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Amy Cozart-Lundin
UnitedLex

Gail Matthews-DeNatale
Northeastern University

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EMBRACING OPPORTUNITIES FOR OPENNESS IN ONLINE LEARNING

Amy Cozart-Lundin, Senior Instructional Designer, UnitedLex; Instructional Design Consultant, eLearn It All

Gail Matthews-DeNatale, Senior Associate Director, Center for Advancing Teaching and Learning Through Research; Lecturer, Graduate School of Education, Northeastern University,

Introduction

This is a story about the evolution of an educator-learner partnership, a play in three acts that involves changing roles and responsibilities, as well as new perspectives that can only be gained with time.

Relationships: Three Acts

Act I: EDU6225 Open Learning

Gail: In 2015 I developed a course titled *Open Learning* for the eLearning and Instructional Design concentration in Northeastern's Master of Education program. As opposed to focusing on the MOOC trend, which by that point was already waning, I wanted the class to examine the concept of generosity in education—the notion that knowledge isn't fully actualized until communities of learners engage with it: questioning, adapting, and sharing it in ever-widening circles. According to [David Wiley](#), “[Openness] is the *sole* means by which education is effected. If a teacher is not *sharing* what he or she knows, there is no education happening.” This notion may sound idealistic, but its roots run deep, from Montessori to the open education resources that are made possible through Creative Commons licensing.

I wanted my students to not just be receivers of knowledge in my course; I wanted them to learn how to curate and build on open-licensed materials to create something original. In the last third of the course my students each designed a two-week online learning mini-course that they taught to their classmates. The mini-course was to be made public and assigned a Creative Commons license.

Students as Bricoleurs: Eliciting Creativity in a Cluttered World

*AMY: [I found out there's a lot to developing a course and teaching it]. I had to be there to be responsive to discussions or posts and to be responsive to adding comments, giving clarification, grading, and things like that. But I loved it. I loved every minute of it. I think it was hard to do. Your job is still hard. I didn't find it overwhelming or, "Oh, I don't know how to do this. How do I give good feedback?" Because I've already been given good feedback by students and by instructors, to know that's how you do it. That's how you encourage. That's how you help people grow or learn better what you're trying to teach them. (Flood & Coleman [2016], *Enabling Reflective Thinking: Reflective Practice in Learning and Teaching*, p. 308)*

The students could select anything as a topic for their mini-courses, which gave them a chance to think about what they had to offer as “teachers” to the world. For example, Amy chose to develop a course on

visual merchandising, because she had worked in retail for a number of years. Another student who worked in financial aid decided to create a mini-course on advising soon-to-be graduates on their options for loan repayment.

But this begged the question, what would be my role during the phase of the class when my students were teaching their mini-courses? Would I stand on the sidelines, continuing to provide formative feedback, or would I step into the role of student and actually “take” the courses my students were offering? I decided to become a student, even though I also continued to play the role of instructor. Essentially, I was living on two planes. I had taken on a second self, a student self, that I was enacting alongside my teacher self in real time. It was both invigorating and disorienting. As I worked on the assignments given to me by my students, I felt unanticipated anxiety, because I wasn’t sure if I was doing things “right” and I was afraid of making obvious mistakes in front of them when they knew more about their mini-course topic than I did. I felt a new sense of empathy for the experience of being a “student,” and I think that changed how I approached my students when I communicated with them. For example, when they posed clarifying questions about coursework I always began my response by thanking them for asking.

The Value of Iterative Design

Excerpt from Gail’s Interview
about *Open Learning*

There'd been all these cycles of formative feedback on planning documents, and then on the actual courses as they were developing them. And I think that that's the preferable way to structure it. But that means you need to really rethink your course design and build in those cycles. A lot of people think they don't have the time to do that, but if you want students to do original work, you really have to have those iterations.

Act II: Co-Authors

Gail: After the course concluded, I continued to reflect on the sense of vulnerability that emerged when I allowed myself to be a student in front of my students, and they in turn were teachers in front of me. About that time a colleague approached me to ask if I would contribute a chapter to a book titled [*Enabling Reflective Thinking: Reflective Practice in Learning and Teaching*](#). I decided to approach Amy, then a recent graduate of the Master’s program, to see if she wanted to co-author the chapter with me.

We decided to approach co-authorship as a collaborative, auto-ethnographic process. Separately, we wrote reflections about *Open Learning* and our individual experiences with the mini-course assignment. Then we recorded interviews with each other, which were transcribed. Separately, we reviewed the transcriptions looking for patterns and themes, then together we coded the interviews to determine what we wanted to say in our book chapter.

Amy: When Gail approached me to co-author a book chapter, I first felt honored to be considered, but then became nervous about being “published.” Gail has been an author and contributor to numerous publications, and here I was, a newbie to the instructional design space. I spent my former career in visual merchandising and committed to a drastic career change when entering graduate school. When I first arrived at Northeastern University, I was intimidated because everyone in my class had prior experience in the field of education—teachers, school administrators, etc.—and I felt like the “black sheep” who didn’t belong. Gail taught my first class in Master’s program and saw a potential in me that I didn’t even recognize in myself—yet.

My last class in the program, *Open Learning*, was also taught by Gail. The final project was to create a mini-course and have the rest of the class—including the instructor—take the created course. It was a stretch of my creativity and a culmination of what I had learned throughout the program. While my initial courses had a lot of guidance on the parameters of assignments, the *Open Learning* course gave me the freedom to decide what I would create for my mini-course. I reflected on this in the book chapter that we co-authored:

When I read that I would be creating a mini-course, and it would be publicly available online, I thought ‘I can’t do that. That’s too much.’ ... But then I realized that I didn’t have to create everything from scratch. There are all these open education resources that I could draw on. It was better because I had freedom of choice in how to do it. Part of the value was creativity, but I also could prove my research skills and have an opportunity to figure things out for myself. The working world is not going to give you a rubric.

When I co-authored this chapter with Gail after graduation I gained a deeper understanding of how the *Open Learning* class affected her and informed the way she provides feedback. Gail spoke of the difficulty she had with the project I assigned as the “instructor” in my mini-course, and it resonated with me the amount of care, understanding, and fairness it takes to give effective feedback to a student, especially if the assignment causes a struggle. This experience also affected the way I create assignments and assessments in my current instructional design role. I take special care to ensure my learners have a clear understanding of the learning objectives, fair assessment questions, and informative question feedback. My partnership with Gail in authoring the book chapter gave me a window into how she experienced the class and how that advised her thinking on how best to “teach” her students in the future.

I have drawn on what I learned through our experience as educator/student and as co-authors many times in my subsequent career as a professional Instructional Designer. The Instructional Design process is very fluid where I work—many iterations, additions, edits, (and a number of “final” drafts). I have learned to embrace the process. I have also been in a leadership position as a Senior Instructional Designer with a team of designers where I was expected to give feedback on their design work, and my work with Gail has influenced how I approach those relationships. She saw potential in me during my early semesters at Northeastern University and pushed me to give everything my best effort. She also encouraged a high level of creativity and freedom in my work, which is something I strive to do with the instructional designers on my team. I learned from Gail’s example how to draw creativity out of my team, and lead them in a way that influences a high level of effort on the designers’ parts.

Act III: Professionals Reconnecting

Gail: When Amy and I co-authored the book chapter I was not familiar with the literature on faculty-student partnerships. I simply knew that I wanted to experiment with the traditional student-instructor power relationship because I suspected that interesting things might happen if the roles became more fluid. What I discovered is a renewed energy in my teaching. Each time I offer the *Open Learning* course it is new, because each time a different community of students has something to teach me. I have been told by students, again and again, that it is the most unexpected, rigorous, and valuable course they have ever taken. I know it’s the most unexpected, rigorous, and valuable course I have ever taught.

When I approached Amy about co-authoring an article for *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education*, once again I was surprised by the interpersonal dynamics of our collaboration. Without my asking, Amy took charge of deadlines and was proactive in setting up meetings. She wrote things I didn't expect her to say and encouraged me to say things I hadn't thought of. When I was her teacher, I set the deadlines, kept an eye on student progress, and reached out to individuals if I was concerned that they were falling behind. When we authored the book chapter together, I coached her as a mentor in addition to collaborating with her on the chapter authorship. Now, Amy is an instructional design professional, and she has internalized the executive functioning that is critical to successful course production. She assumed a leadership role in our process as we coauthored this article for TLTHE. At first this was disorienting, and part of me wondered if I was shirking my duties as a professor. But I felt a sense of relief once I realized that this is yet another evolution in our professional relationship, knowing that all the responsibility for progress did not rest on my shoulders. As I reflect on the concept of "student faculty partnerships," thinking metaphorically, I have come to believe that partnership is more of a reostat with gradations of light than an on/off switch.

Amy: Looking back, I have progressed from nervous student to mini-course instructor to co-author to an instructional design professional. Gail and I are now professional peers, and that changes how we engage with each other. We produce professional work together, such as this article. There is value in our collegial relationship, which is ongoing and open-ended. Gail and I have learned from each other and have passed each other's knowledge and experience onto others, hopefully influencing their learning in a positive way.

Consideration in an Educator-Learner Partnership Relationship

Amy and Gail: It's important to remember that partnership is an evolution. As with any relationship, there are phases of development that need to be revisited iteratively because the process isn't always linear.

Amy and Gail Tips for Getting the Most Out of Partnership

Amy: *You WILL find times when you doubt yourself. Quiet the voice in your head that says, "I'm not good enough" or "They're going to find out I don't really know what I'm doing." No matter how loud the voice, it's never true.*

Gail: *Embrace vulnerability. Note your reactions to the experience of shared authority and take time to unpack underlying motivations and assumptions. You may also want to keep a journal. This will help you become more self-aware and intentional in your partnership work with learners, and it can inform your approach to teaching as well.*

Authority and knowledge play a significant role in the educator/learner relationship. Even when the educator takes great effort to share power, the learner still needs the educator to share wisdom, especially at the outset if the learner is a novice in the domain. As newcomers to the concept and history of open learning, Gail's students needed her to provide information and detailed feedback on works-in-progress. They may have been sharing power in some respects, but it would have been an abdication of

responsibility for Gail to not share her knowledge, to expect her students to discover everything on their own.

There are four questions we recommend asking when educators and learners engage in a partnered relationship:

- (1) At the outset, an educator interested in forging a partnership with students must ask, “What do the learners need from me in order to gain proficiencies to do the work, to level up so the partnership is better positioned to succeed?”
- (2) As students gain greater proficiency in key areas, ideally the dynamic develops into a rapport where together the educator and learners ask, “What can we learn from each other?”
- (3) As mastery is discovered or develops, the question hopefully transitions to “What can we teach each other?” *Open Learning* was carefully designed to engage teacher-students in consideration of all three questions, which is a tall order.
- (4) Four years after completing Open Learning, we are tackling a fourth question in our educator-learner partnership, “What can I teach other people?” We co-authored a book chapter to share lessons learned from our experience, and several years later Amy joined the Mentor Collective where, as an alumna, she served as a mentor for other students.

We think it’s important to consider the partner relationships that can develop in the passage of time beyond graduation. Institutions rarely provide systematic support for this phase in the life of a teacher-student partnership. What can be done to help students and teachers collaborate and grow their relationships beyond the bounds of a 12- to 15-week course? We invite you to consider this question for yourself. This is our call to action for you in shaping the future of student and educator partnerships!