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TAKING A SMALL STEP TOWARDS PARTNERSHIP

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In this essay I explore the barriers of student partnerships in the Singapore context through my own experience as a student pursuing graduate studies in Elementary Education, while simultaneously taking on the role of teacher-educator at my day job as a teaching assistant at the university. Having only recently started teaching in a university for a little more than a year, I find the idea of student engagement and partnership an interesting area to explore. In my undergraduate years (and even right now as a graduate student), I would have appreciated having my voice heard in the pursuit of my learning. At times, I felt disconnected from my experiences in the classroom, as I passively consumed the materials taught by my professors and tried my best to regurgitate what I understood during tests and examinations in order to do well. Each course I enrolled in was structured according to the respective professor, without much room for flexibility in the content, delivery, or assessment as each professor carried out their class as they deemed fit, and this in turn created a relationship that clearly showed an unequal footing between “us” (students) and “them” (faculty members).

I see the merits of the partnership approach and understand the push for it to enhance the learning experience of university students. Reading the accounts of other educators’ positive experiences of working with students in partnerships is heartwarming and encouraging. More importantly, students who have engaged with faculty in teaching and learning see the benefits of partnership. Cook-Sather (2018) offered a sample of stories from student-partners, who participated in the Students as Learners and Teachers (SaLT) program which “transformed their experiences of education as well as their sense of capacity, confidence, and agency.” Individual students had different experiences and takeaways from their collaboration, and collectively, they agreed that student partnership was meaningful and a worthy practice to explore for both students and educators alike. I do feel that partnerships inculcate in students a sense of ownership and responsibility for their educational journey and liberate students to play a more active role in shaping the teaching within the classroom.

While these accounts are encouraging, I feel that these largely favorable results may not translate in the Singapore university environment due to socio-cultural barriers, a lack of trust, and a perceived lack of ‘democracy’ in the classroom, as well as deep-rooted pedagogical practices. Chng and Looker (2013) explored these “differences in practice, participants and politics of culture in locations outside of the West,” highlighting the importance for the need for an Asian perspective of the scholarship of teaching and learning discourse. Based on my limited experience teaching in a university, I find that building student engagement and partnership within a Singapore context is fraught with many challenges that could undermine the very ethos of the approach, which I shall elaborate on below.

Socio-cultural Barriers

At the very core of student engagement, students need to be invested in their own learning and be involved in the decision-making process of program design. However, based on my experience, some Singapore students tend to be quiet and non-participative. The large majority of students appear satisfied with being passive learners, choosing to consume the content delivered by the teacher and reluctant to speak up in class. A substantial number of

students are willing to speak within a smaller group setting without the scrutiny of the teacher. However, when I hover around the groups to listen in, some students clam up and stop contributing to discussions. Similarly, in classes of approximately twenty-five students, only a handful of confident students speak up regularly to clarify doubts and/or answer questions, while the large majority stay silent when I pose questions to the class. At times, when encouraged by their group mates to answer questions, some students shy away and show signs of anxiety and either shake their head or their faces turn red. To some students, drawing attention to themselves seems to be rather distressing. Of course, creating a safe and relaxed environment is paramount such that all students can and are willing to participate, and as educators we need to be continuously mindful of this.

Lack of Trust and Perceived Lack of ‘Democracy’ in the Classroom

Perhaps students in Singapore set up ‘walls’ to create a divide between teacher and student due to a lack of trust and perceived lack of ‘democracy’ in the classroom. In my experience as a graduate student, following my peers, I address my professors as “Prof,” “Sir,” or “Madam,” and although I might attempt to adopt first-name address, I eventually cave in to peer practice. Similarly, some of my students address me as “Prof” or “Madam” or “Ms. Yvette” despite me inviting them to address me by my first name, just as I had addressed my teachers in my undergraduate years in Sydney. I have attempted to break down this imaginary wall by affording an equal status to my students. However, some students are not comfortable with this due to differences in cultural norms.

Interestingly, I teach a module that introduces students to the different modes of questioning across six different disciplines. In the first tutorial of each semester, some students express concern about not being able to pass the module because they rarely ask questions or contribute to classroom discussions due to a lack of confidence and/or out of habit since they rarely spoke up in class prior to university. Most students were comfortable being passive listeners in the classroom, occasionally speaking up to express their views or ask a question, and thus, many students could not fathom why a university module would allocate a sizeable portion of the final grade to student discussions, and how it could place so much emphasis on questions and not answers. It made the students nervous that as a teacher, I was equally if not more interested in their questions and discussions rather than a definitive answer, because they looked to me as someone who supposedly knew the answer simple because I was the teacher.

Pedagogical Practices

Pedagogical practices in grade school and high school levels have framed much of the learning environment in Singapore. A 2017 international study showed that while Singapore students scored the highest grades in mathematics, science, and reading compared to their peers in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), it also suggested that Singapore students experience high levels of anxiety about their grades (Davie, 2017). Due to the great importance society places on achieving good grades and the added pressure of national exams, it almost seems like not doing well or up to expectations in school is tantamount to failure, which is not healthy for the individual and society. Perhaps the stress of having to constantly do well in school has made students conscious about

speaking up in class for fear of answering wrongly or appearing ignorant to their peers and teachers.

While there has been a gradual shift in Singapore schools away from an emphasis on grades, students are regularly assessed and categorized based on academic strength in each subject. The Ministry of Education in Singapore recognises the need for a more holistic education and is attempting to shift away from an overly-assessed, competitive education culture by introducing wider scoring bands to reduce fine differentiation in grades and scoring students based on absolute performance so as to alleviate competition and avoid marking out students too early in their academic journey. Despite this, students are still under immense pressure to do well as the key assessment gateways remain in the Singapore school system.

In my own teaching and learning experience, it is not uncommon for students to attend the first lesson and ask the teacher what is expected on the assessment(s) before anything else as they are so concerned about their grades. Even trained teachers in my graduate studies are guilty of that. The tradition of summative assessments through the years in formal education has wired our students to focus on grades, and I suspect that most students are so accustomed to this assessment culture that this certainty of assessment ironically takes away the anxiety that could have been generated by the unknown. That is not to say that we should accept regular summative assessments as the norm. Instead, as teachers, we ought to be sensitive to this issue and to focus more on formative development.

Further, most teachers will not know the best way to approach student partnerships as it is a relatively new concept in Singapore and we are unable to look towards successful case studies to draw on positive experiences. Thus, more teacher training is required for teachers to implement student partnership effectively in the local context. As a graduate student, I have had some exposure to student-directed learning and lessons. In my experience, the teacher would provide the scaffolding and students would then create presentations based on their interest in a particular approved topic, thus gaining some ownership in learning. However, I found that such activities can become diffused when a student strays too far from the scaffolding provided and may therefore not have the same depth compared to teacher-directed lectures. While the teacher's intention in trying to partner with students is all well and good, student inexperience in this area can mean that student learning is not as effective.

Moving forward – Gradual shift to a calibrated form of partnership?

I do not believe that a wholesale implementation of student partnership would work as successfully as my foreign peers have observed in their classrooms. I propose that a gradual shift towards a hybrid form of partnership would be more effective in the Singapore context. By making small-scale changes, we can take a step toward a more holistic approach to formal education—from grade school through to university—by moving away from make-or-break summative assessments. This way, there is less emphasis on grades, thereby easing the pressure on students to perform well in every examination and students can enjoy the journey of learning instead of being fixated on results.

I will offer some recommendations on how to make this shift. Firstly, students in higher education should be encouraged to address teachers by name to break down the barrier. Outside of the classroom, Singaporeans address any significantly older person as “uncle” or “auntie” even if they are not related by blood, as a sign of courtesy and to instill the message

of respect. It may seem odd to students and teachers alike to drop formal titles within the classroom, however both parties should recognise that doing away with the formal address of an educator does not mean that there is lack of respect, nor does it take away the role of the teacher in the classroom as there are many factors that make up the student-teacher relationship which is not solely determined by titles. While it may take time for all parties to be comfortable with this change, I would argue that by doing so, educators may find it easier to establish a rapport with students as they position themselves to be learners alongside their students in the pursuit of education.

Secondly, an agreement to calibrate a possible partnership framework can be introduced by the teacher in the very first lesson by drawing up an informal contract stating the principles and values of student partnership and engagement within the classroom. For example, a teacher may commence the lesson with a view to place students on an equal footing and explicitly stating so. This may help students feel more comfortable as it is made known that their opinions matter. Although non-binding, such a contract conveys a powerful message that students are encouraged, and *expected* to actively contribute to their learning.

Lastly, teachers can organize optional informal feedback sessions to check for effectiveness of teaching instruction. By allowing students to opt-in to give feedback on the teaching and learning, teachers give students the opportunity to be a part of shaping the curriculum and taking ownership of their learning, if they wish to. As a graduate student, I am invited to respond to feedback forms each semester, scoring the effectiveness of my professor in delivering the curriculum; as a teaching assistant, I receive student feedback on my teaching in the classroom. However, responses are mostly ranked on a Likert scale and not very informative. As a student and educator, in addition to the student feedback form, I would like to see consent forms inviting students to attend focus groups, allowing student and teacher to discuss in further detail about the classroom experience and views on potential improvements.

Through these three steps above, we can take a step towards student partnership in Singapore, albeit one in a hybrid form. Incremental steps can be taken in time to further the goals of student partnership when students and educators alike are more comfortable with these changes. Most importantly though, the emphasis and goals of education in Singapore need to shift away from one that is grade-oriented to one of growth and learning. Be that as it may, there are encouraging signs that the student partnership is gaining momentum in the sphere of higher education in Singapore. Recently, the National University of Singapore (NUS) unveiled a new module, titled “Design-Your-Own-Module” (DYOM) to empower undergraduates to create a module under the supervision of a faculty mentor. NUS Senior Deputy President and Provost, Professor Ho Teck Hua (2019) stated that the “knowledge learnt will complement NUS’ rigorous academic curriculum... to give students a more enriching and stimulating educational experience.” Furthermore, the non-graded nature of the module takes the pressure off students who wish to do well but yet are new to curriculum design. This encourages curious students to try their hands at something new without the fear of being penalized. Such an initiative is a step in the right direction in getting students involved in teaching and learning, and opens the door to future partnership opportunities. Moving forward, perhaps more modules could be designed in this manner.

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