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LIVING AND LEARNING IN RADICAL SPACES: TRUST, AFFECT, AND NEEDS IN THE STUDENT-FACULTY PARTNER DYAD

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“There is a two-way, mutually reinforcing, connection between positive relationships and co-creating learning and teaching. First, positive relationships are foundational for co-creating learning and teaching. Second, co-creating learning and teaching builds positive teacher-student and student-student relationships.” - Bovill, 2020, p. 55

For this special issue of *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education (TLTHE)*, we chose to comment on the essay, “Exploring the Student Experience in an Asynchronous Virtual Introductory Biology Course,” co-authored by student partner Eve Abraha and faculty partner Lauren Crowe. This essay appeared in the issue of *TLTHE* guest edited by Ryan Rideau focused on “Creating Classrooms as Radical Spaces of Possibility.” We chose this essay from this collection because its theme is connected with our ongoing engagement with pedagogical partnership (Toh & Chng, 2022) and our interest in thinking about “radical spaces” in the classroom, especially the possibility of a third space that is inhabited by the student partner as co-facilitator.

Both of us have been engaged in partnership with one another and with our students recently, and we continue to be fascinated with, and troubled by, the complexities of partnership. Tai Chong Toh has co-taught a non-credited course with a student partner as a part of the student’s residency requirement in the College of Alice & Peter Tan at the National University of Singapore (NUS). Huang Hoon Chng is in the process of formally engaging a senior student on an institutional initiative that is called “Undergraduate Teaching Opportunity Programme” (or UTOP), also at NUS.

This commentary takes Abraha and Crowe’s experience at Tufts University in the United States as a point of departure for our reflection on our experience of pedagogical partnerships at NUS in Singapore. The Abraha-Crowe experience, located thousands of miles away, provides an invaluable opportunity for us to reflect about partnership because at some levels, the experience resonates well. In other ways, we are confronted with such different challenges because of the difference in context. The following three elements constitute both our key takeaways from the Abraha-Crowe partnership and the frame for this commentary:

- (1) The element of trust
- (2) The element of affect
- (3) The element of needs

The above three elements of trust, affect, and needs are further framed within the idea of the student partner’s inhabiting what we see as a radical, third space that offers great possibilities in redefining classroom dynamics and culture, in injecting an invaluable voice that was hitherto missing in our classrooms, and, in the process, effecting a transformational multi-directional dialogue between educators, students, and the student partner.

The Element of Trust

Trust needs to be developed across multiple dyads: the educator-students, the educator-student partner, and most importantly, the students-student partner dyad. The educator-student trust dyad is what we have been doing all along in teaching any (traditional) class, and that has remained crucial. The educator-student partner dyad, as a new dimension introduced into the conventional classroom, is a central element in this partnership. Abraha and Crowe (2022) explain that they had to explicitly agree on the basis for their partnership (e.g., for Crowe to seek Abraha's permission before sharing about their partnership experience with others; and for Abraha to observe confidentiality with respect to sharing of information with the students in the class). We have to do the same.

However, in our context, we had to go one step further in developing trust between the students and student partner: to guard the integrity of our student partner's positionality, ensuring that our students do not have grounds for disrespecting or dismissing the legitimacy of the student partner's role in our classes (Marquis et al., 2017). To do this, Huang Hoon has planned to devote time on first-class day to formally introduce her student partner and to take measures to ensure that the students in her class appreciate the institutionally-sanctioned platform (UTOP) that her student partner operates from. These may include what the aims of UTOP are, and the scope of the role of the student partner (e.g. that she will only provide formative feedback and will not be involved in summative grading). We believe that it is crucial to leave no room for any conflict of interest or discomfort even as we accord our student partner the full respect she deserves as a co-planner, designer, facilitator in our classroom.

The Element of Affect

Following from building a culture and practice where trust defines the partnership, affect is the relational part of teaching, expressing our need to connect with students as educators, and with our student partners as co-facilitators as well as enabling the student partners-students relationship. Student partners may be said to inhabit the same space as their peers and can relate at a level of affect that may be usefully translate into the enactment of a safe space for learning. The rich emotional bonds between educator, students, and student partners are thus enablers of learning for all parties involved (Marquis et al., 2018).

As Abraha and Crowe (2022) have noted, there is a "difference between student feelings of learning versus learning itself," and "synergy between the two" (p. 7) is crucial to achieving the intended learning outcomes and importantly, the feeling of having been supported in their learning journey. An additional observation that may be made here is that in the Singapore classroom, there persists a certain level of reticence among students, and much emotional labour has to be expended to build rapport. For example, in Tai Chong's class, he noted that some students selected the course because they knew the student partner was a co-teacher and that the student partner was able to build a rapport with the students by the end of the first class. In the post course review, several students highlighted how the learning environment was "supportive and engaging" and they "had the courage to participate in the discussion" and articulate their views. This experience was a stark contrast to Tai Chong's experience without a student partner, where he typically needs to spend at least four weeks to build up a similar level of rapport with the students and devote considerable effort to prompt students to

speak up in class throughout the course. The presence of the student partner therefore serves as a bridge that can potentially reduce the amount of time and effort needed to ‘break the ice.’

The Element of Needs

“Needs” alludes to the point Abraha and Crowe (2022) make about ensuring equity and inclusion in their (virtual) classroom, so that all students are well-supported in their learning. This is especially important for us because our Singapore classroom has gone beyond the multi-affiliated profiles along several dimensions (of ethnicity, socioeconomic background, disciplines, nationality, language, etc.) to one that is increasingly and visibly varied in terms of physical and learning (dis)abilities and mental resilience.

As Abraha has shared, the professoriate is largely unprepared to support non-mainstream students like her (Abraha & Crowe, 2022). We in Singapore are also under-trained to manage and support students, particularly those with (dis)abilities, physical or cognitive. Having a student partner as a crucial ‘Gen Z’ link between educators like us and the students in our classes is a gift we fully recognize. Our student partners most likely will possess relevant insights into how their peers learn, what they need when and how, and, as former students who have gone through our course platforms, they will have a better understanding of what had worked (or failed). Bovill (2020) captured this point well when she wrote, “in drawing on students’ knowledge, skills and experience to negotiate learning and teaching decisions, also contributes to developing relationships between teacher and students, and between students and students” (p.48). As a young person, too, the student partner potentially has a better understanding of the affective dimension influencing their peers’ wellbeing and learning. This is possibly the most crucial value of such a pedagogical partnership.

Conclusion

Building trust, attending to affect, and responding to needs are essential elements that characterize the third space the student partner inhabits as a co-facilitator in the teaching and learning enterprise. While this radical, third space comes with challenges and risks, it is also a focal point where partnership can yield very productive pedagogical insights that have been experienced both by the Abraha-Crowe partnership and by us in our experience. Such experiences can only enrich and educate all of us. Whether it is the virtual classroom that is the site of the partnership, as in Abraha and Crowe’s partnership (2022), or the in-person teaching that Tai Chong and Huang Hoon undertake with their student partners, the same level of deep investment is required to manifest the living, learning, and leaning into the brave new radical space of having student partners as full-fledged colleagues in teaching and learning.

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