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PLANTING THE SEED OF A STAFF-STUDENT PARTNERSHIP RESEARCH PROJECT

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Introduction

This essay is a reflection on the planting of the first seed of a staff-student research partnership. Our partnership aimed to grow the profile of partnerships at our Australian University while simultaneously evaluating the efficacy of peer-to-peer (P2P) revision sessions in a newly implemented Medical Imaging (MI) course. We also sought to achieve these two aims through the development of a research project to evaluate the P2P revision sessions that were initiated by Sophie, the student member of this partnership; and through the sharing of our experiences of the partnership process through critical reflective journals over the course of the partnership. We hope that both of these processes will inform the structure of future P2P revision sessions and also provide others with insights into the partnership process that may assist them to plant their own partnership seeds. Our partnership began only a few months ago when we were introduced by a colleague.

Sophie: I had recently initiated and conducted P2P revision sessions where I, and a few other second-year students, ran voluntary exam revision sessions for first-year students. The idea to run these sessions stemmed from a discussion I had with one of the MI anatomy teaching staff who was unsure whether the first-year students were grasping the key concepts of the course. He felt that there was very little effective two-way communication between students and teaching staff and that students were reluctant to provide feedback regarding how they were progressing in the course. He believed this was due to the perceived power difference or hierarchy between the academics and students.

I believed this teaching challenge could be partly overcome through P2P learning in which second-year students not only imparted our knowledge and experiences from first year but could also model a more collaborative learning relationship, that is, a partnership, with teaching staff. I thus invited the lecturer to attend the anatomy revision session to offer support to us with the more complicated content if we needed it. In the other sessions, we (the second-year students) spoke freely to the first years regarding the approachability of the teaching team and how we had used the lecturers as aides to *our* learning, asking as many questions as we needed.

These P2P sessions were well attended and anecdotal feedback that I received suggested that the sessions did assist the first-year students' learning, and assisted in encouraging communication between staff and first-year students. With such positive feedback from the first-year students, I thought it would be a good idea to share my experiences and reflections on the value of P2P learning to a wider audience which led to me meeting Darci.

Darci: A colleague, who knew that I had an interest in the staff-student partnership space, introduced me to Sophie. As a Learning Designer, engaging students as partners is important to me because I see the empowerment that can result from this type of collaboration as one

way to assist students in their journey of ‘becoming’ (Barnett, 2008). It also provides us educators with a unique perspective that can challenge the often-subconscious assumptions that we make about students’ learning. I met with Sophie and we had an informal discussion around Sophie’s interest in peer learning and some ideas around avenues of how her experiences might be shared. I was interested in how Sophie’s P2P learning sessions might inform the design of the curriculum and what insights Sophie may have to improve the learning experience of the first year students. Sophie was also interested in getting more ‘formal’ evaluations of the sessions and was looking for assistance/guidance around the next step in this process. We decided to form a partnership to achieve both our personal goals.

Sophie: After discussing what would be involved in formally evaluating and sharing the first-year students’ experiences of the P2P sessions with Darci, I quickly realised that conducting such an evaluation was not as easy as I first thought; I’d need to navigate the University bureaucracy and gain ethical approval in order to share my experiences to a wider audience. I realised that there was much planning and thinking to be done before the information I was after could be gathered and shared, and I have since re-aligned my expectations and aspirations for the project and am now taking a ‘one step at a time’ approach.

Darci: I was already involved in a number of other projects evaluating innovative teaching approaches, but I was particularly excited by this opportunity to form a research partnership with Sophie, a current undergraduate student. My excitement stemmed from my belief that, through a co-inquiry partnership, the types of questions we asked students regarding the impact of the sessions would be more learner-centric because they would be informed by the student voice. The findings of the research project would also be more authentic and all the more powerful because the student experience would be interpreted through the lens of a student. I hoped that Sophie and I would both bring different yet valuable perspectives to the design of the project, and importantly to the interpretation of the feedback we planned to collect and recommendations for future P2P revision sessions.

I was inspired to explore other avenues through which I could promote the student voice in our institution, other than in the traditional avenues of unit evaluation and feedback, as part of professional development programs (Seale, 2010) or committee representation. I was also enthused by the opportunity to interact with tertiary students in a more personal capacity. I see working with students in higher education as inspirational; these students are often in a transition period of their lives, they are becoming themselves (Barnett, 2008) and being part of their journey is rewarding. My current role has very limited scope to work directly with such students yet this was one of the most rewarding parts to my previous teaching positions, and one of the main reasons I chose to work in the higher education environment. I also hoped that, by engaging in a research partnership with a student, I could promote a change in culture around staff and student interactions which appears to me to be dominated by a metaphor of consumerism, rather than one where *both* parties see each other as contributors to, or co-creators in, the learning process.

Sophie: A few weeks after our initial meeting, I read about a national medical imaging conference and decided that I’d like to submit an abstract on my initiative of the P2P revision sessions for consideration. I contacted Darci to set up a meeting to discuss my plan. With the abstract deadline looming in just five days’ time, we met. As I was then off-campus on clinical placement, we needed to carry on our collaboration of the abstract via email. After a large amount of email communication (11 conversations over the next few days!), and a clear focus on the goal ahead, we submitted the abstract on time.

Darci: The ethos of a partnership approach that enables the student voice to be realised centres on values of respect, reciprocity, responsibility, openness, honesty, regular communication, and agreed goals (Cook-Sather, Bovill, & Felten, 2014; Seale, Gibson, Haynes, & Potter, 2015). Having these values frame my mindset has been extremely important to the way I approach the partnership experience, and I believe it has provided our partnership with solid ground from which to grow. A flexible attitude has also been important in our partnership with the need for both of us to be flexible in taking into account each other's differing and, at times competing, demands. In addition, although we are both focused on the goal of the research project, I think we'll need to be flexible in terms of how the partnership will evolve. I have no pre-conceived ideas about what our roles will end up being other than coming to the partnership with an attitude of enthusiasm, openness, and respect.

I feel that the positive start to the partnership has been facilitated by background reading around partnerships, and in acknowledging the complexity and potential challenges that may arise. In terms of complexity, Healey, Flint, & Harrington (2014) describe the different, often overlapping ways that student partners may be engaged. I see this already playing out in our partnership with Sophie being engaged in a partnership that focuses on the *scholarship of learning and teaching* (being a co-researcher with myself) but also engaged as a partner in *learning, teaching and assessment* (through the running of the P2P sessions that stemmed from her conversation with the teaching staff member) and in the team teaching approach (with the anatomy lecturer) during the revisions sessions. I envisage that the partnership may move into the area of *curriculum design and pedagogic consultancy* once we begin to act on our evaluation findings and make recommendations to the MI course team. This latter closing of the loop may also bring about a sense of empowerment that has often been lacking in partnership work where, although the student voice is listened to, it rarely impels action (Seale, 2010). It will be interesting to see if and how these different partnership foci are experienced differently by Sophie and myself, and what we both learn from the co-researcher partnership process.

One of the other complexities that I have found important to acknowledge and navigate is the actual, or perceived, power relationship between Sophie and me. Even though I am not part of the teaching team in Sophie's course, I still feel that a power difference may be perceived. However, I consider that not being directly involved in the teaching of the course that a student partner is undertaking may offer learning designers such as myself a unique position to capitalise on the staff-student partnership movement as the potential for power imbalances is reduced and the student perspective can be taken into consideration from a more objective perspective than perhaps someone directly involved in the teaching of the course.

Sophie: One of the challenges that I see in partnering up with a staff member is the difference in experience levels. As this is my first experience in research, I am unsure of what is expected and required when undertaking research. However, this challenge is also a benefit: Darci can give me advice and guidance in research and writing my presentation as a co-author.

Darci: Issues of power with respect to ownership and expertise in research partnerships may be problematic in that they can form a barrier preventing the student voice from being authentically heard (Seale et al., 2015). In our partnership, the idea of running the P2P revision sessions and wanting to evaluate them originated from Sophie. The project didn't

originate with myself, a staff member, who then recruited a student to be part of the research team. Thus, I believe there is a greater chance of both of us feeling and sharing ownership of this partnership research project and we plan to reflect on this dynamic as the project evolves. Whilst Sophie may have identified differences in research expertise between us, I see Sophie as bringing a wealth of experience of what it's like to be an undergraduate student in the here and now. So rather than seeing our differences as a challenge, they are one of the primary strengths of our partnership approach and we both plan to leverage each other's respective expertise.

Sophie: In the future, I hope this partnership with Darci can continue to build on our ideas. I believe that by working together we can achieve not only our partnership goals but also our individual goals and further explore the concept of P2P learning.

Darci: This partnership process has already been highly rewarding. I am hopeful that our partnership will continue to grow as we work together to explore the benefits and challenges to the partnership process, Sophie's interest of exploring the concept of P2P learning, and ultimately our recommendations to the design of the MI course.

Conclusion

We hope that the reflections on our initial experiences of the partnership process are helpful to others who may be thinking of starting a staff-student partnership and will perhaps inspire the planting of other partnership seeds.

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