# How Can Students-as-Partners Pedagogy Succeed When It Is Not Actively Supported by the Institution and/or Goes Against Institutional Culture?

Ketevan Kupatadze, Eric Hall
Elon University

## Abstract

In this reflective essay, we discuss the following questions that have emerged as a result of our (faculty and student) experiences with Student-Faculty Partnership Pedagogy at our institution: Can partnership succeed when not actively supported by the institution and/or goes against institutional culture? How do we make Students as Partners pedagogy to be institutional priority and part of its vision for the future? What sort of attitudes are necessary for faculty and students to have when engaging in pedagogical partnerships? Can such environments in which partnership is not an institutional culture and/or is not a widely accepted pedagogy still foster the development of such attitudes? What attitudes of the university leadership, as well as those of faculty and students are preventing partnerships from being supported more and, as a result, inhibit the sustainability of this pedagogy?

## Introduction: Transformative Intentions of Student-as-Partners Pedagogy

Our approach to students-as-partners (SaP) pedagogy in higher education is grounded in the belief that it can be a transformative practice when it comes to the relationships established between teaching faculty and students. Even for us as faculty members who work at a teaching-centered university that prioritizes close ties with faculty cultivated during students' undergraduate study, SaP's intention to create an egalitarian and dialogic relationships is new. It reframes traditional hierarchical relationships between faculty and students. In our experience, the attitudes that underpin our university's values—that student learning is a priority and that faculty-student relationships matter—do not necessarily translate into an embrace of partnership values and practices in teaching.

We agree with many scholars who suggest that SaP pedagogy re-envisions and transforms student-faculty relationships in classroom learning through countering contemporary higher education's fundamentally hierarchical and business-oriented nature, which informs the attitude that teaching is delivery. To challenge these characteristics of the higher education system and associated attitude, SaP pedagogy focuses on the process of learning rather than only the results, viewing education as an exploratory and open-ended process (Bovill & Bulley, 2011; Healey et al., 2014). It also challenges the model of neo-liberal institutional culture that treats students (and parents) as consumers and education as a product advertised to them. The attitudes informing SaP pedagogy are that teaching and learning are dialogic processes that strive to create a reciprocal and equitable relationship between the two parties rather than deliver a set of goods.

Cook-Sather and Felten (2017) suggest that SaP is a paradigm-shifting practice premised on an ethics of reciprocity, which goes against the dominant model of western higher education

system (175). Citing Hansen (2014, p. 4), they write that this system is based on hierarchies and inequality, replicating global systems of economic markets guided by the desire to make a profit, instead of cultivating "moral sympathies, deepened democratic dispositions, and a serious sense of responsibility for the world" (177). In the same vein, Matthews' (2017) overarching guiding principles of SaP emphasize their ethical dimensions. These guiding principles promise to be transformative because they inform attitudes toward faculty and students as capable and beneficiaries of sharing power through pedagogical decision-making, thus guiding the intention of placing the responsibility for teaching and learning on both teaching faculty and students (Cook-Sather et al., 2014).

As teachers, we have been drawn to SaP pedagogy precisely because it fosters inclusivity and democratizes the relationships between teaching faculty and students. Our particular interest in SaP work is inspired by the power-sharing and equitable relationships that it promises to develop through dialogue, reflection, and mutual respect. It is our belief that due to its ethical stance on equity and inclusivity, as well as reciprocity and shared responsibility, student-faculty partnership is well suited for the new world in which people realize the interconnectedness of their identities, as well as their interests. The attitude that equity-focused SaP work embraces is that pedagogy should be a force for social justice.

Transformations of attitudes of this magnitude are not easy to achieve, and even though SaP has gained a footing in recent years, we believe it is time to think about pushing the boundaries and increasing the breadth and scope of places that sustainably practice student-faculty partnerships and even consider them to be part of their institutional culture.

## Questions that Guide Our Reflection

Our readers should know that we do not have answers to many of the questions that we ask. Rather, we invite a dialogue about these questions as we think that many, like us, are struggling with implementing SaP pedagogy at their institutions and/or trying to convince their colleagues, students, and institutional leadership in the value of partnership. Together with our readers, we would like to explore how to turn the attitudes that underpin SaP pedagogy into those that shape institutional culture.

Hence, based on our institutional example and our awareness that many other institutions are in the same boat, we consider the philosophical and pragmatic challenges that this pedagogy creates for all stakeholders. We reflect on and explore what attitudes and intentions are formed, transformed and/or facilitate the initiation and sustainability of effective student-faculty partnerships and specifically what attitudes might be preventing partnership pedagogy from being supported more and/or how this lack of intention to support is decreasing sustainability.

While we recognize a healthy number of institutions that have adopted SaP pedagogy, we also want to be cognizant of the many (faculty, students, departments, and institutions) that are skeptical and/or resistant of this pedagogy, including those at our institution. We should also recognize that adopting SaP pedagogy does not guarantee that they will turn into an institutional culture and that some of the issues that we will be pointing out later might not be resolved by such steps as providing funding and other types of institutional support for this

pedagogy. Changing the culture of an institution, especially when the change is so radical as the one promised by SaP, takes time and consistent effort. But we inquire into the necessary, or even essential steps that one would have to take to begin establishing SaP as a sustainable and institutionally recognized pedagogical practice that would consequently build more equitable structures and relationships within an institution.

## Institutional Setting and Our Experiences with SaP

Ours is a medium-size liberal arts university in the South-Eastern part of the US, with strong support for student engagement, undergraduate mentoring and research, and the development of students as globally engaged citizens. While these priorities might seem to be a perfect ground for cultivating the attitudes of egalitarianism and power-sharing promoted by student-faculty partnerships, the university does not have a centralized program or office which would support SaP initiatives.

At our institution, we have tried building partnership through individual and small group initiatives; we have identified and applied for small and temporary pockets of fundings; we have reached out to other, more established programs and expressed our desire to collaborate with them; and we have requested to include SaP into the institution's next 10-year plan of established priorities. Our institution, through the Center for Engaged Learning, as well as the Center for the Advancement of Teaching and Learning, has funded individual faculty to engage in the research on student-faculty partnerships and incorporate this pedagogy into their teaching philosophies and daily teaching practices. It has also facilitated seminars and conversations among interested faculty, staff, and students on this topic. Despite all of this, partnership remains a pedagogy that is practiced sporadically by individual faculty and has not garnered widespread support, be it financial or ideological, from the university.

## Addressing Pragmatic and Ideological Challenges by Expanding Attitudes and Intentions in Existing Programs

In our conversations with colleagues, as well as in our encounters with faculty, administrative staff, and students for whom SaP pedagogy is an unknown or new concept, we have noticed attitudes that are either pragmatic or ideological. In an environment in which SaP is not an institutional culture, one set of attitudes we have encountered is informed by the apprehension that this pedagogical approach requires funding that is not always guaranteed; and the lack of funding goes together with the lack of time set aside to commit to this work. In terms of ideological challenges, transformative intentions of this practice are daunting as they challenge the two perhaps strongest bedrocks of liberal higher education system: its deeply hierarchical nature and its business-oriented mindset.

There are two practices at our university through which some forms of partnership are valued, well supported and funded: undergraduate research and teaching and learning apprenticeship. We describe these practices and discuss the ways in which partnership can happen through them, but also reflect on their limitations.

Undergraduate research (UR) is considered one of the five highlighted experiences of our institution— along with leadership, internships, global education, and service learning. The program is supported by a director and two associate directors who control funds that allow students to conduct research, support conference travel and provide opportunities for on-campus presentation forums and summer experiences. Additionally, students can earn academic credit for conducting research, and faculty members are financially compensated for mentoring undergraduate research projects.

The other institutional practice that we have is a teaching and learning apprenticeship. This is an experience in the form of a course offered to students through each department and intended to introduce students to aspects of (college) teaching and prepare them for graduate education. Through this experience, students get to collaborate with an instructor, attending their classes, offering feedback on instructor's pedagogical choices, learning from them, as well as frequently serving as a go-between students and professor. However, to engage in this experience, students must have taken the course for which they are collaborating with the instructor previously, have done well in the course, and have a good overall academic record.

There are parallels between SaP pedagogy and these institutional practices. Faculty and students might embrace partnership attitudes as they work towards one research goal through UR. Students doing an apprenticeship are probably highly engaged and invested in the course and, due to this investment, develop close, maybe even egalitarian relationships, with the faculty member. The practices in which apprenticeship students engage closely parallel many SaP practices.

However, there are important attitudes and intentions of SaP pedagogy that are missing in both practices. They do not shift the focus of learning from outcomes to process or challenge the model of neo-liberal institutional culture that treats students (and parents) as consumers. Nor do they strive for greater equity. These mentored experiences are built on a notion of partnership in which students are expected to be making original contributions to their respective fields and often lead to co-creation of papers and presentations. Therefore, there is an ethos of partnership in these practices, although establishing non-hierarchical relationships that would lead to transformative results within the higher education system is not an essential element of either of them. One could co-conduct research with a student or have a student work as an apprentice for a course, but not necessarily disrupt the hierarchies that are implied in a faculty-student relationship. Furthermore, these hierarchies can be reinforced by and through the dynamic established between faculty who are directing student undergraduate research. The term "apprenticeship" implies an unequal and hierarchized power dynamic between the two parties. Hence, while these practices could potentially lead towards a partnership between faculty and students, partnership as we conceptualize it is not inscribed in them, and when left on their own, these practices could reinforce the very structures that SaP as pedagogy seeks to disrupt.

To our minds, one of the biggest drawbacks of both UR and apprenticeships is that they tend to benefit students who come from already more privileged backgrounds and, consequently, are better prepared. This inequity prevents students who might be best poised to contribute to curricular design in cases where minority populations may not be performing well or where a lens of justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion could be beneficial from participating in and

taking advantage of UR and Apprenticeship. Consequently, the promise of partnership pedagogy to be more inclusive of diverse groups of students and to build an education system that is more just and equitable is certainly lost.

We think that there is a potential for these two signature practices of the university to develop so that they would intentionally nurture the attitudes put forward by SaP. But, for this to happen, there must be a conscious effort that would require collaboration between those who engage in undergraduate research and apprenticeship, including students, and those who would be able to guide them through the process of cultivating a more equitable, non-hierarchical relationship. In other words, we recognized from the start that SaP offers a very different view of education— one that is exploratory, reciprocal, and dialogic. These attitudes need to be developed not just in students, but also in teaching faculty and other university stakeholders.

## Addressing Challenges by Making New Connections

An experimental pedagogical shift that has become very popular at our institution, as well as at other intuitions, is "ungrading" (i.e., the turn towards evaluating learners' development rather than only achievement). We think that it is possible to establish an ideological link between SaP and "ungrading," particularly because both pedagogies emphasize the transformative process of learning as opposed to the final, predetermined outcomes. They also both propose to meet the learners where they are and recognize individuality to focus on development. The link between "ungrading" and SaP is not explicit, and one would have to work through the similarities and differences, but we think that there is a potential for overlap, for collaboration, that could lead to a more noticeable and sustainable ideological shift.

## Two Considerations for Shifting Attitudes

Our experience and observations tell us that there are two major shifts that must happen at our institution for SaP pedagogy to take hold. We do not see why this pedagogy cannot flourish from the existing practices that we just described, but for this to happen we need to consider the following:

1. Knowing that those signature practices the university values have considerably more academic, structural, and financial support, it is hard to imagine how SaP will expand and become a sustainable practice without such support or a shift in attitude about what kinds of investment are necessary to do this work. While individual faculty have partnered and/or might consider partnering with already established programs to try to build partnerships through them, it has proven not very effective. Partnership, as many of those who have the experience of establishing it as an institutional practice at their universities, requires constant reflective exercise both from faculty and students.

2. SaP pedagogy needs to be understood and valued for its transformative potential when it comes to challenging attitudes underpinning the hierarchical nature of the higher education system and fostering an inclusive environment based on the notions

of justice and equity for all. When practiced sporadically by individual faculty, the attitude towards partnership is not serious enough to garner such fundamental systemic change. When implementing partnership pedagogy in our classrooms, students' comments rarely pass surface-level enjoyment of this experimental pedagogy. They do not prompt a shift in attitude that would suggest students have revised and reevaluated their role as clients nor the role of education as a product that is to be "pleasing" to them.

The absence of attitudes that would support SaP pedagogy have impeded the cultural shift that could potentially transform or break the established higher education paradigms. The absence of an ideological mindset that would view equality and equity in the relationship between students and faculty as a value has impeded the creation of the types of attitudes and intentions in students, faculty, and university leadership, necessary for partnership pedagogy to thrive. Both students and faculty have a very clearly defined hierarchical view of or the attitude toward the teacher-student relationship and altering this attitude can be lengthy, as well as a transformative, process. When such transformation is advocated by peripheral elements in the institution, there is apprehension from faculty, as well as students. We have seen firsthand that the dominant paradigm of professor as an expert and student as a consumer is extremely hard, if not impossible, to break.

## Conclusion and Suggestions for Future Explorations

To conclude, we would like to invite everyone who has experience with SaP and its implementation at an institution to help us explore various ways in which this pedagogy can garner institutional support and become a more sustainable university-wide practice. What types of institutional or other support have worked for others? (How) have you successfully established a SaP program at your institution and what did it take? Has the establishment of such a program helped change the university culture and ideological mindset? For SaP to become a more widespread and sustained practice across the higher education institutions, we would need to invite honest conversations around the extent of SaP being an institutional practice, a practice that is part of one's intuitional culture. How does one implement a transformational pedagogy where there isn't good institutional support? How does one help harness and build on those initial experiences of co-creating and working in partnership to move students and faculty to that relationship of reciprocity and respect? Further exploration of these questions and challenges between institutions of varying central support would be an interesting next step, already taken in some contexts by, for instance, the creation of a new Special Interest Group through the Professional and Organizational Development (POD) network called "Co-Creation through Partnership."

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