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PARTNERSHIP FOR EMPOWERMENT AND DISCOVERING ONE'S PURPOSE

Alya Prasad, The University of Hong Kong, Class of 2023

From a young age, I have been passionate about different forms of art, specifically drama, dance, and music. I really enjoyed the process of bringing stories to life with the body and voice through opportunities in numerous interschool dramatic duologue and dance events. Initially, all of these artistic interests of mine seemed as if they were isolated representations of who I am, segregated from my professional pathway as a double-degree student studying a Bachelor of Science and Bachelor of Education at The University of Hong Kong (HKU). However, after joining a pedagogical partnership program, I was able to unite these artistic interests with my professional preparation as well as develop a sense of empowerment towards agentic engagement in my work within and beyond the partnership.

The pedagogical partnership program was called “Hear This! Festival of Radio Drama,” which was curated by Ms. Kempston Tanya, a lecturer from The Faculty of Education, HKU. My role within the partnership was composed of two parts: to be a trained mentor to secondary school students to facilitate their learning through a creative medium of drama, followed by co-presenting at a conference and seminar with Ms. Tanya at the post-project phase, to introduce the nature of the partnership and my unique student perspective to academics and students. Through my experience, explained in the paragraphs below, I have found that a partnership can flourish if partnering students are given adequate training, resources, and clear instructions of their role. This support ultimately makes the process smoother for students when they proceed to work on their own autonomous, self-directed learning activities, as I did.

Hear This! took full advantage of the absence of physical classrooms during the pandemic via online teaching and learning by using the online conferencing platform Zoom to celebrate drama and promote English-language learning. The program utilised a “train-the-trainer” model. In these training sessions led by Ms. Tanya, we were given practical tasks to allow us to experience the nature of drama making in an online setting and better familiarize ourselves with the challenges it could present to our secondary-school students. Some of these tasks included using “constraints,” such as visual cues, beginning, middle, and ending lines, and muted videos. These constraints made my creativity flourish, as they gave me a sense of focus and direction to which I could act more resourcefully to generate novel ideas. After the training phase, I led a group of secondary students to write and perform an original radio drama, provided an encouraging environment for them to exercise their creative and collaborative abilities, and helped them understand theories and concepts of radio drama as an artistic and expressive medium. Working with my students, I was able to apply these constraints introduced in the training, to which students responded positively and creatively.

This preparation constituted a partnership through the dissemination of knowledge and skills related to drama and teaching concepts from a top-down approach, which further emerged through the creativity and insightful perspectives I brought from a bottom-up approach after applying the training within my independently led group of secondary-school students. To elaborate, as a trained student mentor, I was responsible for monitoring and supporting the

learning process for my own group of secondary school students after being introduced to the project and its aims, such that I assumed independence and used my own judgement. I was able to approach Ms. Tanya, who was available as a resource person, called upon when information or expertise was needed. While working closely with my students, I was able to identify strengths and areas for improvement within the *Hear This!* program structure and day-to-day educational tasks, which served as valuable information to further refine the learning experience for secondary students moving forward. I recognised that this model and approach to a pedagogical partnership program was effective as it acknowledged the different knowledge, skills, and abilities academics and students brought to the work. Specifically, academics disseminated knowledge to partnering student mentors, while they applied it to facilitate learning outputs, provided individualised support and feedback to secondary-school students through effective communication skills and creativity, and elevated the program quality through insights gained from the front office experience.

The partnership experience affected my sense of agentic engagement by enlightening me on the broad prospects of uniting my artistic interests towards and through an appreciation for the partnership structure, specifically the clear instructions and resources provided in the training phase, support during the project implementation phase, and improvement plans discussed during the reflection phase. This growing awareness and appreciation allowed me to recognise the effectiveness of such a program model and approach, and inspired me to mirror similar structures within my own practice of engagement, which I further describe below.

As mentioned above, the partnership with my professor extended further through two co-presentations. For one of those I co-presented at a seminar held by the Centre for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning (CETL), HKU, entitled “Students-as-Partners Series: Are we ready to let go of some responsibilities and authorities?”, while another was at the international conference, “Advance Higher Education UK – Teaching and Learning Conference 2021: Teaching in the Spotlight: What is the future for Higher Education Curricula.” At both these events, I collaborated with my faculty partner to make decisions on the nature and content of the sharing sessions to best target student and faculty understanding of the program, such as through developing the presentations in interactive and demonstrative manners. Within these presentations, I was further able to provide unique student perspectives of the partnership and my experience contributing to education during COVID-19, which could enhance the capacity for knowledge exchange.

This experience of co-presenting empowered me by acknowledging my opinions and perspectives, as a student, to be valid, important and valuable. This heightened sense of empowerment and confidence promoted my sense of agentic engagement by allowing me to contribute more towards knowledge exchange events, such as international conferences and university forums, seating both academics and students. For example, I presented at the International Symposium and Expo on Service-Learning and Socially Responsible Global Citizenship organised by the Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hong Kong Teaching Excellence Alliance Symposium and at the Centre for the Advancement in Inclusive and Special Education Annual Forum 2021 held at my university.

This experience of participating in the pedagogical partnership program positively impacted and inspired me significantly by exposing me to the possibilities of merging education with artistic interests. Since the project, I have been able to apply what I learnt, to develop and curate my own initiatives of agentic engagement, that simultaneously cater to the intensified educational and digital divides amid the pandemic, especially within access for marginalised communities. Since *Hear This!* provided training, self-directed creative working opportunities when leading a team, and a platform to boost confidence and communication skills through presentations, the experiences acted as ideal stepping stones, fuelling confidence in my abilities, skills and leadership capabilities.

Prior to the partnership, I had been able to benefit from university courses and education significantly. For example, participating in the course, *Nurturing Global Leaders*, where I taught refugees and migrant students in Thailand, gave me an enhanced global outlook, which brought my attention to the phenomenon of unequal access to education across marginalised communities. I was able to integrate and apply knowledge from both my common core courses which cover core intellectual, social, and imaginative skills for HKU undergraduates, *Making and Appreciating Drama* and *Poverty, Development and the Next Generation: Challenges for a Global World*, together with numerous education faculty courses in my program that allowed me to grasp fundamental pedagogical theories and strategies.

I did not enact agentic engagement within these courses, but instead used the knowledge and insights gained from them and from the partnership program to further deepen my engagement and sense of agency for undergraduate students beyond the university through curating my own projects. In 2020, I co-founded a global student-led organization and registered charity called “Artpeace” that aims to use different forms of art for positive social change. With 11 core team members across eight different countries, we have been able to embark on projects embodying unorthodox and innovative qualities in order to overcome the constraints brought by the global pandemic, such as incorporating elements of technology and socially distanced activism through online broadcasting, teaching, learning, and interaction.

For example, “Art Apart” was a virtual opportunity for English language learning, mentoring, art appreciation, and cultural exchange through art, drama, and music workshops. It was tailored to refugee and migrant students in Minmahaw School, a non-governmental organisation along the border of Thailand and Myanmar, delivered by undergraduate student facilitators from HKU and the National University of Singapore. It ran for a total of six months, fostering acquisition of language skills and creativity. “Art 5 All” was a series of inclusive art education workshops delivered by fifty international undergraduate students from five different countries/regions, specifically Hong Kong, Singapore, Australia, Japan and South Africa, for students with physical disabilities and cancer at Hong Kong Red Cross Margaret Trench School and Children’s Cancer Foundation, Singapore, to nurture the culture of inclusivity, awareness, and understanding for students with special educational needs worldwide. Not only were these two projects triumphant in the provision of unique learning opportunities to target beneficiaries, but also to our volunteering university students, by exposing them to experiential learning, teacher training, instructional strategies, and creative opportunities to collaborate internationally.

Participating in “Hear This! Festival of Radio Drama” and the work it inspired enabled me to contribute through my leadership to generating project directions and work delegations that enable beliefs into practice within a timeline to reach end goals. I made vast contributions through my skill set of having an artistic background, volunteering experience with refugees and majoring in Education, and having experienced “Hear This!” For example, in “Art Apart,” I created all the online teaching and learning lesson plans and resource packages, and trained our HKU and NUS facilitators in art, drama, and music, and in various teaching strategies in our facilitator briefing session to best prepare them for the experience and challenges they may face when working with our refugee participants in Thailand in an online setting. The program and partnership experience empowered me to merge my passions for education and art towards the purpose of positive social change by embarking on the journey of leadership, activism, and service-learning. Most importantly, the experience uncovered my purpose within integrating and applying isolated concepts across various educational courses and artistic experiences.

Since participating in that partnership work, the success of these experiences in fostering and extending agentic engagement has been well-recognized. For instance, I was awarded the 26th Hong Kong Outstanding Tertiary Student Service Award, invited by Humanitarian Affairs Asia to be a Youth Speaker at their *Lead as a Global Citizen World Series Webinars*, and the local Hong Kong newspaper, *Youth Post* by *South China Morning Post*, also acknowledged Artpeace’s work by covering our story and featuring me in their online and physical copy.

Overall, the pedagogical partnership program motivated me to think creatively and apply newly acquired knowledge towards a purpose for positive social change beyond the program and university. I was inspired to think more critically and be more innovative, especially when considering multiple dimensions of project feasibility during the pandemic, but still maintaining engagement and value. My participation in some external competitions, such as the 8th Hong Kong Outstanding Prospective Teacher’s Award, can be evidence of this change, where I won the top prize for my work in creating a biological sciences hybrid game-based learning approach. I’d also say that through the partnership program, I was able to gain so many transferable skills within leadership and communication that I am applying in my journey of becoming an educator. These experiences of out-of-classroom application of my skills empowered me to view my isolated interests and hobbies as valuable skill sets, which has further fuelled my purpose and ambition within the education industry and societal contributions.