

The possibility of pedagogical partnership: Co-creating teaching and learning through a Singapore cultural lens

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Preamble

Student-staff partnership practices aim to reduce power differentials and to create authentic collaborations. In Asian contexts, scholars have posited that cultural norms have created hierarchical education systems and widened the power distance that pose a barrier to authentic partnerships (Carless and Kwan, 2019).

Toh Tai Chong (TC) is a marine biologist by training, and has been teaching interdisciplinary courses, with a focus on conservation and sustainability, in a residential college for the past 6 years. Chng Huang Hoon (HH) directs a community leadership unit that offers undergraduates community-based research projects. We both believe in active student engagement in service of student learning and have only undertaken sporadic partnerships with students. TC's journey in pedagogical partnership began just a year ago when he co-designed and co-taught a course with a Geography major student, and HH has been engaged in staff-student partnership issues through her leadership work since 2015. This is the first time the two of us are co-reflecting on our separate journeys in student partnerships.

Based on our relatively short history in partnering students in teaching and research, this reflection examines our assumption, beliefs, intentions and attitudes regarding student-staff partnership. For us, 'intention' relates to the underlying purpose and goals that defines partnership and 'attitude' refers to one's disposition or inclination towards partnerships. In this dialogue, we asked, "How might the Singapore culture shape our intentions and attitudes towards partnership?" and "How can we overcome our cultural barriers?" This reflective exchange makes explicit the interplay between the assumptions and constraints in our context, and our own intentions in and attitudes towards partnership, that have shaped our work. We aim to offer a view that keeps an open mind towards the possibilities and potential of partnering with students despite contextual challenges.

Intentions, attitudes and barriers towards partnerships

HH: As a feminist teacher, my motivation to partner with students relates to ideas of student empowerment and democratic classroom practices, which include respecting student voices, reducing power differentials, and fostering agency and ownership in student learning. These are intentions that drive me towards partnership.

TC: I also believe that students bring to the table experiences, skills and knowledge that may be different from my own. On the surface, students' perspectives on learning and teaching may pose some challenges to collaboration, but I believe that such friction may prove constructive and can bring about new ideas. My intention towards partnership focuses on

creating purposeful platforms for faculty and students to discuss topics of interest, build empathy, integrate ideas, and prompt learning with and from each other.

HH: Both our expressed intentions – whether a feminist vision of equity and agency or, in your case, making available opportunities for student involvement – have already signaled a willingness on our parts, i.e. that we are attitudinally disposed towards including students in learning and teaching. The question for me, then, is: given our intentions and attitudes, why is partnership still not so common in our institutional practice?

TC: In my opinion, beyond our individual intentions and positive attitudes towards partnership, we still experience certain constraints in our minds. Our attitudes are shaped by our local schooling experiences and culture, but I am cautiously optimistic that the ground is shifting towards student-staff partnerships.

HH: We definitely still experience contextual barriers. What is a key barrier for you?

TC: Our culture is a key barrier for me. According to Liang and Matthews (2021), Confucian elements in Chinese culture have framed the teacher-student relationship in their context in Hong Kong; and in Singapore, Sim (2019) has also noted that the concept of ‘face’ poses a barrier to student active participation in class. I often wonder how these same elements are manifested in Singapore’s context as well. I think our culture and early school experience have created a power distance between students and teachers. I watch my kids go to school, and I discern a strong element of their teachers overtly emphasizing this power difference, which makes it challenging to entertain partnership, as collaborators, on an equal basis. To me, this emphasis signals the lack of intention to undertake pedagogical partnerships. University, especially in graduate school, seems to be a turning point for us, where we start to acknowledge and even expect students to be more independent. Almost over night, there seems to be a different spatial architecture available for instructors and students to co-create ideas and co-define their practices, thus signalling a shift towards a more equitable culture that puts learners on par with teachers. But the long tail of power distance haunts us even as we try to switch to a partnership mindset. What has your experience been like, bearing in mind that our students are also embedded within the same hierarchical culture we live in?

HH: Partnership requires us to bridge the distance between students and us, but closeness does not in itself engender a partnership if there is no sound intention and positive attitude towards fostering responsibility and ownership in learning and teaching. As Ansari (2021) has rightly put it:

‘partnership’ implies that both parties are equally and mutually invested in a particular cause, task, or purpose. If we consider this definition of partnership, then we can see students as capable individuals who can work alongside their teachers in ensuring enriching learning experiences for themselves and their peers’.

In research collaborations that I facilitate, students subscribe based on their interest and are briefed only on broad project requirements, after which students will negotiate the details of the collaboration. So, the project is collaborative and co-created. However, in spite of my own attitudes and intentions towards partnership, it is challenging to flatten the social

hierarchy due to the deep-seated, pre-established cultural frames driving our habits and practices, in and outside the classroom. The line has become a rather one to cross. Some students would defer to us as 'the experts' even though the intention to effect equity and agency in partnership is articulated and everyone seating round the table is positively disposed to work as a team. It is important, therefore, to consider our cultural frames that provide specific notions about what it means to be a teacher and what is entailed in being a student in our culture. Beyond intentions and attitudes, it still requires conscious effort and confidence from all parties to overcome this barrier. To do this, we will need a mindset shift. I know you have partnered with a Geography student in co-teaching. How did you bridge the distance?

TC: My student Donovan and I co-taught an interdisciplinary food culture course that tapped into our knowledge of Geography and Biology, respectively. My intention was to introduce Donovan's voice as a co-teacher who has co-designed and co-delivered specific parts of the course alongside me, so that he got to experience pedagogical co-creation and co-teaching, and the class could see how the two disciplines intersect and see a peer actively engaged in student-staff partnership. The latter is important because, as Seow (2019) puts it, undergraduate students risk feeling "*disconnected from [their] experiences in the classroom*" if students are not actively invited to be partners in co-creating course activities. I must say, this collaboration with Donovan was an exception rather than the norm. He was attitudinally disposed towards this collaboration in that he saw it as a new adventure in learning and growth. Not many students view this 'extra' work in this way. Many students do have very good ideas about teaching and learning, but they don't share them as often as we would like them to, due perhaps to their own lack of confidence and assumptions they have about the teacher-student roles. To address these challenges, my intentions toward pedagogical partnerships have to be made explicit. For instance, at the end of every semester, I would remind students of my specific interests in partnering with students in research, teaching and student activities. Even so, students rarely take up the opportunities. Anecdotally, from speaking to some students, I know they have not thought of partnering with their teachers as a vehicle to enrich their own learning.

HH: I think students perceive professors as people they should not intrude on outside course time; they feel they need a 'legitimate' reason to seek us out. This brings us back to the power distance issue; and added to this, the high-speed, competitive nature of our society also unfortunately directs many students' decisions about when and whether to be involved in activities outside the curriculum.

TC: Given these challenges, I often wonder whether my intention and attitude towards partnership are enough to drive the partnership.

HH: I think just expressing our own intentions and displaying positive attitudes towards partnerships are not enough in themselves, though these are essential starting points to launch a partnership. We also need to get buy-in from multiple stakeholders who are crucial to the endeavor. First and foremost, we need students themselves to buy into these/our intentions and share our attitudes. If students are not persuaded by our intention to partner them, and if they don't see that partnering with us is important to their education and self-development, then what we intend will fail. And intention without attitude will also not work, as such partnerships will start and then be aborted due to the wrong attitude. Second, we

need other excellent colleagues to be part of this partnership drive, so that student-staff partnership becomes much more of a part of our daily practice as teachers, and once made more ubiquitous, the cultural hold relating to power distance will hopefully be diminished. And finally, we will certainly need the institutional structure to support our efforts, so that partnership becomes an institutional priority and a part of the institutional fabric.

TC: We will certainly need to actively seek buy-in from multiple stakeholders, so that all parties are clear about intentions and orient themselves favourably towards partnership. I do want to take up this last point about making partnership an institutional culture and priority that hopefully will become a part of the institutional structure and practice. My personal experience with administrative structures has led me to believe that the tools we have developed, such as templates and protocols, are primarily used to maximise efficiency that do not encourage significant deviations. Speaking as a relatively junior staff member, I find institutional rules and regulations to be huge considerations. I am always wondering about the do's and don'ts about collaborating with students, and these anxieties have made it challenging for me to undertake partnerships, despite what I intend. I am mindful of the consequences should there be a breach, no matter how unintentional. This is one big barrier that freezes me. Consequently, for partnerships that are not already established, I find myself checking back with my senior colleagues frequently to garner support before I proceed. So, I appreciate this point about institutional support and, also, I appreciate conversations like this one to pave the way to my partnership efforts.

Epilogue: Recommendations for enabling partnership

TC: Given our intentions, attitudes, and the constraints we have detailed above, what are some practices and recommendations that you think would promote partnership in our context?

HH: A crucial first move may be for all of us to make an explicit commitment to valuing different perspectives, to keep an open mind and gather as equals. Our students, and some colleagues too, sometimes don't have the confidence to discern the value each stakeholder brings to the table, and it's worth reminding ourselves that we can all contribute in different ways. As I've said at the outset, my intention for partnership is to enable student empowerment—to give students a strong sense of ownership to define their learning journey. So, I want us to invest energy in involving students as key drivers, and to devolve the decision-making process to students so that they can feel more empowered to do things their way, and not to be dictated to by us.

TC: Yes, I support empowerment and agency in the way you have described them. I would also attempt to bridge the distance by emphasising collaboration and co-creation (Bovill, 2020). This means my student/co-teacher can at any point say, I would like to introduce a change or activity to the course, as Donovan had done in our co-teaching effort. The expressed intention to partner with each other on a shared teaching platform and the established rapport between us become an important foundation for sustained partnership. I recall that in another collaboration, because I did not emphasize this ground rule, the student went on to view her role as an assistant, constantly looking for my lead.

HH: From your co-teaching experience with Donovan, it sounds like your partnership was truly complementary because neither of you can really be said to possess the other person's expertise and you both needed to draw on the other person's and your own expertise to teach successfully. Donovan was as much a disciplinary expert in his field as you are, and that facilitated the equality in your partnership.

TC: Absolutely. In fact, he outlined in his teaching reflections that he "discovered the value of collaboration and the experience strengthened our student-staff relationship". This co-teaching effort continued for a second iteration, with another student. A large part of this success could be because in Singapore, we place a premium on community. To effect buy-in from our students, I think we can encourage our students to view partnership as a community working towards a communal goal and interest, thus enabling the collaboration.

HH: For us, then, partnership is important because we want to give students a voice in their own learning. We know that partnership and mentoring, as deep engagement activities, are highly beneficial to student learning outcomes. As to why we should privilege student partnerships, I ask, who do we most want to nurture/mentor? A faculty or student partnership can probably reap similar benefits, but I believe that partnering with students has the added value of creating a future pool of partners. As scholars, we want to expand the scholarship and the academy. We want to have our students grow into our roles. This is a mentoring effort for creating future leaders in the field.

TC: One institutional practice I do wish to see more of is conversations like this one, to help us to navigate the cultural and institutional environments. We need to dedicate time or create opportunities to engage in conversations with university leaders and more experienced colleagues, to help us work through the barriers so as to build a new culture that treats staff-student collaborations as a critical part of institutional culture. This conversation has not only modelled collegial partnership for me, it has also helped me to understand the importance of articulating our partnership intentions and developing partnership attitudes, as well as how to overcome specific contextual barriers; at the same time, it has opened up more possibilities for future work to build a culture that encourages partnership in our context.

HH: Another thing we can do is to create networks to enable our peers and students to come together as a community, to foster an intentional culture and attitude that is more equitable and inclusive and that encourages a stronger sense of identification and belonging that will make partnerships possible. I think each of us needs to reflect on our own assumptions and address our own mindset first—to clarify for ourselves what our own intentions and attitudes are towards co-creation and partnership. If we adopt this and the practices discussed here, I am confident that together, we can shift the culture, from one that observes hierarchy to one that favors partnership and collaboration.

We have four specific recommendations to enable partnership in our context:

- (a) Start with ourselves, by revisiting our own assumptions and addressing our own reticence, as well as striving to achieve clarity about our own intentions and attitudes towards partnership;

- (b) Influence our colleagues, by drawing them into our network, by actively engaging them in conversations with us so that we can have a critical mass of colleagues to build a collegial support network to enable a new culture of partnership; and also in this process;
- (c) Draw our students into our networks, so that they can also begin to appreciate what partnership can do for their own learning, and finally;
- (d) Work with our local and institutional leadership to create favorable conditions for partnership and where possible, making partnership an institutional priority, thus shifting the Singapore educational culture away from one that leans towards hierarchy to one that embraces partnership.

While this reflection may well ring true in some other contexts too, this is nevertheless an experience that is authentic through our Singapore lens, where culture and hierarchies are real, though change is discernible. With students increasingly making their voices heard, we can envisage a future where partnership will become more natural to us, but it will require active advocacy from those of us who believe in the intentions of partnership and are positively disposed to it.

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