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FROM TABULA RASA TO EMPOWERED STUDENT PARTNER: A JOURNEY OF COLLABORATION

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The pandemic pushed many of us to try new things, and, being a student of education, I knew that I had limited exposure to course design. Therefore, I opted to participate in a Pedagogical Partnership in Spring 2021 at the Lahore University of Management Sciences in Pakistan. Under this partnership I was paired with an administrative member of the university's business school with an extensive background in Economics to design an introductory course on "Disruptive Technology: Blockchain, Big Data and Artificial Intelligence." The goal of the course was to introduce business school students without a scientific academic background to these modern technologies revolutionizing the business world today. This course did not exist at the university before, and so my partner and I began from scratch to create the course outline, find essential reading material, and develop meaningful assessment components. Not only was the course design a novel experience for me, but the content of the course was focused on state-of-the-art disruptive technology. Naturally, this course was to be rooted in science. I, on the other hand, have been a very humanities-focused individual most of my life. This lack of disciplinary familiarity was perhaps the most frightening and exciting aspect of stepping into this experience. The pedagogical partnership was unique in terms of the web of impacts it had over the semester. While the course itself was developing out of research of unfamiliar concepts and thought processes based on trial and error, I also found that the relationship between my faculty partner and myself was evolving throughout the semester. Moreover, I could sense a change in myself, my perspectives, and my ability to voice them.

Growing up I have always been somewhat of a teacher's pet—someone who would go above and beyond to follow stipulated guidelines and excel at all assigned work. This trait is perhaps the first aspect of myself I learnt to let go of during the partnership. My faculty partner had limited experience with course design in a scientific space as well, and she needed a partner who could build upon her views, push her to think outside the box and speak up when an aspect of the course could be further improved. But during the initial weeks of my partnership, I struggled to voice my insights and tried to follow instructions given by my partner. It was only after being stuck for three weeks on our initial plan to develop a contextual case study that I began to feel somewhat anxious and frustrated with the pace of work and found it in myself to voice my concerns. This was an interesting struggle for me. On one hand, I was nervous about bringing up my frustrations with the roadblock we were facing, and, on the other hand, I felt discomfort with failure. I knew that developing a contextual case study from within Pakistan would require contacts in relevant industries, which neither my faculty partner nor I possessed. Hence, I decided to propose to my partner that we utilize international case studies as reading literature and have more context-specific discussions on them within our course.

I explained to her how I felt uneasy about not being able to meet our timelines, and I wanted us to bring a little more flexibility within the content we were developing. To my surprise my partner was elated with my insight and eager to rework our plan moving forward to incorporate my insights. Her acceptance made me feel as if both our opinions could be weighed equally and that this relationship did not require me to merely follow clear instructions but rather help pave a collective way through. It was at this moment I realized the true essence of the pedagogical partnership and began to view it as more than the teacher-student relationships I was familiar with growing up. After this exchange, we decided to keep searching for contacts over the semester to potentially develop the Pakistani case study, but we no longer thought of it as a

prerequisite to the success of the course. I think this initial jolt of confidence really helped me evolve from a student to a ‘partner’ who voiced all her perspectives much more easily and openly moving forward. 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. Somehow this humanized her, helping me realize that she has her limitations as well and that my expertise is valid and meaningful enough to cover those limitations.

I think the “partnership” concept is very new on this side of the world where, due to collectivistic, traditional values, many students treat faculty with immense respect and fear that questioning them may be a sign of disrespect. But the partnership really helped me understand that faculty and students can be equally engaged in the learning process, and if perspectives on both sides are equally weighed, learning can reach exciting and innovative heights. As a result, I was able to bring my creativity and know-how of learning principles first as a student and then also as a student of education. Somehow my faculty partner and I emerged as Yin and Yang. She focused on constructing relevant mathematical models, whereas I developed reflective formative assessments for students. Our diverse expertise helped us develop a much more comprehensive course.

A second capacity that evolved during this experience was the ability to sit with failure and not be married to one plan of action. Over the course of the partnership, many of our top ideas could not materialize, and we had to work out a new game plan. It was interesting, like playing a sport: no matter your expertise, you don’t really know how things will play out on the pitch, and you just have to adapt to different externalities. I think failing at executing certain ideas is what ironically led to finding success in the partnership itself. Failing to find a resource to develop the case study helped my partner and me bring flexibility into our perspectives, and we were able to bring more out-of-the-box ideas to our meetings. Breaking down the failure helped open doors for more honest communication and build trust between my faculty partner and me. We were able to share our frustrations, anxieties, and ideas to get back at it again, and that’s what helped us support each other through the experience and collectively learn from it. This trust in each other helped us build and rebuild the course repeatedly until we formed something solid.

The pedagogical partnership allowed me to genuinely reflect on my experiences as a student as well. I looked back and realized the importance of course evaluations and feedback that the university would pester us students to fill out. I realized how some of the professors genuinely paid attention to the feedback and altered aspects of their course to incorporate the voice of their students to enhance the overall learning experience. During the pedagogical partnership I also had the pleasure to work as a Teaching Assistant on a graduate course, and I found my role as a TA evolved and became more meaningful as well. In this case I was on the faculty side of things, and I found myself having longer and longer office hours with students to understand their experience with the course. Due to the virtual learning set up, I found that many struggled with overlapping assignment deadlines, complicated instructions, and overall heightened anxiety. Upon going over the students’ full schedules and understanding their circumstances, I was able to bring up their overall struggles with the professor. We then worked on rescheduling some deadlines, shifting around course component percentages, and simplifying instructions so that students could feel eager rather than afraid to learn. This had immense positive implications as students realized they were heard and hence wanted to work harder in the class as well. My sense of agentic engagement grew during this experience as instead of being a passive TA limited to grading assignments, I took the initiative to improve the learning experience of the students in the class and the teaching experience of the professor as well. My role as a liaison between the

two parties allowed me to improve the overall learning environment by reducing the pressure it imposed.

The pedagogical partnership also influenced my behavior during my thesis practicum. I had to design and implement a training relating to literature and arts in three low-cost schools across the country. In this training I made sure to incorporate in-depth feedback mechanisms through anonymous surveys and discussions with teachers to gauge their learning and gather insights into possible areas of improvement. I was unaware of the particular contexts and constraints each of the schools functioned within; therefore, I made sure to create very flexible, easy to apply, cost-effective content that could be molded by the teachers' own views. It was interesting to see the teachers slowly open up and absorb the content and take ownership of it so as to apply it to their respective schools as well. I think this was perhaps the strongest manifestation of agentic engagement I have experienced as, while designing my training, I consciously reflected on how to allow the targeted teachers to engage with the content so as to make it their own. The idea was to build the teachers' agency and empower them to learn and implement the curriculum in a manner that is right for them, a manner that excites them, a manner that *is* them.

As I write this reflection, I find myself thinking of most Pakistani schools right now, where teachers treat their students as tabula rasa just imparting their lectures to them expecting them to rote learn. And here I feel so empowered to not only have chances to voice my insights but also to make a difference for students around me. I got the opportunity to use my empowered sense of knowledge to empower those around me as well. It is pretty much a privilege to see this gradual transition from tabula rasa to student partnerships forming on this side of the world. This experience first helped me reestablish my own set of beliefs, where I was able to see a faculty member as a partner: someone with whom mutual learning was possible, someone whose work I could evaluate and improve, someone whose ideas were equally as important as mine. This allowed me to become a better Teaching Assistant, a better trainer, and, in many ways, a better person who weighs others' views much more respectfully, can give feedback more effectively, and is open to learning and mutually building ideas with other stakeholders.