Designing a Master of Art in Art and Design: Student-staff reflections on first-year experiences as a process

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Abstract

In autumn 2019, four staff in the School of Art and Design were charged with designing the first graduate degree in the College of the Arts, a Master of Art in Art and Design (MA). This reflective essay will serve much like an artistic critique of student-staff reflections on the process and products of our first-year experience through our lived experience from inception 2019 through spring 2022. This journey delineates the attitudes and intentions that are supporting the emergence of our student-staff partnership. I am illuminating these concepts from an artistic perspective to showcase the foundational cognitive and emotional processes of diverse stakeholders including students-staff from art education, digital animation, and museum studies while also acknowledging the impact of a "sticky" curriculum (Orr & Shreeve, 2018) on the development and implementation of the MA.

Building partnership within a scholarship of teaching and learning framework

In autumn 2019 I served as a writing team member charged with developing a new online Master of Art in Art and Design with concentrations in art education, digital animation, and museum studies. I helped shape the program outcomes by developing core curriculum in five shared courses comprising 15-hours of the 30-hour degree, and five courses in the art education concentration. I write to share student-staff self-reflections from the first-year cohort through our lived experiences in the fall 2021 core course ART 6010, and the spring 2022 art education course ARED 7050. This reflective essay emerges from the process and development of students-as-partners based on Healey, Flint, and Harrington's (2016) conceptual model with a scholarship of teaching and learning focus where, as Felten (2013) recommended, students were included as co-research partners to evaluate learning and teaching.

Establishing student voice as co-researchers

While mapping this journey, I highlight the attitudes and intentions supporting the emergence of the students-as-partners model by showcasing the foundational cognitive and emotional processes of students and staff within a sticky art and design curriculum (Orr and Shreeve, 2018) where trust, risk, responsibility, empowerment, and reciprocity impacted the implementation of the new online degree. This portrait delineates community building in student-staff relationships, fostering shared responsibility, and meaning making through the development of students as co-research partners and evaluators of their lived experience, and finally, enhancing learning and teaching from student's perspective in ARED 7050. Although I am the primary author, the students engaged as co-researchers on the reflective essay process with their voice represented through discussion posts in ART 6010 where the following questions were explored: what was a piece of cake, what drove you nuts, and what

would you change? Then in ARED 7050 through focus groups students explored questions regarding their learning and teaching by examining the following questions: were the writing teams aspirational program outcomes and learning goals like critical inquiry in creative practice being met; have instructors helped you connect research to problem solving in creative activities; and reflecting on your experience, have you developed a personal narrative that values art? Through this reflective writing process, I hope to offer a glimpse into the foundational efforts to establish a climate for students-as-partners within this new degree.

Community building with active listening, peer learning, and empathy

Seeding the idea of students-as-partners began early in fall 2021 in ART 6010 with a reading assignment which introduced Healey, Flint, and Harrington's (2016) conceptual model. Community building began immediately when students voiced concerns regarding the impersonal nature of ART 6010, an asynchronous online course. This immediate feedback, the course was impersonal, shocked, and surprised me. Hearing this gave me the opportunity for a quick fix. I immediately offered and held a weekly synchronous open office hour. When my technology consistently failed, a student volunteered to record the hour then post it online for those unable to attend the live session, an act that ensured inclusivity and demonstrated student empowerment. The process of community building emerged when we listened to each other and responded with honesty, open communication, and support. Assignment questions and course intentions were answered, clarified, and redefined which resulted in quelled fears. When students felt this as a safe space to vent frustrations, trust building began. Careful active listening meant meeting students where they were within the online learning process which modulated the balance of power within the course. The one-way interaction between us was disrupted as shared responsibility for learning grew.

To encourage engagement in a structed learning process I situated peer-review and assessment in the eight modules hoping this would enhance reciprocity where students would benefit from learning in partnership. Yet, as one student noted:

> *"I understand the necessity of establishing a community and requiring communication within professional discussions is essential to the success of the program – however, when the required readings/personal responding was heavy and I found myself in the weeds, retorting authentically to other's perspectives was like trying to draw water from a dry well."*

Students noted the outline and critique process submitted for the personal narrative peer-to-peer review, delivered at the end of the semester, needed to be presented week one.

Clearly expressed in the discussions was "a lack of clarity" and "an ambiguity in instructions." I struggled to understand this desire for rubrics and specific guidelines. However, reading the following comment, I realised empathy is more important than any vague notion I have about what graduate courses should or need to be:

> *"It has been impossible to do my absolute best in all three of my main roles of teacher/student/mom – teachers have been marinating in a toxic positivity stew where we have to pretend like everything is ok all the time and the truth is that it isn't always ok…we're still being asked to do too much with too little; none of that is necessarily tied to the course or program per say, just that it is part of our lives right now and I think it is important to acknowledge."*

My role as course designer and teacher was standing in the way of attending to and comprehending the lives of the forty-eight students participating in ART 6010.

Change, risk, and freedom

Regarding change, students voiced strong resistance to the idea of developing a personal narrative that intrinsically valued art, a writing team program outcome and ART 6010 learning goal. I hoped this assignment would stimulate thoughts of personal understanding of art and creativity and would be a launching pad for critical thinking about being an artist and researcher. By including samples of my artwork/research, and with permission a Pecha Kucha presented by Rebecca Bourgault at USSEA 2021 as examples of personal narratives, I thought the assignment gave students great independence, autonomy, and empowerment. Rather than seeing this as an opportunity to position themselves in the zeitgeist of the art world, resistance emerged as students feared there was a correct response to be found in the readings which they felt they were not finding.

Freedom to think about art in this way seemed logical to me, though I recognise it can be tricky and risky. Presenting the learning outcomes and assignments with a degree of ambiguity or "stickiness" would, I hoped, support the development of creativity, and allow students free range for diversity of products and/or processes (Orr and Shreeve, 2018, p.129). Open questions caused students discomfort, and the intensity of the readings threw many into a tailspin. As one student noted, *"I found the beginning of the semester overwhelming with the readings assigned"* while another clearly expressed frustration, *"the readings were so heavy I truly don't feel I absorbed much which made the act of reading robotic."* Yet, as another student noted, *"the readings were challenging as my brain had not had this type of stimulation in a long time, if ever, about the value of creativity and my voice in the matter."*

Summary

Engaging students in self-reflection, positioning peer-assessment and feedback within the course, and listening to their voices and honest comments in the open office hour gave me an opportunity for self-reflection to change and develop of new mindset. I discovered students liked Flipgrid. Using technology, sharing ideas, and giving feedback virtually was preferred to reading/writing discussion posts. In the online landscape, seeing faces made a difference to them. Building a learning community began when the conversations revolved around what students found interesting giving me the opportunity to personalise sharing articles or website geared to individual interests and needs. This confirmed the importance of my mantra during the open office hour about *"tolerance of ambiguity"* and *"openness to new experiences."* The comment from a museum studies student, "in the end, I understood

that the process and the knowledge was the goal, and I figured out that every teacher had their own way of displaying information, so thank you for taking me out of my comfort zone and teaching me a lot about new ways and paths in art. I will use this in my personal life and career" assured me that students began to view ART 6010 as part of the entire program, not just a one-off course for professional development. So, the repetition and reassurance in the open office hour did land on fertile ground, spouted, then grew into understanding as seen in comments like, *"as you said we are constantly in the process of growing"* and *"I'm glad you pushed me to grow"* and *"growth comes from challenging yourself and hearing other points of view."* Listening to students as co-researchers rather than subjects in this self-reflective writing process gave me a perspective for (re)designing ART 6010 for autumn 2022 and immediately changed my teaching in spring 2022. Now, I talk less, listen more, and meet students where they are with nuanced understanding, empathy, and compassion.

Fostering shared responsibility and identity

While a nascent learning community was beginning to form in the open office hour, in autumn 2021 I spoke to students about the possibility of participating in the assessment of the degree through an IRB approved scholarship of teaching and learning project as co-researchers through discussions and focus groups. Then in November 2021, I unpacked Healey, Flint, and Harrington's (2014) students-as-partners conceptual model in a Discord presentation. During the presentation the eight core values on which the students-as-partners model is built: authenticity, inclusivity, reciprocity, empowerment, trust, challenge, community, and responsibility were discussed. I also shared examples of co-research projects with former undergraduate students and discussed how a learning community can form around a shared research project. The Discord presentation further supported a sense of community building as students began to understand their identity as co-researchers working with me for our mutual benefit to evaluate the degree through the two courses I taught.

Summary

Introducing Healey, Flint, and Harrington's (2016) students-as-partners model early in fall semester then reinforcing the common principles of community building in the Discord presentation gave roots to the idea which began to grow into an understanding of a lived experience. Discord as a social media space surfaced multiple identities for instructors and students alike. Although the space received mixed reactions from instructors, the students felt it was a safe space to share their opinions. In the discussions, students reiterated the benefit they saw in Discord even if it wasn't used in the way it was intended when introduced fall semester and was at times confusing to both students and instructors. By sharing these thoughts students indicated a level of comfort to express their feelings and challenge me as their instructor. With self-reflection students began to build an identity as co-researchers in this process using their voice to critique the teaching and learning in ART 6010. Responses from seventeen students to the three questions for course improvements were direct and honest. The process reminded me of an art critique where, as one student noted, *"glow and grow"* statements support change while acknowledging areas for improvement in an affirming manner.

Enhancing learning and teaching with reflective writing and meaning making
In December 2021, I offered the opportunity to participate in this reflective writing process to twenty-four students in ARED 7050 as an example of a co-partnership model where they would help design and implement the questions, then report as co-researchers on the reflective writing process. Here was an opportunity, I felt, for meaning making, a chance to connect not only on the evaluation of the two courses but also to reveal the emotions and feelings associated with our lived experience. I envisioned writing the reflective essay with the students as co-researchers within a scholarship of teaching and learning framework as an opportunity to examine to messy and personal work of living and analyzing our identities within this process.

Steps in the process

After the 500-word draft and outline was submitted, the art education students and I prepared the ARED 7050 focus group questions. During the focus group, students emphasized how personalized the program felt, it was not read this and repeat, but more an exploration of self, where solutions to problems were self-generated and supported by building student identity rather than following abstract notions or theories. Insight from peers and instructors supported the idea of continuous change, an idea that we are all in this together. Students reiterated their voice mattered. There was a strong feeling of emergence, growth, and introspection. One student, an art teacher for twenty-four years, noted how surprised she was by the depth of thought and interaction she encountered with instructors and fellow students. Another student described a sense of camaraderie with instructors when *"ideas were shared in one-on-one sessions felt like a space to open up and be more venerable."* The general sense was the importance of personalized sessions with instructors balanced with an equal emphasis placed on peer-to-peer support and learning.

Developing the personal narrative

Comments on the third and last question in the focus group revolved around *"the development of a personal narrative that intrinsically values art."* Students overwhelmingly recounted a shift in perspective since the beginning of the program. There was *"less emphasis on being an art teacher"* and *"greater acknowledgment of being an artist."* One student noted: *"If I hadn't taken this course, I would never have given myself that opportunity to just create art…I know I'm doing it to pass, but that has opened up this whole idea of me thinking of myself as the artist, that I've never considered before."* For another student allowing the open choice within the personal narrative *"definitely helped deepen my own identity because it is a very diverse mix, but I also feel like it strengthened me as a teacher because it exposed me to try new things as well as making me more empathetic as an educator to the struggles of being an artist and being in touch with the artistic process."* As one student noted self-discovery and choice of projects is the one thing *"I would absolutely 200% not change in the program."* Having self-awareness as a process throughout and creating their own path was cited as a seminal part of the program. Another student noted, after sixteen years of teaching art, the creative freedom and opportunity to make art was what she wanted to do, and what she hoped would remain in the program. Whether it was connecting to a personal grief process, or thinking about self in a new way, or finding new media and exploring different techniques, students remarked that the sense of self, making

art/making meaning, and producing a personal narrative were important aspects of the program.

Summary

As a member of the writing team, and as an artist/researcher/teacher immersed in the scholarship of teaching and learning framework, envisioning learning outcomes, and thinking about partnerships while formulating the degree, presented me with an opportunity to (re)assess my understanding and commitment to student engagement and students-as-partners. Like priming a canvas with gesso, my involvement with undergraduate high impact learning activities and my current research served to underscore the process of envisioning the aspirational learning goals for the program. I take Healey, Flint, and Harrington's (2014) notion that partnerships are a process rather than an outcome to heart. As an artist this makes sense to me.

Conclusion

Introducing students to Healey, Flint, and Harrington's (2016) students-as-partners model surfaced a challenge regarding the importance of actively engaging students in their learning by giving them significant amounts of autonomy, choice, and independence. The writing team thought the personal narrative fit with the aspirational ideals of professional art and design practice and pedagogy. Closing comments in the focus group were telling. The students shared how the first semester seemed overwhelming but now in the second semester they understood the pace and were confident about reaching their goals. A tale of first semester woes was followed by confidence moving forward and a sense that with time and organizational tweaking, future students in the program would *"totally be students-as-partners."* I recognize that students are essentially makers. I also hoped the students could emulate the design process where students individually find their learning path and took responsibility for following where this path, and the learning, would take them. A core value at our institution is making student success a top priority – students first. Our goal is to offer students an exploration in learning through the encounter and construction a new knowledge, but it is their experience, taken holistically, that I am working to cultivate.

Yet, as I write this conclusion I wrestle with troubling thoughts and questions: do the readers sense the students as true co-researchers in this reflective essay or is my voice the dominant, privileged authority? What steps can I take to enhance co-development of the courses within a one-year 30-hour program? How can I flip my courses to empower student as teachers and learners who are willing to participate as active co-research partners? The opportunity to grabble with this reflective writing process illuminated aspects of my learning during the first year of the program. In various research projects I have identified as a participant-observer, co-researcher, or collaborator. What was my role in this process? Sending drafts of the reflective essay to writing team colleagues and students in ART 6010 and ARED 7050 felt like that moment in an art critique process where you stand beside your work and listen. I too experienced "glow and grow" moments along with helpful suggestions for change and growth. Without the collaborative, reflective participation of the students, I would not have the opportunity to dive into a deeper process of writing and self-reflection. The process illuminated many implicit assumptions about teaching and learning that now

with insights from the students gave me the opportunity to scrutinize some messy components of my learning and teaching. Without the support of the students this would not be possible. So, I close by acknowledging the students in ART 6010 and ARED 7050 who shared this journey as co-researchers making it possible to paint a portrait of our lived experience over the first year within a new online Master of Art in Art and Design.

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