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THE IMPORTANCE OF TRUST IN STUDENT-FACULTY PARTNERSHIPS: MY JOURNEY FROM A STUDENT PARTNER TO A CO-LEAD PEDAGOGICAL PARTNERSHIPS PROGRAM

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Introduction

“How can I work with my professors as a colleague? Why would they want to work in collaboration with a “student”?” I thought when my professor asked me if I would be interested in becoming a student partner on a team that was working on the development of Pedagogical Partnerships initiative at the Lahore University of Management Sciences (LUMS) Learning Institute (LLI). The core group of professors, staff, and administrators needed a student voice in the planning of launching the pilot project of Pedagogical Partnerships Program (PPP). I joined the core group as a Student Partner where I sat with my esteemed professors as a colleague and questioned, *“Why me?”*

In this essay, I share my personal experience of realizing the importance of trust in reconceptualizing the idea of faculty-student partnership. In my role as a student partner, I continuously questioned my presence amongst the professors. It was hard for me to believe that in a culture where there is a high power distance between faculty and students I was being considered a colleague. I struggled with that unfamiliar concept until I realized the value of trust, which translated my role of student partner into Co-lead for PPP at LUMS. In order to describe my journey of this reconceptualization, I structure this essay as an internal monologue that I experienced in relation to the events that happened.

The LUMS Learning Institute (LLI) was established in 2019 as a new state-of-the-art center committed to enhancing teaching and learning communities, cultures, and practices at LUMS. Over the past year, the LLI has been developing programs that provide leadership in teaching and learning in three key areas: faculty development, technology-enhanced learning and teaching; and, research in teaching and learning. The fourth area that was planned included a Pedagogical Partnerships Program (PPP) as the new avenue for student-faculty partnerships.

How I became a Student Partner at LUMS Learning Institute

I have been a part of (LLI) since its inception, and it has been a very enriching experience for my professional as well as academic growth. My involvement was mainly in the capacity of a student partner within the core group who were responsible for a lot of the visioning and putting various initiatives into practice.

It all started with my involvement with one of my professors, who happens to be the Faculty Lead for the Pedagogical Partnerships Program at LUMS, as a part-time Research Assistant (RA) in the summer semester. I was called in for a meeting and asked by her if I would be interested in becoming a part of the core team (as a student partner) that was working on the development of

the pedagogical partnerships initiative. I got very excited and I instantly said, “Yes.” However, after having been offered this opportunity, I wondered;

Why me? Why is this position not being opened for other students? There are a bunch of my other class fellows who are working on the same project with my professor; why is the professor only offering this opportunity to me? Maybe I am the only one working on the site while the rest of my class fellows are working remotely (because it was summer vacation). Maybe that’s why I got this opportunity. Perhaps my constant availability made my professor offer this opportunity to me as a token of appreciation.

I kept on justifying myself that my professor had “granted” me this opportunity because either she simply likes me or it was due to my availability.

What I Expected in my New Role

After a few days, a visioning session was planned with the core group of the Pedagogical Partnership Programme. Initially, I thought that my representation would be limited to “the back of the stage” in terms of managing the communications and helping out a little in the report writing. But, my heart almost skipped a beat when I received the email of invitation, I was invited to this visioning session along with a bunch of esteemed professors from various departments of the university.

How could I possibly sit in a meeting with my professors? What would I say? I know I am confident enough to speak, but the fact that I would be surrounded by a lot of my professors whom I have known from a fair distance—what will they think if they don’t like what I say? What if I had a disagreement with them, will I have the space to disagree without making them upset? I think I am going to withdraw from this position.

Prior to my role as a student partner, I had worked as a Teaching Assistant (TA) as well as a Research Assistant (RA) in the LUMS School of Education, but the nature of these partnerships was very different. In fact, calling these ‘partner’ roles would not be accurate because there is an absolute power distance between the faculty and both the positions of TA and RA. Basically, in these roles, the authority lies with the faculty and the students in these roles usually do the assigned work only. That is why the idea of having a voice amongst a bunch of professors as a student partner was an alien concept for me. I had no idea what would be expected of me; how much liberty would I have? By liberty, I mean whether I could disagree without facing the consequences of offending the faculty. I knew where all of this was stemming from. My insecurities were anchored in my preconception of “partnership.” I believed that only the top-down approach works between faculty and students where students are given the small managerial tasks. Having so much uncertainty made me feel like I should withdraw from this role.

Recognizing one answer to “why me?”

To help me prepare for my new role, my professor sent me a bunch of readings from the literature on pedagogical partnerships so that I could come ready to participate in the meeting. Despite going through the readings, I felt a lot of pressure and anxiety. However, something happened before the meeting, and it changed my perspective towards my selection as a student partner.

Before this meeting, my professor reached out to me to talk about a project that I was working on under her supervision (as a Research Assistant). She expressed her concerns about the rest of my group fellows, who were also working on the same project: some of them were not attending the meetings, they were not serious about deadlines, and the quality of work wasn't outstanding either. She also told me how she trusted me with the project, that she was satisfied with my performance so far, and that she wanted me to further lead this project and delegate the work to the team members so that we could accelerate the progress. This meeting worked as a pivot for me in terms of my perspective on the first question, “*why me?*”

*All this time I have been underestimating the **factor of trust** between a student and a teacher in order to work as “colleagues.” My selection as a student partner in the core group of pedagogical partnerships program was not merely on the basis of “favoritism”; I had developed a relationship of trust with my professor and established my credibility by always showing up and producing good quality work.*

Wrestling anew with “why me?”

As the core team started to work on how to develop a partnership program, I attended a workshop on visioning the pedagogical partnerships at LUMS with a bunch of professors. Faculty members from various schools of LUMS were invited. Dr. Launa Gauthier, who is a visiting faculty as well as the Associate Director of LLI, was facilitating the workshop, and she explained the kind of work that is happening in various institutes all around the world and the conceptualization of the pilot in the context of LUMS. The first meeting was held in October 2019, and I was the only person representing students in a room full of professors.

I had done the readings shared by Dr. Launa, before the meeting, twice, so that I could actively participate in the conversations. However, being in a room full of professors made me nervous. While I was trying to concentrate on the on-going conversation, I saw a few of my class fellows peeping through the door with inquisitive expressions. With all of this going on in my mind, it was very challenging for me to fully participate.

Why am I the only student partner, largely outnumbered by the professors? My friends are peeping through the door; I must be ready to respond to their questions like, “What were you doing in a room full of professors?”

This experience was a little intimidating because I had several questions in my mind about the ratio of professors to students in a meeting that was aimed to conceptualize a “faculty-student

partnership” program. I felt the need to be accompanied by a few more students to have a better voice, although the first meeting was mostly about learning the different kinds of partnership programs, so there was not much debate. Moreover, the existence of a student in the conceptualization meeting of a program was an alien concept for my class fellows; that is why they were surprised and curious, and their curiosity intensified my own uncertainty.

More questions: Not only “why me” but also “why students”?

The second meeting of the core team was a lot more challenging than the first one because the role of students was explicitly questioned in the kind of pre-existing partnerships between students and professors at LUMS—i.e., Teacher’s Assistant (TAs) and Research Associate (RAs). The faculty members voiced the challenges that they had faced while working with the students.

Another reason this meeting was different from the first one was that there were a few representatives from the Office of Student Affairs (OSA) at LUMS involved. There were opinions about the students being irresponsible, procrastinators, or simply absent in the pre-existing partnerships. Some spoke about the students not being capable of leading the projects, and some also went out on a limb to flag the power dynamics in the collectivist culture of Pakistani institutions where there is a huge hierarchical barrier between students and teachers and the idea of collegiality is questionable for several reasons. Moreover, a few of the faculty members were of the opinion that there is enough partnership work happening at LUMS already, as the faculty members are doing projects with RAs; examples were given about publications and ongoing research projects. The bottom line was, some faculty seemed to argue, the ‘Pedagogical Partnership Program’ is just a fancy term; LUMS is already doing faculty-student partnership work.

The discussion went off on many different tangents, and Dr. Launa had to intervene and pull the whole group back from the cynical comments to the track of a more productive thought process. In this whole discussion, I questioned my own presence in this group more than once.

If the faculty is so unsatisfied or cynical about the role of students and their capacity to lead, why am I even sitting here?

Listening to all these comments and perspectives made me very sad and confused because all the insecurities that I had been trying to settle with came up to the surface, and once again it made me anxious about my presence in this room. This discussion had a huge impact on my ability to participate as openly as I might have. The definition of partnership that I came across in the literature was not of the sort that happens in RAs and TAs.

I feel that the values of pedagogical partnerships need to be cultivated in the culture of LUMS as a philosophy. In my opinion, the first and foremost value is trust-building, which feeds back as to why I am here. Because my professor who made me a part of this project trusted me and that is why I am sitting here.

After this meeting when I visited my professor, she asked me to invite some more students to attend the meetings so that there would be more student representation in the group. Having heard this from my professor made me feel relieved as I was already thinking, maybe having more students in the meeting can bring more student perspectives and there can be a more in-depth debate about the role that students play or the kinds of challenges that they face while working with the faculty in pre-existing partnerships at LUMS, i.e., RAship and TAship.

Moving into Partnership

The third meeting of the core group was held after a few weeks. The main agenda for this meeting was to figure out what kind of partnerships are already in place on campus and what the protocols of those partnerships are so that we can devise a well-informed pilot program. Based on the argument that emerged in the previous meeting about the purpose of pedagogical partnerships, Dr. Launa and Dr. Tayyaba suggested that a survey should be circulated amongst the faculty members of all the schools at LUMS to gather the data about pre-existing partnerships at LUMS.

This meeting made me feel a lot better for two reasons. First, the faculty members had a better idea about the conceptualization of partnership behind the Pedagogical Partnership Program; the kind of partnership that they were referring to, was not pedagogical partnership but rather the assistant-ship in which power lies with the faculty members and students just perform the tasks assigned to them. Second, three more students came on board and I was glad to have more student voices in the group.

The next step was to design the survey to gather data from all the schools at LUMS. Initially, a member of the core group who happened to be an administrator made the survey, but it didn't quite capture the responses that we needed. My professor turned towards the student partners and once again she entrusted me and my fellow student partners and the task of survey designing was given to us. This is where I felt like I have moved into a real faculty-student partnership. A major shift occurred following this meeting: the core group got divided into two sub-groups. One became the *advisory group*, which consisted of all the professors, and the other became the *working group*, which included Dr. Launa, Dr. Tayyaba, and four student partners. In collaboration with Dr. Tayyaba, we developed another draft of the survey and piloted amongst the advisory group to test its efficacy. Once we got their feedback, then all four of us student partners further developed the survey questions, and a final online version was prepared to send to faculty and staff. This felt like a real student-faculty partnership that Dr. Launa introduced us to, in the very first meeting. We designed the survey independently and sought the feedback of our professor and this collaborative effort made it possible for us to gather this important data.

This situation made me think that students are capable to take the lead and complete responsibility for a task. With the successful effort of gathering this important data through a tool developed by the student partners, the whole core group will probably realize that all they have to do is trust the students and they will work as their equals with a fair share in responsibility and leadership.

After those meetings and the distribution of the survey, only two of the student partners were left on board, the rest of the two couldn't continue the partnership due to personal reasons. We analyzed the data that we got from the survey and prepared a report to submit to the core group which I was sure would help in making informed decisions while launching the pilot of the pedagogical partnership program. With this work, I thought my role as a student partner would end as I was in my last semester and graduation was a few months away.

Translation of my Student Partnership into a Co-Lead position

While I was in the process of working on my final year project and also thinking about applying for a job, I got a call from Dr. Tayyaba.. She gave me some good news that a full-time job opportunity was available at LLI. I was so surprised because the position was “Co-Lead Pedagogical Partnership Program.” It was such an important role in which the hired-person would work alongside Dr. Tayyaba. . Once again, I had the same question that popped up in my mind when I was chosen as a student partner: “*Why me?*” However, this time I knew the answer.

While working as a student partner, I had developed a relationship of trust with the working group and with the LLI administrators, which proved to them my capability of pulling off such an important role.

My full-time job has started and I am attending the meetings in which important decisions are being made for the pilot of Pedagogical Partnership Program and supporting the students for a smooth transition into their role of Student Partners. Nonetheless, 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. I have to constantly remind myself that I must take the initiative and not wait for the faculty-lead to delegate tasks. It is a work in progress, and perhaps it will take some time.

Conclusion

I think that, for a culture like Pakistan, where I grew up having bare minimum agency as a student, and the inherent sense of hierarchy in the teacher-student interaction, programs like Pedagogical Partnerships can be groundbreaking. I presume that “why me?” is the question that many students like me ask themselves when their professors entrust them for a leadership task. My professor chose me as a student partner and then as a “Co-Lead” because she trusted me as well as my capability of working in a partnership. After this experience, I think trusting the students is a fundamental value that can work as a building block in faculty-student partnerships at LUMS.