

CASE STUDY

Empowering student learning: Examining the significance of student pedagogy advocacy in a large university context

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ABSTRACT

This case study explores the impact of a student partnership in an undergraduate psychology course focused on alcohol use and disorders at a large public university in the United States. It shares insights into the process of creating a student partnership program, pairing a student with an instructor, and sharing feedback via observation notes from the student perspective. This case study highlights the value of this student partnership by detailing the course implementations inspired by observation notes and conversations about pedagogical goals. The three pedagogical goals of the partnership were to foster an accessible learning environment, increase student engagement, and structure the course based on learning outcomes. The partners share their final thoughts on the process through a discussion of the strengths of and future opportunities from this experience.

KEYWORDS

students as partners, classroom observation, pedagogical partnerships, large class size, co-creation

The Student Pedagogy Advocates (SPA) program at Purdue University launched in January 2022, modeled on the Students as Learners and Teachers (SaLT) program at Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges (Cook-Sather et al., 2014; Cook-Sather et al., 2019). Each student in this program partners with a faculty member to observe a class, provide feedback, and serve as a thought partner. Following the SaLT model, most students have not taken the specific class; instead, they draw on their experiences as learners and their institutional knowledge. SPAs discuss their partnerships in weekly check-ins with fellow SPAs and program leaders, which provides support and access to advice during the semester. The SPA program is unique because of its position at a large public institution (i.e., 37,000 undergraduate students) in the midwestern United States and its connection with IMPACT (Instruction Matters: Purdue Academic Course Transformation), a long-running course design program (Levesque-Bristol et al., 2019). Students work with classes ranging from six to 1,200 students. This diversity in class size creates a range of needs and goals

for instructors and allows SPAs to explore class environments from multiple perspectives to enhance student learning.

These partnerships support implementing course redesigns developed in a program that historically has not included student voices. The faculty involved often have significant teaching experience and accomplishments. While many other programs have begun to include student partners more actively in the course redesign process (e.g., Jardine et al., 2023; Allen, 2023), the SPA program started as a way to enhance the implementation of a course redesign process, responding to instructors' feedback that the first iteration of a redesigned course never went quite as planned. This took on urgency in the 2021–2022 academic year when instructors expressed concern about attempts to return to something resembling pre-COVID-19 learning environments while still dealing with the pandemic and students who had experienced a year or more of different learning environments. While Dr. Daniel Guberman and colleagues constructed the IMPACT program for the pandemic, they tried to anticipate what teaching during and after the pandemic might look like. This uncertainty helped make the case for the launch of the SPA program to support instructors in adjusting to the unpredictability of teaching during and after the pandemic.

BACKGROUND

In the spring of 2023, Dr. Julia Chester eagerly accepted the opportunity to partner with Kelsey Smart, who is introduced below, in the SPA program, which enabled personalized support for the course PSY 421: Alcohol Use and Disorders. Julia's teaching philosophy is grounded in flexible and multifaceted approaches set in a safe and inclusive space to exchange ideas. Julia strives to continually improve her teaching methods to meet course learning goals and outcomes that will impact students' lives long after the course is over. She has received teaching awards at the departmental, college, and university levels. In spring of 2021, Julia redesigned her course, PSY 421, in IMPACT to meet the need of increasing enrollments and to make the course amenable to online instruction, as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic. She joined the SPA program after completing IMPACT to continue working on PSY 421, which was maximally enrolled with 54 students over a 16-week semester.

Kelsey is a fourth-year undergraduate student at Purdue University who has been working with the SPA program since the fall of her sophomore year (2022). She is studying speech, language, and hearing sciences with additional majors in sociology and linguistics. As a SPA, Kelsey can explore her interest in fostering inclusivity in higher education with hands-on experience. Her partnership with Julia began by discussing the power dynamics within a student-professor partnership, and they agreed that they were an equally weighted team working towards the pedagogical goals of fostering an accessible learning environment, increasing student engagement, and structuring the course based on learning outcomes. Throughout the semester, they worked to achieve these goals while being responsive to as many student voices as possible.

COURSE AND COLLABORATIVE STRUCTURE

Before the course started, Kelsey and Julia met to establish initial goals of their work together and to discuss the logistics of Kelsey's involvement. In addition, they spent time getting to know each other personally. This open conversation gave Kelsey the confidence to share open and honest feedback throughout the semester and helped Julia feel at ease with trying new approaches.

As Julia had already been a part of IMPACT, Kelsey was able to provide feedback on the initial transformation work she had done. Kelsey reviewed the course syllabus and assignments and talked through exam structures with Julia. One of the goals of IMPACT was for the instructor to utilize learning objectives to frame the learning resources, so Kelsey also supported Julia as she updated previous material. By the end of the course, the lectures and exam questions were tightly linked to the course learning objectives.

Kelsey attended every class that semester as a student observer and emailed observation notes after each class. Observation notes used a three-column chart with time, observation, and reflection columns (see Appendix). This structure was suggested by the handbook shared with all SPAs entering the program (adapted from Cook-Sather et al., 2019), and it gives space for the SPA to think deeply about the significance of the observation made, find connections to broader goals, and provide thoughts to the faculty partner. Kelsey's observations focused on accessibility in the classroom, student engagement, timing of activities, and lecture style. Biweekly, Kelsey and Julia met to discuss the observation notes and track their progress on pedagogical goals. These meetings facilitated brainstorming and encouraged open communication about all observations made. In addition, Kelsey and Julia often exchanged quick reactions and ideas via email in response to observation notes. Mid-semester and end-of-semester student surveys sought to measure their thoughts about changes that had already been made through this partnership and to gauge their feelings on potential future adjustments.

RESULTS

The observation notes and conversations resulted in multiple changes to the course based on the goals of fostering an accessible learning environment, increasing student engagement, and structuring the course based on learning outcomes. Each section below details corresponding observation notes, implementations, and connections to survey feedback.

Accessibility

Observations about accessibility in the classroom included notes on the physical space that contributed to students' ability to hear, see, and fully engage with the course material and activities. On the first day of class, Kelsey observed: "Two students are sitting on the wall without desks. It seems very full." With the structure of the three-column chart, this observation was paired with the following reflection: "It is not an ideal learning condition for those two students to not have desks. Were there any open seats left? We may need to block off those seats" (see Appendix). Based on these comments, Julia filed a report to get four broken desks fixed within a week. While this might seem obvious, no students in the class or other instructors using the room

shared any concerns. The lack of students reporting the broken desks may speak to the fact that often students do not feel they have the power to address these learning barriers.

Kelsey sat in different seats each week to experience the environment in different ways, which led to an observation about the visibility of the screen. One day, from the middle of the classroom, Kelsey observed: “still looking at Brightspace and the screen is not maximized to the full projector.” The slides had been pulled up on a webpage and not expanded to full screen dimensions. The reflection note read: “Not a huge deal, just making sure people in the back can see!” (see Appendix). This observation was brought up in their next meeting, and Julia shared that this had not crossed her mind and that she would try to always have it maximized in the future. Although no students mentioned this in a survey, Kelsey and Julia were glad to have this awareness.

In efforts to enhance accessibility, Kelsey and Julia discussed recording lectures. Julia expressed concern that recording lectures might hurt attendance. Since the pandemic, many instructors began recording lectures to increase course accessibility; however, a decline in attendance had been documented across campus, becoming a point of frustration for many instructors. Julia and Kelsey brainstormed the concerns prompted by this approach, as well as its benefits. Through conversation, Kelsey shared that recording lectures would support students in exam review and could supplement an excused absence, which outweighed the potential of decreased attendance because students could watch lectures outside of class. Notably, Julia found no significant difference in attendance after recording lectures. In the end-of-semester survey, one student shared,

I liked that the lectures were recorded. . . . It helped to hear the lecture since a lot of valuable information was said rather than in the slides. When it came to studying for exams this was very helpful.

The decision to record also necessitated the use of a microphone in the classroom. Julia noticed that she had to stand right next to the podium for the recordings to capture her voice, which limited her ability to move around the room (see Appendix). By the 10th week of the semester, Julia began using a portable microphone so she could continue moving around the room and record lectures (see Appendix). With the support of a SPA, the instructor felt confident adjusting engagement strategies, knowing that the domains of seating, vision, and hearing had been considered to create an equitable learning environment.

Engagement

Kelsey noticed that many students were eager to contribute to discussions. In the second week of class, she shared, “Any time you ask a question, at least one student raises their hand” (see Appendix). This led to a conversation about what desirable engagement looked like: student interest in the material, willingness to share, and eagerness to be involved with the course. Kelsey attempted to observe when the class seemed engaged and when they did not. In one class, Kelsey commented, “We have been going over statistics and a webpage for around 10 minutes,” which she noted with the intention to share information about timing. However, this observation evolved, as it was followed by the reflection, “It is good information, but I can see students getting lost in this portion of the lecture. As I typed this, you started moving around the front of the room

and I am instantly more engaged” (see Appendix). This idea of walking around the room when lecture material was dense was discussed in their next meeting, and they discovered that this strategy could be used to directly engage students (Dong et al., 2021). In the mid-semester survey, distributed in the 6th week of the semester, one student shared that “the lectures can get really long so it can be hard to pay attention.” This feedback, coupled with Kelsey’s observation, gave Julia an awareness of and plan to break up dense lecture material through movement and additional pauses when material was not as amenable to other methods of engagement.

At one meeting, Kelsey shared her hunch that students may be willing to contribute to class discussions because of their comfort with the professor. Julia commonly shares personal anecdotes, tells jokes, and incorporates humorous gestures and body language during lectures. In one class, Kelsey noted, “You did a funny demonstration of swaying to talk about what cops look for when they pull you over,” which was paired with the reflection, “I heard a couple of laughs. Fun way to engage in the middle of lecture” (see Appendix).

With hopes of evolving the course engagement, Kelsey shared that the instructor-student relationship was strong but that there may be room to develop the peer relationships of students (see Appendix). On the mid-semester survey, a student suggested, “The lecture could include more activities to get students excited with the topics.” Kelsey and Julia then brainstormed ideas for peer activities to incorporate into lectures. The first activity had students engage in a think-pair-share, and Julia typed their answers as bullet points on the slides. This activity introduced students to peer work and allowed them to contribute to the lecture. The theme of peer-to-peer relationships was a focus of the rest of the semester, and students mentioned enjoying this in the end-of-semester survey: “The discussions we have in class are fun. . . . Hearing from other students makes the topics more interesting and is a real treat.”

Course structure

Class sessions lasted 75 minutes, which can challenge students’ attention. Julia noted that one of the greatest benefits of having a SPA attend was receiving written minute-by-minute observations. For example, Kelsey kept track of when the instructor lectured continuously for 15–20 minutes and recommended that that was a good point for a brain break (see Appendix). Kelsey discussed this idea with her fellow SPAs in their weekly meeting to confirm that this was good timing for a break, and they agreed. Julia became aware of this timing mark and was careful to insert a pause for questions or change her method of content delivery to keep attention. This became a way to promote individual engagement with the course material.

IMPACT encouraged Julia to anchor activities and assessments with learning goals, which received positive feedback from students in the end-of-semester survey. One student wrote, “I also really like how the learning goals for each module directly reflected the exam questions, it made it a lot easier to focus on relevant material when studying.” Another shared, “I think that the class environment, activities and structure of this course is really well done.” Initially, Kelsey was hesitant to apply this course structure. Using learning outcomes to guide lectures, study guides, and exam questions was new to her, and likely new to the students in the course. Julia welcomed Kelsey’s concerns and the partners had thoughtful discussions that led to successful implementation of the structure. This experience showed Kelsey how much Julia respected their collaboration.

CONCLUSION

Key takeaways

This relationship began with the discussion of power dynamics in a student partnership, which paved the way for consistent, open, and honest communication between Kelsey and Julia (Mercer-Mapstone & Abbot, 2020). This was a major strength of this partnership that contributed to the achievement of their goals. Moving forward, we strongly feel that explicitly discussing the traditional power dynamics between instructors and students at the beginning of the partnership is vital. We consider this partnership a model for others, with the initial agreement that Kelsey and Julia were on an equal level in terms of working with the course being key. This conversation gave Kelsey the confidence to fully engage in the partnership and allowed Julia to trust the program and embrace collaboration.

In order to gather feedback on how students perceived the partners' implementations, they used a mid-semester survey administered to students enrolled in the course. SPAs often collect mid-semester student feedback, finding it valuable to hear from enrolled students. This allows partners to consider a broader range of voices when making decisions moving forward. Additionally, it creates a check-in to see how students have felt about changes made thus far and gauge their thoughts on the partner's ideas for the end of the semester. In this course, Julia felt comfortable customizing questions on a generic course evaluation survey available for all instructors to use. Together, Julia and Kelsey were able to apply the results as a guide for the rest of their partnership.

As a SPA, Kelsey was immersed in a community of fellow SPAs who met weekly to discuss how things were going, share advice, brainstorm ideas, and problem solve. Just like Kelsey was there for Julia, the other SPAs supported Kelsey in being a partner and having confidence in her voice. We see this structure as a major strength of the program and hope it can serve as a model for others. The SPA program being at a research-intensive university is fortunate in that we are also able to include former SPAs who remained at the institution for their graduate study in these discussions. Many SPAs, like Kelsey, join early in their academic career and remain with the program, so we are able to bring together voices with a wide range of experiences both as students and as partners to support each other.

Opportunities for future growth

Kelsey is one student with implicit biases and experiences who cannot solely capture all of her peer's feelings and opinions. Kelsey completed the training as a SPA to guide observations and SPA work, but it is noteworthy that her observations were thoughts she personally felt applied to the course at the time they were made. In the future, we are interested in exploring how multiple SPAs might collaborate to support a single instructor/course to increase the diversity of thought and representation of voices.

Additionally, while we have referenced comments in the end-of-semester evaluations as one source of data, we recognize that these evaluations are complicated as a measure of class effectiveness (e.g., Mitchell & Martin, 2018). Still, we believe they provide information about student experiences that is distinct from the observation notes Kelsey collected. While most survey responses were positive, one student reported dissatisfaction with the updated structure. We see this as an opportunity to explore how to handle outlier feedback and interrogate whether

outliers reflect some broader structural opportunities. Since this class, the university has restructured the questions in these end-of-semester evaluations, which we hope will help add clarity for the future. However, we believe that creating unique surveys to capture student feedback may be more valuable than relying on the university's standard questions.

At the program level, we see potential for these partnerships to also help us understand how students enrolled in classes with student partners can benefit from these partnerships. The surveys give us some insight into this, but we are under the impression that many students forget the purpose of the SPA or never fully process a role so removed from their broader educational experience. In future work, we would like to hear from students in these classes (through focus groups, interviews, or as co-authors of a future paper) about their perception of an instructor partnering with a SPA.

Final thoughts

The SPA partnership created a space to focus on the topics of access, engagement, and course structure in a large university context to empower student learning. Julia shared that it is difficult to dedicate time to the effectiveness of a course while managing the other responsibilities of teaching and that Kelsey provided constant support, reassurance, and validated the importance of ensuring that pedagogical goals are prioritized and met. The outcomes of this partnership indicate that this program can lead to improved learning and greater satisfaction for both the instructor and the students.

This research was successfully reviewed according to Purdue University's research ethics committee guidelines.

NOTE ON CONTRIBUTORS

Kelsey Smart is an undergraduate student at Purdue University triple majoring in Speech, Language, & Hearing Sciences, Sociology, and Linguistics. She works for the Center for Instructional Excellence as a Student Pedagogy Advocate where she specializes in students-as-partners work and explores her passion for inclusivity in education.

Julia A. Chester is a Professor of Neuroscience and Behavior in the Department of Psychological Sciences at Purdue University. She specializes in identifying biological and behavioral mechanisms that influence risk for alcohol use disorders and co-occurring conditions. She also promotes public knowledge about neuroscience through teaching and advocacy work.

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APPENDIX: EXCERPTS OF OBSERVATION NOTES

DATE & TIME	OBSERVATION	REFLECTION
January 10, 10:30	Two students are sitting on the wall without desks. It seems very full.	It is not an ideal learning condition for those two students to not have desks. Were there any open seats left? We may need to block off those seats.
January 17, 10:42	Any time you ask a question, at least one student raises their hand.	From what I've seen so far, your participation and engagement is excellent.
January 17, 10:54	We have been going over statistics and a webpage for around 10 minutes.	It is good information, but I can see students getting lost in this portion of the lecture. As I type this, you started moving around the front of the room and I am instantly more engaged.
February 21, 10:37	Just a random thought for our meeting today. Let me know if you want to come up with any other peer-related activities.	I dont think that we have done any peer work since that one activity. Maybe we set a frequency and try to stick to it (once/month or unit or lecture etc.).
March 2, 10:33	Still looking at Brightspace and the screen is not maximized to the full projector	Not a huge deal, just making sure people in the back can see!
March 2, 10:49	You did a funny demonstration of swaying to talk about what cops look for when they pull you over.	I heard a couple of laughs. Fun way to engage in the middle of lecture.

March 7, 10:31	Started class and mentioned that you have to stay by the podium so the recording can hear you. And that Alec has a possum in his tub which made everyone laugh.	Fun way to start class laughing.
March 21, 10:30	I love the mic!	I happen to be sitting in the back today and I can hear you so clearly. I love this adaptation and think it will help students hear in the recording too.
April 20, 11:09	Taking a brain break to watch a video.	I was about to comment on how it was a long lecture time, so great timing for a video!