# Undergraduate students partnering with staff to develop trauma-informed, anti-racist pedagogical approaches: intersecting experiences of three student partners

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## Abstract

When the global pandemic intersected with the worldwide Black Lives Matter uprisings, undergraduate student partners, paid by the hour in an extension of an existing pedagogical partnership program, researched resources on trauma-informed, anti-racist and equitable approaches to hybrid and remote teaching and learning, contributed to annotated outlines of these resources gathered on a publicly accessible web page and met in pairs with cohorts of academic staff at our own institutions and across a ten-college consortium to consider how to implement the recommendations in the resources. Autoethnographic accounts of three black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) student partners' experiences of this work revealed pedagogical partnership as: 1) a space for affirming the lived experiences of BAME students; 2) a structure that supports students in developing language to name their experiences so that staff can hear, respond to and act on them in revising pedagogical practices; 3) a way to create institutional roles that remunerate students for the work that otherwise might not get done or that remains invisible, uncompensated labor; and 4) an inspiration to students to carry the benefits of partnership work beyond the partnerships themselves.

## Introduction

> "*Joining the Summer Pedagogical Partnership Program…* [gave]*... me a space to encounter multiple vocabularies that nearly encapsulate the experiences and feelings of being a minority in these times…* [and]*... to help the* [staff] *cohort I worked with create courses that take steps toward... addressing racism in higher education…*"
> Rhoda Akua Ameyaa

> "[The program]*... gave me a new sense of purpose and something to focus on to escape the uncertainty and anxiety of the pandemic… One of the most important things that I have learnt throughout this partnership is that professors might not always do things in the right way, but they are willing to listen and change.*"
> Kirtee Ramo

> "*My identity as a first generation, international student and a person of color helped me to bring a different perspective to the conversation...From this partnership work, I learnt how to express my feelings in the right and efficient way to make an impactful conversation. I believe this experience will help me throughout my entire life.*"
> Hurum Tohfa

In June 2020, when the global pandemic intersected with the worldwide Black Lives Matter uprisings, the second author of this case study, Alison Cook-Sather, created the Summer Pedagogical Partnership Program at Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. This extension into the summer of the colleges' existing student-staff partnership program supported fifteen undergraduate students in researching resources

on trauma-informed, anti-racist and equitable approaches and working with cohorts of academic staff to prepare for hybrid and remote teaching and learning informed by those resources.

The three student authors of this case study, Rhoda Akua Ameyaa, Kirtee Ramo and Hurum Tohfa, all of whom identify as black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) students, wrote autoethnographic accounts to capture their experiences of working in these partnerships with staff. Captured in the excerpts with which we open this case study, these accounts revealed the themes of pedagogical partnership as:

1. a space for affirming the lived experiences of BAME students whose identities make them particularly susceptible to multiple forms of harm at the intersection of the pandemic and the racism the pandemic has further revealed;
2. a structure that supports students in developing language to name their experiences so that staff can hear, respond to and act on them in revising pedagogical practices;
3. a way to create institutional roles that remunerate students for the work that otherwise might not get done or that remains invisible, uncompensated labor;
4. an inspiration to students to carry the benefits of partnership work beyond the partnerships themselves.

As we discuss in this case study, their intersecting experiences show how the student partners were positioned as change agents through innovative partnership activities. We suggest that these activities contributed to creating conditions that can change racist narratives and practices structured into institutions such as ours.

## Context

Located fourteen miles outside Philadelphia on the land of the Lenape, Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges are both historically Quaker, residential, liberal arts colleges that enroll approximately 1,300 undergraduate students (and 260 graduate students at Bryn Mawr) from diverse socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. Both colleges have high teaching and research expectations for faculty and low student-to-faculty ratios; both are known for supporting student autonomy and self-governance. Since 2007, the Teaching and Learning Institute (TLI) at Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges has contributed to the development of more equitable and inclusive classrooms through student-faculty pedagogical partnerships supported by Students as Learners and Teachers (SaLT), the TLI's signature program.

SaLT was one of the first programs designed to *"engage students as co-learners, co-researchers, co-inquirers, co-developers, and co-designers"* (Healey *et al.*, 2016, p.2) through semester-long, one-on-one partnerships with staff, administrators and other students. Defined as *"a collaborative, reciprocal process through which all participants have the opportunity to contribute equally, although not necessarily in the same ways, to curricular or pedagogical conceptualization, decision making, implementation, investigation, or analysis"* (Cook-Sather *et al.*, 2014, pp.6-7; Healey *et al.*, 2014), pedagogical partnership can deepen engagement and enhance learning and teaching (Cook-Sather *et al.*, *op.cit.*; Mercer-Mapstone *et al.*, 2017). SaLT has had since its advent a commitment to equity and inclusivity (Cook-Sather, 2018) and a growing body of research affirms how student-staff partnerships foster more equitable and inclusive practices (Cates, Madigan and Reitenauer 2018; de Bie *et al.*, 2019).

## Project and implementation

Through the Summer Pedagogical Partnership program (SPPP), a group of fifteen undergraduate students or recent graduates, including the three student co-authors, were paid by the hour at the top of the student pay scale from monies left over in the academic-year budget for the SaLT program and from the Provosts' Offices on Bryn Mawr's and Haverford's campuses. Student partners spent approximately two to five hours per week for twelve weeks and Cook-Sather spent approximately two hours per week for no additional compensation. Student partners engaged in each of the project activities described below.

### *Developing pedagogical recommendations for trauma-informed, anti-racist, equitable pedagogical approaches*

Student partners created a resource that became a publicly accessible set of documents. Based on their own experiences as well as the arguments in the resources, student partners created a table of contents with titles and short descriptions of the resources, each linked to a separate Google Doc that presented the set of recommendations that student partners thought staff should keep front and center as they were planning for teaching and learning during the 2020-2021 academic year.

### *Consulting with cohorts of academic staff at Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges*

Drawing on the resources and on their own experiences, pairs of student partners met weekly with cohorts of two to six academic staff from across the disciplines at our own institutions. In these sessions, staff shared their plans, hopes and fears and student partners took on both the intellectual and the emotional work of co-creating with these staff members trauma-informed, anti-racist, equitable pedagogical approaches the staff would use during the academic year.

### *Facilitating conversations among staff from a ten-college collaborative*

Also drawing on the resources and on their own experiences, pairs of student partners facilitated fourteen stand-alone sessions with a total of ninety-two academic and professional staff from across the ten-college Liberal Arts Collaborative for Digital Innovation (LACOL). Using a structured format that Cook-Sather developed and that each pair of student facilitators adapted as needed, the student partners invited staff to share their thoughts and plans and offered recommendations and responses.

## Method

The overlapping experiences of the three student authors that we present here were generated through a form of collaborative autoethnography. Autoethnography draws on researchers' lived experiences to *"describe and critique cultural beliefs, practices, and experiences"* (Adams *et al.*, 2015, p.1). 'Collaborative autoethnography' is the result of *"a group of researchers pooling their stories to find some commonalities and differences … to discover the meanings of the stories in relation to their sociocultural contexts"* (Chang *et al.*, 2013, p.17).

## Themes from student authors' accounts of pedagogical partnership

Ameyaa, Ramo, and Tohfa each wrote their respective autoethnographic accounts of their experiences of the summer pedagogical partnership work. We then looked across their accounts for commonalities and differences and identified the four themes we discuss below.

### 1. Making space for and affirming the lived experiences of BAME students

One theme that was consistent across accounts was acknowledgment of the devastating effects of the pandemic on BAME students whose identities make them particularly susceptible to multiple forms of harm at the intersection of the global pandemic and the structural racism the pandemic has further revealed. As international students, Ramo, Tohfa, and Ameyaa could not go home when the pandemic struck the United States in March 2020; all three felt isolated and afraid.

Ramo's parents are both essential workers. Feeling not only the emotional strain of that, but also, as a first-generation student, a constant need to prove herself, Ramo had the additional pressure of needing to work twelve hours every week while managing five classes. Similarly, Tohfa, an international student from Bangladesh and a first-generation college student, found herself in a constant state of uncertainty and fear, not knowing when or if she would see her friends and family again. Ameyaa, as an undergraduate, black, international student unable to go back home, constantly encountered the fear born of the surge of racial discrimination and police brutality.

Joining the SPPP in June 2020 gave all three students a job, a focus and a community in which they were valued. It may not have erased or eliminated the larger realities they experience, but their having such a space and support structure served them well in addressing such challenges. As Ameyaa explains, she placed her identities and lived experiences at the forefront of her suggestions to staff, which helped her both to humanize the opinions of the people she worked with and to hold herself accountable for what she put in the resources that informed all the work student partners did with staff.

### 2. Supporting students in developing language to name their experiences

All student accounts acknowledged the fact that, despite the problems they see in pedagogical practices, staff actually want to help students, even when they are not always sure how. Understanding this underlying commitment inspires student partners to find ways of naming their experiences so that staff may better understand and respond to them.

While she had always known, Ameyaa explains, that the system in her school was not favorable to her and her peers who looked and identified in similar ways, she couldn't find the 'right words' to describe the ways she felt about the system. Joining the SPPP introduced her to language that named the experiences she had had. That did not heal her of the trauma, fear and uncertainties she had had to endure or solve the problems she came to the table with. It did, however, allow her to join in the conversation and express herself in a variety of ways ranging from conveying how her perspectives as a black, first-generation, international student could help the staff cohort she worked with create courses that would take steps in addressing racism in higher education to suggesting how to create a more equitable and livable atmosphere in and out of the classroom for students of several backgrounds. As Ramo notes, sometimes the issues that are obvious to students are not as

apparent to staff and so better communication is needed to address these. Through weekly meetings with one another and Cook-Sather, and in weekly meetings with staff partners, student partners developed language to name the experiences they have and perceive but that staff may not.

As Tohfa explains, her identity as a first-generation, international student and a person of color helped her to bring a different perspective to the conversation about teaching and learning. She felt able to draw her staff cohort's attention towards the mental health of students, racial discrimination and inequity issues, especially during the time of a pandemic. While conversations concerning race and individual identities are indeed, as Ameyaa notes, difficult to have, conversations are nevertheless integral to destabilizing a system that has worked countless years to sideline people on account of their cultural identities and racial backgrounds. Through the SPPP, we have started conversations about these issues and have brought to light – or reminded both staff and students – how white supremacy has worked to give power and influence to some students while depriving others of them.

### 3. Creating institutional roles that remunerate students for invisible labor

Ramo, Tohfa, and Ameyaa would likely not have been able to engage in the conversations with staff they refer to above had they not been positioned in institutional roles that make explicit and compensate the labor that is usually invisible and uncompensated.

Ramo learned about the opportunity to join the SPPP just after she heard that she had lost her summer research program. It gave her a new sense of purpose and something to focus on to escape the uncertainty and anxiety of the pandemic. Tohfa also needed something to take her mind off the many personal worries that some staff, rigidly focused upon required coursework, seemed to overlook: an overwhelming sense of terror, a constant dread of infection/contagion, a feeling of isolation and unremitting anxiety, social and financial uncertainty. She thought it was high time that we change how we perceive education and learning and that students' stories be told, so when she saw the opening for the SPPP, she thought the job would give her a chance to voice the inequity and discrimination that has become a part of the curriculum. Ameyaa built on the capacities she developed through her work with other student partners and with staff to direct conversations toward tearing down systemic oppression, racism and discrimination in higher education and the community at large.

### 4. Inspiring students to carry partnership benefits beyond partnership work

As the work continues, so too do its effects. Tohfa captures succinctly the enduring nature of this partnership experience when she reflects, in her comment at the opening of this case study, that she believes this experience will help her throughout her entire life.

Ramo explains that before this partnership work, she was always hesitant about sharing her concerns, but the weekly meetings of the student partners made it easy to open up and discuss the changes that need to happen. And Ameyaa notes that by the end of the partnership she had learnt to be more empathetic towards the staff she worked with and see things from their point of view. She feels this insight will stay with her throughout her college career and inform the ways she perceives instructors of the classes she enrolls in.

## Impact

The affirmation, language and roles the SPPP afforded the student partners carried into the Fall-2020 and Spring-2021 semesters, when Tohfa, Ameyaa and Ramo continued to work in pedagogical partnership with staff.

Because of the positive response of staff to the work of student partners through the SPPP, weekly student-led brown-bag lunches and weekly coffee chats continued into the academic year, and Tohfa worked with student partners from four other colleges with student-staff partnership programs in the LACOL consortium. Tohfa also participated in one-on-one, semester-long pedagogical partnerships with new staff members in chemistry and biology, supporting her staff partners in developing trauma-informed, anti-racist pedagogical approaches while (as opposed to 'in preparation for') teaching. Ramo also continued in partnership with a new staff member, working with her to make computer science equitable and inclusive, and with an entire department of mathematics staff with the same focus. Ameyaa worked in one-on-one, semester-long pedagogical partnerships with staff members in environmental studies and dance, with a departmental cohort from political science who participated in the SPPP, and in the newly created Pedagogy Circles for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion.

The staff members' engagement with these BAME student partners contributes to anti-racist work by structuring BAME student voices into continuing dialogue about and planning for teaching.

## Conclusion

Pedagogical partnerships position under-represented students to mobilize their identities to effect cultural change (Cook-Sather *et al.*, 2019; Reyes and Adams, 2017). Ameyaa's, Ramo's and Tohfa's intersecting experiences show how these student partners not only experienced the empowerment and affirmation described above, but they were also positioned as change agents through innovative partnership activities focused on developing trauma-informed, anti-racist pedagogical approaches. As Ameyaa explains, she, as a student, wanted to share these stories because they could go a long way to validating students who feel similarly and also inform and keep reminding majority students and staff about how they consciously or unconsciously strengthen these deadly systems. While there are individual and institutional challenges to furthering such work, we suggest that these activities have contributed – and will continue to contribute – to creating conditions that will support and promote change to racist narratives and practices structured into institutions such as ours.

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