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Mehak Najib

Lahore University of Management Sciences

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## **CAPTURING MY VOICE AND AGENCY THROUGH PARTNERSHIP**

*Mehak Najib, Lahore University of Management Sciences, Class of 2021*

My journey of being a pedagogical partner at my university is one of the purest memories, which I cherish and relive every now and then. Even after a whole year, just thinking about the process of the partnership, the friends I made, the insightful experiences I shared, and the intellectually stimulating conversations I had brings a smile to my face, accompanied with a sense of achievement. I recently graduated from Lahore University of Management Sciences (LUMS), one of the leading research universities in Pakistan, with a major in Accounting and Finance along with a minor in Education. I am well aware of the reactions that I have experienced as people always try to find a relevant relationship between my major and my minor. But my journey of pursuing a minor is exceptionally close to my heart and one that is not as widely understood as one would anticipate. I always felt that my business major might not help me engage with the community and critically reflect on my own self and the issues around me. The constant urge to find and achieve that sense of helping and community building led me to pursue my minor, and the first meaningful project I channeled my energies into was this pedagogical program through the LUMS Learning Institute (LLI).

As a part of the pedagogical program, I had to develop a course along with a co-student partner and a faculty partner, catering to the role of education within media and evaluating it with a gendered perspective in Pakistan. It was particularly interesting because getting to work on developing such a unique and one-of-a-kind course was challenging yet exciting. The challenge stemmed from the fact that being a developing-country citizen with strongly endorsed subcontinent cultural values and ideologies, I found that to create this course with the acceptable, unbiased, and non-controversial curriculum seemed almost impossible, since the idea was to create awareness regarding the issues. The issues primarily relate to gender roles, particularly the portrayal of roles through different forms of media: print, radio/audio, and television. There are also associated expectations of education to channel the specific gender interests through institutions, but at the same time not impose or even slightly promote alterations in the already existing cultural beliefs. A second challenge was to make the course curriculum and teaching methodology as engaging as possible according to the online semester instructions owing to the then-recent outbreak of the pandemic, Covid-19. Both these challenges seemed quite daunting and overwhelming in the beginning, but became less so as the timeline proceeded.

The partnership process was stretched over a period of two months during which all three of us, my faculty partner, co-student partner, and I had weekly meetings to update our progress, and we were connected on online documents and messenger applications to track our continuous process. Although we had chalked out the full timeline, adhering to it was an enormous challenge, as coping with Covid-19 and the rapid transitioning phase from in person to EdTech, which all of us were experiencing back then, made it difficult to have a semblance of work-life balance along with enjoyment while making the course as well. This is where I particularly learnt the art of compartmentalizing, taking things piece by piece so that I was not overwhelmed. For me, it provided a means to focus more on engaging with the needs of the students, while also maintaining my mental well-being and addressing my academic needs as well. While

compartmentalizing may be a very generic term to use, it is one of my favourites ever since the development of this specific course because this trait amounted the most to my personal growth, and I owe it to my faculty partner for trusting my judgement with the execution of the partnership.

My interest and passion for video games and their storylines is something that I always wanted to study, but such a course on the intersection of the development of gameplay with gendered issues was not available across any university in Pakistan at that time. I had a staunch belief that if I have a particular interest, then that interest would definitely be common to someone else, at least globally. Thus, I wanted to add the element of gameplay storyline development in the curriculum for the course that I was co-designing. I still remember I had to advocate my case quite a few times to convince my co-student partner and faculty partner. Naturally, the hesitance I felt from my co-partners was justified because of the nature of the student-faculty relationship that had been prevailing in my country, where advocating ideas and giving reasons repeatedly in front of the faculty is seen as a sign of disrespect. But this process made me realize the true essence of teamwork where both my co-partners did not simply reject any idea, but used a fact-based approach and reasoning to deduce the curriculum elements that needed to be added.

This approach was brought forth by my faculty partner, who ensured that for whatever elements we proposed we provided him with a short demonstration of how that element would be taught within a classroom setting. Eventually, this inculcated immense confidence within me as the mere fact that my student co-partner and I were required to have logical reasoning for every course component that we advocated for reshaped my outlook on learning from my other courses as well, facilitating growth in agentic engagement. I realized that I started questioning and engaging more in my other classes, along with the class where I was the teaching assistant, by introducing components that required more question-based activities, rather than encouraging class participation through only offering correct answers.

Naturally, at that time it seemed like a huge burden, and I would question my judgement a lot. For instance, in picking out a movie to be included for a reflection assignment, from the beginning I thought my selection would not be appreciated or approved and I might get misjudged on the movie I picked for the paper. However, the continuous support and openness in communication I experienced with my faculty partner and the student partner leads at the LLI in developing the course made me realize how important it is to be able to think from a student perspective as well; if someone offered the same course to me, would I be interested in it; how is knowing this specific piece of information going to help me? A point in improving agency can also be attributed to my frequent communication and team meetings with the directors of LLI, who were open to any feedback and ideas, which proved to be very encouraging and helped me think outside the box as well.

One particular thing for which I do not give myself enough credit is that this course-designing partnership existed for about four months during which I had an internship going on along with an online summer semester. It was the workload that made me aware of how difficult it is to manage rigorous graded course components during the regular semesters with more credit hours. I guess it was a blessing in disguise as it helped me empathize with the students and to advocate

in our partnership for developing more engaging components with reduced workload. For instance, in place of a written, timed, final exam, we offered a videomaking component for the final, as well, so that whoever had connectivity issues or language constraints and believed a video would help us better understand their perspective, they did not lose out on marks. I still remember I had taken up 19 credit hours during that semester, which included a senior-year project at that time as well. Even to this day I vividly remember how difficult it was for me to attend 9:00 a.m. classes for this course.

The mere inability, the lack of capability, immense exhaustion, and mental pressure due to the spread of Covid-19 made me feel that the course should be shortened and not feel burdensome. And of course, this decision was inspired by one of my all-time favourite professors at the university who taught me Comparative and International Education that semester. She kept checking up on the student well-being and introduced this concept of learning qualitatively and not quantitatively, as merely completing the course content without proper student engagement and understanding compromises individual learning and processing capabilities. Being a witness myself and a new practitioner of this belief at that time, I proposed the shortening of course content from 26 lectures covering 13 topics to a mixture of synchronous and asynchronous learning including only 10 topics over a period of 26 lectures. The empowerment that I felt in recommending the shortening of course content coincided directly with the development of agentic engagement, as I could feel that autonomy arose from me being able to relate to being a student myself and deeming myself to be competent enough to believe this change would be beneficial for the students studying the course. And much to my surprise it did induce a lot of student commitment, dedication, and class participation as the element of grading was less dependent on quality of student engagement in class.

I am proud to say that the bounds of inspiration of this partnership for me extend beyond my academic life as well. I am currently working as an analyst in a management consulting firm. In executing my job where the spectrum is quite broad with a lot of unhidden and undocumented factors emerging in both public and private sector problems, I need to assess each and every aspect before narrowing down the area of concentration for research. The level of concentration, control, sophistication, and logical thinking that goes into breaking down the problem at hand for research and the constant unconscious reminder to think from the client's perspective has its foundations for me in this pedagogical partnership. As a pedagogical partner, I was always told to develop courses from students' as well as the teacher's perspective. Hence, it is safe to say that the element of compartmentalization and attention to detail in perception and understanding that I amassed from my days at LLI has been mapped onto my career trajectory as well, and will continue to stay with me forever.

On a second note, the curriculum development phase of the course involved a lot of self-reflection; coming from a privileged background and having to develop a course surrounding the issues and scenarios not known to me, it was indeed difficult to find commonality which could be interpreted by students from all walks of life enrolling in the course. My relationship with my faculty partner and co-student partner is a vivid memory. The mere fact that I was able to derive and accumulate agency from my experience is due to the balance and importance my ideas were

given. The honesty, reliability, professionalism, and maturity that my faculty partner exhibited later on became a precedent for the entire duration of this partnership. Hence, agentic engagement has its roots embedded for me in these four core qualities.

It was this critical reflection and cognizant behaviour derived from my partner feedback and constructive criticism from the whole LLI bench that helped me later on in leading seminars by the United Nations Youth Action Hub in Pakistan for the development of sustainable interventions for the betterment of the underprivileged communities considering the extreme technological gap due to Covid-19. The partnership helped me provide the perspective that overshadowed my privilege to avoid biased interventions, while ensuring the resources owing to the privilege were fully utilized as well. Perhaps, in addition, it even realistically proved to be a valuable insight into professional relationship building and trust and mutual respect for ideas that should prevail among colleagues.

This reflection thus far seems to make the partnership appear more of a back-end course development job, but in reality, the co-designing course partnership turned into a student delivery pedagogical partnership in Fall 2020. The purpose was to assess the success of course delivery during the classes and to monitor student engagement and course components. Not only did my co-partner and I have to oversee the logistical requirements of the course delivery, our engagement with students was also one of the most overwhelming, exciting, and fulfilling experiences I have ever had. Just observing a classroom and assessing students' comments from a faculty perspective, focusing on receptivity as well as criticism to the course content being taught and the ability to handle potential controversial arguments owing to the course content, was quite new for me. It was quite discouraging for me in the beginning, to the point that I was once quite thrown off by a couple of comments within the class on one of my favourite segments of the course. Naturally, at that point I became quite nervous as well as the audience to whom I had to defend my claim or make relevance of it to education were my own age fellows and the thought of not having that age superiority to get credibility for a specific point was difficult to digest. Had it not been for the trust and patience exhibited by my faculty partner placed in my ability to handle and defend my stance, I would have been quick to react and not trust myself as well.

I can certainly say that just collecting participant observations and engaging from the faculty end in that classroom was tiring and challenging, but also the most fulfilling experience I have ever had. It reshaped my cognitive abilities and made my transition to the new normal in education quite smooth. Moreover, it polished my thinking ability by enhancing my creativity, especially narrative building, which is a core part of my current job. Most of all, the experience provided enough autonomy to me to be able to trust my judgement without having someone oversee my work at all times and to learn to accept my own mistakes, as there is no learning without committing mistakes. Had I not challenged myself to stay neutral in the class the day my segment was challenged and even get feedback from the faculty and students after that, I never would have been able to realize the role that this partnership played and especially how the process facilitated my personal growth and developed my inner confidence.

In conclusion, my journey as a pedagogical partner is one that I cherish the most. While it was a learning experience for me, it was the first time that I had to do work which did not feel burdensome. Not only did my faculty and student co-partner make me feel empowered and supported, they made sure that I got to fulfill my personal interests through this course too, as I was able to add the element of gender portrayal in video games as a part of the curriculum content. Perhaps, I got to experience what it is to have autonomy in deciding what to teach and be taught if roles were reversed, which in its true sense developed my agentic engagement, which is “what students say and do to create a more motivationally supportive learning environment for themselves” (Reeve & Shin, 2020, p. 151). Although the challenges that emerged in both the co-designing and course delivery partnerships seemed intense back then, I was fortunate enough to have undergone that experience to realize exactly what I enjoyed doing. This in turn helped me achieve independence of mind, which eventually led to my agency. I owe it to my university for trusting me with this responsibility, not once but twice, and also taking particular care of my mental and physical wellbeing during the course of partnerships, which helped me reach where I am today.