

REFLECTIVE ESSAY

Students as partners in the library: Perspectives of partnering to develop a new information literacy undergraduate research program

**Rachel Fundator and Samantha LeGrand, Purdue University Libraries and School of Information Studies, Secret Permenter, Department of History, and Benjamin Weiss, School of Mechanical Engineering, Purdue University, United States*

Contact: rfundato@purdue.edu

Students as partners (SaP) is a pedagogical approach where students and instructors learn from one another and contribute to educational decision-making as respected partners (Bovill, 2020; Cook-Sather et al., 2019). SaP is increasingly applied to develop and refine higher education courses and programs (Green, 2019; Scott, 2022; Smith et al., 2021; Struel et al., 2022). However, there is a notable gap in the SaP literature about how libraries, which play an important role in supporting academic achievement and belonging (Oliveira, 2018), partner with students (Salisbury et al., 2020; Germain, 2001). The democratic, participatory mission of libraries aligns with SaP core values, such as respect, mutual decision-making, and shared responsibility. Because libraries support and engage with students in many ways, they are well-positioned for SaP to develop meaningful instruction, programming, and services (Dollinger et al., 2022; Salisbury et al., 2020).

Our team of librarian-faculty and students used SaP principles to develop an undergraduate research program within the Purdue Libraries and School of Information Studies. Upon initiating this work, we, Sam and Rachel, two librarian-faculty in the Purdue Libraries and School of Information Studies, recognized the limits of our perspective as educators grounded in libraries. We sought student partners who are accustomed to navigating a variety of disciplinary, professional, and personal identities as they learn to co-develop an inclusive, meaningful, and engaging program focused on information literacy (IL) research. We welcomed Secret, a history graduate student, and Ben, a mechanical engineering undergraduate student, to partner with us to discuss IL, explore student perspectives about undergraduate research, and design outcomes and lessons for what became Student Partners for Information Research and Literacy (SPIRaL), a year-long undergraduate research program where undergraduates conduct original research about IL's role in addressing societal issues that matter to students.

This reflective piece explores our student-faculty partnership, highlighting the relational growth that partners experienced within themselves, the team, and beyond the partnership. All four partners reflect on how each partner leveraged personal expertise to strengthen the partnership. We also analyze how the partnership facilitated personal growth. Our experiences and insights coalesced around three themes: (a) identity is individual and communal, (b) trust is

critical, and (c) growth beyond partnership. These reflections illuminate how four individuals experienced positive personal and collective outcomes, each influencing the other. These themes reflect the roles libraries play in higher education, demonstrating how SaP can further realize the values of librarianship. Namely, library collections and services balance the development of individual and communal identities, libraries function on trust built within their communities, and libraries foster growth in users that extends beyond their walls and collections. We conclude with recommendations to support the expansion of SaP in libraries, which may also prove beneficial to classroom instructors, program administrators, and educators of undergraduate research experiences interested in SaP.

REFLECTIONS

Theme 1: Identity is individually and communally formed

A purposeful reflective structure created opportunities for partners to identify and share our worldviews, disciplinary practices, and areas of strength with one another. By valuing all contributions, we formed a communal identity and shared vision around SPIRaL.

Sam and Rachel, librarian-faculty

To promote co-creation with our student partners, we devised a flexible structure of individual reflection and group discussion. As believers in the power of reflection to deepen and communicate learning, we proposed reflecting regularly to Ben and Secret as we got started. Ben and Secret agreed that an ongoing reflective process would help us track our progression toward shared goals in this abstract work. At our first meetings, we determined how often to compose reflections to be helpful but not feel like busywork and how to share ideas with one another while respecting privacy. We collectively composed reflective prompts (see Appendix A).

These group decisions shaped a reflective structure that produced several shared benefits. We gained insight from differences and similarities in our disciplinary backgrounds, which helped us better know one another and collectively explore roles in developing SPIRaL. Secret spoke from her training in history, race, and disability, particularly on learning from silenced voices in IL work. Ben incorporated perspectives from engineering and art to analyze particularities of disciplinary information practices and how they broadly shape society. We contributed from our grounding in libraries and pedagogy. We found that our student partners were eager to learn more about IL and bring this knowledge into their disciplines. Our group conversations about IL were rich and cooperative, as we all learned from one another's ideas about the value of IL, academically and personally. We worked against imposing a disciplinary perspective onto our student partners. We believe that framing their perspectives as necessary in conceptualizing and developing SPIRaL created a shared sense of responsibility for the work and a connection to IL research.

As we unearthed our identities and saw how they fit together through iterations of individual reflections and group discussions, we were better poised to make collective decisions and leverage personal assets to develop SPIRaL. Our group meetings helped us synthesize our individual reflections, observe where we had been, and strategize next steps using our individual and collective strengths. These purposeful conversations fostered team identity and a cohesive

vision for SPIRaL, as a program that recognizes the value and complexity of IL across disciplinary contexts and groups. Ben's and Secret's backgrounds, the curiosity and commitment they developed towards IL, and their valuable insight into student experiences helped us create an IL undergraduate research experience to be appealing and relevant to students from across disciplines.

Ben, undergraduate student

Working on SPIRaL exposed me to the importance of individuality in working effectively on a team. Our team worked exceptionally well together socially, in academia, and in the context of meeting our goals as a team. In addition to being personally compatible, our group ensured the cohesion and efficacy of the group through consistent meetings where involvement was expected of and encouraged for all partners. An important feature of the partnership was taking on individual assignments and using group time to discuss, brainstorm, and provide feedback to one other. This pairing of individual assignments and group work helped me adjust and improve my own abilities when I assumed lead on tasks.

Individual growth was a key outcome of our group dynamic and identity. By working collaboratively, we found ways to push ourselves to take lead on certain tasks, so that we were bringing our own disciplines and strengths to the program we were building. Rachel and Sam's background in libraries could address aspects of the program that Secret and I could not. In the same sense, our own respective fields were incorporated in program development, which was necessary in accounting for the wide variety of student perspectives at Purdue and in preparing students for new kinds of research.

SaP projects should give space for students to work on assignments on their own so they feel like true project partners while establishing the team as a support system. SaP projects need to account for both a healthy team dynamic and an environment where students take ownership and feel a personal connection to the work.

Theme 2: Trust is critical

Working through a nebulous task with open communication and shared practices of reflection fostered trust, which helped us achieve our goals and made the process of building SPIRaL personally meaningful.

Rachel and Sam, librarian-faculty

Our goal to develop an undergraduate IL research program was ambitious and amorphous. As the librarian-faculty, we felt a sense of duty to quickly clarify and guide our efforts. However, not having all the answers, integrating all partners' contributions, and engaging in reflection enabled us to conceptualize and build SPIRaL together.

A deep trust in one another emerged from our SaP-informed ways of working, which supported us through the emotional and pragmatic dimensions of our collaboration. Trust helped us determine who would take on tasks based on skill set or desire for professional growth. Ben, for example, wanted to develop interviewing skills, so we prioritized his leadership on developing questions and facilitating conversations with students about their perceptions of undergraduate research. We encouraged each other to take on new tasks that took us out of our comfort

zones—such as presenting in front of a professional audience for the first time. These could have been experienced by Ben and Secret as compulsory tasks had we not emphasized mutual trust and continuous growth for all partners early on.

We used our reflections and group meetings to be honest about the emotional experiences of taking on new tasks. We all experienced imposter syndrome at some point in the development of SPIRaL, and our reflections enabled us to identify and analyze the sources of our fear. Some of us were more comfortable being told by a superior precisely how to go about a task (which was not the nature of this work); others felt deep unease not knowing exactly what the final product would look like; some of us were hesitant to recognize our contributions as expertise. Our group meetings were a safe space to share these experiences with one another, and they revealed that regardless of our place in our academic careers, we all faced emotionally daunting tasks. Finding comfort in our shared experiences, we devised paths forward by normalizing these feelings, identifying concrete steps to meet these opportunities for growth, and sharing strategies with one another. Having co-designed a process for reflection and communication deepened our sense of trust and enabled us to learn from and with one another. We used pre-meeting prompts about what we accomplished and how the group might support us (see Appendix B) to establish trust before group discussions. We did not hide our own questions and concerns (e.g., “I’m struggling to balance autonomy and guidance with designing this lesson”) to model this kind of openness with students. We wanted to show that honesty about one’s needs or limitations would not be met with punishment, but would help us identify solutions, learn from challenges, and move forward.

Secret, graduate student

A difficult thing about developing SPIRaL was how abstract the work was in the beginning. We were creating something out of nothing, which was scary. We would not have been able to create SPIRaL as we did without trusting each other, which was supported by our multifaceted identity formation. As a graduate assistant, I worked on information literacy projects with Rachel and Sam before we developed this program. That previous experience getting to know them and how they work allowed me to establish trust with them early on, making me more comfortable working on unfamiliar tasks and seeking help when I needed it.

For example, I initially struggled to finish my tasks in a timely manner because of the open-ended nature of our work and not having smaller deliverables. Composing the reflections helped me identify these challenges and brainstorm solutions. Because I trusted my partners, I was able to ask for help with these issues, such as having more explicit deadlines and check-in meetings in order to help me be more efficient and effective in my work. Building trust in a way that made me feel comfortable sharing my struggles allowed us to make this project more accessible by equitably meeting the needs of different team members, which allowed us to produce better quality work overall.

Theme 3: Growth beyond partnership

Celebrating individual and communal identities (theme 1) and our trust in one another (theme 2) enabled us to overcome obstacles in and beyond SPIRaL, resulting in unexpected and meaningful growth within our academic, professional, and personal lives.

Ben, undergraduate student

I had little experience with IL at the start of developing SPIRaL. Coming from an engineering background, I was suddenly working differently than I was used to. My work with SPIRaL was complementary but distinct from prior academic experiences because it helped me learn new skills and perspectives from a completely different discipline and equipped me with alternative ways of problem-solving to create the program. In SPIRaL, I had more freedom and a better grasp of concepts than I had experienced in my classwork because I was in collaboration with Sam and Rachel as the project leads, which helped me feel like a project lead, too.

I continued to accomplish new goals and grew in unexpected ways. For example, my contribution to designing the SPIRaL curriculum helped me understand the value of setting a strong base for future SPIRaL researchers, who would likely be unfamiliar with IL, as I was at the start of this work. With my partners, I learned how to construct a curriculum that provides an accessible and structured method for SPIRaL researchers to engage in IL research, likely for the first time. This experience of building lessons that introduce new topics to future SPIRaL researchers equipped me with a mindset that I can apply to future engineering environments, where onboarding and acclimating new team members happens frequently. Being a part of SPIRaL has helped me reflect on my time at Purdue academically and pushed me to consider what impact I want to leave on my school. Developing an undergraduate research program helped me recognize that students can play a real role in creating educational experiences. I believe that I—as an undergraduate student who was new to IL—was able to help make SPIRaL into a program that makes this kind of research more approachable and meaningful for Purdue students.

Secret, graduate student

I began feeling as though I did not have enough background in IL or undergraduate research to contribute fully to the project, which initially led to feelings of imposter syndrome. Struggling with time management, I initially felt unable to fully contribute in our regular meetings.

The specific yet open nature of our reflections, the pre-work, and group meetings helped me recognize my own expertise and the ways my education and field training connected to our work, allowing me to feel more confident in both what I did and did not know. For example, I became more comfortable stepping out of my comfort zone to try new things, and I was able to find intersections between my work with SPIRaL and in my history program. Specifically, I used knowledge gained through developing SPIRaL for a conference proposal that was accepted and will become my master's thesis! Without working with my partners, I would not have been able to make the connections between my work and the conference theme the way I did and likely would not have been accepted to present this work.

Overall, working with SPIRaL made me more confident in my historical and analytical skills and knowledge by allowing me to apply them to libraries and IL research and enabling me to make connections between my field and others. I have gained an abundance of knowledge in different areas, including IL, curriculum planning, and interview processes, which directly applies to my own work as a historian as I consider the modern information-related implications of the events I study.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ADOPTING SaP IN LIBRARY CONTEXTS

We employed SaP strategies to fortify our partnership. Below are particularly helpful strategies that may benefit readers in libraries and beyond.

Reflect regularly

Reflections—individual reflections and group conversations—provided a recurring structure for documenting our efforts and making progress (see the Appendices for example prompts). Layered reflection enabled relationship-building, which helped us get to know one another’s identities, expertise, and goals.

The reflective practice woven into this SaP project provided Ben and Secret an opportunity to expand their understanding of libraries and IL in ways that they brought back to their disciplines. Ben’s and Secret’s reflections and insights also prompted Sam and Rachel to broaden their understanding of the applicability and value of IL for students across contexts. Librarians carrying out SaP projects can leverage these kinds of reflections to identify priorities, opportunities, or areas for improvements to libraries services, programming, and spaces that may not be readily apparent to librarians immersed in this daily work. Libraries can then partner with students on these efforts.

Pursue transparent ways of working

Establishing transparent practices fostered shared accountability for our work. Frequent check-ins and consistent use of Google Docs helped all partners stay organized; open discussion of deadlines and talking through low-stakes writing tasks helped us orient ourselves to providing feedback and overcoming the initial fear of sharing ideas. Partners in positions of power can model transparent approaches to these common tasks for student partners, who may not be used to interacting with faculty in this more equitable dynamic. For example, early on Rachel and Sam would share a draft and ask Ben and Secret for feedback—be it a promotional email, a presentation, or a summary of the scholarly literature—to demonstrate that work is improved by input from all readers, regardless of experience. We purposefully alternated who created first drafts and who made edits to affirm that all partners’ contributions were valuable. Ben and Secret became more comfortable with taking responsibility for first drafts and editing Sam’s and Rachel’s writing as we welcomed and validated one another’s contributions.

Our transparent practices helped Ben and Secret recognize the numerous and varied contributions libraries make to teaching and learning and how this might be different from how they previously thought of the work librarians do. Librarians can use SaP projects to provide a behind-the-scenes view of our profession and its democratizing mission with students. Inviting students to incorporate insights from their personal experiences and areas of study into SaP library projects can help students better know libraries and enable libraries to better serve our users.

Seek out diverse perspectives

Purposefully incorporating diverse perspectives and experiences enabled growth beyond SPIRaL for the partners and supported the development of a more well-rounded and inclusive program.

We sought student partners with disciplinary backgrounds and research experience that were different from Sam and Rachel's library background. Having student partners at varied points in their academic careers and from diverse disciplines helped the team conceptualize and develop SPIRaL to be more relevant and accessible to a wide variety of students. Ben and Secret suggested we collect student perspectives on the benefits and challenges of undergraduate research and the IL topics they found important to help us craft a research experience that would reflect the values and affirm the participation of students from a wider variety of lived and academic experience.

Libraries are a natural fit for interdisciplinary partnerships, as they are at the nexus of academics and campus life and often do not have students that they can invite into this work as default disciplinary partners. We recommend libraries seek a variety of academic experiences and invite students with varying degrees of interaction with libraries to participate in SaP projects to demonstrate that the library is truly for everyone.

CONCLUSION

SaP continues to be adopted in increasingly diverse higher education disciplines and contexts. Yet, there is a notable gap in the SaP literature about how libraries partner with students (Salisbury et al., 2020; Germain, 2001). Libraries are deeply involved in creating a climate of collaborative, democratic teaching and learning, and thus offer promising opportunities to advance SaP in higher education.

This paper explores the experiences of a collaborative partnership between students and library-faculty as we built SPIRaL, an undergraduate research program focused on IL research. We found that the interrelated, iterative development of the individual team members and team as a whole, coupled with trust, allowed us to leverage our unique areas of expertise and grow in personally meaningful ways. This paper aims to demonstrate how libraries can successfully incorporate SaP into their practice by using practical, replicable strategies for building equitable partnerships with students that honor the inextricable link between individual and group identity and growth.

NOTE ON CONTRIBUTORS

Rachel Fundator (*she/her*) is a clinical assistant professor at the Purdue University Libraries and School of Information Studies. Her teaching and research focuses on faculty development and information literacy.

Samantha LeGrand (*she/her*) is a clinical assistant professor and Instruction and Design Librarian in the Purdue University Libraries and School of Information Studies. Her teaching and research focus on inclusive information literacy pedagogies and students as partners in the development of learning experiences.

Secret Permenter (*she/her*) is a PhD student in the History Department and a former Graduate Assistant for the Libraries and School of Information Studies at Purdue University. Her research

examines the experiences of historical Deaf subcultures and their varying access to education, democratic participation and processes, and socioeconomic inclusion.

Benjamin Weiss (he/him) is an undergraduate senior in the School of Mechanical Engineering at Purdue University. His studies primarily focus on engineering techniques, mathematics, and disciplines that apply to mechanical applications in the field.

REFERENCES

- Bovill, C. (2020). Co-creation in learning and teaching: The case for a whole-class approach in higher education. *Higher Education*, 79(6), 1023–1037. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-019-00453-w>
- Cook-Sather, A., Bahti, M., & Ntem, A. (2019). *Pedagogical partnerships: A how-to guide for faculty, students, and academic developers in higher education*. Elon University Center for Engaged Learning. <https://doi.org/10.36284/celelon.oa1>
- Dollinger, M., Salisbury, F., & Davis, K. (2022). Unrealised potential: A survey of students as partners in Australian university libraries. *New Review of Academic Librarianship*, 29(3), 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13614533.2022.2138477>
- Germain, C. A. (2001). Are we overlooking our most vital resource? Building librarian/student partnerships. *College & Research Libraries News*, 62(7). <https://doi.org/10.5860/crln.62.7.720>
- Green, W. (2019). Engaging “students as partners” in global learning: Some possibilities and provocations. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 23(1), 10–29. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315318814266>
- Oliveira, S. M. (2018). Retention matters: Academic libraries leading the way. *New Review of Academic Librarianship*, 24(1), 35–47. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13614533.2017.1365003>
- Salisbury, F., Dollinger, M., & Vanderlelie, J. (2020). Students as partners in the academic library: Co-designing for transformation. *New Review of Academic Librarianship*, 26(2–4), 304–321. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13614533.2020.1780275>
- Scott, C. (2022). Partnering with students to support international students in an Australian university setting. *International Journal for Students as Partners*, 6(2), 69–78. <https://doi.org/10.15173/ij sap.v6i2.4517>
- Smith, S., Akhyani, K., Axson, D., Arnautu, A., & Stanimirova, I. (2021). The partnership co-creation process: Conditions for success? *International Journal for Students as Partners*, 5(2), 48–66. <https://doi.org/10.15173/ij sap.v5i2.4772>
- Fundator, R., LeGrand, S., Permenter, S., & Weiss, B. (2024). Students as partners in the library: Perspectives of partnering to develop a new information literacy undergraduate research program. *International Journal for Students as Partners*, 8(2), 217–225. <https://doi.org/10.15173/ij sap.v8i2.5725>

Streule, M., McCrone, L., Andrew, Y., & Walker, C. (2022). Engaging with students as partners in education-space design. *International Journal for Students as Partners*, 6(2), 79–90. <https://doi.org/10.15173/ij sap.v6i2.5024>

APPENDIX A

Reflection prompt examples completed every 2–3 weeks:

1. Which conversations, readings, or project-related experiences that are aimed to move the project along have resonated most with you these past weeks? Please describe how these experiences inform the actions you are taking or suggestions/questions you will bring to the group.
2. What is your thinking about the nature of partnerships between students and instructors (i.e., students as partners) at this point in the project? Please describe the aspects of partnering in this way that you have thought about most (challenges, benefits, insights, etc.) and are acting upon.
3. In what ways are you considering IL and information challenges in your work on this project? How are you acting upon these ideas?
4. Are there any other aspects of the work you've been doing or things you've been considering that you would like to share?

APPENDIX B

Weekly pre-group meeting prompts:

1. What progress have you made since we last spoke? This can be a bulleted list, but be specific.
2. What items will be of most relevance/importance to the group? Explain briefly how this helps us move the project forward.
3. Overall, do you feel like you know what you need to accomplish and that you have what you need to accomplish it?
4. If relevant, what are you stuck on/would like the group to weigh in on? If you know, what resources/support will help you overcome this challenge?