SPECIAL SECTION: EQUIPPING STUDENT LEADERS AS PARTNERS FOR SUSTAINABLE HUMANITARIAN ACTION

REFLECTIVE ESSAY

Responsibility and privilege in a long-term faculty partnership with students

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I am a latecomer to the discourse on students as partners (SaP), even though I have been experimenting with the model for more than a decade. In this essay I share my own particular experience that involves a unique, sustained partnership with successive generations of students committed to social action. Anchored in the common understanding of SaP as a mutual, collaborative process that invites equal contribution to "curricular or pedagogical conceptualization, decision making, implementation, investigation or analysis" (Cook-Sather et al., 2014, pp. 6–7), my journey has extended far beyond the limitations normally associated with university teaching. The incorporation of experiential learning attached to consequential opportunities for my student partners to shape and run a campus-based humanitarian NGO has led to an exhilarating but extremely challenging experience that I am now processing in terms of the SaP model.

Prior to analyzing the experience itself, it is important to explain the path that led to this unusual outcome. Trained as a historian of the Middle East and Islamic world, my discipline is among the most conservative on a university campus, and for years I subscribed to the standard pedagogy associated with lectures, seminars, and research papers. More than a decade ago, my search for ways to motivate students to do the work necessary for them to learn intersected with a difficult period in departmental politics that led me to seek out like-minded colleagues in other departments. This generated the conceptual space for me to reconsider my approach to teaching. I began to experiment with both active and experiential learning pedagogies at the same moment that the hard work of two visionary associate deans yielded the introduction of new active learning classrooms and international field courses in my Faculty of Arts. I took advantage of both developments and thus launched on an adventure I had not anticipated.

It was in these years that the Middle East became synonymous with ever increasing violence. Long known for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the region was rocked by the Arab Spring, which soon grabbed the world's attention as violence began to consume the region, especially Syria. I discovered that students could only tolerate so many lectures about the roots of the current conflicts in past centuries. Instead, they wanted to understand the lived experiences of those caught in it, and—no less importantly—they wanted to do something by way of formulating a meaningful response to the suffering that digital media presented to us unrelentingly each day.

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Thus, in 2013, in place of a research essay, I took the risk of introducing project-based learning. This was not common at the time. One of the projects challenged students to design the framework for a partnership with an NGO to offer scholarships to young women from the Middle East.

What appeared to be simply an academic exercise at the time would in fact be translated into a genuine program as a result of vital learning partnerships with students in subsequent years. I continued to teach regular courses in history and religion, but support from the dean of arts and other colleagues encouraged me to offer "directed studies" courses through the Global Studies Department in order to spend time working closely with students who were interested in actually realizing the proposed scholarship program. The first iteration of these courses included projects tailored to the interests of the two students who enrolled: organizing a symposium to educate the university community about the lived experiences of those impacted by the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and organizing a referendum campaign to secure the support of the student body for the new scholarships. The projects enabled each student to work towards developing specific competencies that included adaptability and resiliency, collaboration and teamwork, problem solving, creativity and innovation, and leadership. Regular weekly reflections reinforced the learning that took place as they pursued their projects. Together we designed the syllabus to suit their learning; when we realized later in the term that we had been overly ambitious and that they were struggling to meet our goals, together we worked out how best to modify the course in a fair and equitable way.

Little did we imagine the long-term results of this short-term partnership at the time. Today, International Students Overcoming War (ISOW) is a full-fledged student-funded and student-run humanitarian organization based at Wilfrid Laurier University. In addition to volunteering on the Student Management Team that oversees the scholarship program, students have the opportunity to partner with me through similar directed studies courses that we design together. We read in Peace & Conflict Studies, in Humanitarianism, in Refugee Studies, and in Higher Education in Emergencies. At the same time, through these courses we have refined the concept of "legacy projects" by which we have organized multiple conferences to engage local, national, and even international networks, and through persistent advocacy we have pursued partnerships to increase our capacity to offer scholarships to refugees and at-risk students from around the world. As such, students continue to engage with specific fields of knowledge while developing critical competencies that will serve them well in future careers.

RELATIONSHIP-RICH LEARNING THROUGH THE STUDENTS-AS-PARTNERS MODEL

I first encountered the SaP literature in 2020, after having effectively experimented with and practiced its fundamental principles over the previous decade. The SaP model incorporates experiential learning through both research and the scholarship of teaching and learning (Healey & Healey, 2019). My own approach has been to take the partnership concept much further by designing experiential learning opportunities based on a shared, outward-focused commitment to sustainable social action. Together we harness a mutual desire to make a difference in the world today, and the resulting synergy from these partnerships means that academic learning has become the fuel that powers ISOW.

My approach to learning through partnership has embodied what Peter Felten and Leo Lambert (2020) have suitably called "relationship-rich education." ISOW incorporates the characteristics they identify as key to student success: relentless welcome, inspiration to learn, a web of significant relationships, and exploring questions of meaning and purpose. However, the richness of the ISOW experience likely exceeds that which normally results from faculty-student partnerships precisely because it is sustained over deepening relationships that span multiple years. That students clearly value their experiences with ISOW is evident in the fact that they volunteer for increasingly senior leadership roles in successive years and sign up for the directed studies courses that are available. Some students have in fact worked with ISOW for up to 6 years as they have progressed from being first-year students to young professionals hired through a dedicated internship program to which they can apply upon graduation. As we have tackled the wide range of challenges inherent in humanitarian work, we have weathered many significant difficulties and celebrated just as many accomplishments. The learning relationship has often been tested, and we have all been challenged to grow in terms of self-awareness and skills associated with collaboration.

The directed studies course framework has been essential to the development of ISOW, and each year a number of student leaders have committed to working with me to build further on the efforts of their predecessors through legacy projects. These courses have incorporated the core elements of the SaP model: we agree upon the assigned reading, the assessments, and the approach to grading before the student begins each course. Some students are more comfortable contributing to this process than others, but each one is empowered to help define learning outcomes as well as how we will achieve them. Undoubtedly, for students there is risk entailed in signing up for such a course, especially when legacy projects fall outside the standard experience of writing a research paper. For me as the instructor, it is challenging to establish a suitable rubric by which to evaluate their work. Each legacy project also requires a considerable investment of time and energy on my part in order to provide adequate guidance for the project to be of sufficient quality to be useful. As I have discovered, when the SaP model is scaled up and multiple projects are underway at any one time, I am pushed to my limits. Ultimately, trust and respect are at the core of our shared efforts. We spend considerable time together reflecting on what we are doing, recognizing the fact that reflection is an essential component to effective experiential learning (Pries, 2019). Together we have hosted regular conferences, built new partnerships with NGOs, reconciled the annual scholarship budget valued at more than half a million dollars, developed sophisticated but sensitive campaigns to present ISOW to the public, and planned regular trips to Ottawa to engage with politicians and advocate for government support for the program.

ISOW is an example of the "radical collegiality" that empowers students to be the agents of real change through transformative learning (Cook-Sather et al., 2014, p. 129). For this to succeed has required not only my willingness to work tirelessly with successive cohorts of student leaders, but also institutional recognition of the value of the learning that is taking place. As Felten and Lambert (2020) point out, this is essential to relationship-rich education. It includes departmental chairs and the dean agreeing to each directed studies course; busy senior administrators and university staff respecting students by meeting and working with them; and, in recent years, the allocation of funds to support the internship program that allows recent graduates to continue their involvement as paid staff dedicated to supporting the next cohort of

ISOW student leaders. Thus, a critical ingredient has been the openness of colleagues to the gradual growth of this program by contributing to the respect, reciprocity, and responsibility (Cook-Sather et al., 2014) that defines ISOW as they recognize the legitimacy of students carrying out specific tasks usually reserved for professional staff. The ISOW paid internship is but an extension of this commitment: the interns themselves play a crucial role bridging the gap between me as an ageing professor and the student leaders who remain consistently young! The interns continue in a learning partnership with me while transitioning to become early-career professionals.

PASSING THE TORCH

SaP constitutes a radical challenge to long-standing pedagogies of power in higher education. That my colleagues at Wilfrid Laurier University have supported the student learning and leadership at the core of ISOW speaks volumes to a collective commitment to student success. Entering into partnership with students means surrendering power that the institution normally holds, and yet my conversations with ISOW student leaders leave me under no illusions that they believe true equality is actually achieved. For all that I may wish to "flatten" the hierarchy (Hawley et al., 2019) by elevating students and interns to a level equal to me, a power imbalance will always exist in practice. Nowhere is this more evident in the context of ISOW than in my capacity to generate rewarding learning opportunities for eager student leaders. Naturally they want to respond positively because the work by its very nature is so compelling. However, I have learned a critical lesson over the years: namely, that students can say no even when faced with compelling opportunities for further learning and personal growth. More than that, students *must* learn to draw appropriate boundaries and to say no. In turn, as their teacher and mentor, I must allow for this, even though I may not want to hear that response because I see such potential in a particular opportunity. Although it can seem like personal rejection at the time, in fact it is a very healthy sign when students can look at me and say that they have reached their limit. Difficult though it may be, I always know that this means that the student in question has achieved a learning outcome far more important than anything I could have taught them in a history course: drawing boundaries is essential to a healthy life in the future.

On the other hand, students themselves wield a power of their own that makes ISOW particularly challenging to me in my role as faculty advisor. Among the strengths that students bring to the partnership are their idealism, energy, and determination to make the world a better place. Often, they do not shrink from challenges that those with more life experience would hardly countenance. Each year, I welcome a new cohort of student leaders armed with compelling ideas, and my commitment to ensuring that they might learn as much as possible through ISOW means that I am inclined to help them realize those goals. Yet the reality is that before long they will graduate and move on to future careers, leaving me holding partially completed projects that require more years of hard work to bring to fruition. Normally, a faculty member's responsibilities to the student partnership would end upon completion of a course, but in the case of ISOW I have the privilege and responsibility of stewarding the investment made by my former partners in learning long after their departure.

In winter 2023, as their legacy project in a directed studies course, the ISOW president and vice-president engaged previous ISOW leaders in reflective conversations to understand their

perceptions of the experience in retrospect. In summary, their memories were very positive: they expressed appreciation for the opportunity to develop empathy, to practice critical thinking, and to hone leadership skills. Relating to each other, to ISOW scholars, and to partners within the university and beyond clearly had provided valuable moments of learning. Belonging to a team in which each person's opinion was valued empowered them to voice their opinions while advocating for a meaningful cause. They remembered with satisfaction the challenging situations they had faced, even if they were extremely difficult at the time. Of particular importance was the fact that ISOW student leaders are frequently asked to share ideas and then are encouraged to pursue their implementation if they are consistent with the ISOW mission. As a result of belonging to a dynamic and empowered community, these former student leaders recognized that they had gained considerable confidence—an outcome that they have then been able to apply on the diverse professional paths that they have since followed.

A conference hosted in March 2023 by ISOW in conjunction with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees was evidence of widespread interest in the partnership model that has produced such compelling results. Representatives from universities and NGOs around the world spent 3 days exploring how to equip students as partners for sustainable humanitarian action at a time when creative but sustainable responses are sorely needed. It was an exciting time for the student leaders who planned the event with me, but we also came face to face with the sobering reality that ISOW is unique and cannot be easily replicated. Through our very success we have discovered the limits of the student partnership model extending beyond the normal structure of a course. Today we can offer approximately 14 scholarships a year, but further growth and expansion to other universities cannot be sustained by an academic partnership built on legacy projects and volunteer leadership. To pursue national growth and intense international engagement would require professional staff—ISOW student leaders are extremely dedicated and capable, but they do have other classes as well as other commitments in life. Paid interns can only go so far to compensate for these limits—supervision of each intern requires time and energy on my part. Inevitably, they will move on to pursue their own careers and I must begin the process of training senior leaders once again. As a humanitarian organization based in a university, ISOW is a means to supporting personal and professional growth of the students involved; for all the importance of its contribution to alleviating human suffering, ISOW is not an end in and of itself. I must maintain my focus on cultivating and nurturing student leadership through learning partnerships, alive to the fact that this means that we will have to make difficult choices as to which opportunities we pursue and which ones we decline.

As the faculty member in these partnerships, it is this moving on that I find most difficult. There are countless other significant challenges we face in running ISOW as a humanitarian organization, but it is precisely because we collaborate closely as partners in learning to tackle these that the conclusion of the student-faculty partnership is accompanied by a sense of loss. I know from experience that not only will students move on, but that ISOW will begin to fade in their memories as they build diverse and rich lives. What may seem like transformational learning at the time will eventually be but one point in lives that incorporate all manner of challenges and experiences which can hardly be imagined at the time when the student graduates. As a teacher who has watched each student grow through the partnership opportunity that ISOW provides, the sadness that accompanies the end to their journey with me is very real. I must continue to uphold what we have created together while they look forward to the next stage of life with the

excitement that derives from the confidence they have gained through our collaboration. No less real, then, is the knowledge that when one equips students through the SaP approach and allows them to take the lead, the outcomes are profound—in their lives, in my life, and in the lives of those they have helped through ISOW. It is hard to imagine that teaching can get any better than that!

NOTE ON CONTRIBUTOR

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