

The spirit of collegiality in fostering student-staff partnership: A student perspective

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The concept of collegiality “*is a complex and somewhat ‘slippery’ idea*” (Kligyte and Barrie, 2014) which, over the years, has developed varying interpretations. Most relevant to partnership work is Fielding’s (1999) notion of “radical collegiality” between teachers and students, which has been taken up to explore multiple forms of student-staff partnership in higher education (Cook-Sather, 2021; Scoles et al., 2021). While there is abundant literature on collegiality, there is little from a student’s perspective. I hope to fill this gap by sharing my experience during Covid-19 when a year of my supervisory relationship developed online. Studies during the pandemic often identify isolated feelings among university students (Phillips et al., 2022). However, collegial relationships with my two mentors have enabled me to sustain connectedness and feel as though I was in partnership. The unexpected structure of online engagement took my mentors and me out of our regular roles and modes of engaging and allowed us to build reciprocal trust and share responsibility for the educational process. As a Japanese student studying in New Zealand during the pandemic, I revisit the values of my home country to argue that the spirit of collegiality can be understood as a form of care that can foster student-staff partnership.

In Japan, teachers’ authoritative role is fixed as *sensei* (teacher) from the Confucian philosophy, and the concept of student-staff partnership is almost alien (Mori, 2021). In some instances, a form of student-staff relationship may be seen as a “partnership” (e.g., in collaborative research); however, if observed carefully, such relations stand on senior-junior vertical relationships, which is an underlying social structure typical of Japan (Nakane, 1973). The saying, “a student must never step on the teacher’s shadow, walk three steps behind” [*sanjyaku sagatte shi no kage o fumazu*], implying that “a student must always honor the teacher,” illustrates how perspectives towards the student-staff relationship in Japan are different from the West. However, this does not mean collegiality cannot exist in a Japanese student-staff relationship if collegiality is understood as a manifestation of care. Though a highly distinguished scholar, my *sensei* in Japan had been very approachable and always available for students whenever they required support. The reassurance of being safely guided by *sensei* has enabled me to have courage for my journeys even after graduation. Because I experienced how genuine student-staff relationship “*is a way of showing unconditional love, nurturing learners, and seeing them [students] prosper*” (Mnisi, 2015), I was able to find and build that kind of care with my mentors in New Zealand.

My mentors in New Zealand provided a “*secure base*” (Bowlby, 1988) from which we could build mutual trust. Because I received prompt responses in times of urgency, Zoom-meetings were held in a timely manner, and submission dates were entrusted to me, I responded by maintaining my motivation to produce quality work (Rizkalla et al., 2022) and felt myself working alongside my mentors, not only following three steps behind. This experience is consistent with findings from a recent study that teachers’ intentional interaction with students can strengthen students’ trust in teachers, which in turn improved students’ learning conditions (Trolan et al., 2022). Building trust is crucial for a student’s

personal growth because it is only with reassurance of this secure base that a student can have courage to take risks and explore in the real world. If reassured, a student “*does not have to cling to that base as much as an individual who lacks such confidence*” (Feeney & Thrush, 2010: 58). But beyond that, the care a student experiences can be turned back into the relationship, making it a partnership in which all parties share responsibility for learning. Indeed, “a high degree of empathy in a relationship is possibly *the* most potent factor in bringing about change and learning” (emphasis in original; Rogers, 1980: 139).

My experiences in Japan and New Zealand have taught me that a genuine student-staff partnership ultimately depends on whether both parties see themselves as a “*companion to the person in his or her inner world*” (Rogers, 1980: 142). I also found that in such instances, position or status does not come into play. I am aware that I have repeatedly used “genuine” in my essay while being cognisant of the fact that “[*t*]here is no such thing as ‘real’ or ‘true’ collaboration or collegiality...[*but*] only different forms of collegiality...” (Hargreaves, 1991 in Fielding, 1999, p. 6). I consciously used “genuine” to signal that the essence of collegiality in student-staff partnerships is an emotional experience (Scoles et al., 2021) which, so far, I can only interpret as genuine. The complex and dynamic ideas Fielding (1999) conveys regarding various forms of student and staff relationships interact with the mutual trust my mentors and I built, affirming for me that collegiality is a process that is inherently vulnerable like any other relationship but can also be mutually empowering. Inspired by my experiences with my mentors during the Covid-19 pandemic, I continue to make efforts to weave these ideas with my own cultural heritage and values. In doing so, I walk three steps behind my mentors when I am guided by the responses I receive from them (Rogers, 1980), and for implementing my share of responsibility, I walk alongside them.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my profound gratitude to Dr. Alison Cook-Sather, Dr. Amrita Kaur, and the two anonymous reviewers for their kind support and guidance.

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