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STUDENTS AS PARTNERS AS A MODEL FOR RESEARCH ON REFLECTION AND COOPERATIVE EDUCATION

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Introduction

Cooperative education (co-op) is an integral part of student learning at Northeastern University, with the majority of undergraduates participating in one to three co-ops during which they work full time for six months. Co-op-related coursework and advising are embedded in the curriculum to help students connect their workplace, academic, and personal learning, and reflection is a critical component of cooperative education. We were curious to understand what reflective practices faculty, staff, and students at Northeastern perceive as most valuable to their learning and development. Our project team attempted to tackle this research question, with the ultimate aim of creating a “reflection curriculum” that would include sample goals, learning outcomes, and a catalog of activities that promote reflective practice in co-op.

We saw a need for research into the methods and impact of reflective practice in cooperative education at Northeastern. Currently, reflective practices are integrated into the co-op curriculum independently by Co-op Faculty. There is no universal curriculum, and students often have little or no input on how to best express themselves and the reflective methods that are most valuable to them. The assignment-based nature of reflection can create a culture in which students resent reflection rather than see its value. We hoped our research would allow us to collaborate with students to develop a more thoughtful and intentional reflection curriculum.

Students as Partners stood out as a good framework for this project. Students experience co-op and reflection in real time, and their firsthand experience with reflection during co-op as learners positions them to contribute a perspective that faculty cannot access. We set out to assemble a group with no hierarchical structure, including students as equal partners in the decision-making team rather than Research or Teaching Assistants. Our goal was to design the Reflection in Co-op research project together.

The literature on reflection, especially as it relates to cooperative education, informed the

pedagogical framework of this study, and the Students as Partners (SaP) framework informed the project's methodology. Harvey et al. (2010) articulate three principles for effective curriculum-embedded reflection: clarity of intent, explicit expectations, and an authenticity that links coursework with experience. Sykes and Dean (2013) also propose a work-integrated learning model that emphasizes the students' reflective practice in the workplace with respect to their professional and social development.

SaP advocates partnering with students on a range of endeavors, from course decision-making and curriculum design to the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning. Cook-Sather, Bovill, and Felten (2014) propose three guiding principles for a partner-oriented approach to working alongside students:

- Respect (valuing what others bring to the project)
- Reciprocity (balancing give-and-take)
- Responsibility (students sharing responsibility for pedagogy, faculty sharing responsibility for learning)

Curriculum-embedded reflection and the SaP model challenge co-op educators and learners to reconsider their roles in order to engage in two-way dialogue about learning from experience. Our team found that working within the SaP model required a level of honesty that was both disorienting and invigorating.

Project Narrative and Rationale

Our team consisted of two Co-op faculty members (Coordinators), Sarah Klionsky from the College of Science and Michelle Zaff from the College of Social Science and Humanities, Gail Matthews-DeNatale from the Center for Advancing Teaching and Learning through Research, and two undergraduate students, Sarah Lam from the College of Science and Rebecca Raffo from the College of Social Science and Humanities.

We first developed a project description that included an explanation for the motivation to study reflection within the SaP model and laid out some preliminary project goals, but we purposely did not define the project before adding student partners. In addition to the project description, we developed a job description for all team members, which we used to recruit students. Michelle and Sarah each identified and discussed a handful of students who had been particularly engaged with co-op and co-op reflection and were involved on campus. We sent job descriptions, and Rebecca and Sarah L. were the students who accepted the offer. We intentionally identified all participants, faculty and students, as "team members" to avoid the typical, inherently hierarchical dynamic that exists between students and faculty, with the aim of creating a group of equals in which no one member was in a position of greater power.

After adding Rebecca and Sarah L., we, as a team, met to define the goals and project methods. Before deciding what information to gather from the broader co-op community, we did some introspective work on our experiences with co-op reflection. We developed a project ePortfolio site as a shared space for our work. As individuals, we did literature searches on reflection and Students as Partners and identified some common readings. We each wrote about our

experiences with co-op reflection and then met as a group to share our thoughts and perspectives. This process was illuminating because, for example, we discovered that Sarah K. and Michelle, as educators, shared similar concerns and frustrations with Sarah L. and Rebecca in relation to the current reflection practices. Themes that emerged from our narratives as factors that can either increase or compromise the value of reflection included: honesty, sense of audience, social engagement, and supportive technology.

The SaP model was especially useful as we shared how the format and platform of different types of reflection affects both students and faculty, because we each had an opportunity to consider differing perspectives. Students undertook reflection for the purpose of assessing and evaluating a co-op and appreciated feeling empowered through reflection to make choices regarding future academic and career goals. The students, however, did not think that all of the specific reflection assignments helped them towards empowerment, and acknowledged reflecting differently in writing, in person, and in online formats. Coordinators used reflection for the purpose of evaluating the learning that students achieved on a co-op but recognized the uneven impact reflection assignments had on different students. Considering the format, prompts, timing, and purpose of reflection together helped our group come up with ideas we might not have thought of as individuals.

We then each contributed ideas for gathering more data from a larger set of Northeastern students about their experiences with co-op reflection. The consensus was that we would first design an online survey to send to a large group of academically diverse students that could be easily completed in a short period of time. The multiple-choice survey asked students questions about the types of reflection activities in which they had participated both during and after co-op, their feelings about the value of those activities, and the types of reflective practice they would prefer if they had a choice. We planned to follow the survey with in-depth focus groups to drill down more specifically into students' experiences with reflection. Sarah K. and Rebecca met to develop the survey first draft, and working as a subgroup proved an effective way to make progress on the project. We had been struggling to coordinate the team to advance the project due to conflicting schedules, so recognizing the option of using a sub-group to create a survey draft was a breakthrough and built momentum. As a group, we consulted with an external assessment specialist about formatting survey questions, and then refined and administered the survey.

The survey was successful. The response rate exceeded our expectations, and we were able to synthesize and distribute the results to participating co-op faculty. Students from five of Northeastern's seven colleges responded to the survey ($n = 197$), and students' reflection experiences varied by college. Across the University, though, students indicated that their preferred reflection method would be one-on-one meetings with their Co-op Coordinator. This is helpful information; Co-op Coordinators rarely have the time and resources to commit to one-on-one reflection meetings with every student, but they can work to replicate the benefits of such meetings in other settings. We designed the subsequent focus groups but were ultimately unable to continue on with the project due to challenges ranging from co-op faculty career changes, students' graduation, and shifting priorities. Michelle believes that the possibility of re-opening the project in the near future with new partners remains an option.

Challenges and Recommendations

Bovill and Bulley's (2011) Ladder of Participation diagram outlines a spectrum of student partnership positionalities, from bottom to top: faculty control decision-making, faculty control is student informed, student choice and influence, substantial student influence. We wanted our project to function at the upper end of the ladder, embracing a fundamentally collaborative approach to engaging with students in curriculum-related research. Healey et al. (2016) contend that use of the Students as Partners model "provides an opportunity to confront and consider reasons why partnership in learning and teaching may be experienced as unsettling, resisted, and difficult to implement..." We did, in fact, find that implementing an SaP project at the upper end of the spectrum was incredibly difficult, and our team was unable to fully transcend the boundaries between our traditional roles.

We experienced many challenges in pursuing a research project with a team of five people of equal standing. In an effort to maintain the integrity of the upper level of the ladder, we intentionally did not have a designated team leader, but the lack of one person taking charge to keep the group focused delayed our progress. Despite our team's stated objective that students consider themselves equal partners in the project, they did not seem to feel empowered to take charge and take initiative, highlighting the challenge of how to create student-faculty partnerships in which the students feel that they have an equal voice. Rebecca was in her senior year, and her schoolwork plus life circumstances were more taxing than she expected, which limited her ability to participate to the fullest extent. In addition, it was difficult for her to feel empowered to take initiative in certain areas as she does not come from a quantitative research background but felt more equipped for qualitative analysis. Unfortunately, we did not perform the follow-up interviews, which would have involved more qualitative methods, because Rebecca graduated before we were able to get to that part of the project. Sarah L. was in her junior year and found out during the project that she would be graduating a semester early, which shifted her priorities to finishing her graduation requirements, leaving less time to focus on this project.

Logistically, finding meetings times for five people with busy schedules was very difficult. In retrospect, it would have been more feasible to implement two parallel projects that paired one Co-op Faculty member with one student, with periodic whole group check-ins. Co-op also makes this model particularly challenging to pursue. One student on our team was on co-op during the fall semester and the other during the spring semester, which involved working full-time off campus and less availability. Realistically, the student on co-op could not attend meetings or participate in as many meaningful ways.

Learning and designing collaboratively was an interesting and compelling way to frame a project but required a more structured commitment from team members. In the future, we would begin the SaP by collaboratively identifying a project lead and designating specific roles for all involved. It also could be helpful for student collaborators to be a paid position, which would recognize the work on a more even footing with Co-op Faculty who are paid employees.

Conclusions

In conclusion, we learned a lot about ourselves as both educators and learners through this project. We all experienced difficulty listening to and integrating others' perspectives, in particular when we each have been invested in certain practices and assignments. For example, the co-op coordinators regularly assigned a mid co-op and end of co-op written assignment with pre-determined reflection prompts that we thought would be useful and beneficial for students to consider, but the students preferred one-on-one meetings and did not find as much value in the written prompts.

The Students as Partners model enabled co-op coordinators and students to engage with each other on a different level than the traditional teaching and advising model allows. Through this model we asked different questions relating to the student and educator experience with reflection, and we dug deeper to understand how each of us approached reflection and when we felt it was most impactful. These insights will be valuable in designing reflection curriculum and, more broadly, in viewing students as self-directed learners. Overall, we found that the benefits of the SaP model outweighed the challenges, and we will seek out opportunities to employ the model in the future.

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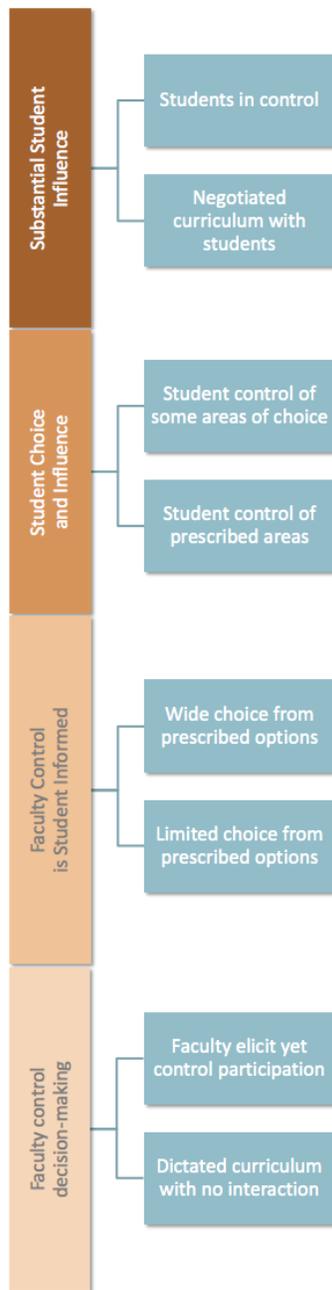


Figure 1. Ladder of Student Participation (Bovill & Bulley, 2011)