

# Disruptive Partnerships: Collaborating with Students to Create Empowering Learning Experiences in Information Studies

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## ABSTRACT

Faculty at Purdue University's School of Information Studies have developed pedagogical approaches aiming to disrupt traditional power dynamics, centering students' voices in the construction of learning experiences. The paper describes three educational programs developed at Purdue leveraging a *students as partners* (SaP) approach, where faculty and students co-design learning experiences. The programs include: 1) Students Partners for Information Research and Literacy (SPIRaL), a two-semester undergraduate research program in which students investigate societal information challenges, 2) Partners for Algorithmic Literacy (PAL), a six-week program in which partners integrate artificial intelligence into coursework, and 3) Information Studies Research Accelerator (ISRA), a first-year living-learning community introducing students to information studies research. Existing and ongoing studies are underway to examine learning benefits of pedagogical partnership in information studies curricula. Partnership in course design is a promising avenue for LIS educators to begin decolonizing classroom hierarchies, creating curricula shaped by students' lives.

## ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS

Pedagogy; Students; Teaching faculty; Curriculum; Education programs/schools

## AUTHOR KEYWORDS

Students as partners; Undergraduate research; Curriculum development

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## INTRODUCTION

Fostering learner motivation and agency in the learning process is a central goal of educators, yet academic systems often preserve traditional top-down power dynamics. Faculty at Purdue University's School of Information Studies have developed approaches to teaching and learning that aim to disrupt classroom hierarchies, giving students a voice in the construction of their learning experiences. An arm of Purdue Libraries, the School of Information Studies began in 2018 and currently offers two graduate certificates - digital humanities (DH) and geospatial information science (GIS) - and an undergraduate information studies minor. Not intended to prepare future information professionals, the School's curriculum educates students in all disciplines to make informed personal choices and advance careers in their chosen professions. To create a curriculum meaningful to students and empower them to use information effectively during and beyond their time at Purdue, faculty in the School adopted a *students as partners* (SaP) approach (Cook-Sather et al., 2014; Healey et al., 2014). This relationship-centered process begins the work of decolonizing traditional faculty-led instruction by foregrounding students as collaborators in the course design process. SaP ensures the development of curriculum that is shaped by students' interests, views, and lives. In this way, SaP moves toward a decolonizing pedagogical approach, as it challenges and restructures traditional hierarchies in higher education.

Described in detail below, faculty at Purdue used SaP pedagogy to develop three signature educational programs: 1) Students Partners for Information Research and Literacy (SPIRaL; Fundator et al., 2024), an undergraduate research program in which students investigate societal information challenges, 2) Partners for Algorithmic Literacy (PAL), a six-week program in which faculty partner with students to integrate artificial intelligence (AI) into coursework, and 3) Information Studies Research Accelerator (ISRA), a first-year learning community in which students are introduced to information studies research. Existing and ongoing studies, described in more detail below, examine the learning benefits of students adopting a partnership role in information studies curriculum.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The School's work to increasingly co-create curricula with students is inspired by transformative pedagogies, like critical, Indigenous, and decolonial pedagogies. These approaches aim to dismantle colonial structures embedded in education through historical one-sided decision making - curricula and classroom norms determined by faculty, lack of culturally relevant learning materials, and devaluation of non-Western academic forms of knowledge (Campbell & Sich, 2023; Littletree et al., 2023). The School's partnership approach creates opportunities to challenge established colonial pedagogies that typically disempower and objectify students by framing them as consumers of expert knowledge rather than creators of

their own learning (Felten et al., 2019). Recognizing that institutional constraints and the expectations of disciplinary colleagues and students may limit the possibilities of curricular change, having opportunities for partnership at different points in the teaching and learning cycle lays the groundwork to take progressive steps towards decolonizing existing classroom hierarchies.

Specifically, faculty in the School work to dismantle faculty-centered classroom structures by empowering students with the language and process of information-focused curricular design and metacognitive decision-making (Fundator et al., 2024). Critical Information Literacy (CIL), gaining widespread adoption in LIS education, and SaP share critical pedagogy roots, building on the praxis of educational theorists like Paolo Freire and bell hooks (Accardi et al., 2010; Downey, 2016; Tewell, 2016). While distinct in some methods, transformative pedagogies like critical pedagogy, Indigenous pedagogy, and decolonial pedagogy share goals to challenge power structures and recognize multiple ways of knowing (Littletree et al., 2023; Marsh, 2022).

The ideological kinship between critical, Indigenous, and decolonial pedagogies and student-faculty partnership is demonstrated by Littletree, Andrews & Loyer's (2023) definition of Indigenous information literacy: "the ability to use information and create or gain knowledge, while practicing the Indigenous concepts of relationality, reciprocity, and respect." Mirroring those relationship-focused values, Cook-Sather et al. (2014) describe pedagogical partnerships as built upon three core values: respect, reciprocity, and responsibility. SaP begins laying the groundwork for engaging more deeply in decolonizing pedagogies, as we "acknowledge that the first step in decolonization is making space for multiple ways of knowing" (Campbell & Sich, 2023). SaP repositions students and faculty not as mutually exclusive 'receivers' and 'givers' of knowledge, but as partners in shaping more equitable and inclusive education. This repositioning may provide an entry for more LIS faculty to adopt decolonizing approaches.

Initiating partnership between faculty and students necessitates commitment to respecting one another's perspectives and motivations. Importantly, partnership does not ask students to be experts in pedagogy or disciplinary subject matter, nor does it ask faculty to relinquish all control over their courses. Rather, SaP emphasizes the complementary roles faculty and student experience play, being transparent about motivations and goals in the particular process of learning being co-developed. Reciprocity enables trust-building as partners contribute unique strengths and experience mutual benefit. Partnership affirms faculty's valuable roles as disciplinary experts and intellectual guides and draws to the fore students' equally valuable, but different, roles as experts in their experience as learners with diversity of talents and interests.

When engaging with respect and reciprocity, partnership develops a shared sense of responsibility for learning outcomes, as better understanding one another shifts how faculty and students think about their own part of the process. SaP pedagogy takes many forms in a variety

of contexts (Bovill, 2019). Essentially, SaP centers the development of authentic, caring, and complex relationships between faculty and students (Cook-Sather et al., 2014; Healy et al., 2014; Mercer-Mapstone & Abbot, 2020). SaP pedagogy rearranges traditionally faculty-centered processes of curriculum development and classroom management, as partners share their expertise to co-create learning environments with mutually meaningful outcomes.

## **PROGRAM 1: STUDENT PARTNERS FOR INFORMATION RESEARCH AND LITERACY (SPIRaL)**

The SPIRaL undergraduate research program was co-designed during the 2022-23 academic year by two information studies faculty, a history graduate student, and a mechanical engineering undergraduate. Respecting and leveraging team members' unique and complementary expertise - as information-focused educators and as students with varied disciplinary experiences - the team created a curriculum responsive to diverse interests in information research. The team explored Purdue students' perspectives on undergraduate research and information topics that resonated with them, using those insights to design SPIRaL with the aim of helping students recognize societal information challenges and the role of information literacy (IL) in addressing them (Fundator et al., 2024). Infusing SaP into both ethos and curriculum, SPIRaL emphasizes the relationship-centered characteristics of respect, reciprocity, and responsibility so student researchers act agentially as individuals and as a cohesive research team.

SPIRaL consists of two semester-long courses where students contribute as full research partners, making decisions that shape project outcomes. In the first course, scholars explore prior research, learn IL research methods, select and interview study participants, and begin coding transcripts. Faculty have observed that conducting interviews is transformational for SPIRaL scholars. As students engage with data they collected, they recognize it is often more complex than expected. In the second course, students finalize coding, analyze data, and develop thematic findings. Building on prior experiences they develop techniques to communicate findings, which they present at Purdue's undergraduate research conference.

Yearly SPIRaL cohorts have examined a range of salient information-focused topics, such as Purdue students' perceptions of social media algorithms's relationship to democratic participation (2023-2024), information challenges faced by student journalists (2024-2025), and how Purdue students use information to participate in conversations about climate change (2025-2026).

Aligned with SaP, reflection is both a mechanism and measure of learning as students partner with faculty in new ways. Regarding SPIRaL, Fundator and Maybee (2025) are analyzing reflection assignments the 2023-24 cohort completed across five points in the year to determine shifts in the students' views on IL. Using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke,

2019) to examine student perspectives over time, findings suggest that students initially equated IL with evaluation skills for finding ‘good’ information sources. By conducting their own study, they recognized IL in layered, complex ways, articulating relevance to their lives, peers, and broader society. Later reflections showed students viewing IL as a scholarly phenomenon worthy of study, ultimately advocating IL education as essential for young people to feel a sense of responsibility and agency when using information across their lives.

## **PROGRAM 2: PARTNERS FOR ALGORITHMIC LITERACY (PAL)**

The disruptive wake of ChatGPT and other LLMs left many faculty in speculation, confusion, and panic. An explosion of conversations, training, and scholarship on AI topics have centered on ways faculty might address the complexities of AI in their teaching, namely, preventing unethical use by students. However, conversations about how to move forward rarely seem to meaningfully include students. Partners for Algorithmic Literacy (PAL) was created as an alternative to deficit-based narratives about student misuse. PAL makes space for faculty and students to share perspectives, rather than assuming one another’s motivations. It is a student-faculty learning community, facilitated by academic librarians, where undergraduates and faculty co-design teaching strategies to integrate or interrogate AI. Through this experiential partnership, students become active decision-makers about AI in courses.

PAL uses a novel algorithmic literacy pedagogy framework to structure the co-design process across weekly sessions. Two cohorts of competitively selected partners from diverse departments and majors—12 in Fall 2023 and 19 in Fall 2024— have produced curricular plans to be implemented in the faculty’s courses. These plans have included co-designed AI course policies, AI-integrated group projects, and specialized chat bots to support disciplinary critical thinking. To understand how PAL fosters partnership, program coordinators are conducting a thematic analysis of deliverables, including individual reflections and co-developed plans. Initial findings show that, beyond innovative curricular outcomes, PAL’s partners report a deepened sense of connection and appreciation for one another’s perspectives in teaching and learning (LeGrand, Mayhook & Lu, 2025). Participants experience conversation between faculty and students as a mechanism to create actionable curricular plans and a culture of shared decision-making about learning with AI.

## **PROGRAM 3: INFORMATION STUDIES RESEARCH ACCELERATOR (ISRA)**

The School recently redesigned a yearlong learning community for first-year Purdue students. In its previous version offered by another college, the program focused on introducing students to research methods before giving the option to conduct research under a faculty mentor. Faculty in the School recognized an opportunity to welcome students and pique their interest in information studies research. Purdue students are enthusiastic about undergraduate research—roughly 5,000 students engaged in research experiences in the 2023-2024 academic year (Purdue University Office of Undergraduate Research, 2024). But as a new School in 2024, it was unclear if students would be aware of or interested in information studies research. While the earlier version of the learning community was considered successful, faculty teaching in the program reported difficulty motivating students to participate in co-curricular activities. In spring 2025, two faculty leveraged SaP principles effective in SPIRaL and PAL to redesign the program, emphasizing student engagement and making personal connections to information studies.

ISRA courses integrate whole-class co-design, where all students collaborate with faculty on course structure and content. Bovill (2020) suggests whole-class partnerships may be the most equitable form of partnership, as they allow broad participation and benefit. A challenge of this approach is the personnel resources required to create a responsive “high touch” structure so students feel supported while managing increased decision-making. The yearlong two-course series guides students in exploring research topics, defining scholarly impact, and developing a collaborative mentality with peers and faculty. Partnership processes are woven into the core of the course.

During the first week, students and faculty co-design course goals and policies, revisiting them throughout the term. Student teams select research topics meaningful to them, working in dialogue with faculty and peers for support. To address the strain grading can put on the student-faculty relationship, evaluation is based on individual reflective self-assessments completed across the semester rather than final research products. In consultation with faculty, students grade themselves and their groups using personal goals, team goals, and a shared rubric. Building on the SaP core values of respect, reciprocity, and responsibility (Cook-Sather et al., 2014), this structure combines faculty expertise with students’ expertise in their own learning. As a new offering, IRB has approved future examination of student coursework. Through thematic analysis of student self-assessments, we seek to understand how first-year students process and articulate information studies learning experiences within course-based partnerships.

## CONCLUSION

It can be difficult for even well-meaning university faculty to disrupt power structures that place students on unequal footing in the learning process. Depending on departmental or institutional context, faculty may be constrained in course changes they can make. Employing SaP to create partnerships with students requires trust-building and collaboration on design decisions, which may take more time than traditional approaches to curriculum design in which all decisions rest with the faculty. Partnership also requires leaving space for the unknown, as some valuable outcomes cannot be planned, which can be challenging within institutional requirements to develop proposals, syllabi, and outcomes far in advance. Nevertheless, there is tremendous benefit to both faculty and students in pursuing design partnerships (Cook-Sather et al, 2014; Fundator et al., 2024). Through SaP, students and faculty can develop empowering learning experiences that are also fulfilling for faculty seeking to cultivate increasingly self-directed learning. In doing so, the faculty and students may better understand each other, possibly recognizing common interests, motivations, and passions for a subject.

For those interested in exploring SaP pedagogy, we share insights from designing, implementing, and analyzing these programs. To infuse partnership into teaching, one might start with a small-scope project. Pilot a program with a limited number of participants, or think creatively about honoring participant effort if resources are limited - employment, publication or presentation opportunities, course credit, certificates or professional development badges can all provide valuable recognition. Secondly, lean into existing infrastructure at your institution. Faculty development programs or relationships with student employees can serve as strong foundations for adapting practice around SaP. Thirdly, leverage cross-campus partnerships. Libraries' work is highly interdisciplinary and frequently involves collaboration with other units. Utilize connections across campus to identify others interested in partnership or build mutually beneficial projects. Finally, working with students to understand their experiences as learners need not be limited to partners in the same degree program. As these programs demonstrate, shared understanding across disciplines can lead to clarity and creativity in curricular design.

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