

Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education

Volume 1
Issue 33 *Spring 2021*

Article 4

May 2021

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Recommended Citation

Bala, Nandeeta "A STEPP into Uncertainty: Pursuing Passions To Embrace Pedagogical Risks," *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education*: Iss. 33 (2021), <https://repository.brynmawr.edu/tlthe/vol1/iss33/4>

A STEPP INTO UNCERTAINTY: PURSUING PASSIONS TO EMBRACE PEDAGOGICAL RISKS

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[STEPP \(Student Teacher Engaged Pedagogical Partnership\)](#) stemmed from Vassar College's [Engaged Pluralism Initiative \(EPI\)](#) Inclusive Pedagogies Working Group and was piloted during the Spring-2020 semester. Although it was initially unclear how I would participate in STEPP due to scheduling complexities, I was able to join the pilot as a student coordinator. This unexpected option empowered me to integrate interdisciplinary interests, forge valuable relationships, and engage in personal growth. Guided by enthusiasm and inspired by serendipitous opportunities, I was encouraged to choose "the road less travelled," leading to this possibility of reflection on pedagogical partnerships in light of responsibility and risk (Arshad & Cook-Sather, 2018).

Exploring Educational Interests

To make the most of a liberal arts education, I was keen on exploring my interests in cognitive science, chemistry, and psychology while trying classes in new subject areas. To these ends, I enrolled in my first education class during my freshman year. I was stunned by the inclusive format of discussions, the creative assignments, and the emphasis on the student voice. Excited to pursue my newfound interest outside of my classes, I joined the EPI Inclusive Pedagogies Working Group during the Fall-2020 semester. I learned that, among its initiatives, the Working Group planned to pilot a version of Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges' SaLT program at Vassar during the upcoming semester. From the little I knew of SaLT, I was eager to participate as a student partner in Vassar's pilot. However, fate begged to differ: the chosen working group meeting time on Fridays was devoured by my four-hour Cognitive Science lab. It was difficult to believe that scheduling of all things would impede my exploration of interests. Before my journey into a pedagogical partnership program could even begin, the discipline of a major had demarcated my involvement.

For the Spring-2020 semester, I ensured that I had Fridays free (a rare feat for STEM majors!) and was delighted to join the Inclusive Pedagogies Working Group. While it offered a chance to participate in many exciting projects, the pilot team was already established with four student partners, four faculty partners, and a facilitator of the student partner meetings. My participation as a student partner would have necessitated additional work from working group members. Though vexed that a choice of a STEM class months ago affected my involvement, I did not want my passion to burden the pilot. Yet, a door opened: when I heard that an introduction of SaLT, conducted by Alison Cook-Sather, Director of the Teaching and Learning Institute at Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges, was open to the Vassar community and that an orientation specifically for the participants would follow soon after, I immediately asked Jonathon Kahn, Faculty Coordinator of STEPP, for a chance to attend the orientation with all participants. My enthusiasm, which disregarded my inability to participate, insisted on channeling my curiosity about the program and consoled my disheartened thoughts, edging them to engage with an

intentional choice that prioritized intellectual curiosity over emotional vulnerability — with the idea that a lost opportunity to contribute could and would be replaced by an exciting opportunity to learn.

During the orientation, I absorbed information about pedagogical partnership programs and was astonished to find my fears vanquished as I participated in a discussion with predominantly administrators and faculty. I observed partners discuss their apprehensions concerning their roles in the pilot; as luck would have it, I was not participating and had no worries — I was now enjoying the orientation as an intellectual and emotional experience rather than as one preparing to participate in a partnership. Overwhelmed and inspired by the chance to attend the 3-hour orientation, I invested the rest of my day in digesting the experience. I woke up the next day to discover the enthusiasm and desire for pedagogical partnership work intact — and enhanced. My head buzzed with questions and gratitude. Fueled by zeal, I emailed Alison expressing appreciation and posing questions.

Participating in Pedagogical Partnerships

Not only did Alison's quick response to my email answer questions and reinforce my passion for pedagogical projects, but it opened an incredible possibility of participating in the pedagogical partnership matrix (Arshad & Cook-Sather, 2018) that revealed a novel path in the pilot. She encouraged me to see if a role could be created for me to document the program as it unfolded and bring a different perspective to the partnership work — as a student partner to the director of the program, a student coordinator. Thrilled at the opportunity to participate and seeking information on the role, I emailed Alison and I was amazed (mostly shocked) to find that, to her knowledge, no undergraduate had assumed similar responsibilities. While I felt unable to contribute like post-bac fellows who took on such coordinating roles (Cook-Sather, Bahti, & Ntem, 2019), given my limited time as an enrolled student and structural hierarchies, Alison outlined my role through a list of bullet points and offered to have exchanges on a Google document, where I would record my progress and reflections and she would comment.

While taking up a considerable amount of time, this exchange proved extremely rewarding. I separated plans and observations from my reflections, analogous to the format recommended for student partners' note taking. By outlining immediate and long-term goals separate from my reflections, I was able to envision how I could fulfill what the role entailed by breaking down (then seemingly impossible) goals into feasible tasks. For instance, to effectively document STEPP's development, I planned to observe student partner meetings and record notes, find an approach to naming the program, and periodically check in with participants. While plans were disrupted due to a rapid transition to remote learning caused by COVID-19, spontaneous opportunities emerged: I was able to organize an intercollegiate virtual discussion with student partners from nine universities — an intervention that led to an [innovative partnership](#) across higher education institutions, [reflection on pedagogical partnerships regarding transitions during the COVID-19 pandemic](#) (Cook-Sather & Bala, 2020), and the development of [resources for online pedagogical partnership work](#).

Initially, I felt a little uncomfortable composing a reflection section separate from my observations, but I soon discovered how this helped me understand and keep in touch with my feelings. While very excited, I was anxious about the uncertainty of my role, and this format helped me focus on the work objectively while reducing nervousness. Furthermore, this document offered a unique lens of self-reflection in the writing of this essay and in current pedagogical work. In conversation with Alison, I 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. Having exchanges with Alison, who was not at Vassar, enabled me to see STEPP's progress as someone observing the program while participating in it, a perspective my role necessitated and encouraged. I extended my reflections on this document to consider personal challenges, which invariably affected how I was approaching my role as a student coordinator given that pedagogical partnerships are essentially about developing relationships (Cook-Sather *et al.*, 2019, p. 243). Sharing in a typed, virtual format actually helped situate myself in a very vulnerable way while fostering continuous reflection through the writing process, which helped me become aware of trends in my subconscious reactions and work toward overcoming personal obstacles in and outside of STEPP.

Given that the role was so new and I defined it as I experienced it, I felt that I was *always* a student coordinator and participating in the program, which led to an exacerbation of emotions (mostly nervousness and excitement!) relating to STEPP. Because I so enjoyed STEPP-related work, I spent more time on it than I did on my classes! Like anything done intensely without a regimen for a long period of time, I found that I was unable to contribute to my full capacity and had to take consciously scheduled breaks for a couple of days. Being aware of the time and energy dedicated to pedagogical partnership work and formulating a schedule to participate in the program, as suggested for student partners, can enhance emotional, social, and intellectual productivity.

A perk of consciously considering how pedagogical partnership work intersects with daily life is that I became more aware of the qualities I brought to partnership work and of how STEPP helped me develop as a person. I found myself feeling more like I belonged to Vassar, more at ease facilitating, and more comfortable interacting with faculty in a non-hierarchical way. In fact, I now realize that my experience in the pilot was akin to my experience during the orientation: I learned more about pedagogical partnership through candid discussions with students, faculty, and administrators and through observing interactions to relish my work as an intellectual and emotional experience.

Navigating Boundaries and Hierarchies

Diving into relevant readings also offered me hints at valuable possibilities while providing subtle reassurances. For instance, I recognized after reading [*Pedagogical Partnerships: A How-to Guide for Faculty, Students, and Academic Developers in Higher Education*](#) that I was not alone in my concern about communication and interactions with others; STEPP was inherently

working “counter to traditional hierarchical structures and modes of interacting” and each participant was embracing risk in their role (Cook-Sather *et al.*, 2019, p. 96). Nevertheless, the duality of my role as a student partner and coordinator posed interesting challenges. Like student partners, I was concerned about failing to observe noteworthy trends and about hurting participants when providing or asking for feedback (Cook-Sather *et al.*, 2019, p. 99, p. 108). Like student partners, I appreciated the reminder that my role was not extraneous but actually essential because, as a student and person with diverse experiences, I brought something valuable to STEPP (Cook-Sather *et al.*, 2019, p. 235). Like student partners, I worried about devoting adequate intellectual and emotional effort and navigating role boundaries (Cook-Sather *et al.*, 2019, p. 218-219). However, like a program director, would I serve as a resource for students *and* faculty (Cook-Sather *et al.*, 2019, p. 257)? Would I have the agency to navigate a conflict with students or faculty should a challenge arise (Cook-Sather *et al.*, 2019, p. 257)? As someone both actively engaging with the partnership work and also observing STEPP as a fly on the wall, am I responsible for and would all participants feel comfortable with me supporting them (Cook-Sather *et al.*, 2019, p. 257)? As a coordinator, I was prompted to traverse institutional structures and norms, so with the untraceable pressure of establishing an inclusive approach (Cook-Sather *et al.*, 2019, p. 217), every happening in STEPP became relevant and impelled me to choose the significant exceptions and trends.

Due to the intersecting role of program director and student partner, the boundaries between asking permission and informing of action, requesting help and expecting support, and silently following and speaking up blurred, necessitating conscious choices that were directly dependent (and extremely variable) based on context. “Pedagogical partnership intentionally and radically complicates traditional roles and relationships . . . throw[ing] institutional and wider social identities into relief and call[ing] for the forging of new identities” (Cook-Sather *et al.*, 2019, p. 226). I was pushed to consider others’ pedagogical experiences (Cook-Sather *et al.*, 2019, p. 4) from a tertiary perspective, though like many students, I considered having little of my own and had internalized that students are not “among those with pedagogical expertise” (Arshad & Cook-Sather, 2018). It took others and me time to adjust to the idea that I am constantly defining and exploring my role through the intersection of my identities, but awareness of my role’s elusive nature that I gained through discussions and reading literature aided in alleviating my concerns. Considering the importance of boundaries and the balance between documenting and reflecting is also paramount to figuring out whether information is confidential and to ensuring that I do not hurt anyone when sharing private information. Clear communication, reassurances of confidentiality, and erring on the side of caution contribute to creating and maintaining trust.

It is crucial not to reduce people to their most prominent identity (Cook-Sather *et al.*, 2019, p. 103) and I was fortunate to find STEPP participants and others who helped me delineate my role while accepting me and my role’s undefinedness. Elucidating clear guidelines for myself and sharing those with others by exploring possibilities in the literature has been key to defining my responsibilities and to easing related worries. While the fluidity of my role offered a myriad of choices, it also meant a lack of inbuilt structural support for my work. Scheduling regular meetings with anyone involved in or interested in the work helped me to build relationships and develop a support network.

Acknowledging Disciplinary Perspectives and Understanding Facilitation

In addition to navigating hierarchies institutionalized by higher education institutions, STEPP encouraged me to steer tendencies that stemmed from a disciplinary perspective grounded in STEM. Through reflection, I realized that my education background has significantly morphed my perspective (Arshad & Cook-Sather, 2018) and this awareness was an important element in circumventing biases. For example, in comparison to the humanities, I found STEM classes to be very hierarchical; I quickly understood that my status as a freshman or sophomore in a predominantly upperclassmen classroom rapidly became one of my most salient identities. As one of the youngest people in the program, I became very conscious of my interactions with students and faculty and hesitated to take a forward role in discussions. Moreover, from my two years at Vassar, I noticed that question posing in STEM contrasted with the same practice in the humanities: in the former, the professor asks or responds to questions in the classroom with all assuming that the professor holds the answer; in the latter, questions facilitate discussion with the acknowledgement of no objective truth.

In STEPP, I found a need to restructure my thought process and reconsider how my predisposition based on previous training affects my contributions. One of my most valuable learnings in STEPP was uncovering that pedagogical partnership work is not about knowing but *seeking*: I realized that genuinely engaging and exchanging points of view with others through open-ended questions encourages growth and learning and builds cherished relationships in academia. Facilitation initially proved very difficult for me because my left-brained perspective hesitated to pose questions when I lacked knowledge of the answer, and I tended to embrace closed-ended questions. Readings, once again, reassured me in my progress as I recognized that “students might not be expert facilitators . . . but they bring experience and expertise as students and knowers more generally” (Cook-Sather *et al.*, 2019, p. 105).

The first conversation I was encouraged to facilitate with the student partners was about naming the program. Having analyzed participants’ initial expectations of the program, I shared the key words with student partners and asked if they could think of a name that, ideally, also had a good acronym. Fortunately, a student partner had already spontaneously come up with the acronym STEPP, which was readily adopted by all participants. Nonetheless, the experience reiterated how framing open-ended questions provides a flexible direction to approaching a solution while unfolding numerous possibilities. Open-ended question posing not only creates an inclusive atmosphere for discussion, but it also encourages learning — all seek knowledge over assuming the authority of an individual or group.

Due to the rapid switch to online learning, the next conversation I facilitated was at the end of the Spring-2020 semester. This was when the Faculty Coordinator of STEPP and I decided that the best means of recording participants’ experiences in STEPP was interviewing. This time, when enveloped with familiar emotions of nervousness and excitement, I realized the nervousness stemmed from my lack of experience in interviewing. I painfully recalled an informal high school interview where I stuttered over the questions I had written and left the interviewee twiddling their thumbs as I flipped sheets looking for my next question. I did not know what kind of and how many questions would be appropriate for a given time frame. I had no experience with qualitative research and was anxious about breaching privacy and hurting

interviewees when striving to compile information while retaining anonymity. At the foremost, despite my improved non-hierarchical interactions with those older than me, I was hesitant to interview faculty! In most of my interactions with faculty, they lead the conversation or I only have a couple of subject-related questions to ask. I feared slipping up in the mysterious interview etiquette; asking for too much or not having appropriate follow-ups could be disrespectful.

By receiving feedback on my interview questions, I felt supported — I was not the only one involved in interviewing! It so happened that I interviewed all student partners and then faculty partners, lending me to have adequate experience with interviewing and understanding its nuances (including waiting for the right time to pause, formatting interview questions in a table with bolded keywords to suit my thought process, spontaneously asking open-ended follow-ups, etc.). Sharing my drafts of the documentation of STEPP for feedback ensured that I was on the right track and that participants may not be hurt if I accidentally neglected privacy. In accordance with the idea that practice tends to increase knowledge and confidence, at the conclusion of eight verbal interviews, I felt more competent and capable of interviewing and facilitating extended conversations with faculty members. The uncertainty of delving into an unknown field of research bewildered me, but by seeking academic support (which, to me, was also emotional support) and permitting myself to have adequate time to prepare for the process reinforced my morale.

Concluding Thoughts

Over the summer of 2020, I facilitated a discussion with a group of three faculty and five students. I would have had little idea how to approach the conversation without my prior experience in STEPP. In fact, the purpose of this conversation *was* to propose the continuation of STEPP in the upcoming Fall-2020 semester.

Though the initial scheduling conflict due to a STEM class hindered my participation in STEPP, I am now able to integrate my passions for STEM and STEPP in the first collaboration between [Grand Challenges](#), an inclusion in STEM initiative at Vassar, and EPI to lead the continuation of STEPP while acknowledging possibilities that classes may be online and preparing for hybrid models in the Fall-2020 semester. With a “combination of avoidance and intentionality” that informed my choices, I have reached “a place at which pedagogical partnership is crossing disciplinary and role boundaries” (Arshad & Cook-Sather, 2018). Ironically, the necessity to defer my involvement in the Inclusive Pedagogies Working Group has led to this fortuitous moment.

To all students taking the lead in pedagogical partnership programs: each moment is serendipitous and will prove itself over time. Allowing a passion for inclusive education to propel pedagogical partnership work will reveal a wonderfully unimaginable path and facilitate a journey of self-reflection. The undefined vastness of the role might originally appear daunting, but it opens the possibility of creating new relationships. Likewise, deviating from a disciplinary background could seem intimidating, but it offers an opportunity to grow and to integrate academic interests.

Since the summer of 2020, when I documented the pilot, planned for the fall, and led the development of a Summer STEPP pilot in Vassar's [Summer Immersions](#) program, I have created [STEPP's website](#) and welcomed over 50 participants, launched [an intercollegiate collaborative program](#), reflected through writing and co-editing scholarly essays, guided the development of Emmanuel College's pedagogical program, and facilitated conversations for faculty and administrators on developing inclusive [assessments](#) and [academic environments](#). Neither could I imagine nor could I choose a different journey. A single STEPP can lead to many possibilities.

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