CASE STUDY

Reflecting on vulnerability, skill-building, and identity in an interdisciplinary SaP project

Matthew Dunleavy, Centre for Teaching Excellence and Innovation, Yorkville University and Toronto Film School and Together Time, **Susan Andrews, Carla VanBeselaere, Christelinda Laureijs, Shannon Goguen, and **Denise Roy-Loar**, Together Time, Mount Allison University, Canada.*

Contact: mdunleavy@mta.ca

ABSTRACT

Launched in 2021 by a team of undergraduate students, university faculty, associate researchers, and community partners collaborating as genuine equals in a diverse team, the Together Time Story Sacks intergenerational literacies program forms part of an ongoing action research project aimed at understanding and addressing barriers that residents of rural regions face in accessing literacies programming. In this paper, six team members who co-imagined, co-designed and co-implemented Together Time but occupy different roles on and beyond university campuses reflect on the ways the students-as-partners (SaP) model, through which we brought Together Time to life, shaped both our process and our outputs during the project's pilot phase (September 2021–August 2022). We suggest that empowering humans with diverse academic and lived experiences through the SaP model is an Invigorating, messy, and, at times, nerve-racking process but an eminently fruitful enterprise that, in our opinion, produces rich research with and for our community while transforming our understanding of education and ourselves.

KEYWORDS

literacy, rural, community-based, reflection, partnership

The Together Time intergenerational literacies program is a success for reasons ranging from the growing number of rural households it is reaching to the excitement and engagement it is generating among educators, children, adult caregivers and other stakeholders alike. This success is largely due to our collaborative approach that invites students into partnership on the project. Launched in 2021 by a team of undergraduate students, university faculty, and associate researchers, working with community partners collaborating as genuine equals in a diverse team, the initiative forms part of an ongoing action research project aimed at understanding and addressing barriers to literacy programming in rural regions. In this paper, six core faculty, staff, and student team members who co-imagined, co-designed, and co-implemented Together Time but occupy different roles on and beyond university campuses reflect on the ways the students-as-partners (SaP) model shaped our process and outputs during the project's pilot phase

(September 2021–August 2022). We suggest that empowering humans with diverse academic and lived experiences through the SaP model is an eminently fruitful enterprise that produces rich research with and for our community. Invigorating, messy, and at times nerve-racking, this experience transformed our understanding of education and ourselves.

OVERVIEW: HOW DID SAP FIGURE IN OUR PROJECT?

The origins of Together Time lie in a successful application for New Brunswick Innovation Fund (NBIF) to explore the provincial literacies landscape. Though residents of rural communities disproportionately and differently experience social, economic, health, and other consequences of low literacy levels, research on intergenerational literacies remains decidedly metro-centric. We see intergenerational literacy—sometimes referred to as family literacy—as how literacy is used and valued within homes and family lives. Beginning in September 2021, our team set out to fill this scholarly gap by answering three related questions:

1. What are the barriers to rural-based literacies programming?
2. What role(s), if any, do intergenerational literacies collaborations between local hubs of learning play in ameliorating or exacerbating these obstacles?
3. Can we design and pilot an intergenerational literacies program in rural New Brunswick informed by our research findings?

Initial data collected on the Together Time Story Sack program suggests that our intergenerational literacies program is successfully addressing the obstacles to accessible literacies programming in rural regions. Through our partnership with local elementary school educators, kindergarteners in the Tantramar region receive a weekly backpack containing picture books and accompanying sensory materials (puzzles, activities, toys) oriented around a theme (such as dinosaurs, gardening, and music). According to interviews with literacies practitioners and education experts, our program offers an engaging intervention in rural, intergenerational literacies.

This case study uses an autoethnography methodology to look at the impact of using SaP as a foundational principle for project collaboration, using reflections from two faculty members (Carla VanBeselaere, associate professor of economics and Susie Andrews, professor of religion in a visual and material culture program), one staff member (Matthew Dunleavy, educational developer), and three undergraduate researchers (Christelinda Laureijs, biology; Denise Roy-Loar, psychology; and Shannon Goguen, sociology).

Undergraduate research assistantships typically result in a particular working relationship between faculty members/principal investigators and their undergraduate assistants: a relationship that we would define as transactional. The faculty receives labour and, in exchange, the students receive quantifiable benefits (wages, a line on their CV, a citation, etc.) and unquantifiable benefits (mentorship, experience, etc.). Instead of going into the project with a preconceived notion of how we would work together and what we would do, we joined as a team, united under our three questions, and developed an ever-evolving research and project strategy that built on everyone's strengths.

Throughout this project, we understood the value of hearing and respecting everyone's opinions and concerns. The partnership resulted in a dialogic approach to research, as we all had opportunities to lead research meetings and even redirect our research based on personal interests and findings. It also informed the creation of our pilot project—the Together Time Story Sacks—as each member of the team felt they had a say in what that intergenerational literacies project would look like. Every aspect of the initiative—the program themes, picture books, logo, and even its name—reflect the input of multiple contributors who could oftentimes be found in spirited and generous discussion on the Microsoft Teams platform or circled around a table at the local public library with picture books in hand.

We decided to take the same approach when compiling this reflective essay. Matthew and Christelinda took the lead in finding connections throughout our six reflections. As we read each other's essays, we found several overlapping themes: the benefits of interdisciplinary research, disruption of the educator-student hierarchy, vulnerability, skill-building, and identity.

REFLECTION: WHY DOES THE SAP MODEL MATTER?

Interdisciplinary research and connection
Our team draws from a range of academic, professional, and lived experiences. While we each used our strengths, as we will show later in this reflection, we did not stay confined to each of our disciplines. Instead, we combined the perspectives from each discipline at all stages of our project. By choosing to integrate knowledge from multiple perspectives in our research, we transitioned from a multidisciplinary approach to an interdisciplinary approach (Choi & Pak, 2006). As Christelinda noted, "We were able to consider a topic from multiple angles, and the wide range of perspectives gave us fresh insights into our data." Carla remarked that the interdisciplinary approach allowed us to "continue and expand our research" and that "having students as partners is a wonderful way to incorporate multiple perspectives into your work."

Students shared their findings in weekly discussions, took turns preparing and facilitating meetings, and partnered with colleagues from different disciplines. The faculty on the team also invited students to share their ideas, reflect on research findings, and engage in conversations that influenced the direction of the research. Each member of the team, regardless of position within the institution, would see the project change in response to these large team discussions characterized by mutual respect.

Students began to feel further connected to the project once they had found a role that challenged them, showed them the value of their work, and connected to topics that mattered to them. This was especially clear in Shannon's reflection, where she stated:

> Interviewing educators involved in the Story Sack Program was where I really began to feel my contribution mattered. . . . Conducting interviews provided me with an internal perspective that gave me a better idea of just how meaningful this research assistantship is and the work we are doing.

This was not a role assigned to Shannon, but rather a place where she believed she could make a meaningful impact on the project. Shannon connected her work with educators to her

passion for social justice and community work: "I transitioned from feeling like a passenger to being in the driver's seat."

Faculty also found ways to connect the work that they were doing to their own goals and values. The project was especially meaningful to Susie, who wrote, "University teaching is the heart work through which I endeavour to foster connections between humans that are fundamental both to transformational learning and the diminution of suffering." It was paramount to us to ensure that each person on the team felt like they mattered, which has proven to not only be vital for the well-being of students and faculty but can have a direct impact on the overall success of a project (Flett et al., 2019).

Disrupting hierarchies

Most academic projects are based on an educator-student hierarchy (Smith et al., 2019). Our partnership moved beyond this hierarchy by allowing people to choose their projects and research topics. Some members found tasks that matched their existing skill sets, while others chose challenging projects that led to new skills. Christelinda added, "The scope of our research was much wider when each of us used our interests and experiences, compared to what we would have found had we been limited to specific roles and instructions." Shannon also commented on our partnership, writing, "This collaboration has encouraged brainstorming and open communication in a way that departs from the traditional roles associated with higher education." Both students, who were at different stages of their degrees, could identify that something was different with this framework for collaboration and that it departed from their prior experiences.

In our reflections, the disruption of the power dynamics of higher education was a recurring theme. Shannon stated, "This research project disrupted everything I believed a research partnership could look like." Although she was initially apprehensive about student research, Shannon quickly realized that the SaP model provided many opportunities for both students and faculty. Shannon thought that our group meetings were particularly disruptive to the student-educator hierarchy. She cited the inclusion of student voices, reflective practices, frequent encouragement, and shared celebration of everyone's successes as ways of changing the narratives of student-educator relationships. Shannon also found reassurance in the collaborative nature of the SaP project, writing that the project allowed her to feel "like a valued partner in [the] project . . . the power dynamics that I was initially concerned about had begun to dissolve."

Another example of the disruption of the hierarchy can be seen in Denise's reflection on the working environment of the project. She reflected that the project allowed her to "co-learn with fellow students and leaders." Denise's use of the term "leaders" when describing the project is significant; she does not use this word to refer to faculty, the typical "leaders" of an academic project; rather, she uses the term here to express the ways the project environment changed the power dynamics usually seen in collaborative research. She explained that everyone was called upon to "engage in collaborative idea generation, to provide project feedback, and to work with trust and autonomy . . . regardless of position." The student-educator hierarchy was disrupted when everyone was given a chance to be a leader. Leadership fluctuated depending on the needs of the team and the stages of the project. Carla also used the concept of leadership to show how a SaP model could operate beyond the hierarchy: "To help students become effective partners

we need to model effective leadership traits. . . . Students can learn to lead and see their 'voices' as equals if we provide them with a model to emulate." A transparent, compassionate model of leadership from Carla, Matthew, and Susie paved the way for Christelinda, Denise, and Shannon to take the lead when the need arose.

Vulnerability

Healey, Flint, and Harrington (2014) argue that "Partnership is essentially a process of engagement, not a product. It is a way of doing things, rather than an outcome in itself" (p. 12). This new "way of doing things" in a SaP model, however, is at odds with the ways the faculty and staff in the project had grown accustomed to working in higher education. Susie learned that faculty need to trust themselves—and others—when relinquishing control. She wrote about how she learned to become intentional about "choosing to risk making something [she values] vulnerable to another person's actions" (Feltman, 2009). She acknowledged that trust was initially difficult for her, but our partnership taught her a lot about the ways that trust can work in practice: "Trust is . . . vital to the ongoing success of our educational partnerships, and [is] one of the ways I'm stretching as I strive to live out a pedagogy of love."

The vulnerability of engaging with a new type of partnership may connect to feelings of anxiety, which is a point that was brought up in several of our reflections. Matthew commented on the ways that our partnership related to feelings of inadequacy when he wrote, "In academic spaces, like many of us, I feel the spectre of imposter syndrome." He saw that acknowledging the differences in our lived experiences was crucial to forming a healthy working partnership: "Going into this project, I wanted to disperse that feeling and also help disperse any similar feelings in others, knowing we had all reached this point of collaboration via multiple paths."

The project challenged the way that faculty experienced research projects with students, which often required flexibility and courage from faculty. In her reflection, Susie thought about the vulnerability of "letting go" of power: "I've come to see [the value] that co-imagining, co-designing, and co-constructing educational initiatives in which the individuals alongside whom I learn and lead feel radically welcome, valued, and empowered to share and shape our creative processes and outputs takes guts." Susie explained some of the ways that all of us experienced vulnerability as we engaged with the partnership and brought our authentic selves. She reflected that partnership "demands . . . showing up authentically as we are and inviting others to do the very same. It necessitates depending on others to harness their superpowers in pursuit of our shared goals."

Despite our belief in the research that showed the benefits of SaP as having a "potential transformative nature of a culture change that challenges the customer-provider model of HE" (Curran, 2017, p. 3), we wondered how the project would succeed if we relinquished control. Yet, it was this very opening up that allowed us to see our shared strengths and led to professional and personal growth for all members of our team.

Skill-building

The highly collaborative nature of the project led to the discovery of many hidden talents. All three students commented extensively on the skills that they developed or strengthened when contributing to the project. Faculty also acknowledged the role that the SaP model played in encouraging new skills. Carla wrote, "I am always surprised by the 'hidden' skills that students

come with. . . . Uncovering these talents is what makes the project that we have undertaken special." By making space for a range of experiences and expertise, our team was able to offer up new ways to engage in the project that may not have had space if we felt confined to traditional roles. Leveraging our personal experiences outside of academia as small business owners, paralegals, and parents, we built trust, became radically invested in this project, and brought more of ourselves to Together Time than sometimes feels welcome in academic contexts. Our product—and process—were greatly improved through this generosity.

The level of support in our partnership gave everyone a safe space to develop new skills. Christelinda remarked that "parts of this project pushed me out of my comfort zone, leading me to discover new things about myself and to grow as a researcher." She went on to describe a reflective practice in which all members were asked to consider emotions as they went through literature reviews. The strong focus on emotions was initially unsettling to someone used to her field of scientific research. However, she found that it assisted her with the project: "When I considered how emotions related to the data that I was collecting, I was able to relate to papers more easily and notice things that I would not have found otherwise." Christelinda said that she may not be able to apply emotions as easily in future scientific research, but she learned valuable lessons about the ways that lived experiences can shape individual perspectives.

Identity

The learning process that accompanies collaborative research relates closely to concepts of identity and self-worth. Shannon wrote about some of the power imbalances that students feel within academia. She believes that "far too often a student may feel as though they consume knowledge but do not have autonomy in their contributions." She went on to describe how the SaP model, and the resulting disruption of the hierarchy, changed her perception of her identity as a student: "This framework creates a symbiotic educational ecosystem where both the educator and student may flourish and learn from each other." By actively contributing to research, Shannon acknowledged how her role changed from that of a consumer of knowledge to a producer of knowledge (Neary, 2010).

Our partnership helped Denise to examine the conflicts between her identity as both a professional and a mature student. Her reflection thoughtfully examined the ways that being a member of a SaP partnership changed her perspectives:

> I no longer see myself as just a student who used to have an established career; I am now a student who has years of experience that actively contribute to my ability to engage in innovative research, relationship building, and my continued education.

Denise explained that the frequent validation and encouragement in our partnership helped her to re-evaluate her identity. Working with people at different stages of her career also led her to change the way that she thought about her self-worth: "Instead of solely focusing on who I will become, working on a students-as-partners team allowed me to recognize the value of who I am today thanks to who I have been."

CONCLUSION

The Together Time Story Sacks program is built upon partnership. As a community-engaged program, we must build networks beyond the university and nourish reciprocal relationships built upon trust with our partners in schools, libraries, and families. By designing the program under a SaP framework, we ensured that partnership was embedded in everything we do. The program has been a great success and we continue to strengthen and grow; each member of our team— regardless of status or title in the university—has left a mark on what we do. The same can be said about how the project has marked us all, and we take that with us into the future. Susie wrote: "This project—like teaching more generally and the research with which it is interwoven— are about connection creating, sustaining." Even though, as Matthew argued, there is a certain risk and "messiness that comes from learning alongside others," those risks can result in "innovative and transformative experiences." And we have been transformed, we have passed a threshold, and none of us can imagine comfortably falling back into the old, hierarchal way of working together.

NOTE ON CONTRIBUTORS

Susan Andrews *is a scholar of narrative and a Mount Allison University faculty member. Recipient of many awards in teaching and learning, in 2022 she was also honoured to be elected a member of the Royal Society of Canada's College of New Scholars, Artists and Scientists.*

Carla VanBeselaere *is an expert in survey non-response and student engagement at Mount Allison University. Using a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative data, she has been able to uncover interesting stories about what affects student engagement with learning and the factors that prevent individuals living in rural communities from connecting with literacy programs.*

Matthew Dunleavy *is a Senior Educational Developer at the Centre for Teaching Excellence and Innovation at Yorkville University and Toronto Film School. He previously served as an Educational Developer at York University, and the Program Director of the Online Learning and Technology Consultants Program at the Maple League of Universities where he was awarded the D2L Innovation Award in Teaching and Learning by the Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education.*

Christelinda Laureijs *is a graduate student (MSc. in Biology) at Mount Allison University, where she studies the effect of insulin on hypothalamic neurons in rats. Her experiences with Students as Partners projects have inspired her to pursue a career in academia.*

Shannon Goguen *studied at Mount Allison University and obtained a Bachelor's degree in Sociology. Shannon has a passion for social justice and believes in the importance of applying a trauma-informed approach to the work she does. Shannon currently works in the harm reduction field, fostering the important frameworks and skills she has gained from her education and lived experiences.*

Denise Roy-Loar *is an graduate of Mount Allison University where she completed a Bachelor of Science with honours in Psychology and a minor in Religion. Her research includes examining the relationship between sexual health education and biases toward gender and sexual minorities, and the intersection between religion and mental health within the 2SLGBQTIA+ community.*

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