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BECOMING A SCHOLAR: BEING AGENTIC IN A DOCTORAL PROGRAM

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Engaging in a PhD program involves learning about becoming an academic. Most would assume that such learning must encompass engagement from students. However, in connecting with other doctoral students, I found that many of them feel isolation, fear, and a lack of expertise when engaging in their studies. Fortunately, this hasn't been my experience. I have been reflecting on why this is the case, and I believe a significant reason is the fact that I have been working with my advisors in partnership. This partnership distinguished my experience from those of the other students I spoke with and has grown over time to include student-led partnerships with other PhD students my teachers also supervise. In this way, we have expanded the idea of students as partners into our PhD learning community.

I can recall the first significant event that shifted my entire behaviour as a student, prompting me to become a more active contributor to my own learning experience. I was invited to work with one of my advisors, a faculty member, to explore the use of partnership practices in a large undergraduate classroom of approximately 60 students. My role was to work with her to understand how students perceived the creation of space to take an active role in shaping their own teaching and learning experience. Once I enrolled in the formal student-staff partnership (SSP) program at UQ, my faculty partner and I began by meeting and discussing how we might work together. She suggested we work as co-inquires, introducing partnership to the students in her classroom and then exploring how students felt about this experience through a study.

As a doctoral student studying teaching and learning in higher education, I found the idea of co-inquiry quite exciting, as I had just begun my thesis. Being included as a co-inquirer was meaningful to me as a beginning researcher and aspiring academic within the university, and it also felt achievable. It wasn't my entire thesis. Instead, it was a small-scale study where I had the opportunity to contribute and lead. Our discussions made it clear I wasn't on my own; we were doing this together, but I could make decisions about how we proceeded. In this way, I was developing confidence and capacity for my own skills as a research student.

The implementation of partnership in a large classroom, as well as the investigation of it, was tricky. The course was a capstone focused on professional learning for final-year, preservice, primary school educators—one of the last courses students take prior to graduating and beginning their teaching career—and the students had never experienced partnership opportunities before. My faculty partner and I didn't know what to expect exactly, but it made sense to us that the students could be involved in making decisions about what content they needed to cover and when to prepare for their final practicum. Students were given options to demonstrate their competence as educators in different ways by selecting their preferred assessment method for 10% of their course grade. The goal was for students to feel they had ownership over their course and how it fit in with other courses and their preparation for preservice teaching, as well as their life in general as university students and human beings.

We decided that whilst my faculty partner was teaching the lesson, I could begin observing the class and talk to the students, gauging their experience of and interest in being active participants in their learning and their openness to speaking to me in formalised focus groups.

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At the end of the first class, my faculty partner asked me what I thought: "How did the students feel about being active participants in their learning?" I shared honestly: they were uncomfortable. I could see (and from talking to some of them while I was in the classroom) the opportunity for choice was exciting and welcome, but that didn't minimise that it was also difficult and new. They were final-year students studying at university for four years, and this was the first time they were given this opportunity. I found their experiences were no different from mine: I was new to partnership and being a graduate student, and despite being excited by the experience, I also felt uncomfortable in the beginning. For years, we have all been part of traditional classrooms where we were traditional students absorbing knowledge.

Thinking about the parallels between their experiences and mine, I drew on what changed for me. When was it that I shifted from feeling uncomfortable to feeling I could make decisions based on what is relevant to me and my interests as a student? It was when my faculty partner asked me how I thought we should work together. When I was given opportunities to share my opinions and ideas, my contributions were always met with interest, consideration, and respect. This made me feel a sense of agency as a student. I had opportunities to explore and share my interests, and I received guidance and support from my faculty partner. So, I suggested that she get feedback from the students. I proposed that she ask them what they thought of these opportunities to make decisions about their learning. I suggested that she ask them to write one thing they enjoyed and one thing they thought could be improved on a post-it note as an exit card at the end of the lesson. This would give us a snapshot of what they thought and an opportunity for them to have voice and choice in the class, as their feedback could be implemented in the following lesson.

I was surprised at how comfortable I was in sharing this idea with my partner. It was the first time I had experienced true student/faculty partnership after four years of undergraduate education and two years of graduate school. In this partnership, I was taken seriously; my partner implemented my suggestions. Contributing ideas and being part of the ongoing planning of the implementation of partnership 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. The natural and meaningful progression of our partnership made me feel comfortable and safe in the unknown, and I was willing to grow and work through new experiences.

After establishing our partnership, my faculty partner and I added a new student partner to our project and formalised this co-inquiry experience in a co-authored publication (Godbold, Hung, & Matthews, 2021). I was invited to lead the project (if I wanted to). I used this as an opportunity to channel my agency as a student and develop my own competence as a PhD student. I decided that I wanted to collect data from the students and begin the first round of analysis, establishing with my faculty partner the key findings I thought the students were communicating. My sense of agency from the partnership experience enabled me to act independently in leading this paper (with guidance and support from my faculty partner) because I was given voice and choice in our work together. Similarly, we found that the students in the class also felt they were able to overcome their discomfort and conflict with the newness of partnership. They articulated that this was because of *decision making*. By being able to make decisions about their learning and assessment, they felt motivated and acknowledged as autonomous individuals and trusted adults. They found the process of decision making signaled they too were competent learners (Godbold, Hung, & Matthews, 2021).

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One of the most valuable things I experienced in this partnership was learning to trust myself in the research process—an important skill as a PhD student. Working as partners on a formal study and publication built my confidence as a student researcher. These skills—collecting data from students, analysing and discussing results in my partnership work—built my confidence and capacity as a beginning scholar in the university. In this way, my experience motivated me because I had opportunities to trial my research abilities as a student.

Since the partnership, I have used these skills immensely in my PhD program. They have led my work in partnering with other PhD students in the university to collaborate on projects. For instance, with support and encouragement from my advisor, I led a PhD student learning community that functioned as a student-led partnership. This community has been running for a few years now and we take turns in its organisation and development. Through the sharing of our PhD experience, we have had an appreciation for constructive feedback and peer support of our individual PhD research. This experience provides us a new space to share meaning and negotiate diverse perspectives, broadening our worldview and scholarship.

As a result of this partnership experience, I have become even more of an advocate for partnership practices in higher education, and, how these practices can reach more and more students in Australia. I have delivered partnership workshops for academics with my faculty partner, joined the universities SSP community of practice, become involved in the *International Journal for Students as Partners* (*IJSaP*), joined partnership advisory groups at the university, presented our partnership findings at an international conference (prior to Covid-19), and been part of running pre-conference workshops on partnership processes with other partnership scholars in other countries. I believe the fact I am a doctoral student working in partnership offers a different perspective to undergraduate partners. My hope with this reflective essay is that it inspires other faculty and student partners to engage in similar experiences (both faculty-student and student-student partnerships) to what I have encountered on my journey to becoming a scholar.

References

Godbold, N., Hung, T. Y., & Matthews, K. E. (2021). Exploring the role of conflict in co-creation of curriculum through engaging students as partners in the classroom. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 1-15. doi: 10.1080/07294360.2021.1887095