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# Students as Partners with Faculty in a Teacher Education Program

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In our physical education teacher education program we stumbled into our student-faculty partnerships (Cook-Sather, Bovill & Felten, 2014). Engaging students as partners in learning and teaching represents a range of activities that create spaces for students to think about the teaching and learning process. The unique qualities of student-faculty partnerships are that they are rooted in respect, reciprocity, and shared responsibility (Cook-Sather et. al, 2014). In this essay we will share our experiences of working with each of our student partners in three student-faculty partnerships within the Physical Education Teacher Education Program. We will describe the context, introduce you to the student-faculty partnerships, describe the nature of the partnerships and share lessons learned.

We stumbled into partnership because we were looking for ways to engage several of our pre-service teachers, who we could see had much potential as future teachers, yet they needed additional meaningful academic experiences beyond the classroom experience. Our early experiences involved students in the role of classroom assistants in one activity-based course, Theory & Practice of Gymnastics, taught by Karen Richardson. The student assistant provided an additional set of eyes and ears and worked one-on-one with students as they tried to master complex gymnastics skills and creative movement sequences. The student assistant role was born of the constructivist idea that when the instructor shares power with students and structures classes with a range of challenges that benefit from facilitation, rather than solely from teacher directed activities, then students learn better.

Over time we gave student assistants more responsibility by debriefing with them after class, having them facilitate activities during class, and asking for their input in planning for the next class session, thus moving them to a role we called, “academic peer mentors.” Looking back now, this was the beginning of our realization that students could be partners with faculty by providing particular insight into the student learning experience that we cared so much about—insights to which we as faculty were not privy. In addition, we realized how much the leadership opportunity mattered to the academic peer mentor (e.g., the honor of being asked to have this role) and to their peers.

After the initial success of engaging with our academic peer mentors, we began to further incorporate students as partners in other required teacher education courses (Theory & Practice of Games; Elementary Physical Education Methods and Secondary Physical Education Methods courses). As we have moved to a student-faculty partnership model, we more fully recognize the potential for improving teaching and learning in our teacher education program by engaging with our students as partners. Both we and our student partners understand teaching and learning from a new perspective.

## **Description of Context**

Our physical education teacher educator licensure program at Bridgewater State University is designed to prepare competent, caring professionals who foster learning for all students. As faculty members we root our pedagogy in a constructivist theoretical perspective in

our respective courses. Our pre-service teachers engage in multiple hands-on learning experiences that build from their prior knowledge and serve as catalysts for questioning, reflection, and ultimately learning.

#### *Description of Selection/Responsibilities of Mentors*

We selected students to work with us as student partners based upon their availability to attend each class session; their interest in furthering their learning; and the faculty members' desire to give that student an additional leadership/learning opportunity. Our student partners were: Sonny, Dave, Rich, and Erin. Initially, the responsibilities for the student partners were outlined in 2-credit, Directed Studies contracts that included responsibilities, work products, and assessment. We intentionally created responsibilities with the aim of increasing our student partners' understanding and experiences using constructivist teaching, enhancing their depth of content knowledge, and providing additional practice opportunities for interactions with students.

Although we initially attempted to structure and direct the partnerships ahead of time, in reality, the partnerships unfolded in unexpected and unique ways, making them more genuinely collaborative. For example, Erin became an active participant in post-teaching conferences; Dave and Rich became skillful questioners and summarizers; and Sonny personalized his feedback to peers about their teaching. None of these responsibilities were included in the initial directed study contracts. We as faculty learned that our student partners felt empowered through the experience; that both faculty and student partners valued the relationship that developed; and that despite our best efforts to be accessible to students, it was often our student partners who both translated our expectations to students and served to bridge the power difference between students and faculty.

#### *Description of Partnership Development*

We were each aware that our student partner needed ongoing guidance and direction; however, how that support was provided was individualized. We often met with our student partner outside of class time to prepare for in-class work, communicated with our student partner during class sessions, and always spent a least a few minutes after class debriefing. Development of the partnerships was informal and different for each of the three partnership relationships, which will be highlighted in the vignettes below. Looking back, it was the initial opportunities to share decision-making and power that established a level of comfort between each of us as faculty members and our student partners, creating a context that supported conversation and eventually led to the student partner having a unique voice in the class and with the faculty.

#### **Partnership 1: Theory and Practice of Games (Deb Sheehy)**

I selected both Dave and Rich to work as partners with me as I wanted each of them to have the opportunity to grow and learn as future teachers through this partnership, and I felt that they could support each other in this new role. While there are many ways in which we worked in partnership, I offer one example to illustrate the importance of building trust and genuinely collaborating early in the partnership.

In the Theory & Practice of Games course, I wanted to start the course off with a captivating experience to illustrate our focus for the semester, which is to teach games constructively. I came up with an underdeveloped idea to use a novel card game, Nertz, to show the distinction between traditional games teaching and a contemporary approach called Teaching Games for Understanding (TGfU). I brought this idea to Dave and Rich and asked for their help in figuring out how we could use the card game to make a point. They were interested in my idea, so I taught them the card game.

Next, we brainstormed as we played the game and explored how we could use it to teach the idea of manipulating the constraints of the game to pose a problem that students would need to solve. Together, we developed a lesson plan that included role play for the students and specific responsibilities for lesson implementation by Dave, Rich and me. The lesson was wildly successful as students were deeply engaged and were able to come up with a range of responses in the lesson closure that indicated their understanding of game constraints.

This experience taught me one of the first important lessons that I learned about partnership: that I needed to have authentic experiences with my student partners early in the semester to allow us to work together and for their voices to matter in the planning and implementing of a lesson. My student partners seemed to gain a similar insight. Rich said:

I think all 3 of us worked together awesome. I don't know if we all have the same thinking styles or ways that we generate how we teach...We can all think on the fly, which I think is one of our strong points. We started off the year with an hour meeting. Just creating a game, we created a model based off the TGfU model based off of a card game, which was hard to do. And we all really chipped in, put our brains together to find a way to show students how the TGfU model works. (Final interview, May, 2014)

In the same conversation, Dave added:

That card game making it off of the TGfU [model] could have easily taken somebody hours and hours to create and we were able to break it down in an hour and make it simple and we actually taught it. All the students understood it, and we were able to get through the lesson no problems. And it went the way we planned it...We are always thinking what the next person is thinking like ahead, we're all on the same level.

I benefited from the Nertz experience with Dave and Rich, as I recognized how much they had to offer as they had a deep understanding of traditional games teaching and understood key difference in TGfU. They had completed the course in a previous semester and had opportunities to teach middle school students using TGfU. In addition, Dave and Rich provided me with a student perspective, which allowed us to create a lesson that their peers found meaningful. Further, the Nertz experience developed a deep level of trust among us. Dave said:

Like Rich said, it [trust] mainly developed last semester ...I think we really molded together when we were doing the Nertz game. We were all brainstorming and working together and we realized we were all going to work as a team and that we could all trust each other. We would come up with ideas and Dr. Sheehy would come up with ideas and then we would flip flop which ideas we would use. Then use one and then always keep talking. I feel like we developed a lot of trust right then and there coming up with that game. (Final interview, May 2014)

I share the Nertz example to illustrate how I have come to understand the importance of embracing the voice and perspective of my student partners and of making sure that early in the semester we engage in an activity that we co-create. With another student partner, in a following semester, I simply implemented the Nertz game and neglected to have an early real experience of co-creating an assignment. Although my student partners valued the experience, we did not develop the synergy and the level of trust in each other that come from the true collaboration I had with Dave and Rich.

### **Partnership 2: Secondary Teaching Methods in Physical Education (Karen Richardson)**

I selected Sonny as a student partner as I wanted him to have a meaningful experience in an introductory secondary methods course, which he was taking after completing upper level coursework in elementary physical education. He was concurrently enrolled in the course for which I invited him to be a student partner in the lab portion of the course. I intended for the partnership to be for Sonny's benefit, yet his perspective on students' experiences with peer teaching in the course had a significant impact on my teaching and was an unexpected and wonderful benefit. Sonny gave students personal one-on-one feedback that they were very open to receive. Sonny said:

I think that since I was also in the class and I had to do most of the same coursework as them [students], they felt comfortable to get the feedback from me. After I observed them teaching, I found that a lot of times they would ask me for help on a lot of things. I guess it was good for me to be able to help them try to understand what we're trying to achieve in the program. (Final interview, May 2014)

I found that students were so open to Sonny's feedback. I was pleasantly surprised when I was formally assessing lesson plans and had the opportunity to see the feedback that Sonny had provided to students. His written feedback to students on their lesson plans was positive, specific, and action focused. During the semester I came to value Sonny's ability to give positive, specific feedback to students

after they completed a peer teaching experience, particularly when a student was really struggling. In addition, Sonny would also provide formative assessment to his peers during peer teaching labs. I said to Sonny:

I felt very comfortable when the students were peer teaching and we always had more than one lesson going on at the same time. I could just totally depend on you. I really thought of you as a colleague. When I was watching a student I felt like I could be honest with you, 'Oh, no, they're blowing it. What did they do? And so we'd have a side conversation and we'd discuss how can we tell them in a nice way what to do better. So, it was really nice to have someone to talk to and to share ideas. You pointed out positive that I didn't see, because sometimes I get overwhelmed with what I see going wrong. (Final interview, May 2014)

Sonny spoke of his own growth about effective teaching and the important role that he played in supporting the learning of his peers:

I'm not sure what group it was but after they taught their dance and I gave them their feedback they were just really thankful. They said, "Wow, that's so nice that you found all these things that we did good and you could only find 2 or 3 things that we need to slightly improve on, so we really appreciate it. I just love when you give the feedback..." Specific feedback is very important when teaching, just to the individual if you see that, only that person needs the feedback. I think it's more beneficial just to go up to them with that feedback instead of trying to tell it to the whole group, if it's not the whole group that needs the feedback.

I came to really appreciate Sonny's ability to give feedback on teaching in a personal and non-evaluative manner. I realized that due to the number of students in the course, 25, I was always in the role of evaluator when I was watching a lab lesson. I realized that I internalized my students' struggles teaching, as a failure on my part as a teacher educator, even though this is an early methods course. The realization of the power of the non-evaluative feedback has prompted me to design a semester-long project for students to video all their teaching episodes and demonstrate and reflect on their growth over time in effective teaching through a video archive.

### **Partnership 3: Elementary Physical Education Methods (Misti Neutzling)**

I selected Erin as a student partner with me because she had aspirations to teach at the collegiate level in the future. Erin was in the post-baccalaureate licensure program, having completed a degree in English as an undergraduate. As a first-year faculty member, I welcomed the opportunity to have additional support in my classroom. Erin made it clear that she hoped to further develop her skills as a constructivist teacher, which, looking back, held me accountable to model effective pedagogy. Our partnership developed into a relationship with a deep level of mutual respect. I viewed myself as a mentor for Erin as a future Physical Education Teacher Educator, and we came to rely on each other for frank and honest feedback about our teaching. To include Erin as a partner, I shared lesson plans with her prior to class in an effort to get her input and to model the importance of planning.

I was pleased that Erin embraced the value of planning for her in-class interactions as we both used constructivist pedagogies in our lesson design. We focused on asking questions about students' experiences and understandings of important concepts, rather than telling them. Erin commented on her prior planning for a feedback session. A feedback session occurred in the classroom with the student, professor and student partner. The session is designed to promote reflective practice and to identify strengths and weaknesses. Erin said:

So when I was providing feedback I would write feedback about things that they did well, and things that they didn't do well on their rubric. And before their meetings, I would sit down and I would develop written feedback and questions. (Final interview, May 2014).

I was pleased because students were receiving the same programmatic message from both Erin and me, in part because we had each modeled lessons using effective demonstrations. Erin noted that students responded well to her approach to providing feedback that required them to think about their teaching practice. Erin said:

I had a student, when we did our 2<sup>nd</sup> feedback meeting, so in the 1<sup>st</sup> meeting I had told the student that he needed to use more demonstrations in different ways and then in the 2<sup>nd</sup> feedback Dr. Neutzling told him that he had great use of demonstration. He actually said that he took what I said and made sure he did it in this lesson, so I was like cool. (Final interview, May 2014)

In addition to being able to provide important feedback to students, because students developed a level of respect and admiration for Erin, they also sought her out when they needed clarity on an assignment. Erin said:

Sometimes students would ask me questions that you had clearly already said but they felt more comfortable instead of saying, "Dr. Neutzling, is this what we're supposed to do?" So, I just reiterated it for them. I think that you, as a student, don't want to be perceived as someone who doesn't know something at that point. It's not that they are scared of you; they don't want you to perceive them as "You're a slacker or you don't know what you're doing". Sometimes I would ask them and they would be like I totally just blanked on that last few minutes. (Final interview, 2014).

I was disappointed to hear that students were afraid of asking me questions as I worked so hard to establish an environment that encouraged questions and not knowing. Although I welcomed Erin's support, I still found students' reluctance to ask questions unsettling. This is, perhaps, one of the down sides of partnership: it can widen rather than bridge the divide between students and faculty.

### **Final Thoughts and Next Steps**

In addition to the benefits we have already mentioned, student partners identified that their role reinforced skills and knowledge they learned in prior coursework, such as their understanding of constructivist teaching. Gilles and Wilson (2004) contend that relearning or the opportunity to rethink or adapt was one of four main impacts of a mentoring program. Social interaction, required of the student partners with both students and faculty afforded them the chance to question "taken-for-granted worldviews and their own behaviors and to be reinforced in those views and behaviors that were deemed effective" (Gilles and Wilson, 2004).

Furthermore, because we were committed to constructivist teaching, which depends on understanding students' experiences, we had to acknowledge that despite our intentional focus on knowing our students as individuals, our role as professor was a barrier to open and honest student-faculty communication. Acknowledging this hierarchy was a wake-up call for us, which calls into questions some of our taken-for-granted assumptions about our constructivist classrooms. The reciprocity of the student faculty partnership, the balanced give-and take between faculty and student partners where each brought their perspective (Cook-Sather et al., 2014) was an important aspect of partnership that allowed us to grow as teacher educators.

We are looking to continue to provide opportunities for students to work with us as patterns in our teacher education program. We are exploring options to use work-study funding to pay students for their important work. In addition, we also want to open this opportunity to all students by making an open application process. Our students-faculty partnerships have allowed us to grow as teacher educators and to reconnect us to the student experience in our respective courses.

### **References**

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