to excel in their roles (Smith & Kalivoda, 1998).

In the context of this case study, undergraduate students at our institution often approach their professors voluntarily to become teaching assistants. These undergraduate students are still pursuing their undergraduate degree and may not possess the advanced knowledge and necessary skills and competencies required for the role of graduate teaching assistants. As a result, they are often denied this opportunity due to the perception of being unprepared to serve as teaching assistants. To overcome this deficit mindset, we transformed the faculty and teaching assistant roles into a student-faculty partnership, where both parties collaborate as co-creators of class instruction with the aim of promoting inclusivity and empowerment for undergraduate students.

We believe that the co-creators model differs from the traditional GTA model in two key ways. Firstly, students actively participate in contributing creative ideas for instruction, decision making, curriculum design, and examination paper creation rather than doing what they are told to. This contrasts with the passive support role of traditional teaching assistants. Secondly, co-creators experience minimal or no power distance from professors, fostering a collaborative teaching approach. Involving undergraduates as co-creators enhances student-centered teaching, promoting effective peer interaction. Compensation for co-creators wasn't provided in this study, emphasizing personal motivation for genuine teaching participation.

Student-faculty partnership is increasingly gaining popularity as a means of engaging students as co-creators, co-enquirers, and collaborators in designing and implementing important aspects of teaching and learning (Healey et al., 2014; Kaur et al., 2022). These collaborations aim to empower students to go beyond being mere consumers of knowledge. This practice is based on the fundamental principle of valuing students as informants who can contribute unique and meaningful insights to teaching and learning processes (Cook-Sather, 2020).

The seminal definition of student-faculty partnership emphasizes that all participants have an equal opportunity to contribute, even though their contributions may vary in terms of methods or approaches (Cook-Sather et al., 2014; Cook-Sather & Agu, 2013). The literature on students as pedagogical consultants clearly demonstrates the implementation of this idea, highlighting how students' positionalities, perspectives as learners, and unique standpoints (Cook-Sather, 2020) can benefit pedagogy, curriculum, and class instruction (Kaur & Noman, 2020). For instance, in a pedagogical consultancy project, a foreign academic at her institute found that the student partner brought attention to the native university or national culture, assisting her in developing culturally responsive pedagogy (Kaur & Yong Bing, 2020). Similarly, in another pedagogical consultancy, the authors provide a detailed section on pedagogical transformation resulting from student partners' recommendations in a psychology course (Kaur and Tang, 2023). Furthermore, Cook-Sather and Agu (2013), discussing the faculty gains in the Students as Learners and Teachers (SALT) program, highlight how having a student pedagogical consultant of color offers white faculty members a valuable opportunity to access and learn from the experiences and viewpoints of students of color, which they might otherwise not have had. The previous research illustrates that this approach has the potential to enhance various aspects, including skills, motivation, creativity, staff-student communication, and self-efficacy (Matthews et al., 2017; Kaur et al., 2019).

Building on the scholarly evidence mentioned above, this case study examines a partnership project where undergraduate students' work as teaching assistants was framed as co-creation of instruction. In this case study, we showcase two examples of co-creation held over two semesters during the 2022–2023 academic year for two psychology courses. The objective was to demonstrate how we can leverage the values underlying student-faculty partnerships to capitalize on students' insights and their intention to contribute and transform the teaching assistant position into more meaningful co-creation collaborations. These collaborations are not only beneficial for faculty members but also for the student partners and the students involved in those classes and curricular structures.

This case study will provide a detailed description of the initiative in which students and a faculty member engaged in the co-creation of instruction, focusing on how it was initiated and sustained for one academic year. The authorship of this case study consists of five undergraduate students and one faculty member who actively participated in this collaborative endeavor. Throughout the collaboration, each team member maintained a reflective diary to document their feelings, learning experiences, and observation notes of the partnership processes. By analyzing this reflective data, the case study explores the processes, impacts, and challenges of such collaborations.

THE INITIATIVE

Every year, prior to the start of the semester, several students would personally approach faculty members to express their interest in participating as teaching assistants. As a selection criterion to become teaching assistants, the students must have already taken the course and have a deep understanding of the knowledge in the course. In general, no more than three student co-creators will be in a class so that they can collaborate and negotiate matters together. The positions are open for both undergraduate and postgraduate students. However, due to the time commitment, undergraduate students, who are all full-time students, are preferred by the faculty. No financial rewards would be paid to the undergraduate co-creators according to the college rules. The experience of collaborating and working closely with professors is considered the biggest reward for students wishing to partner.

In the academic year 2022 to 2023, the faculty member in charge invited these interested students to work as co-creators of instruction for two psychology courses. Five students agreed to join the initiative. This program was initiated at the individual level and did not receive any funding from the department or university.

The collaboration took place for two courses: one offered in the fall, which consisted of two sections, and the other in the summer semester. The fall semester course was a three-credit psychological statistics class (PSY 3200) primarily taken by freshman psychology majors. Each section had a capacity of 28 students, and two junior-year students who had already taken PSY 3200 agreed to serve as co-creators for this course.

The second course was offered during the summer semester. It was a three-credit general psychology introductory course (PSY 1000), which included students from various majors and different levels of study. The class size was 50 students, and one junior student and two sophomores who had already completed this course agreed to participate as co-creators of instruction.

A week before the courses began, the faculty and student partners had a lengthy face-to-face meeting. During this meeting, the faculty introduced the student partners to relevant literature on student-faculty partnerships and co-creation mainly with the intent of showcasing students' ability to contribute to teaching and learning. Affirmation of the students' abilities and the expertise they would bring to the collaboration was emphasized, as it is central to effective partnerships (Kaur et al., 2022; Cook-Sather et al., 2019). Also, building mutual respect and trust is foundational for effective power negotiation. During this period, there was a chance to proactively tackle potential challenges related to power dynamics between faculty and student partners. The key factor that contributed to this opportunity was that the student partners were not enrolled in any course taught by the faculty during that semester. This absence of enrollment in the same course naturally eliminated any coercive or pressurizing elements that students might typically feel, creating a conducive environment for open and transparent communication. The faculty and student partners clearly defined guidelines outlining the boundaries of student partner involvement to help manage expectations and mitigate potential conflicts. For example, the duties of teaching assistants included (a) clarifying complex terms in Chinese for better student understanding during class; (b) editing and enhancing PowerPoint presentations by addressing errors and incorporating visuals; (c) reviewing student homework and creating test questions; (d) facilitating communication between students and teachers, reporting feedback to instructors, and motivating student participation; (e) cultivating a creative and relaxed classroom atmosphere, and (e) assisting with class activities when needed by instructors.

Faculty negotiated power in decision making by entrusting teaching assistants with various responsibilities. These included determining suitable examples and activities, setting the difficulty level of quiz questions, and addressing student requests. This delegation of tasks contributed to a collaborative approach to decision making within the teaching team.

Ethics were given equal importance in these partnerships. The faculty and students, while agreeing upon their roles, also promised to uphold respect, fairness, and confidentiality for everyone involved in the collaboration. They explicitly stated that any sensitive information they learned about the students enrolled in the course would remain confidential.

A broad outline of how this co-creation would work was created. The student partners and faculty members enumerated the different roles and responsibilities they would assume during the process. Additionally, they established a group on the WeChat instant messaging app to share course-related materials and readings.

At this point, the students were provided with the course syllabus and teaching materials, and they were asked to provide their insights on various issues for which the faculty required student perspectives. This included the order of topics to be discussed, the time assigned to each topic, the activities chosen for teaching each topic, and the teaching materials, such as PowerPoint slides and readings. Before the course began, the student partners made significant contributions to and provided valuable insights on these materials. It was agreed that the student partners would attend all sessions in person and be formally introduced to the students enrolled in the course.

Each week, before the class, the student partners and faculty members would discuss the topic of the week and collaboratively decide on hands-on activities, quizzes, or reading materials to share with the students. After each session, the team would assess how the class went, what needed improvement, what should be continued, and the plan for the next class. The student

partners also helped in analyzing the students' classroom engagement and their responses in classroom discussions and assignments.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Data for this case study was collected from both faculty members and students through a variety of methods. Reflections were gathered before, during, and after the collaboration, and members also took observation notes. Additionally, artifacts such as collaboratively created lesson plans, teaching materials, and readings were utilized to contribute to the study of the collaboration's impact. At the end of the session, all the reflection and observation notes were collated and analyzed together. Using a deductive approach, the data was coded for opportunities and challenges. Finally, the codes were categorized into themes.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Opportunities

Students gains
The benefits of student-faculty partnership collaborations are widely reported in the literature. However, each collaboration is unique and contributes distinct gains for students. For example, one student partner mentioned, "working closely with the professor has provided me with insights into how the classroom setting operates and how I, as a future teacher, should observe and analyze student behavior." Student partners also reported developing assessment literacy while collaborating in assessing the work of enrolled students. One student partner stated, "taking notes during the presentations not only allowed us to understand the criteria professors use to grade students but also provided us with a better understanding of what constitutes a strong presentation." Another student partner mentioned, "along with subject mastery, my ability to communicate with people from different disciplines and levels of study, as well as my confidence, grew during the collaborative process."

Student partners majoring in psychology benefited from observing students' learning behaviors. For example, one student partner wrote:

> I noticed how some students would rush to answer questions in class without giving turns to those who needed more time to think. This made me reassess my own behavior as a student to ensure I don't do the same.

According to their reflections, these experiences transformed not only their identity as future educators but also as students themselves.

Pedagogical and curricular gains
Incorporating student insights and suggestions to design instructional activities and appropriate assessment techniques greatly benefited the delivery of these two courses. For example, in the statistics class, the student partners were able to provide a rationale and persuade the faculty to rearrange the order of topics based on their previous experience with the course. Additionally, the two student partners in this class contributed to improving the PowerPoint slides by

incorporating Chinese explanations and translations of important terminologies. One student partner noted,

> given my own prior struggles with understanding and navigating Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), I was acutely aware of the potential challenges that students might face. To lessen these difficulties, I added more specific and step-by-step instructions to the exercise materials.

Furthermore, these students in both courses brought Chinese resources and readings related to the course content that the faculty, being a foreigner, would not have been aware of.

The student partners in the general psychology course emphasized the importance of game-based activities and introduced a reward system based on group performance. Students in both groups helped faculty identify the topics that students in general find challenging and provided ideas to situate those in the Chinese context. For example, the interpretation of emoticons used in personal messaging can be very different in the Chinese adolescent context to study human motivation and emotions. These student partners also assisted the faculty in exploring various web tools that could be efficiently incorporated for end-of-lesson quizzes.

Gains for enrolled students

Another significant benefit of such collaborations was the gains experienced by students enrolled in the courses. Student partners recognized the limitations that Chinese students may have in questioning professors and the apprehension they may feel in regard to challenging professors (Kaur, 2020). The presence of student partners, who seemed to have more control over the class compared to a regular teaching assistant, provided assurance to enrolled students. They had someone they could voice their learning preferences to or ask questions they may not feel comfortable asking directly to their professors. One student partner wrote:

> I notice that students in the statistics class experienced less anxiety and… less helplessness as we were there to help those in need. I would often tell the sophomores that I had encountered the same situations they were facing, which appeared to alleviate their frustrations.

The deeper engagement of student partners in the design and delivery of classroom content also helped them master the material, enabling them to provide guidance and sometimes tutoring to their fellow students.

One student partner from the general psychology course wrote:

> One notable aspect of the class was our professor's intentional inclusion of our trio team as examples and role models. By highlighting the close relationships between the professor and our team, our professor not only acknowledged our integral role but also inspired other students to envision themselves in similar positions in the future. This served as a powerful motivator for both the students and ourselves.

Challenges

Faculty and student partners

While having student assistants as co-creators has enormous benefits, it raises important concerns regarding power sharing and balance, both between faculty and student partners, as well as between student partners and enrolled students.

The collaboration sought power sharing in important matters related to the design and delivery of classroom instruction, including students' involvement in class assessment, such as designing final exams and evaluating students' presentations. However, determining the boundaries and degree of involvement in these areas posed a dilemma for the faculty. The faculty mentioned in their reflection,

> I was eager to get my student partners' viewpoint on determining the linguistic competence (ability to translate psychology terminology into Chinese) of enrolled students, something student partners can assess better than me. However, I hesitated and decided against involving them in providing information on exam questions due to considerations of fairness, ethics, and assessment integrity.

In another instance, the faculty noticed that one student partner expressed appreciation for the opportunity to engage in important matters:

> we actively participated in discussions with the faculty during their presentations, sharing our feedback on content and delivery, and offering constructive criticism on student's [sic] presentation styles. This collaborative process highlights our partnership with Nikki, as our evaluations play a role in determining the final grades for the presenters.

However, Nikki was apprehensive about revealing this to the enrolled students as they might question the judgment of student partners.

Student partners and enrolled students

Student partners observed that power dynamics may come into play between them and the enrolled students in the class. One student partner wrote:

> I am mindful of how students might perceive us, having access to the professor's computer and being responsible for uploading their grades. They may view us as privileged, perceiving that we hold more power than them. . . . It is important to consider whether this dynamic poses any obstacles or negatively impacts the self-esteem of students who do not have the same opportunities.

Student partners were aware of their privilege and made an effort to alleviate the distance between themselves and students enrolled in the course. One student partner explained:

I focused on sharing knowledge and exchange of knowledge. After class, I sometimes tell jokes to lighten the pressure they may feel and to create an atmosphere where they see me as a supportive older sister always willing to offer help.

Way forward

As a way forward and to overcome the challenges, we recommend that student partners and faculty develop explicit guidelines outlining the roles, responsibilities, and boundaries for both faculty and student co-creators. This ensures a shared understanding of expectations and helps in mitigating potential conflicts. Additionally, we encourage faculty and student partners to communicate transparently with enrolled students about their roles and contributions. This transparency helps in managing expectations and addressing any potential concerns about fairness or judgment. Additionally, considering the time and energy investment and professional capabilities, TAs could be compensated.

Each year, new student partners are selected as teaching assistants; perhaps those who have experienced this co-creation can mentor the new cohort.

CONCLUSION

Traditionally, teaching assistants have been assigned the role of assisting professors in executing their teaching plans, leaving little room for them to contribute their insights and actively transform pedagogy or curriculum. However, by framing students' collaborative role as co-teachers or co-creators of instruction, faculty can harness students' experiences, perspectives, and standpoints. Through power sharing, affirming students' positionality, fostering reciprocity, and establishing a common goal, faculty can cultivate a small community of learners. Such collaborations not only lead to personal and professional growth but also have a positive impact on students attending the courses and the overall curriculum. Nevertheless, these collaborations are not without challenges. The issue of power-sharing in sensitive matters and decisions like assessments and balancing power between student partners and enrolled students and the notion of privilege requires careful consideration and mindful navigation. In summary, by carefully applying the principles of student-faculty partnership, undergraduate higher education can create meaningful opportunities for students to engage in outside-of-class activities.

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