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THE POSSIBILITIES OF STUDENTS AS PARTNERS – A PERSPECTIVE FROM SINGAPORE

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Prologue: Are students customers, clients, or pawns?

In a deeply thought-provoking keynote lecture at the ICED-Atlanta Conference in June 2018, Peter Felten spoke about how we have viewed students as objects of the curriculum we deliver, as invisible/absent in our conversations about learning and teaching, even as a data point in our research projects, and then invited all of us to “[reimagine] the place of students in educational development” (Felten, 2018; also Felten et al., 2019). Though Felten’s invitation was situated within the domain of educational development, this challenge may easily be—and, I argue, should rightly be—broadened to a “reimagining the place of students in [higher education].” More specifically, instead of viewing students as objects, could we not think of students as partners? *Can students be partners?* Though I started out among the skeptics in the room who believed that long-entrenched power differentials between student and teacher and deep-seated cultural practices in specific contexts could not be so easily overcome to enable such partnerships, I have found myself increasingly entertaining the possibilities of students as partners, aided in part by a shift in the usage and meaning of the idea of ‘partnership.’ The caveat remains—it would not necessarily be an easy, unproblematic, uncontentious partnership—but I am now more optimistic that we can work to enable such partnerships to happen, even in Singapore, if only to a degree.

As many of us know, there is a parallel debate on many campuses that considers whether students are consumers (of education), customers/clients (demanding a good degree/future job), or products of the education system (i.e. graduate output). In this debate, the absence of nomenclature like “agents,” “actors,” “learners,” or “partners” is stark. I recently participated in an informal discussion in my institution on the subject, “Are students customers, clients or pawns?” (cf. Tight, 2013), where my fellow discussants had offered the perspectives that in some contexts like in Business and Law School settings, students themselves may actually adopt the perspective of a *client* with certain entitlements, and who *expect* a Business or Law School degree to open doors to higher prospects in the marketplace. The Dean of NUS Law School argued, however, that whether students are customers in search of a good university education/experience or are products of university curriculum may depend on “how the mission of a university is defined” (Chesterman, 2018).

Chesterman attempts to redefine the focus of the discussion when he writes, “I worry less about what students are and more about helping them work out what they will become. Then let them choose their own metaphors” (p. 5). I concur with Chesterman: facilitating students’ achievement of their own potential is more crucial than debating over metaphors. I also support the shift to the important reconsideration about university mission than to invest energy in unravelling the metaphors of clients, customers, and products. The point remains however, that what educators adopt as starting positions (and our choice of metaphor reveals those positions), how we choose to relate to students (as clients, or as partners etc.), can and will likely shape the way students view themselves in relation to their education pursuits, which can in turn limit that becoming which Chesterman spoke about.

Viewing Students as Partners

Mick Healey and colleagues (2014) have pointed out that “engaging students and staff effectively *as partners in learning and teaching* is arguably one of the most important issues facing higher education in the 21st century” (p. 7, emphasis mine). The focus of my essay is on student (not staff) engagement, and I wish to provide a way to think about partnership in the Singapore context, a context that many (both insiders and outsiders) assume to be essentially authoritarian, culturally rigid, highly hierarchicized, and therefore, will admit of little or even no possibility of student partnership. As Healey has alerted me (p.c.), however, much depends on what we mean by ‘partnership’ (i.e. what we mean and how we use the term). After all, the concept of “the teacher” derives its meaning in contrast to “students,” and the cultural structures are in place in some locations to ensure that this dialectic is maintained. We may be well into the 21st century, but we should not be surprised that such deep-seated assumptions about who does what in a class will take more than just an introduction of new concepts to change—power structures are experienced even if largely unobserved, even in the most liberated learning spaces.

If motivating student learning is about creating the conditions for learning (Biggs, 1994), then reducing barriers to learning—such as, activating the empathetic in teachers towards students; reducing the distance or closing the gap between teacher and student; and fostering a less rule-bound/oppressive culture, a less disciplined (in the Foucauldian sense) and a more conducive learning environment that is defined by a learning enterprise that suggests collaboration and partnership (though not necessarily equal, because someone has to lead, at some moment or other)—should be a first starting point. To modify a sentiment offered by Roxå and Mårtensson (2017) about institutional practices and structures that could work, whether consciously or subconsciously, to suppress academic agency, I think we should be consciously liberating students through transforming praxis, specifically in the way we relate to our students as co-journeymen in the learning process. In short, we need to find ways to partner with students, to find opportunities for them to be our collaborators in education, as partners, to allow them agency and ownership in their own learning journeys. How can we do this?

The happy news is: the “students as partners” literature is already filled with many good examples of creative partnerships, and there is no need for me to reinvent this wheel – this platform, *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education (TLTHE)* is filled with examples of partnership, as are the many good works generated by lead practitioners in this domain (like Cathy Bovill, Alison Cook-Sather, Peter Felten, Mick Healey, and Kelly Matthews, to name just a few) who have already debated about the problematics and possibilities involved.

Is it possible to enable partnership with students in the Singapore classroom? What do we need to reimagine in order to position students as agents in [the learning and teaching process] in this particular context?

Considering the Possibility of Students as Partners in Singapore

If indeed the Singapore context is as authoritarian and as hierarchical as many people assume it to be, it will take an active reconsideration of the teacher-student dialectic to enable partnership to occur. Rephrasing Felten's point slightly, we will need to redefine the purpose and practice of education and reconsider curricular outcomes and graduate attributes. Importantly, we will need to review and allow for certain types of student identities to flourish on campus—the type of practice that Felten iterated in his Atlanta keynote lecture included holistic education, focus on well-being, inclusion, critical attention to power, building trust and community, and creating openness and connection.

Much of everyday practice in Singapore classrooms is still teacher-centred to a large extent, even as the terms 'active student engagement' and 'active learning' are bandied around freely. Even though there are opportunities for project presentations (i.e. peer teaching supporting one another's learning), role play (where students adopt the role of facilitators and peer reviewers), and student-led activities, many of these activities still originated from a teacher's decision rather than from some kind of curricular negotiation prior to the design and final delivery. Very often, when asked why they would not allow students to have a voice in designing the curriculum, or to co-construct an assessment rubric, the response among many colleagues is, apart from time constraint, that students are novices, new to the discipline, and they 'don't know enough' to be able to define their own learning and learning goals. Abbot and Gravett (2018) have, however, argued: "Indeed, there are times when the perspective of someone from the outside can offer a clearer reflection of one's practice precisely because there is no content understanding or expertise coloring that reflection" (p. 13). I often wonder how much of this resistance is due to a teacher's reluctance to relinquish his/her control in the classroom.

Having said that, there can be other barriers to partnership. In addition to the perception that students are not ready to participate in co-creating their own learning, as both Seow and Sim have pointed out (this issue), there are contextual, cultural barriers like 'face,' trust, and power issues that need to be first overcome to ease the way for partnership in the Singapore classroom. If we re-think all these issues, as Felten has invited us to do, I believe we could realize the possibility of partnership, even in 'authoritarian' sites like the Singapore classroom.

There have been really good examples of partnership that have been undertaken by a number of Singapore colleagues. In the two examples described below, both faculty members have found ways to involve students more directly in their learning, and seem to have overcome obstacles discussed by Seow (about lack of trust and democracy in the classroom) and Sim (face issues). One such example is the *NUS Young Educators in Science (YES)* program that provides opportunities for undergraduates to develop outreach materials to excite and teach the public about Physics. These outreach activities were collected into "personalized portfolios" and presented to students when they graduate, and this has meant that each participating student has a document that tracks "their individual self-designed learning, science communication and service journeys" (Sow, 2018).

Another good example that puts students' involvement in their own learning at the center is the use of podcasts to 'make public' student efforts in learning in a 'Home' module (McMorran, 2018). Most conventional student projects would have resulted in a written essay that is 'shared' only with the instructor. McMorran has moved away from this mode for

several years: by requiring his students to create a podcast to record their individual interpretations of what ‘home’ means; by filming their own chosen sites, overlaid with student commentary and self-sourced soundscapes; and subsequently sharing these with peers locally and globally through an online space, thus broadening the student ownership and impact of his/her learning (see <https://blog.nus.edu.sg/homeonthedot/>).

It could be argued that in both examples that students were provided the space and an explicit role to step out of the conventional frame that is reenacted in many classrooms, and this overt pedagogical move has adjusted the conventional footing between the teacher and students, thus allowing issues of power and face to recede into the background. As Sim puts it (this issue):

When students are given roles to perform, they are afforded the opportunity and space to step out of who they are, to assume a different identity, and to momentarily become someone else, all of which can reduce the intricate politics among students in a competitive culture and alter the ecology of the classroom.

I would argue that the instructors in the YES program and in the ‘Home’ module have to some extent reimaged the purpose of teaching and learning in the Singapore context, by allowing students more active involvement in the decision-making process at the module (McMorran’s) and program (Sow’s) levels. They have created the space that enables student engagement. In the process, they have gotten students to show what they can do, from their perspectives, to scaffold the learning process rather than to prescribe a final product. In short, when the instructors took a step back, partnership as a pedagogical practice became possible—where there are instructors who actively redefine the roles that both teachers and learners assume in those contexts.

However, to qualify as “partnership,” where “there is a collaboration between an institution/faculty/department and student, involving joint ownership and decision-making over both the process and outcome” (see Healey et al., p.16), there may need to be a more deliberate, consolidated effort that goes beyond the effort of individual colleagues, and extended beyond one activity, as an isolated practice. Though an ideal, collaboration and joint ownership in decision making from end-to-end will require a kind of openness and connected curriculum that are able to transcend the cultural specificities of particular contexts.

Epilogue

The Sow and McMorran examples discussed here are just two specific examples of ‘creative pedagogy.’ They have given me optimism that trust and democracy in the classroom can be realized. At the same time, these examples have showed that ‘face’ and power issues can be mitigated in favor of student agency, even if not fully overcome. This has not been an easy journey. As Seow and Sim have reported, even when instructors extend that trust to students, not all students will necessarily respond, or respond comfortably. The reality is that there is a much longer preset social climate that makes assumptions about roles in teaching and learning, and a politics surrounding classroom behavior that is already predefined culturally as norm, in places like Singapore, even as this climate is gradually shifting towards a more student-centric ecology. The competitive nature of the Singapore education is a very real phenomenon, and years of induction into a conventional way to teach and to learn will require a lot more work than a mere showcase of some good examples of practice.

The world of the 21st century youth is said to be a ‘flatter’ world that is networked rather than hierarchical. If this is true and as the globally aware Singapore students themselves increasingly and confidently make demands to have an education experience that speaks to their own learning goals, as they find their own voice in their learning journey, it will not surprise me that the idea of partnership will evolve over time. In fact, I see a near future time when we will find ourselves engaged not in debates about the possibility of partnership, but in a different set of issues such as, what is the *role* of the teacher in light of partnership?; what pedagogy works to enable partnership, how, and *for whom* the partnership serves? When that day arrives, the debate about whether students are clients, customers, objects, products, or just learners with a view about their own learning will be superseded by the hows and whys of partnership, and importantly, will go on to focus on the role of the university.

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