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THREE KEYS FOR SUCCESSFUL PARTNERSHIP AND COLLABORATION

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I first got involved in a student-faculty partnership when Dr. Lynette invited me to join her and a few other students to discuss how a class she taught at National University of Singapore could be improved. I felt a little skeptical at first as I thought it was simply another feedback exercise. After all, the University mandates such an exercise at the end of every semester, in the form of an online survey that is sent to students' email accounts. Being a teaching assistant myself in the Department of Computer Science, I also received feedback from my students in that routine. I was acutely aware of its limitations. Students simply rank teaching staff on a scale from 1 to 5 on various aspects, with little room for qualitative feedback. Seeing little incentive to do so, a sizeable proportion of the student population does not even participate in the survey.

Yet, it became clear that Dr. Lynette was attempting something different. She interviewed me and the other participants, in person, asking how the content, assessment, and design of the class could be improved. What took place was a surprisingly candid and bidirectional conversation, departing from my expectations of feedback exercises. After I agreed to take part, I received a set of guiding questions a week before I was interviewed by Dr. Lynette. The questions focused on the way the course was experienced by the students, instead of evaluating the instructor based on a set of parameters that matter more to the university administration than to students. For example, Dr. Lynette asked if I knew the intent behind the course content and assessment objectives. She also asked if the course content was effective in meeting course objectives, and, if not, what else could be incorporated.

Even with this clear structure and invitation, when the interview eventually took place, I felt apprehensive as I reflected my thoughts to her. I wondered if this was just another futile feedback exercise, my cynicism initially persistent. As time went by, I felt more comfortable in the discussion, as my narrow expectations grew into a space where my thoughts could flow freely. The calm demeanor of Dr. Lynette certainly helped. She was not just going through the motions, and we spent a substantial amount of time on how my suggestions could be implemented. The fruits of our discussions were later published on a blog run by the University called [*Teaching Connections*](#).

From the whole process, I took away three keys to the success of such pedagogical partnerships. The first is the capacity to act. I felt surprised initially with the capacity to change the experiences of students who would come after me. After all, capacity to act in this way is not usually something readily available in education. Students usually just do what they are told to do. In the absence of capacity, most people, including myself, are accustomed to carrying out instructions, sometimes blindly. Even when there are opportunities to better shape one's learning experience, there is a lingering doubt about whether one's efforts will amount to anything. However, I feel that the capacity to act is one that can be nurtured even when one has been conditioned over a long period of time not to do so. Dr. Lynette encouraged me to overcome self-doubt about my abilities and the urge to repress emotions and opinions I had about the education I was receiving. Even when I suggested something she did not understand or agree with, she patiently listened and tried to understand my perspective. This helped me realize that I had much room to act, that I need not be afraid of appearing silly or causing offence. Overcoming these hurdles felt like breaking free of the

shackles and gaining a superpower. In such a case, there is extra emphasis on the role of the educator to help the student overcome this deficit.

The second element is the motivation to act. I felt this motivation immediately after my session with Dr. Lynette. As I was the first to be interviewed, I shared my experience with the others taking part in the project, and what they could expect. I urged them to take part actively and ask me about how I felt. In a way, motivation is contagious, and I caught it from Dr. Lynette. I hoped I could pass it on to my peers to embrace agentic engagement, because I could see why they might not do so. Having a capacity to act means empowerment, but also means responsibility. From my experience, many people would turn down an opportunity to act as they do not possess the motivation to do so. I identify two main reasons for this attitude. First, for some, the benefits are unclear. If one can already thrive in an environment in the absence of individual capacity, why change? This culture is particularly evident in the education system where I come from. Secondly, even if the benefits are clear, some might anticipate difficulties in coping with the extra responsibility. They do not wish to potentially compromise their existing capacities and relationships, viewing responsibility as burdensome. Personally, experience in other areas of life, especially my time serving in the air force, persuaded me to view responsibility as empowerment. It was an opportunity to improve and uplift myself and people close to me. Managing the workload is just something I had to learn along the way. After all, if you put your mind to something, you can accomplish anything. Being motivated is necessary to do so.

The third element is the commitment to act. The display of commitment builds trust and confidence between faculty and students, and the sense that there will be a positive outcome for both parties. A positive outcome here implies constructive and beneficial change for faculty in terms of pedagogical methods and outcomes. Students want to see genuine change, that their words are taken seriously. There is no order in which one must come before the other. Both faculty and students must concurrently and continuously demonstrate commitment. Initially, while I was still apprehensive about the project, another person in my shoes could have decided to take the easy way out. Short of giving up entirely, giving cookie-cutter responses and putting in minimal effort would have undermined the level of commitment expected. Commitment to act is a conscious choice made by all parties every step of the way throughout the process. Laying out clear expectations for both parties and establishing goals and milestones for the partnership is essential to keeping everyone involved invested in the project.

In retrospect, the experience with agentic engagement through my partnership with Dr. Lynette resulted in a subtle shift in how I behaved in my undergraduate studies. I experienced this shift mainly in classes where group projects made up a large part of the assessments. In most situations, being someone eager to take the initiative, I found myself as the de facto group leader. It was something I embraced because my newfound sense of agentic engagement made me more confident that I would perform the role well and effect a positive outcome. At the very least, it would be a learning opportunity, another chance for personal development. In that role, I noticed several similarities between an instructor and a team leader. For example, in both roles, I actively engaged the people around me and encouraged them to strive for their best. People often looked to me for direction, even when I may be unsure. That means that I was able to apply my knowledge of agentic engagement from the perspective of an educator, while at the same time being a student.

I realized that I became more confident of my own authority, like how a professor exudes authority and uses it to run a class well. While I could not offer the knowledge of a professor nor demand the trust of my teammates, I developed a clarity of thought and the comfort in expressing those ideas. These characteristics are also apparent in how a professor teaches students. Secondly, I became more motivated. Being the team leader also means that not only your grades, but also your character and reputation are on the line. This gave me more to lose, with little in return. Being put in such a situation would be tough for most people, but I managed it quite well. I was energized by the desire to prove to myself and others that I was capable of handling extra responsibilities. Finally, commitment and trust-building. Most people would describe me as a committed person, but I thought this experience really helped me as a team leader. By showing that I cared deeply about the project, I was able to persuade my teammates that this project would be worth my time and encourage them to be invested as well. In the end, not only did I do well in those classes, but I also felt more confident leading a team in a real-world situation in the future. In this manner, one is able to see the parallels between teaching and leading a team.

I have found a way to apply what I have learned in my life away from college as well. Even before the pandemic, our increasingly digital lives coincided with a rise in loneliness. Pandemic restrictions have exacerbated the situation. To overcome this, I thought of viewing personal relationships through the lens of capacity, motivation and commitment. Armed with nothing more than a Zoom account, I organized a video call with different groups of friends and loved ones almost every day. I was initially worried that no one would attend my calls given the stress that everyone dealt with during lockdown. For my college friends, it also coincided with the period when final exams were being held. To my surprise, people expressed their thanks that I tried to help them connect with their social circles in that era of loneliness. I was heartened to hear that because I was also motivated by concern for my loved ones and their mental health. Even if some did not join the first or second meeting, I invited them again and again to join if they wanted to. Most eventually did. I suppose that was my way of demonstrating commitment to the people I care about. This has allowed me to maintain existing and build new relationships in unprecedented and challenging circumstances.

It was only when I received the call for submissions to this special issue of *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education* that I learned about agentic engagement, and how it requires capacity, motivation, and commitment. I am glad to learn that I had independently discovered these factors, which agree with the view of pedagogical experts. Indeed, being a part of this project has given me an avenue to embark on a journey of self-discovery and improvement. Perhaps my partnership experience with Dr. Lynette could be the reason why I received better ratings in my teaching assistant role compared to before and even received nominations for teaching awards. I also feel a deep sense of satisfaction when friends who later take Dr. Lynette's classes share how much they enjoyed and learn from her. I hope that they will pay it forward and engage in this never-ending exchange between teachers and learners.