

Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education

Volume 1
Issue 34 Fall 2021

Article 2

September 2021

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Recommended Citation

Allard, Sam "Finding Identity and Agency Through Partnership and Collaboration," *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education*: Iss. 34 (2021), <https://repository.brynmawr.edu/tlthe/vol1/iss34/2>

FINDING IDENTITY AND AGENCY THROUGH PARTNERSHIP AND COLLABORATION

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Joining the partnership program at Florida Gulf Coast University (FGCU) was a leap of faith that I took within myself, and my goal was to develop professional working relationships with faculty and identify what promotes learning. While observing students and professors in the two partnerships I participated in, I was able to point out what was already working well and identify areas of improvement. This constant process of observation, dialogue, and application taught me to observe my skills and life in this way. The partnership provided me with a critical lens that was different from that of a typical student, and I was able to think about why professors teach the way they do and how they operate in and out of the classroom. My partnerships gave me a seat at the table and allowed me to gain confidence, knowing my ideas and perspective held weight and had value. This awareness brought about action and a new desire to change outcomes in other areas of my education and life.

For students in the classes I observed, they could enact their agency via mid-semester evaluations. Each semester, I developed a formal survey with my partner, which included questions such as: “What changes could your professor make that would help you learn better?” and “Is there anything in this class that disrupts your ability to succeed?” The survey centered on empowering students to voice concerns, ideas, and encouragement. As a part of my evaluation, I prompted students to share their thoughts with me as part of an open conversation without the professor present—an absence that enables greater agentic engagement. I learned that positive feedback was relational and that everyone can provide wisdom because each perspective and experience is woven from community. As students shared their vulnerabilities, this normalized the concept for others and allowed for a more open and honest dialogue between the students and me. They were not just passive observers but contributors to the story. Formulating, administering, and interpreting the student evaluations enabled me to juxtapose what I had observed in the classroom with student input. At this point, I reflected critically on how my partner and I could use this information to prioritize student engagement and success in the course with respect to pedagogical practices. After condensing my findings and suggestions into a report for my partner, we agreed that an integral part of this process was directly acknowledging and validating the students’ feedback. By doing this, the professor further included students in the course development and explained the purpose behind particular decisions while letting the students know their voices were heard. Beyond validation and acknowledgment, a significant outcome of the evaluations was a professor altering their course in response to my recommendations. The mid-semester evaluations helped change the traditional narrative that students encounter inside the classroom. Students enjoyed being able to play a more prominent role in their education as they became advocates of their experience instead of solely relying on the professor’s expertise.

Throughout my partnerships, a lot of the experience felt like fumbling around in the dark, especially at the beginning. I didn’t know what I was doing or if my efforts would be helpful and appropriate. Despite the support in the student partner meetings, I didn’t realize that I was experiencing formative growth that evolved as I learned to trust myself. I was forced to rely on myself and my partner as we worked together to achieve a joint goal. One of the most valuable

things I did when working with my partners was to question why things were being done and wonder if they could be done differently. I started to look for opportunities outside my formal partnerships to ask these questions and make room for myself to voice my ideas. I noticed the professors in my classes who engaged with students in this manner, and I was able to find a research mentor who fostered my confidence, learning, and abilities in a new arena. By developing relationships with faculty, I became comfortable creating deeper connections with my professors and, in them, gained valuable resources and mentors along the way.

The natural progression of the relationships I formed within my partnerships allowed me to see that this progression could occur anywhere and that it stemmed from me. My growth required presence, adaptability, and a willingness to be uncomfortable. The acceptance of these ideas led me to advocate for myself and others as I began to navigate my education while considering the relational dynamics of our lives. As I continued to explore how my own identity was tied to my work as a student just as much as it was to my work in healthcare, this would continue to shape my expectations of the university and the education provided to me. In addition to being a full-time student, I am also a Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) and work with the area's local hospitals; upon the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic, I became a frontline healthcare worker. As a CNA, I am often seen as the "last in the pecking order" and, in turn, felt that my voice would not be heard. When the pandemic hit, I volunteered to work directly with COVID-19 patients alongside other dedicated healthcare professionals. The mental and emotional toll that this work took on many of us and the vital necessity of my role inspired me to advocate for our experience. I participated in town hall meetings with hospital leadership to help obtain adequate protective equipment, safer working conditions, fair compensation, and recognition for the work we were all doing to support the community.

Working in conditions that few would choose solidified the importance of my presence, and recognizing my voice helped me claim that as part of my identity. I felt confident in my identity and knew I had a role in questioning the ethics behind the university's decisions on students' behalf. After enduring the effects of COVID-19 firsthand, I was skeptical of what I saw as hasty decisions to re-open the university and few resources for students to make other arrangements. My partnerships have taught me to work collaboratively to work towards the goal of student-learning and success. The dynamics of my partnerships provided the mold for how I wanted to work with FGCU to ensure that students were safe and provided an equitable learning experience. I took the time to send out emails voicing my concerns, resulting in a video conference with university leadership. In these communications, I stressed the need for a student and community-focused approach to return to in-person classes. I argued that the university would need to be cautious in their decisions and readily offer students other modalities to receive their education. Ultimately, this meeting's outcome was disappointing, but I learned from the encounter and grew more self-assured advocating for and through my experience. Clarity came through taking action, giving me the wisdom and insight to adjust, evolve, and make more informed choices moving forward. I drew from this experience and evolved awareness during my classroom observations and reflections on my peers' opportunities to enact agency in the classroom.

My partnerships have taught me to embrace the uncertainty I experience in new contexts and relationships and to trust myself, find my way into the answers, and relinquish the fear that I am

making the wrong decision. I learned to lean into my wisdom as well as communicate freely with others to gain wise counsel. Each question that I asked, each idea that I proposed, stretched my abilities to think diligently and flexibly in unique situations. This fluidity of thought lent itself to be readily extended into other areas of my life. My effort and perspective represent who I am and are a conscious connection to the world around me. Collaborating with faculty to foster their development and improve the student learning experience rewarded me with ownership of that experience and respect for the role I play in my education. My 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. When students are given the opportunity and ability to recognize their voice and the power they have to create actionable change within the classroom, this instills a sense of confidence and agency with a far-reaching impact (Cates, Madigan, & Reitenauer, 2018; Cook-Sather, 2014). Feedback from professors who have continued to teach students who were a part of our partnership has let me know that they are more engaged and eager to participate in meaningful discussions within the classroom. These anecdotes lead me to believe that students who have the opportunity to create actionable change are more prepared to claim their education for themselves and make sure they get the most out of every experience.

References

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