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DEVELOPING AGENTIC ENGAGEMENT THROUGH AND ACROSS PEDAGOGICAL PARTNERSHIP PROGRAMS

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The stories of two student partners, Elena Marcovici (this issue), and Samantha Allard (this issue), inspired the creation of this issue of *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education (TLTHE)*. Marcovici and Allard had written autoethnographic reflections on their experiences of developing agentic engagement through their participation in Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges' Students as Learners and Teachers (SaLT) program and Florida Gulf Coast University's Student-Faculty Partnership Program (SFPP), respectively. Those autoethnographic accounts served as the primary data source for a research article the two of us co-authored with Allard and Marcovici (Cook-Sather, Allard, Marcovici, et al., in press), but we wanted to create a forum in which they could share their stories in full, in their own words. So we invited student partners at other institutions to write about their experiences of agentic engagement within and beyond pedagogical partnership in order to create an entire issue of *TLTHE* focused on what we see as a particularly generative form of student engagement.

Student engagement has traditionally been conceptualized as having three dimensions, or pathways, that contribute to academic progress—behavioral, emotional, and cognitive (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). Agentic engagement represents an additional and distinct dimension and refers to “students’ constructive contribution into the flow of the instruction they receive” (Reeve & Tseng, 2011, p. 258). Although this original definition implies unilateral action on the part of the student, Reeve (2013) characterizes agentic engagement as a reciprocal and transactional process, and he asserts that it “can be viewed not just as a student’s contributions into the flow of instruction but also as an ongoing series of dialectical transactions between student and teacher” (p. 580). While research on the concept of agentic engagement has occurred primarily in the context of classroom settings, the stories shared by student partners in this issue suggest that one’s experience of agentic engagement through pedagogical partnership may contribute to enhanced self-efficacy and autonomy in other contexts.

As the facilitator of the partnership program at FGCU, Bill Reynolds was introduced to the concept of agentic engagement through his work with a former faculty partner, Brenda Thomas, who was attempting to apply lessons from her individual partnership experience to her relationships with students in an entire class. Based on her observation that her student partner experienced enhanced personal agency as a result of their partnership, Thomas and Reynolds designed a scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) project in which she would engage an entire class in the process of negotiating the course curriculum—choosing readings, activities, and other aspects of the course, with the intention that the students would be more engaged and, ultimately, successful than students taking the course in its traditional format. While reviewing

the literature on student engagement, Thomas discovered the relatively new concept of agentic engagement and determined that this dynamic, reciprocal form of engagement was what she hoped to enhance in her students. Since that project began nearly two years ago Thomas and Reynolds have been engaged in an ongoing conversation about the relevance of the concept of agentic engagement to student-faculty partnership work, and this journal issue represents one outcome of that dialogue (Thomas & Reynolds, under review).

Marcovici's and Allard's essays threw into relief three related and mutually informing experiences:

- (1) Developing confidence in, capacity for, and commitment to supporting student and faculty learning as a result of joining a pedagogical partnership program as a pedagogical consultant;
- (2) Carrying that confidence, capacity, and commitment developed in and through pedagogical partnership work into the courses in which student partners are enrolled as students and enacting agentic engagement in their own learning and in support of others' learning; and
- (3) Extending the agentic engagement developed in the first two instances into contexts outside of the classroom.

These mutually informing experiences in relation to Allard's and Marcovici's reflections on their work (Cook-Sather, Allard, Marcovici, et al., in press) are presented in full here, and student partners in other partnership programs also reflected on their own experiences using this three-part structure. These student partners attend a range of colleges and universities, including: Amherst College, USA; University of Queensland, Australia; National University of Singapore, Singapore; Bryn Mawr College, USA; The University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong; and Lahore University of Management Sciences, Pakistan. Although all student authors addressed the three dimensions of developing agentic engagement within and beyond partnership noted above, each did so in their own way, as their essays illuminate.

In [**FINDING IDENTITY AND AGENCY THROUGH PARTNERSHIP AND COLLABORATION,**](#) Samantha Allard, Florida Gulf Coast University, Class of 2021, introduces her entry into a partnership as a "leap of faith" that afforded her insights into the ways that faculty think about teaching and learning and, more significantly, enhanced her confidence and trust in her own judgment and decision-making capacity. Allard highlights her participation in surveying and interviewing her partners' students to provide feedback about their experience of the course as a significant process in her development of agentic engagement. As a result of data that Allard gathered and interpreted, her partner made changes to the course, which Allard experienced as validating not only for her as the one gathering and communicating the student feedback, but also for the students, who were able to become "advocates of their experience instead of solely relying on the professor's expertise." She goes on to describe examples in which her partnership experience and the self-confidence it conferred enabled her to express her agentic engagement by advocating for change in educational and professional contexts. Ultimately, Allard notes that her "accomplishments within my partnerships validated the leap of faith I took when beginning this venture and inspired me to accomplish more. The gift of this validation changed my perspective

on every other challenge that I faced, and my small accomplishments became the model for larger ones.”

In “[TAKING OWNERSHIP OF MY LEARNING AND PUSHING FOR CHANGE](#),” Elena Marcovici, Haverford College, Class of 2021, highlights the ways in which her partnership experience greatly enhanced her trust in her own judgement and capacity to make meaningful contributions to student learning through her work with her faculty partner. In her words, Marcovici gained confidence “in my abilities to contribute to the partnership and the perspective to recognize how crucial reflecting on and delving into setbacks was to progress.” This sense of empowerment, in turn, manifested itself as agentic engagement in her own classes, in which Marcovici found herself to be more reflective about her learning and aware that she “had to prioritize my own learning in my own classes and to the best of my ability, ‘partner’ with all of my professors to help produce it.” Like Allard, Marcovici credits her agentic engagement in her partnership and, in particular, the validation she experienced, with enhancing her confidence to support social justice efforts at her college by collaborating with her peers to “contribute to a more inclusive environment that empowers them to prioritize their own authentic learning.”

In “[UNDERSTANDING THE VERSATILITY OF TEACHING AND LEARNING](#),” Eugene Lee, Amherst College, Class of 2023, begins by articulating the fears and anxieties that many students feel when entering a partnership with a faculty member, especially when the student has a different disciplinary background. In Lee’s case, he “feared that my background in the humanities would prove inadequate in a mathematical pedagogical partnership,” even though he had prior experience teaching in a secondary educational context. Instead of his humanities background being an impediment to his partnership work, however, Lee found that his grounding in pedagogy transcended disciplinary boundaries and enabled him to make suggestions that were appreciated and implemented by his faculty partner. One noteworthy element of Lee’s story is the way in which his personal experience of increased agency and confidence runs parallel to the main goal he and his faculty partner had for the students in the class: that they develop “self-efficacy in the classroom” and become more independent learners. Through Lee’s dialogue with the students in the class and his faculty partner’s responsiveness to their feedback, the students became more engaged in the course, and Lee had the affirming experience of his suggestions being implemented and bearing fruit, as evidenced by changes in student behavior. As Lee succinctly notes, “this experience afforded me not only agency, but also empowerment for my peers’ engagement.”

In two essays from students at the National University of Singapore who participated in a partnership with the same professor, Kundala Gayathri Shankar, Class of 2023, and Keith Low Jun, also Class of 2023, show how the actions and attitudes of a faculty partner can have a profound impact on students’ agentic engagement. Both students point to early interactions with their faculty partner that set the tone for their work together, and they describe their initial conversation with their faculty partner in remarkably similar ways. In “[LEARNING TO VALUE MY IDEAS AND TAKE CONTROL OF MY EDUCATION](#),” Shankar writes, “What took place was a surprisingly candid and bidirectional conversation, departing from my expectations of feedback exercises,” while in “[THREE KEYS FOR SUCCESSFUL PARTNERSHIP AND COLLABORATION](#),” Low Jun notes, “What I expected to be a one-sided interaction turned out to be a deep conversation that had a profound impact on me.” In Shankar’s case, the faculty partner’s

willingness to discuss issues of social inequality that Shankar notes are often “taboo” in a conservative Asian society aided in the trust and confidence she felt in herself and in her relationship with this faculty partner. Low Jun also found that his partnership contributed to both his motivation to act in a responsible manner and his empowerment, qualities that manifested themselves in his confidence to act as a group leader in his classes and in his commitment to maintaining strong relationships in his personal life. In the end, both Shankar and Low Jun identify the validation they received from their faculty partner as a key contributor to their evolving agentic engagement.

In “[BECOMING A PHD SCHOLAR: BEING AGENTIC IN A DOCTORAL PROGRAM](#),” Nattalia Godbold, PhD candidate, University of Queensland, writes about her partnership experience as one of “co-inquiry,” in which it was made clear that she and her faculty partner “were doing this together, but I could make decisions about how we proceeded.” As a doctoral student, Godbold approached the idea of co-inquiry from a scholarly perspective, thinking systematically about how aspects of her partnership experience might be relevant to the students in her faculty partner’s class and about how she could write for publication about her partnership. She notes that having her ideas taken seriously by her faculty partner “developed not only my confidence to contribute ideas and suggestions, but also my motivation to be part of the co-inquiry. I felt engaged and competent in this experience.” These feelings of agency and self-efficacy, in turn, contributed to Godbold “learning to trust myself in the research process—an important skill as a PhD student.” She goes on to show how her agentic engagement in her initial partnership led her to immerse herself in the scholarship of partnership, advocacy for student-faculty partnerships, and the dissemination of partnership strategies by facilitating trainings and workshops.

In “[A YEAR OF RECOGNIZING MY AGENCY THROUGH PARTNERSHIP](#),” Maria Bohan, Bryn Mawr College, Class of 2021, describes her experiences in a unique partnership program that emerged “from the intersection of the COVID-19 pandemic and the Black Lives Matter Movement uprisings,” and which was designed for students to assist faculty in developing and implementing “trauma-informed, anti-racist, hybrid and remote approaches to teaching and learning.” Although Bohan did not initially have a faculty partner when she joined the Summer Pedagogical Partnership Program (SPPP), it is noteworthy that she nonetheless attributes her interactions with peers and faculty in the program as instrumental in the growth of her agentic engagement. Bohan used her research skills to investigate best practices in teaching and learning, and she became a resource for peers and faculty, who participated in small-group conversations she facilitated. She later found that the agentic engagement and practical skills that she gained as a result of her SPPP work transferred to other aspects of her life, especially when she had to make a difficult decision to change her career path. She notes that “taking agency over my future would not have been possible had I not worked on breaking down the barriers of the teacher/student hierarchy in the SPPP,” and she ultimately came to see herself as an “agent of change” in her own life and the lives of her fellow students.

In “[DISCOVERING PURPOSE WITHIN OVERLAPS OF OUR INTERESTS](#),” Alya Prasad, The University of Hong Kong, Class of 2023, describes how she was able to merge her interests in education and the arts during a unique partnership experience called *Hear This!* This fully online program used a train-the-trainer model to prepare university students to facilitate an arts program for high school students. In Prasad’s case, she was responsible for partnering with her students in

the writing and performing of a radio drama. While being granted the trust and autonomy to work independently on her project, Prasad also experienced the security of knowing that her faculty partner was available as a resource person. As her partnership progressed, Prasad was able to participate in the dissemination of knowledge about the impact of partnership programs by contributing to scholarly presentations with her faculty partner. In her essay she notes that “this experience of co-presenting empowered me by acknowledging my opinions and perspectives, as a student, to be valid, important and valuable,” and she ascribes a developing sense of agentic engagement to the “heightened sense of empowerment and confidence” she gained from participating in international conferences with her faculty partner. Prasad concludes her essay by sharing examples of the “transferable skills” in leadership and communication that are attributable to her partnership work and applicable to her future work as an educator.

In “[FINDING AGENCY THROUGH STUDENT PARTNERSHIP](#),” Kriti Verma, Amherst College, Class of 2022, writes about the ways in which her agentic engagement was supported in two somewhat unusual partnerships. Typically, students are partnered with faculty in whose classes they are not enrolled, but in her first partnership Verma was both a student in the class and a partner for the professor. In addition, students are usually partnered with a single faculty member, but in her second partnership Verma was partner to two faculty members who team-taught an upper-level biochemistry class. While she attributed particular benefits to each partnership model, the most impactful features of her partnership experiences were common to both and reflect the reciprocal, iterative dynamics of partnering (referred to as “reciprocal causation” by Reeve [2020]). Verma writes: “I got to play a part in shaping the current class to an extent, but also future classes of the same subject, so that future students experience a class that was shaped by students who had experienced it, and gave feedback that was implemented. Hopefully, that would empower future students to also share any feedback they have, so that the class can continue to evolve.” The value of partnership accrues not only to future students, but also to Verma in her life outside of the classroom. She writes: “Because I have practiced sharing ideas and suggestions with professors, who are in an authority position, I’ve gained confidence to simply share my thoughts, when I might otherwise have decided not to share them.”

In “[CAPTURING MY VOICE AND AGENCY THROUGH PARTNERSHIP](#),” Mehak Najib, Lahore University of Management Sciences, Class of 2021, emphasizes the deep reflection that was necessary for her to successfully navigate a partnership in the context of a particular set of cultural constraints. Najib’s partnership involved both course design and course delivery components, each of which had particular challenges she had to overcome on her path toward agentic engagement. For example, in a course that explored the intersection of education and media, Najib had to help create content that was engaging and relevant without promoting “alterations in the already existing cultural beliefs.” In addition, during the course delivery portion of her partnership she had to process critical feedback from students taking the course, which initially was “discouraging” to the point that she became “quite nervous” about engaging with the students in the class about their feedback. In the end, however, she described the reflective process of analyzing student feedback and engaging with her partner as “the most fulfilling experience I have ever had.” The affirmation of her autonomy and the personal growth she experienced are illustrative of the outcomes associated with enhanced agentic engagement.

Also from Lahore University of Management Sciences, Fatima Umar (*MPhil ELM Class of 2021*) writes in her essay “[FROM TABULA RASA TO EMPOWERED STUDENT PARTNER: A JOURNEY OF COLLABORATION](#)” about a partnership that focused primarily on the design of a new course on “disruptive technology,” a topic that felt very removed from her educational experience as a humanities major. Because of her lack of familiarity with the subject and lack of experience in course design, Umar initially “struggled to voice my insights” and “felt anxious and frustrated with the pace of work.” However, after her partner responded favorably when Umar took the risk to suggest an alternative approach to their work, Umar found that “agentic engagement stirred within me as I began to realize the depth of my role and also because I started seeing my partner as a partner rather than a teacher.” Not only did her work with her partner become more satisfying and productive, but she was also able to apply her newly-earned agency to her work as a TA, where she “improv[ed] the learning experience of the students in the class and the teaching experience of the professor as well.” Upon reflection on her partnership, Umar came to view the experience as a “privilege” that resulted in her feeling “so empowered to not only have chances to voice my insights but also to make a difference for students around me.”

The student essays featured in this issue demonstrate the ways in which a variety of partnership models foster increased agentic engagement in the student partners and, perhaps, in the students who take classes from the faculty who partnered with these authors. In writing about their partnership experiences, students frequently used words like “empowerment,” “voice,” and “confidence” to describe what they experienced and developed through the partnership work and carried beyond it. Writing about agentic engagement, Reeve and Shin (2020) also capture one of the key dynamics of effective partnerships: “When teachers are responsive to students’ input and suggestions, reciprocal causation is likely to occur and the teacher and student become increasingly in sync with each other” (p.153). The key point here is that the validation students experience when their feedback to faculty is appreciated and acted upon is experienced as agency-affirming, and students and teachers can become collaborators in constructing the teaching and learning process.

Moving beyond what they can develop collaboratively with teachers, though, these students offer insight into how they can carry their sense of agentic engagement beyond the classroom arena and into other areas of their lives. Finally, in addition to the agentic engagement that developed over the course of their partnerships, many of the student authors noted that the act of writing these essays deepened their understanding of their experiences and reinforced their sense of agentic engagement. There are implications here, then, for the potential of reflection and analysis, such as reflective essays afford (Cook-Sather, Abbott, & Felten, 2019; Healey, Matthews, & Cook-Sather, 2020), to further support the development of students’ agentic engagement.

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