Building Bridges: Conceptualizing a Student-Teacher Partnership Program to Improve Pedagogical Practices

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When discussing student-teacher partnerships within the context of universities in Pakistan, many students might instantly resort to thinking about how students can be utilized as additional resources such as Teacher's Assistants (TAs) or Research Assistants (RAs) to help their instructors in decreasing their workload. However, in my opinion, the term "partnership" implies that both parties are equally and mutually invested in a particular cause, task, or purpose. If we consider this definition of partnership, then we can see students as capable individuals who can work alongside their teachers in ensuring enriching learning experiences for themselves and their peers. While discussing her experience of initiating a student-teacher partnership program, Cook-Sather (2018) proposes that such collaborative partnerships are "not only generative but also essential to fostering understanding between teachers and students and developing the most productive pedagogies." I have been fortunate enough to have been given a chance to become a part of a developing student-teacher pedagogical partnership program at Lahore University of Management Sciences (LUMS) and adding my voice to it.

Rethinking my Personal Perspective Towards Student-Teacher Partnership

As an undergraduate student, I felt that LUMS provided me with an opportunity to enrol in courses with brilliant students and professors. It was liberating to attend a university in Pakistan that follows international standards of education thus ensuring that its students feel comfortable in both professional and foreign academic settings; whether joining the workforce in Pakistan or continuing their studies abroad. Besides extracurricular activities, just like most Western universities, LUMS tries to engage its students in academic activities where students work alongside teachers as TAs or RAs. As TAs, students primarily provide assistance to teachers in grading papers, marking class participation and attendance, holding office hours for students seeking additional support, or in some cases even holding remedial classes to go over basic concepts. I found this model of providing additional assistance to students extremely remarkable, where a senior student would teach alongside a teacher to help other students. If I had been asked back in 2014 whether this model of student-teacher partnership is the most efficient one, I definitely would have agreed. However, now that I have been introduced to a new form of student-teacher partnership at LUMS, I can understand that perhaps this collaboration can extend even further.

Neutralizing Internal Voices to Overcome Barriers

I am currently pursuing an MPhil degree in Education Leadership and Management from LUMS. Coming back to the same institution that still follows its ideology of empowering students by giving them opportunities to work with teachers as TAs or RAs felt refreshing. However, when presented with the opportunity to become a part of the planning team of the new Pedagogical Partnership Program at LUMS, my initial response was one of doubt

because, at that time, I never imagined the role of students going beyond being an assistant in grading papers and holding office hours.

I vividly remember the ambivalence I felt sitting in the room where our first discussion was going to take place for the pedagogical partnership program at LUMS. Filled with enthusiasm and nervousness, I arrived well before the start time of the meeting. I was not surprised to see a fellow student, who is currently in her second year of the same MPhil program, waiting for other members to arrive. Despite not knowing her, I chose to sit with her because I felt that we could relate to each other because of our belonging to the student faction in that meeting. As the time of the meeting hour grew closer, the faculty members began entering the room and settling down at separate tables. My anxiousness and nervousness was gradually building with each teacher entering the room. These were faculty members and administrative staff that I had always held in high regard. I was again not surprised to see the members from the faculty and administration sitting with each other, but it made me feel alienated to a certain extent, which fed more into my anxiety.

The prime objective of this preliminary meeting was to get a conversation going around the theme of existing student-teacher partnerships and to explore areas where those partnerships can be further enhanced. This meeting also introduced the newly founded LUMS Learning Institute (LLI) to a selected few instructors belonging to a variety of academic disciplines and administrators working in different capacities in the Office of Students Affairs (OSA). This meeting was moderated by Dr. Launa Gauthier who is the Associate Director of LUMS Learning Institute and also a visiting Professor at the School of Education at LUMS. As the discussion was taking place, I could sense the intimidation of the fellow student (who was sitting at the same table) as we mostly observed different perspectives around the theme of collaborative partnership between faculty members and students.

My own reluctance to contribute stemmed from two internal voices. First, being new to the MPhil program, I was unaware of all the existing partnership work at LUMS. Second, since my schooling is from a low cost private school, and in most Pakistani educational institutions, just like in other South Asian countries, compliance and subjugation of students in the presence of an instructor are instilled in students' minds until they become virtues and norms for them (Bista, 2015; Hallinger, 2010). Therefore, I was hesitant to share my ideas because I felt as if I could not be on an equal footing with the faculty.

In addition, while writing this very essay, even the use of the term "student-teacher partnership" seemed problematic as I felt obliged to use the term "teacher-student partnership" instead to show my deference towards my teachers. Hence, I resorted to keeping my silence during the first half of the discussion. However, as time passed, I felt that by refraining from contributing to the discussion, then my perspective on the program would not be accounted for. Moreover, the exercises designed for this session proved to be helpful in making us comfortable in expressing our thoughts. For instance, during the discussion Dr. Gauthier conducted a few planned activities that required us to list our ideas about the partnership program. Afterwards, everyone shared his/her perspective on the questions that were being asked in those exercises. This encouraged me in opening up as I saw my fellow student also participating in the discussion thereby making me feel more comfortable in voicing my opinions and ideas so they could also be considered and evaluated.

Planning for the Partnership Program

There were three meetings in total during which a core group of faculty, staff and students were invited to brainstorm the necessary elements of a pedagogical partnership so a new program could be developed. In this first meeting, we debated what this partnership program would entail. We consulted some of the existing models of partnership programs that are being developed in multiple universities across the world. The more we discussed, the more aspects of a student's academic life we tried to incorporate into the program. These aspects included but were not limited to student partners in course design, pedagogical practice feedback to instructors, peer to peer assistance as RAs or TAs, and support to administrative staff. However, we realized that placing students in all of these roles under a pilot program could prove to be counterproductive and overwhelming. Based on the information gathered during these meetings, the next step was to devise a concrete student-teacher pedagogical partnership program to empower students—a program in which students would perform the role of a collaborator rather than mere assistants.

Moving Ahead Despite Challenges

The major challenge for me during this ideation phase was to ensure that I attend all these meetings. Unfortunately, I was unable to attend the next two meetings due to the alteration in my class schedules in the middle of the semester. I refrained from requesting a time change because most of the faculty members who were involved in these meetings already had a plethora of commitments, and deciding on a particular meeting time was a struggle in itself. Due to this, once the schedule of the meetings was finalized, it could not have been altered easily. Hence, the meetings went on as per the designated time in my absence since the other student member was present throughout the other two meetings.

Once these meetings were finished, the team formulated a draft of a questionnaire, which was later circulated among the entire faculty at LUMS. The basic purpose of this data collection tool was to gather feedback from teachers in varied disciplines including Engineering, Law, Education, Business, Anthropology, Accounting, Economics, Sociology, and other areas on different capacities in which they have been working with their students and their perceptions regarding a place for such collaborative programs at LUMS. I worked closely with Dr. Tayyaba Tamim, who is the co-lead for the Program, alongside Dr. Gauthier.

Since I was not able to contribute while the first draft of the questionnaire was being planned, I was enthusiastic when Dr. Tayyaba not only actively asked for my opinion on the questions and the structure of the document, but also considered suggestions regarding the questionnaire from me and my peers. This made me believe that some instructors, if not all, truly acknowledge the potential of students' views and pay heed to their advice. This notion was further solidified on two separate instances. The first occurred when I suggested that a few questions should be reworded; the suggestion was taken into consideration and the proposed changes were approved. Second, since the questionnaire was to be shared with every faculty member at LUMS, the survey had to be of a certain high standard. I was entrusted with the task and was given the sole responsibility of designing the online questionnaire, which made me invest more of time in the assigned task.

Once the form was finalized, its link was shared with the rest of the faculty members at LUMS. Based on the responses collected from the instructors and staff members, we have

officially initiated the pilot partnership program. I was under the impression that my involvement would be limited to the data collection phase. However, I was offered a continuing role in the program and was asked to assist the LLI team members in managing the pilot program; helping organize events, documentation, and providing support to the selected student partners for the pilot project.

A Note to Other Hopeful Student Partners

I can relate to all those students who might believe that working alongside their instructors as collaborators can be a daunting task. However, my experience of being involved in the development of a student-teacher partnership program has taught me that both students and teachers can learn from each other to a great extent at every stage of their professional careers and can rely on the expertise of their team members. For instance, the pedagogical partnership program at LUMS could not have been planned so thoroughly and efficiently had we not included faculty members from all the academic disciplines being offered at LUMS. Nor would it have been so successful if the program had lacked the valuable insights of the students.

In addition, students who are hopeful of becoming a member of such collaborative projects need to understand that no matter how much professional experience they have or in which capacity (collaborators, assistants, planners, etc.) they are being included in these partnership programs, they will *always* have certain unique skills that can be utilized in either refining or in implementing the project. This was my experience as well while working with this pedagogical partnership program. My previous professional experience had trained me in conducting surveys and performing data analysis. Therefore, although I was unable to attend all the meetings, I was still able to take the lead on designing the survey and worked closely with different stakeholders involved in the process.

Final Thoughts

This experience of sharing ideas with extremely qualified faculty members who acknowledge the possibilities of students collaborating with teachers to enhance the overall learning and teaching experiences has allowed me to re-evaluate my perception of my role as a student. This experience made it possible for me to learn that a valuable idea can originate from anywhere. In this case, I was able to capitalize on my previous professional experiences and assist the team by handling one of the major components of the pilot program—the designing of the online survey module. Finally, students need 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.

References

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