When Students Take Leadership Roles in Launching Pedagogical Partnership Initiatives

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WHEN STUDENTS TAKE LEADERSHIP ROLES IN LAUNCHING PEDAGOGICAL PARTNERSHIP INITIATIVES[1]

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In this issue of *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education (TLTHE)*, eight students tell their stories of taking on leadership roles in the development of pedagogical partnership initiatives at liberal arts colleges and research universities in four US states and Pakistan. These institutions—Davidson College, Vassar College, Tufts University, Syracuse University, and Lahore University of Management Sciences—constitute diverse contexts for student leaders who must navigate seeking to be heard and respected in places that also have invalidated them and others they represent. This approach to student leadership reflects a form of mobilization through which students seek "more formalized recognition for their knowledge, skill and efforts...and professional opportunities for leadership roles" (Willis, 2018). It also positions student leaders— and those with whom they collaborate—to disrupt structures and practices that perpetuate inattention and inequity and to model and encourage dialogue and co-creation of pedagogical approaches among students, faculty, and staff.

This student-led pedagogical partnership work at individual institutions is complemented and supported by student-led efforts across institutions. For instance, catalyzed by the intersection of the global pandemic and the uprisings against anti-Black racism in the US, mixed pairs of five students who attend institutions that belong to the Liberal Arts Collaborative for Digital Innovation (LACOL) facilitated cross-institutional and cross-constituency conversations focused on anti-racist pedagogies, trauma-informed, anti-racist teaching and learning in hybrid and remote contexts, and equity in assessment in summer and fall of 2020 and spring of 2021. One of the student co-facilitators of those conversations, and a contributor to this collection of essays, also developed a project called Pairing Student Partners: An Intercollegiate Collaboration to support student partners in this and all partnership work. Thus, the student authors of the essays included in this issue of *TLTHE* are part of a movement that, like other coalitions for change, takes on both risks and responsibilities.

In this connection and to provide a common reference point for their essays, I invited the student authors to draw on "Taking Roads Less Traveled: Embracing Risks and Responsibilities Along the Way to Leadership" (Ahmad & Cook-Sather, 2018). In that essay my co-author and I wrote about our commitment to the notion that "radical collegiality" (Fielding, 1999) among education stakeholders has a place as part of the project of institutional leadership. Highlighting key moments in our experiences as students, teachers, and program developers, we explain how that commitment to radical collegiality prompted us to risk embracing leadership of teaching and learning institutes rooted in pedagogical partnerships among students, faculty, and staff. In the eight essays included in this issue, each student author narrates how they navigated different risks and took up different responsibilities in the launch of pedagogical partnership initiatives at

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their institutions. Threading through the stories is a strong sense of vision, passion, and pursuit of possibility and also strands (sometimes thicker and sometimes thinner) of self doubt, uncertainty, and anxiety about taking on leadership roles (see Marquis, Jayaratnam, Lei, & Mishra, 2019, and Marquis, Jayaratnam, Mishra, & Rybkina, 2018, for discussions of the impediments students face in seeking and taking on pedagogical partnership work).

Traveling roads less or not-yet traveled often requires letting go of deep-seated assumptions and familiar roles. It also requires forging new ways of being and new voices through which to affirm those. Both these processes at once necessitate and contribute to the creation of community, solidarity, and shared witness. As a child of the 1960s, I think of the road metaphor Bob Dylan (1964) evoked the year I was born when he told parents that their "old road is rapidly aging" and to "please get out of the new one if you can't lend your hand." As a grown feminist of the 2020s, I also think of the three components of having a voice that Rebecca Solnit (2020) identifies in her narrative of her road less traveled as a female author in a male-dominated world: "audibility, credibility, and consequence" (p. 229). As Solnit explains, audibility means that "you can be heard, that you have not been pressed into silence or kept out of the arenas in which you can speak or write" (p. 229). Credibility, Solnit continues, means that, "when you get into those arenas, people are willing to believe you" (p. 229). Finally, Solnit argues, to be "a person of consequence is to matter." And "if you matter, you have rights, and your words serve those rights and give you the power to bear witness" (p. 230). If you are a person of consequence, "your words possess the authority to determine what does and does not happen to you" (p. 230). The student authors of the essays in this issue of *TLTHE* can guide us down roads less and not-yet traveled, and they tell us about their journeys in voices we need to hear, believe, and heed.

In two essays written by students at Davidson College in North Carolina, USA, the focus is explicitly on how partnership can support the pursuit of equity in STEM. The partnership program developed at Davidson is, to my knowledge, the first in which students took the lead in the conceptualization and launch. In "**EMBRACING THE RISK AND RESPONSIBILITY OF STARTING A PEDAGOGICAL PARTNERSHIP PROGRAM FOCUSED ON FOSTERING INCLUSIVITY AND RESPECT IN SCIENCE**," Sabid Hossain, Davidson College Class of 2021, recounts his experience as a sophomore of joining FIRST (Fostering Inclusivity and Respect in Science Together), "a five-year initiative funded by the Howard Hughes Medical Institute (HHMI) to promote equity and inclusivity within Davidson STEM disciplines." The FIRST Action Team that Hossain joined was "a group of students from different STEM disciplines and of various marginalized backgrounds" that was "tasked with identifying structural barriers within Davidson College's STEM departments that hindered the educational advancement of people of marginalized backgrounds." Offering an important perspective on voice, in this case in relation to an incident of hate speech on his campus that "catalyzed my journey working towards establishing more equitable teaching practices," Hossain notes that "nobody seemed to be asking about the safety of students and how this promotion of protecting hate speech, even if it is free speech, could affect the mental wellbeing of marginalized individuals." Among the pieces of advice Hossain offers to prospective student leaders is this: "Reaffirm your values and remember that improving the pedagogical practices within classrooms helps every party involved and helps institutions take a step closer to a more equitable and inclusive environment."

In "**CREATING MORE INCLUSIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS AT DAVIDSON COLLEGE**," Claudia Hernandez Brito, Davidson College, Class of 2020, offers her story of developing FIRST's Action Team project MILE (More Inclusive Learning Environments) in the Fall-2019 semester. Hernandez Brito shares the guidelines and structures she and her co-creators developed for MILE as well as obstacles and challenges they encountered in their work, and she describes the resulting program. She asserts the importance of bravery in such work, a theme of previous discussions of pedagogical partnership work (see Cook-Sather, 2016) and particularly important, as Hernandez Brito explains, for launching partnership initiatives: "Piloting MILE at Davidson College was risky, because it not only diverged from traditional pedagogical practices, but it took courage from both the student and faculty partners to see each other's value." Hossain's and Hernandez Brito's essays affirm what my co-authors and I argue in *Promoting Equity and Justice through Pedagogical Partnership*: that pedagogical partnership can contribute to redressing epistemic, affective, and ontological harms inflicted by higher education on under-represented students (de Bie et al., 2021 in press).

In "**A STEPP INTO UNCERTAINTY: PURSUING PASSIONS TO EMBRACE PEDAGOGICAL RISKS**," Nandeeta Bala, Cognitive Science and Education major, Chemistry minor, Vassar College, Class of 2022, narrates how, first thwarted and then enabled by her challenging course schedule, she created a new role and path for herself as a leader in the launch of STEPP (Student Teacher Engaged Pedagogical Partnership) at Vassar College in New York, USA. Managing both anticipated and unanticipated planning responsibilities, Bala forged an entirely new role for herself—one that other institutions interested in launching pedagogical partnership programs might adapt. Through ongoing reflection and dialogue, Bala found that "the uncertainty, multiple possibilities, blurring boundaries, and consequent overwhelming sense of responsibility left me nervous, but this was really a result of caring deeply about STEPP and its participants and wanting to engage and grow. I realized that expressions of support and being in dialogue early on bolstered my strength and made risk-taking much less emotionally arduous." Bala's visioning, hard work, relationship building, and documentation led her to conclude: "neither could I imagine nor could I choose a different journey."

Two essays written by students at Tufts University in Boston, Massachusetts, USA, highlight the student leaders' respective and overlapping perspectives on taking the lead in launching a pedagogical partnership program at Tufts. Both essays focus on building structures and relationships that can support pedagogical partnership and offer detailed recommendations for how to do so. In "'**VERY NERVOUS AND VERY EXCITED': MY EXPERIENCE DEVELOPING A PEDAGOGICAL PARTNERSHIP PROGRAM AT TUFTS UNIVERSITY**," Jillian Impastato, Tufts University, Class of 2021, traces the development of the program from when she first heard about the idea from her co-leader, Langley Topper, through the relationships she built with staff and faculty members at Tufts who provided essential support. The relational focus of this essay conveys the importance of relationship building as well as knowing when to stop, as Impastato explains: "Knowing when to stop before you get overwhelmed is important, but the sheer quantity of people at your institution (and within higher education) who have thoughts, ideas, and support to contribute to your work is really what takes your program to the next level."

In **"BUILDING PARTNERSHIP THROUGH PARTNERSHIP**," Langley Topper, Tufts University, Class of 2021, emphasizes the importance of connecting with those on other campuses that have already been engaged in partnership work. As she notes, there is no need for reinvention, although there is need for developing a program appropriate to a given context, as Topper discusses in sections of her essay including clarifying mission, finding support, sharing the work load, and more. Topper also offers an important reminder to those who might want to launch a pedagogical partnership program: "You do not need to be an Education major to take a leading role in developing partnership programs at your own institution," and she explains why this is exciting: "because it means that students without a background in education are still capable of leading the development of student-faculty partnership programs and as student partners, reflecting on what works and what doesn't, and turning that feedback into action."

In "**IMAGINING A BETTER FUTURE: CO-LEADING THE LAUNCH OF SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY'S PEDAGOGICAL PARTNERSHIP PILOT AS A FIRST-YEAR STUDENT**," Dara Drake, dual major in Citizenship and Civic Engagement and Policy Studies, Syracuse University, Class of 2024, traces her commitment to partnership back to her high school days and details how she built on and extended that commitment when she came to Syracuse University. She discusses the research she did and, like other student leaders, the relationships she built. Also, circling back around to a theme Bala (this issue) raises in her essay, Drake emphasizes the passion that drove her and how it informed her persistence. Drake describes "the many significant lessons" she has learned "about leadership, communication, determination, and relationship building," and she captures what many student leaders might well feel: "If you told a high school senior me that I would have achieved all that I have done a year later, I probably would not have believed you. With big dreams comes big change. Leadership roles are available to students who have the initiative to assume them!"

While it is challenging enough to take roads less traveled in contexts striving to be inclusive in leadership, it is even more so in contexts where "power difference defines the very identity of the students and teachers" (Tamim in Cook-Sather, Ho, Kaur, & Tamim, forthcoming). Two students from Lahore University of Management Sciences (LUMS) in Pakistan offer their stories of how they set out on roads less traveled in such a context. In "**BUILDING BRIDGES: CONCEPTUALIZING A STUDENT-TEACHER PARTNERSHIP PROGRAM TO IMPROVE PEDAGOGICAL PRACTICES**," Humayun Ansari, MPhil in Education Leadership and Management, LUMS, Class of 2021, begins by naming just this challenge as it manifests in assumptions about student roles, and he details in his essay his experience of being a part of a developing student-teacher pedagogical partnership program and, in his words, "adding my voice to it." Indeed, Ansari's essay focuses on voice and the necessity of "neutralizing internal voices to overcome barriers" to his engaging in the co-development of the partnership program at LUMS. Emphasizing that "a valuable idea can originate from anywhere," including from students' perspectives, Ansari assures other potential student leaders to "look within and realize their own strengths so they can avoid doubting their potential and make valuable contributions in the pedagogical partnerships between themselves and their teachers for better learning outcomes."

In the second essay authored by a student leader at LUMS, "**THE IMPORTANCE OF TRUST IN STUDENT-FACULTY PARTNERSHIPS: MY JOURNEY FROM A STUDENT PARTNER TO A CO-LEAD**

PEDAGOGICAL PARTNERSHIPS PROGRAM," Fatima Iftikhar, a student of Mphil Education Leadership and Management, also evokes the multiple, competing voices in her head. She alternates between narrating her experience on the one hand and channeling the voices in her head that doubted her qualifications and capacity to take on a co-leadership role on the other. The question, "Why me?" was a persistent one in Iftikhar's head, and then also "not only 'why me' but also 'why students'?" Like many other student partners and co-leaders, Iftikhar reflects: "I still feel nervous while I am sitting amongst my professors in these meetings who taught me in the classroom culture with high power distance, but I gain my strength from the trust that my working group has in me." Other student partners have emphasized the importance of trust in established partnership work (see Brunson, 2018), and Iftikhar narrates her journey to and through trust for students who take on leadership roles in establishing partnership initiatives.

These students' essays capture the strong sense of vision, passion, and pursuit of possibility that drove them all to take roads less or not-yet traveled. Across their essays, the student authors offer essential glimpses into what catalyzed and strengthened the development of their voices and projects, what others can learn about relationship building within and across institutions to support partnership work, and how both individual and collective efforts can have an impact on institutions. In each case, these students' leadership has challenged individuals and institutions—through new conversations and foci for shared inquiry—to change their practices. The student authors here also recognize that such change is made one step at a time. These leaders, as Myles Horton and Paulo Freire (1990) urge, make the road by walking. With this issue of *TLTHE*, I aim to affirm the "audibility, credibility, and consequence" (Solnit, 2020, p. 229) of these young people's voices, honoring them as leaders in practice and as guides for others who aspire to take roads less or not-yet traveled.

Acknowledgments

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