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## **STUDENT VOICES AS THE COMMON THREAD THROUGH CHANGING PEDAGOGICAL PARTNERSHIPS**

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### **Introduction**

Increasingly common in higher education are initiatives that partner students with faculty to develop some aspect of teaching and learning. The phrase that has become most common to describe this practice is “Students as Partners” (Bovill & Woolmer, 2019). The choice of these particular words, rather than “Faculty as Partners,” implies the novelty of faculty working *with* students as partners in their learning rather than imposing teaching on them. It is an approach that invites students, whether positioned as external partners or enrolled in a course, to add their voices to decisions regarding classroom learning experiences, thereby creating a more inclusive learning environment and allowing students to practice their communication and collaboration skills.

At the same time that COVID-19 was causing the world to reexamine the relationships and functions in our everyday lives that we assumed to be certain, the co-authors of this reflection were challenging the certainty of the student-faculty relationship. Our nontraditional collaboration began the semester Viktoriya worked as a student consultant in Brenda’s introductory sustainability course as part of the Student-Faculty Partnership Program (SFPP) at Florida Gulf Coast University (FGCU). The next semester we redesigned an in-person section of the course after Brenda had taught it online for three consecutive semesters in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, Viktoriya enrolled as a student in the same sustainability course that she had helped Brenda redesign. Because Brenda utilized a negotiated curriculum in her classroom (Fitzpatrick et al., 2018), the lines between student and faculty were blurred once again. In that class, Viktoriya joined 24 of her classmates to collaborate on what we would learn together throughout the semester.

In this essay we (Viktoriya and Brenda) reflect on the forms of our various, respective pedagogical partnerships as well as on the evolution of our own while simultaneously adapting to the challenges COVID-19 posed to higher education. For Viktoriya, these experiences helped cement her desire to teach at university level, but also demonstrated the actions and attitudes that make the difference between a good professor and an outstanding one, one who helps their students become the best version of themselves by creating an environment in which the students thrive. For Brenda, Viktoriya provided a much-needed constant during a time of significant change. In addition, Viktoriya’s commitment to giving students choices reinforced the importance of trusting students to take ownership of their learning. For both of us, revising the traditional student-faculty roles by including student voices was a natural evolution that reflected our commitment to teaching and learning together.

## **Changing Partnerships in a Time of Change**

Pedagogical partnerships take many forms (Bovill, 2019) as the co-authors' experiences demonstrate. Here we describe the variety of partnership formulations in which we have participated. As the partner with the most experience, Viktoriya begins the conversation, and Brenda follows. Whether face-to-face or online, synchronous or asynchronous, one student partner or the entire class, the common thread through all was the incorporation of student voices into teaching and learning.

### *Viktoriya*

I joined the SFPP at FGCU as a sophomore in the spring of 2020. My student consultant role was to help a faculty member improve their course using in-class observations, written and verbal feedback, student surveys, and more. Throughout my participation in the SFPP, I worked with four professors, each from a different discipline and with different goals, but all of whom wanted to engage their students in a dialogue about their learning. At our first meeting at the beginning of each semester, my partners and I set the goals for our work together, ensuring that my voice was in dialogue with their voices as we named both commitments and hopes for our collaboration.

Usually in the SFPP, students are partnered with faculty members outside their field of study, so the focus is on the teaching and learning experience rather than on content. Because I was a math major, my first faculty partner and I felt fortunate that I was joining them in a statistics class, one that I had taken before as part of my course of study. My faculty partner's goal for the semester was to find ways to build a better connection between them and the students, particularly important given that students frequently dread taking math courses, especially when they are a requirement for graduation. My partner's concern was that after teaching by lecture for more than ten years, they no longer understood the way today's students learn. Because I had taken the class just a year before, I understood the student experience in this classroom and could serve as a translator between the instructor and their students. We were doing good work when COVID-19 began and everything shifted online. It was a difficult time for everyone, but we continued to work together, communicating with students to offer our support. Suddenly, a supportive connection, and listening to students' voices, was more important than ever.

After scrambling on how to save peoples' lives from a pandemic that we had not seen in our lifetime, the next big question in higher education was how to continue classes without exposure to the virus. The answer at FGCU was to meet over Zoom. During the fall semester of 2020 my partnership with a biology faculty member took place in a Zoom classroom. Once again, the instructor was interested in hearing student voices, this time related to a new lab software being used for the first time in the forced online environment. I was the link between my partner and their students, communicating their concerns and difficulties, keeping everyone connected in the new reality of social distancing.

My partnership with Brenda in the spring semester of 2021 brought a new challenge. She was teaching online asynchronously, and I was unsure of how I would communicate with the students. Determined to make it work, I devised a plan to become a part of that online cohort.

My interaction plan included a short video to introduce myself to the students in the first week, surveys that the students completed online, and regular Zoom meetings for students to talk to me. Through those meetings I discovered far more than students' experiences with the class. I learned of their daily life with the pandemic: the fatigue of staying in front of a computer for hours at a time, their struggles to take care of immunocompromised relatives or those battling COVID, their financial issues from job loss, or their lack of a reliable internet connection. Being a student and a mother of a middle schooler myself, I could relate to some of those problems. What Brenda's students appreciated most was that rather than exerting control over them, she heard their voices when they expressed their struggles and concerns, offering flexibility rather than hard deadlines. One student said that "the course is a breath of fresh air" in comparison to accommodations in others.

We were back in the classroom in fall 2021 for my last partnership with a composition instructor. Once again, my partner was interested in hearing students' voices by creating a safe space for them to dialogue with the instructor and each other. Most of these students had finished high school during COVID, began their college experience over Zoom, and now were juggling a full load of college classes face to face. Building a safe community of learning was essential. At a time of widespread misinformation and "fake news," one of the main goals was to show the students how to evaluate sources of information and to create a safe space where they could express their informed opinions without fear of retaliation. The students were given freedom to choose topics to explore and discuss, and although passionate opinions were expressed, debates were structured as courtroom proceedings, and the discussions went smoothly. From that experience, I learned how to be a better listener to others' opinions and how to create a safe environment in the classroom.

That same semester I partnered with Brenda again, this time enrolling as a student in the course for which I had served as a student consultant. We had collaborated over the summer, focusing on building a community of learning in a brick-and-mortar classroom after a long period of teaching online. As was the case with each of my partnerships, Brenda was interested in including students' voices in the learning, but her approach in this introductory sustainability course was a bit different. Rather than impose a set of topics on the students, Brenda allowed us to pick topics related to sustainability that applied to our disciplines. Since the class is required for graduation, students were coming from many different disciplines with sustainability meaning something different to each: deforestation and clean water for environmental science majors, equity and equality in health care for those in the health professions, clean energy and green building for engineers, accessibility to quality education for future educators, and many more. Once we negotiated the topics we wanted to explore, Brenda also gave us the option of teaching those topics that we were most interested in rather than completing a final writing assignment. Having that kind of choice gave me the possibility to concentrate on the topic of access to education, something that I am particularly interested in, and to share my knowledge and passion with my classmates.

While the specific goals of each of these partnerships differed, each embraced the same purpose—to incorporate students' voices and choices into their learning, beginning with me. Each semester, my faculty partner took the time to get to know me as a person, engaging with me in open and honest dialogue and treating me with respect. Although some of the perspectives I

offered were different from theirs, each was taken into consideration, evaluated, and discussed. My partners took the time to explain to me their perspective on a problem and then asked about my opinion, rather than just disregarding a suggestion by saying, “This will not work for me!” Those interactions were what made our collaborations so rich and diverse. Each of my faculty partners demonstrated similar care and respect for their students. From responding to feedback on lab software to offering creative choices to fulfill assignments, hearing students’ voices was essential in a successful transition to virtual learning during quarantine and the return to in-person classes in a new normal.

### *Brenda*

For the last 9 years, I have taught an upper-level introductory sustainability course that is a graduation requirement for all students. That means two things. First, in any given semester, the students sitting in my classroom are from every discipline and department on campus and many of them have not engaged with the complex issues of sustainability in other classes. Second, many of those same students enter my classroom resenting the fact that they are required to be there and resisting the value-laden socio-scientific issues inherent in discussions of sustainability. Therefore, my first task is overcoming their resentment and resistance by enhancing their engagement.

Finding ways to accomplish that goal was the motivation for my first student-faculty partnership with a student who was not enrolled in my course. It was while working with that student partner that I began to recognize the power of including students authentically and deliberately in their learning. I watched as my student partner took increasing ownership of the learning in my in-person classroom because she had a vested interest in what was happening. Her ownership translated to engagement with the students as well as with the material. I began to wonder about incorporating principles of partnership into my classroom and inviting my enrolled students to work with me to design our learning.

My wonder led me to the idea of a negotiated curriculum (Boomer et al., 2005; Bron et al., 2022; Fitzpatrick et al., 2018). With this approach, I spend a few weeks getting everyone on the same page as far as our understanding of sustainability, then I turn decision-making over to the students. Together they decide what sustainability-related topics they want to spend the rest of the semester exploring. The results were hugely successful in my in-person classes until COVID-19 forced me to pivot to online learning. The initial goal of my partnership with Viktoriya was to figure out how to implement the same process in an online asynchronous class. However, my crushing administrative workload involved in those early days of the pandemic had left me exhausted, so I fell back to the simpler traditional approach for my online class.

Therefore, the goal of my partnership with Viktoriya changed from implementing negotiation to making sure I was connecting with my students who were now scattered far and wide. After weeks of isolation and lockdown, we were all suffering from a lack of community and connection. I wanted to be sure they were hearing my voice and I was hearing theirs. After her previous experiences as a student partner, Viktoriya was confident in her approach and a strong advocate for my students. She encouraged me to give students choices regarding various course

components, something that was clearly important to her. In the process she reminded me that although I purported to embrace negotiation, I was still clinging tightly to control of some of my favorite assignments and assessments. There was still plenty of space for me to give students choices.

Knowing that we were returning to in-person classes again in the fall, I began making plans to reinstate the negotiated curriculum I had used before. Viktoriya worked with me that summer, continuing to highlight places I could give students choices. I was pleased when she decided to take the course with me, and her classmates benefited from her contributions to their negotiation of course content. An additional layer of choice that the students negotiated was the option of working in small groups to teach one week's topic instead of completing their major writing assignment. It was an option that allowed some to push outside of their comfort zones while others chose to stick with an assignment format that was familiar. As I had experienced in previous semesters, the approach was an overwhelming success.

With the help of my student partners, I have come to realize that curriculum negotiation models the principles of pedagogical partnership—respect, reciprocity, and responsibility (Cook-Sather, Bovill, & Felten, 2014)—in authentic and tangible ways. In a traditional classroom, the relationship between students and teacher is one of power and authority. By giving students choices about their learning, by intentionally inviting their voices into decision-making processes, I have chosen to relinquish much of my power and instead demonstrate respect for the knowledge, skills, and experiences students bring with them to our learning community. Relationships within that community are reciprocal and involve a shared responsibility for learning. Mine is no longer the only voice being heard.

## **The Lessons We'll Take into Our Educational Futures**

*Viktoriya*

My partnerships in FGCU's Lucas Center for Faculty Development have shown me that classroom experience is more than the courses in which a person is enrolled; it includes the relationship between the professor and their students that shapes the learning environment. There is less flexibility and choice in what topics students learn in some science or math courses than the opportunity to negotiate that Brenda was able to give us. However, as a future educator, I learned that even giving students ownership of parts of the teaching and learning process gives them agency and a sense of accountability for their learning.

For example, my partner in the composition course gave students a choice not about their curriculum *per se*, but how to specifically approach assignments. In response, the students were more engaged in class and more passionate in their presentations. As a mathematician, I have tutored and helped in classrooms for the past four years. I have seen a lot of students struggling and saying things like they plan to go into politics afterwards and they will never need anything except basic math again in their lives. I think that for those students there should be projects whose learning activities are meaningful to their future and career goals. For example, for a future lawyer, logic, as part of mathematics, might be very helpful or for a future psychologist,

statistics will be helpful to find correlations among behaviors. The learning must be relevant and applicable to students, but we will not know what is relevant until we ask them—until their voices shape how, if not always what, they engage in their learning.

I have felt similar struggles myself. There have been moments as a student and a mother that I have also wished for greater choices. As an undergraduate student I found my options for electives very limited. I took the initiative to advocate for myself with some of my professors and the head of the math department and we created independent study courses that better fit my interests and needs. However, this is not a common practice and many students do not know that they can do independent study and research. For others, they may not have a voice strong enough to advocate for themselves.

My experience as a parent has put me in the same situation. My middle school aged son is not very keen on math, unfortunately. He gets by, but it is not his strength, and not something he enjoys. In a recent meeting with his math teacher, I was told that he will need math a lot if he wants to be successful in the future. Does he? He will if he wants to be an engineer, or a scientist, or an economist, but there are so many other fields in which that will not be so. He is passionate about art, music, theater, and cinema. While I realize that he may not ultimately pursue those careers and so he needs to be prepared to have a formal education as a backup plan, I would like to give him choices and to encourage him to follow his passion.

### *Brenda*

Because “educator” is an important part of my identity, signing up for the SFPP put me in a very vulnerable position. It has never been easy for me to hear criticism, even of the constructive kind. Yet I knew my teaching practices would benefit from collaborating with experts in the student experience. Because I work hard to be an effective educator and I take my teaching personally, it was sometimes emotionally challenging to hear suggestions from my student partners. Through the process of developing a trusting and comfortable working relationship, my first partner reminded me of students’ humanity and our shared goal for student success. Ultimately, students and faculty are all striving for the same things— a positive learning outcome and students who graduate ready to be successful in the world. With that shared goal in mind, her suggestions no longer felt like criticisms. I was able to set my bruised ego aside and we became collaborators working on a meaningful project together.

Perhaps the most important lesson came from Viktoriya who reminded me that I was still clinging to some control. I had become quite attached to the format of a weekly low stakes writing assignment and she continued gently urging me to consider allowing students to be creative in how they met the assignment’s goals. After using it for 9 years, I was comfortable with the assignment as written. It accomplished what I intended, and I had been using it for so long that I could quickly grade the uniform submissions. I was reluctant to let go of my attachment, but Viktoriya persisted. “Let them have the choice. They will be creative. I promise you will like the results.” I relented and found that Viktoriya was right. The variety of submissions I received was not easier to grade, but they were more pleasurable to grade because of the improved quality of the work. I removed my restrictions on students’ ownership of their

learning, and they responded in meaningful ways. Now I can see their identities and hear their voices in what they submit.

Our university's most recent strategic plan focuses on the buzzwords "student success." COVID-19 was a significant impediment to that success, but many faculty put up barriers that exacerbated the situation. When student voices were reporting unemployment and financial struggles, the burden of caring for family members, attempts to complete homework on their phones because they didn't have computer access or adequate wireless internet, far too many faculty were holding to strict deadlines and rigid policies. I am saddened when students tell me of instances in which their voices have been excluded from learning experiences. I hope that I have set a different example for Viktoriya as she makes progress toward a career in higher education.

## Conclusions

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a paradigm-shifting challenge, but also an effective teacher that reminded us of our human need for relationships and that gave a voice to systemic inequities and vulnerabilities, providing societies around the globe with an opportunity to change (Ladson-Billings, 2021). In education circles, we learned the importance of accessible and effective online education, but even more importantly, that the most effective online education needs to create connection by incorporating student voices. Furthermore, online education cannot replace the relational connections that come from building a learning community in a brick-and-mortar classroom. Their focus on nurturing connections is precisely why liberal arts colleges, Honors programs, learning communities, and small class sizes are valued.

As Viktoriya begins graduate school to pursue a terminal degree that will enable her to teach in higher education, she takes with her an understanding that learning is about more than accumulating knowledge of the topic of study. It is about hearing the voices of classmates as well as professors and learning from the diversity of perspectives they bring to the experience. As Brenda completes a terminal degree as well (education doctorate), she takes with her a commitment not only to including students in decision-making in her own classes, but also to promoting the inclusion of student voices with her colleagues in their classrooms. For both of us, our evolving partnership has reaffirmed our belief in the power of education to change lives when people come together as partners in a co-created community of learning and support.

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