CASE STUDY

The students-as-partner experience: Perspectives from the students and the faculty

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ABSTRACT

This article offers a case study of a student-faculty partnership. Focusing on the perspectives of two student research assistants and a faculty member, the authors utilize current literature on student-faculty partnerships to support their perspectives. This case study adds to the body of research suggesting student-faculty partnerships enrich and mutually benefit those involved. This article explores the working partnership of the consultation team and their work as part of a large collaborative project amongst post-secondary institutions and community-based organizations. Over the course of 3 years, success was evidenced by the outcomes of this project. The team has led workshops on the subject matter, and, additionally, contributed to the co-creation of a workbook/e-course on mitigating vicarious trauma for English language learning teachers. The research team published two subject-related articles. This article explores the facets that impacted the quality of the partnership.

KEYWORDS

co-construction with students, scholarship of teaching and learning, students as partners, research assistants

Students in some undergraduate post-secondary programs can be afforded opportunities to engage with faculty through the role of research assistant (RA). In some cases, students are approached, while at other times they may have to apply and be selected. A research assistant can be described as a support role for a faculty member who is the principal investigator of a research project. In this description, there is a hierarchy that shows a top-down approach to the working relationship. More recent approaches to working with research assistants include bringing on students as partners (Hill, et al., 2019) to create a team with a flattened hierarchy, allowing for more collaboration and knowledge sharing. In the case being presented in this article, the faculty member handpicked the RAs for the project and did so having had previous experiences with these students knowing that they would be open to a collaborative relationship. The RAs were fully informed that they were entering into a student and faculty partnership and that the project they were going to embark on was 3 years long. Further, they understood it involved a team from other institutes and was nationwide in its scope and were aware that the

experience would benefit them academically and professionally. To sustain involvement in the project, regular meetings were held and check-ins were done on a regular basis. The faculty choosing the RAs created a relationship where the RAs felt a sense of ownership and commitment.

According to Bonney (2018), choosing students who show particular knowledge and skills may assist with project success. Student RAs had the opportunity to participate in most aspects of this research project including interviewing stakeholders, collecting data, transcription, data interpretation, development of resources/tools to address the identified phenomenon, publication, and dissemination of research. When seeking students as partners, skills such as writing mastery, interest in the topic, as well as "creativity, perseverance and diversity of perspective" (Bonney, 2018, p. 1) are considered appropriate attributes. Since the project the RAs were being selected for was lengthy at 3 years and it involved multiple relationships, these attributes were particularly important. In addition, creativity was needed as there were graphic pieces to complete, as well as module content design for easy reading that would eventually become online learning modules. Bonney (2018) also discussed that students can be involved at each step of the process, which was the case with this project apart from the funding application. In this paper we explore the process and discuss the many mutual benefits of such an arrangement between students and faculty.

THE PROJECT AND PARTNERSHIP

The purpose of the larger research project was to explore the impact of vicarious trauma in the English language learner (ELL) classroom. This qualitative research project included interviews with 42 teachers and 10 stakeholders to understand more about how learner trauma could impact teachers in these settings. The first phase was to interview the teachers and stakeholders, and the second phase was to create and pilot resources to support teachers and institutions. In phase three, these materials were revamped after receiving feedback and sent as a final product to institutions that teach English as an additional language across Canada. Phase three was completed as of 2023.

After funding was secured, the research assistants were involved from the beginning so that there was a clear understanding of the scope of the project and to ensure there was understanding from all parties regarding expectations and timelines. The initial steps were to meet as a team from all the institutions that were involved on a regular schedule. The institutions had representatives from two post-secondary campuses, one team which taught ELLs and one that acted as the content expert in relation to vicarious trauma. The vicarious trauma content expert team consisted of faculty, staff, and students from their institution. There was also an organization that taught ELL but was not a post-secondary institution. There were two RAs from the content-expert post-secondary institution and four from the ELL post-secondary institution. The RAs from the content-expert institution were involved in interviewing, transcribing, analyzing data and writing both the resource materials and journal articles. In addition, there was one individual who acted as a teaching content expert.

We began our work as a content-expert team by co-creating language, such as a codebook for the qualitative data, to ensure we had a similar understanding of the phenomenon under question. RAs were given resources to learn about transcribing and worked with the researchers

to understand the interview process. Once interviews with stakeholders began, students first witnessed and then led several stakeholder interviews with the researcher present. Once interviews were completed, a codebook was established. The research teams were split between the teacher interviews and the stakeholder interviews. The RAs from the content-expert institution worked with the researcher to analyze the stakeholder data using an inductive coding method (Thomas, 2006). Once that process was completed, the data was shared for resource material input for the project. In addition, the content expert team on vicarious trauma recognized at least two overarching data streams that could be used for journal articles.

STUDENTS AS PARTNERS

Most literature on students as partners (SaP) is related to classroom endeavors such as collaboration on rubrics, course content, and curriculum design. However, in their systematic review of the literature, Mercer-Mapstone et al. (2017) included co-research and co-inquiry within the realm of student-as-partner initiatives. The student partner relationship is becoming more prominent in post-secondary education, though Barradell and Bell (2021) noted that practice-specific lenses require further research. Mercer-Mapstone et al. (2017) also reported on student-to-student partnerships, which was seen in this project as well. According to Mercer-Mapstone et al. (2017), there are both positive and negative aspects to students-as-partner initiatives. The positive benefits for students included such things as student ownership of learning, a positive shift in identity for students, as well as self-efficacy, better relationships, and insight. Some of the negative aspects of these partnerships were related to the reinforcement of power dynamics, time commitment, loss of belonging at project completion, and lack of supervision. Mercer-Mapstone et al. (2017) also reported on staff and faculty experiences having both negative and positive benefits.

   Bovill and Felten (2016) described student-faculty partnerships as collaborations which provide opportunities for equal engagement. It was important for the faculty member to acknowledge the imbalance of power that did exist within our partnership project. For example, being able to handpick students to work on the project was a right use of power. Bovill and Felten (2016) also noted that these opportunities may differ between the parties within the partnership as one person may bring skills and knowledge that is different from their counterparts. Therefore, it is important to recognize what each person brings to the collaboration while not getting mired in structure and processes. Bovill et al. (2016) also described some of the challenges related to partnerships as similar to those noted by Mercer-Mapstone et al. (2017). In particular, Bovill et al. (2016) described some considerations as being related to "boundaries, capabilities and risks" (p. 198) and discussed the personal challenges of faculty opening up to students about their processes, which are typically in a silo.

   Another challenge that has been reported in student-faculty partnerships is the lack of partnership for the end result. For example, in the Mercer-Mapstone et al. (2017) review, the authors noted that while there were partnerships being touted, almost all publications related to these partnerships had the faculty member as first author. Positional power is an example of inherent imbalances in faculty-student partnerships (Acai et al., 2017), and as a faculty member who has witnessed this practice many times, it was important that within this project opportunities to change first author practices were promoted. In doing so, we were "ensuring

that collaboration is meaningful and not an empty promise" (Bovill et al., 2016, p. 205), and each member of the content expert team will be first author on a jointly written academic article.

PERSPECTIVES

Students involved in this student as research–partner experience were afforded opportunity to participate in work that benefited their academic experience, as well as their professional growth. Their contributions to this research project developed skills and lived experience that were otherwise not available on the student schedule. In addition, the research team benefited personally by developing relationships that were authentic, reciprocal, and caring (Barradel & Bell, 2021). This created insight for the students about how to work on and collaboratively contribute to a research project. The following paragraphs detail the perspectives of the faculty member and the two RAs involved.

Faculty

As the faculty who provided mentorship to the two RAs represented in this article, I recognized that the students' engagement in this long-term project required them to possess certain characteristics. I have been working to decolonize structures within a post-secondary system and saw a student-as-partner model as an opportunity to continue with this approach. Using a students-as-partners model allowed me to work within the parameters of transformational leadership (Northouse, 2019). As such, my first consideration was identifying students who were interested in knowledge building and were seen as collaborative. Drawing on the work of Hill et al. (2019), I knew that if this was to be a collaborative project, I needed to have a belief that the students who were to be partners were competent not just in learning, but in knowing what they know and were willing to assert this knowledge. It was not so much knowledge of the topic as it was the disposition of willingness—a willingness to learn and share perspectives. This was a project that was looking for co-creation at all levels and that meant working in both small and large groups on a variety of projects. The RAs needed to see both the big picture (3 years from the start of the project) and the mini projects (module development) that would lead to the final product.

What I had to consider in choosing these RAs was how they might work together (as there were pieces of the project that they would do as a dyad), how we would work as a triad, and how they would work with the other team—a team I did not know myself. Additionally, I needed to consider how I would assert expectations yet provide space for working at their own pace and developing their own timelines. When meeting with potential RAs I had to be clear about the project myself, as well as be clear about the policies at the institution for working with RAs who are also students.

More importantly, since this was a longer-term project, we needed to have a relationship that could be honest and authentic. I needed to know that the students would tell me if they did not understand something or if they felt pressured by the other team. I needed to know they would be honest, and they needed to know I would respond authentically and would validate their needs.

Student

By inviting us into the project as student RAs, the supervising professor broke down an academic barrier. Being invited to work on this project became a window into a world that was previously understood to be fairly exclusive to a certain level of academic achievement. This was empowering and confidence building for both of us involved. The early context of writing research articles and participating in creating workbooks and courses seemed daunting. At each phase, we were placed in a position to succeed when the expectation was to work through problems and think critically, but there was plenty of room to ask questions and seek guidance. Our involvement created opportunities for us to fully engage as equal partners in the research process. To that end, an important observation was that both of us felt more like partners in the research team than assistants to any one individual.

Working as an RA for a faculty member had many benefits for us, and this is represented in this case study. The research project presented a number of unique opportunities to apply individual skills and knowledge, competencies that were simultaneously being developed through our undergraduate degree program. We were welcomed to build professional relationships and offered roles to effectively contribute within a multidisciplinary team. We were provided the opportunity to engage in this extended research project in almost every aspect of the work, and we were able to engage in spaces that worked to our individual and academic strengths. Conducting research with an experienced and knowledgeable faculty member supported our growth in a variety of academic areas. The faculty member supported us by providing and demonstrating equity, meaningful collaboration, and co-construction. We were given the opportunity to advocate for topics for scholarly publication, take the lead on authorship, and advocate for how we contributed to the project team goals.

To that end, working as an RA on this project enhanced the academic experience significantly (Bonney, 2018) for both of us. This opportunity created insight into and experience with the research process and placed us in a position to learn the responsibilities of a researcher (Barradell & Bell, 2021). We were given the opportunity to participate in and lead interviews and to transcribe lengthy, detailed interviews into interpretable data. As such, we each gained an enhanced academic voice and were encouraged to contribute, collaborate, and apply the knowledge and skills gained through this project. This produced individualized, meaningful outcomes for each of us through unique participation in developing the toolkit that was distributed across Canada. We were able to lead workshops for professional bodies seeking information on vicarious trauma and promote and disseminate our research about student and faculty collaboration in academic settings.

There were unique and important professional benefits that were a result of generalizing the skills learned during the research process (Barradel & Bell, 2021). Being a part of such an intricate partnership with stakeholders from different institutions gave us insight into the attributes required of a research professional. From organization to organization, the research team maintained an ongoing, long-term relationship based on consistent communication and collaboration. There was honest accountability to the work being done and flexibility when it was needed.

Barradell and Bell (2021) described five key themes of understanding for student faculty partnerships: the framing of the partnership, drivers for partnership, sustainability, inclusion of student voice, and understanding of partnership. While some of what drove this partnership was

external, internally we were able to make decisions and choices about our working relationships and contributions to the project. At all levels, our voice was accepted and responded to, which facilitated our contributions to a successful project. In that, we found these five themes to provide a relevant framework to reflect on this student as research– partner experience.

Framing of the partnership

Barradell & Bell (2021) stated that "involvement of students [in SaP] was seen as a way to respond to existing problems or challenges" (p. 521), and this experience is true for the students involved as RAs on this research project. Both of us, when initially contacted by the instructor, was identified by their academic strengths and current timelines for enrolment at the institution; we were both available for the duration of the project and were willing participants. In being identified as potential fits for the research assistant positions, timelines and expectations of the role were made clear. A full value agreement was in place from the beginning.

Drivers of the partnership

As we engaged in the research project deliverables, we were granted the opportunity to experience relevant competencies and understood the "need to meet degree-level accreditation requirements" (Barradell & Bell, 2021, p. 522) in our work. Working on this research project allowed us to utilize research and evaluation skills learned through our undergraduate degree program (Mount Royal University, 2023), creating a robust synthesis of academic and professional experience.

Student involvement in this lengthy research project allowed engagement in all phases of the qualitative research process. We, as RAs, were involved with data collection, transcription, analysis, coding, research, publications, presentations, and the dissemination of research findings. The possibility and reality of becoming a first author on a research article is another driver of the partnership; being able to enter the job market with published research articles at the bachelor level demonstrated on our resume was a major motivator.

Sustainability

Challenges do exist in order to sustain any partnership, student/faculty partnerships included. From the beginning, though, it was evident that we, as students, would "benefit from being brought earlier into the professional fold in interesting, authentic ways" (Barradell & Bell, 2021, p. 527). We each learned that we had unique strengths that could be put to use within this research project, and experienced how "educators can learn a great deal from working alongside their students, and clients and communities stand to benefit as well" (Barradell & Bell, 2021, p. 527). That sentiment echoed in working with the stakeholders involved; it felt like everyone was supported and engaged in the work. More importantly, it felt like we as RAs were on equal footing with our colleagues on the project.

Working within a student/faculty partnership through our organization, as well as with our larger research team and stakeholder organizations, meant that our project timelines would sometimes closely align. Our obligations as students and faculty members within our respective institutions were to meet with our larger research team on a regular schedule, which proved to be difficult at times. Members would have conflicting obligations to their jobs or studies which resulted in some members missing meetings or delays in the project's deliverables. There was an

ongoing commitment to meeting as a larger group, though, as well as deadlines that held the process together—overall, there was a dynamic need for flexibility that was met with acceptance from the larger group.

Inclusion of student voice

A common consideration was providing us as students with the chance to develop the skills to work collaboratively in complex situations (Barradell & Bell, 2021). Our faculty member provided an opportunity for us to advocate for ourselves throughout all aspects of the project. We had choice in how we contributed to each phase of the research project. We were able to contribute our unique skills and interests, which included overarching knowledge on policy and vicarious trauma, as well as art design elements for the digital toolkit. We were both given the opportunity to pick topics in relation to the project and to be lead authors of scholarly research articles. We were also provided leadership opportunities with the support of our faculty member. For example, we led an online workshop on vicarious trauma for an American educational institution, offering information about vicarious trauma to educators. Our faculty member was there to support us but let us take the lead.

Understanding of the partnership

As RAs, our' willingness to participate in the project became foundational to our learning process around the research. Willingness to participate grew from clearly established expectations and agreements on our roles at an early stage. Our faculty afforded both of us trust and room to work from an empowered position; this agreement held true for the duration of the project. As the project evolved, so did the understanding of the partnership.

Early in the project, deliverable tasks were assigned based on experience and willingness. The expectation to be able to deliver on assigned tasks was always present, and we were empowered to ask questions and seek guidance from the content-expert partners. One good example of this is the transcription process; there were opportunities to put the interviews into text that could be analyzed and interpreted, as well as to contribute to the process of extracting themed data that could be explored in the contexts of the research.

CONCLUSION

In this article we described the outcomes of the project and the pride in what was accomplished over the 3 years of our work. However, the point in this article is to describe the student-as-partner aspects of our work. One indicator that this was a true partnership relates to what Mercer-Mapstone et al. (2017) noted about authorship credit. In this work each of us has a first-author publication. In this article, each partner has spoken to the nature of the collaboration, limiting the notion that there were "empty promises" (Bovill et al, 2016, p. 205). As noted by the students above, they gained insight into the research experience in a way that enhanced their academic experience and provided opportunities to highlight their strengths and talents. At any given point this project could have gone awry but our honest and realistic conversations allowed us to engage more fully and plan in ways that made space for everyone's needs. Truly a partnership.

NOTE ON CONTRIBUTORS

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