

# STUDENT-FACULTY PARTNERSHIP AS A FOUNDATION FOR AUTHENTIC LEARNING

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*To understand the nature of student-faculty partnerships we began to explore the literature on students and educators as pedagogical partners. What emerged was a strong alignment between our transformational partnership as co-teachers in higher education and how our co-teaching practice has evolved to influence our relationships with students. Reflecting on our co-teaching practice has created a space for us to cross the threshold and embrace 'radical collegiality'; not only through engaging as full faculty partners but transforming our thinking about the nature of partnership with students. Students became active partners in pedagogical planning surrounding a teaching philosophy assignment which revealed students' understanding of the significance of authentic partnership. Understanding the education process as a partnership between students and educators compels us to continue fostering a brave space for both students and ourselves to risk and engage in courageous change, growth, and learning.*

**Key Words:** learning, teaching, student-faculty partnership, authentic learning

Students as Partners (SaP) is an emerging area of interest in higher education whereby students and faculty are deemed collaborators and partners in learning and teaching inquiries (Mercer-Mapstone, Dvorakova, Groenendijk, & Matthews, 2017). Delving into the literature on SaP offered compelling narratives of lived experience and research associated with students and educators as pedagogical partners in higher education (Cook-Sather, Bovill, & Felten, 2011). A surprising result from this exploration was the realization that there exists a strong alignment between our transformational partnership as co-teachers in higher education and how the evolution of our co-teaching practice influenced our relationships with students as partners in the education process. In this paper, we outline how engaging in effective co-teaching practice in a nurse educator course informed the student-faculty partnership we experienced with our students. Role modelling an effective co-teaching partnership enabled students to learn to trust and enter into partnership with us. As a result, the students discovered the value of becoming active partners in pedagogical planning surrounding a teaching philosophy assignment which revealed students' understanding of the significance of authentic partnership. The resulting Quilt of Teaching Philosophies came to represent an engendered community that captured authentic learning through student-faculty partnership.

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## **CO-TEACHING AS PARTNERSHIP**

As co-teachers delivering a nursing education course, we embrace a concept of co-teaching defined by Wenzlaff et al. (2002) as “two or more individuals who come together in a collaborative relationship for the purpose of shared work...for the outcome of achieving what none could have done alone” (p. 14). Co-teaching tested our comfort with uncertainty and demanded our commitment to invest in the emotional work that is required for us to embrace new ways of being in our pedagogical practice (Lock et al., 2016). We have come to appreciate that the strength of our co-teaching collaborative relationship is framed by the development of harmony. This harmonious approach leads to both discovery and appreciation of the diversity that influences the teaching and learning experience. Cultivating mutual trust and respect enables us to be authentic and to navigate fluidly through the complex uncertainty of working in the moment with each other, with the students, with the curriculum, and with the knowledge that is co-created. Conflict and disagreement existed in the relationship yet the ability and confidence to openly discuss and negotiate these tensions resulted in a stronger and healthier partnership (Lock et al., 2016). The experience and deep-learning from reflecting on our co-teaching practice has created a space for us to cross the threshold and embrace ‘radical collegiality’ as described by Fielding (1999); not only through engaging as full faculty partners but transforming our thinking about the nature and potential of entering into full partnership with students as outlined by Bovill, Cook-Sather, and Felten (2011) and Cook-Sather (2014).

## **ENTERING INTO STUDENT-FACULTY PARTNERSHIP**

Embracing the underlying values of commitment, trust, respect, mutuality, and collaboration, and fully appreciating the vulnerability associated with entering into partnership; we modelled the co-creation of our own pedagogical practice for our students (Bovill et al., 2011; Swennen et al. 2008). Students were invited to become active partners in pedagogical planning for their final assignment, which was the development of a teaching philosophy. Being invited to express their voice and be actively involved in decision making around the nature of their assignment, challenged students traditional understanding of the hierarchical nature of student and faculty roles (Bovill et al., 2011). It took time for students to develop confidence to engage in dialogue, to share their ideas, and negotiate their authority over their learning, in essence, to trust the reciprocal approach that enabled the partnership (Bovill et al., 2011). Through ongoing collaborative partnership and pedagogical transparency, the visible nature of learning and teaching motivated students to embrace the transformation in their approach to learning (Bovill, 2009; Cook-Sather, 2011). Once students learned that they could trust the partnership, students navigated from simply performing what was required of them to learn, to developing a conscious awareness of what comprises and enhances their learning (Bain & Zimmerman, 2009). Baxter Magolda (2009) would refer to this level of student engagement in their own learning as self-authorship. Self-authorship was evident through students embracing the freedom to learn, enabling them to discover not just what they know, but who they are as learners (Dreier, 2003, cited in Wortham, 2004; see also Cook-Sather, 2006). We witnessed the shift in the students’ way of being not only during our weekly interaction in the classroom but also in their written work. As they became more actively involved in determining how their final teaching philosophy assignment would look, they embraced the freedom to authentically learn.

## **AUTHENTIC LEARNING THROUGH PARTNERSHIP**

Students in the Nurse as Educator course experience the real world by engaging in authentic learning opportunities designed to offer a wide range of theoretical and experiential learning. Authentic learning exposes students to the ambiguity and complexity associated with real world teaching and learning (Swart, 2016). Within the course, assessment strategies that build on one another provide opportunities for active integration of student understanding in various contexts of practice. Through these experiences students apply knowledge to practice and reflect on themselves both as learners and as developing educators. This reflexive exercise fosters self-awareness and a deep consideration of the values and beliefs that define the authentic self (Iucu & Marin, 2014). Authentic learning experiences are those that are personally relevant from the learner's perspective and situated within appropriate social contexts (Swart, 2016). For their final teaching philosophy assignment, students partnered with us to explore a creative means through which to express their teaching philosophy. The opportunity to offer suggestions and choose their approach, personalized the learning in a way that enhanced the authenticity. Through active engagement in authentic learning students shifted from simply doing to developing an awareness of what is being done and why. Their values and beliefs about effective learning and teaching were captured through the creation of their own conceptual framework or using a photograph or piece of art to express their teaching philosophy. Engaging students as pedagogical partners creates a space where students experience the freedom to become critical thinkers and beings which shapes not just what they know, but also who they are (Bovill et al., 2011). The result of the students' authentic learning manifested in an amazing visual expression of their teaching philosophies in the form of a Quilt of Teaching Philosophies (see Appendix). Another outcome of student-faculty partnership was an enriched sense of community.

## **PARTNERSHIP AS COMMUNITY**

Flint (2016) framed partnership in learning and teaching “as an ethos or way of approaching student engagement through which students are active participants in learning and teaching processes and practices” (p. 1). The approach is characterized as being deliberately appreciative, reflecting on successes and challenges and exploring opportunities to build on the partnership (Flint, 2016). Creating an environment or community that truly embraces student-faculty partnership requires both intellectual and emotional commitment. To promote a sense of community, we engaged in a relational approach through which we encouraged the students to develop their voice and trust the nature of the partnership as the course progressed. We also encouraged the students to engage with one another in partnership as co-learners within the course. Conceptualizing students as knowers and having the capacity to engage in pedagogical conversations seems counterintuitive and challenges the prevailing notion that students have neither the knowledge nor experience to inform teaching practice (Cook-Sather, 2014). Through encouraging peer to peer interaction regarding their teaching philosophy, students came to appreciate that they are ‘knowers’ and have capacity to engage in pedagogical conversations. The peer to peer exchange cultivated a deeper sense of learner accountability, enhanced understanding of partnership, and promoted a sense of community.

Embracing genuine student-faculty partnership requires a shift in understanding and ways of being that challenge traditional roles of faculty identity and authority in higher education (Cook-Sather, 2014; Flint, 2016). Cook-Sather (2014) suggested that “a dialogic and relational approach actually reinforces faculty authority, as it legitimates student authority, making way for

profound change in attitude and in practice” (p. 191). The success of the student-faculty partnership that we embodied with our students evolved from our transparent acknowledgement of the hierarchical roles of educators and students in higher education. Engaging in student-faculty partnership did legitimate our authority within the course and transformed the students’ attitude about their capacities and accountability as learners.

Andrews et al. (2001) characterized community through the following practices; gathering – bringing in and calling forth; creating places – keeping open a future of possibilities; assembling – constructing and cultivating; staying – knowing and connecting; caring – engendering community; interpreting – unlearning and becoming; presencing – attending and being open; preserving reading, writing, thinking and dialogue; and questioning – meaning and making visible. These attributes defined our community and characterized the student-faculty partnership. Through establishing a community that embodied partnership, students and teachers became partners and co-participants empowered to explore meaning and transform their own and others’ understanding and knowledge of learning and teaching within a community of partnership.

## **LEARNING AS PARTNERSHIP**

Entering into partnership is a place of vulnerability from which evolve confidence, strength and courage to embrace experiencing learning and teaching in transformative ways (Cook-Sather, 2014; Mercer-Mapstone et al, 2017). Although the creative approach to expressing their teaching philosophy was a challenge for some students, they embraced their vulnerability. As they began to trust in the student-faculty partnership, students “felt courageous enough to risk, explore, experiment, assert, learn, and change, knowing that they would be supported in those necessarily destabilizing and unpredictable processes” (Cook-Sather, 2016, p. 1). The student-faculty partnership enabled student choice around their learning which contributed to students taking responsibility for and making a commitment to their learning (Bovill et al., 2011). The flexibility to represent their knowledge and experience in a creative format resulted in students becoming meaning makers and contributed to authentic learning. Supporting a collaborative approach to pedagogical planning through student-faculty partnership resulted in ourselves and our students valuing the process and the outcomes of the learning (Bovill et al., 2011). The Quilt of Teaching Philosophies (see Appendix) is a manifestation of the authentic learning that the students experienced as a result of the process of engaging in partnership. This project can also serve as the basis for building community and enhancing student-faculty partnerships as it is introduced to future students engaged in the nurse as educator course. The understanding of education as partnership among students and educators compels us as co-teachers in higher education to continue to foster a brave space for both our students and ourselves to risk and engage in courageous change, growth and learning (Cook-Sather, 2016).

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APPENDIX

Quilt of Teaching Philosophies

