

CASE STUDY

Working in partnership in Pakistan: Lessons from launching a pedagogical partnership program

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ABSTRACT

This case study presents an account of the implementation of the Pedagogical Partnership Program (PPP) at a leading university in Pakistan. The PPP was unique in two main ways: (a) it was the first of its kind in any higher education institution in Pakistan and (b) it was launched during COVID-19. The launch of the program during COVID offers insights into how partnerships can be a unique support system for students and faculty in difficult times. We share several lessons learned from our experiences leading the PPP and from the feedback we received on end-of-partnership reports. These lessons have been critical to how we continued to think about the evolution of the program and its impact on students and faculty/staff at Lahore University of Management Sciences (LUMS). Through our analysis, we aim to add a new contextual perspective on partnerships in South Asia as a developing area of the world for partnership initiatives.

KEYWORDS

pedagogical partnership, students as partners, Pakistan, program development, higher education

Students as partners (SaP) initiatives in higher education typically vary, but many focus on elevating students' voices through their engagement in enhancing the quality of teaching and learning (Bovill, 2017; Bovill et al., 2011;). When students and faculty/staff partner "as co-learners, co-researchers, co-inquirers, co-developers, and co-designers" (Healey et al., 2016, p. 2), it extends students' engagement beyond token representation

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(e.g., on committees or at events) across our institutions (Liang & Matthews, 2020). SaP initiatives can provide democratic spaces for students to truly participate in shaping their education through dialogue, collaboration, co-construction, and joint decision-making.

To date, SaP initiatives have been most common in Western institutions; however, they have started to take root in several Asian contexts (e.g., Cook Sather et al., (in press) Gauthier & Iftikhar, (in press); Ho, 2017; Kaur, 2020; Kaur & Yong Bing, 2020; Liang & Mathews, 2020; Sim, 2019). We are also learning more about the nuances of these unique cultural settings that impact partnership practices. For example, Asian countries typically have embedded dominant cultural narratives about the hierarchy between teachers and students where greater value is placed on teachers' knowledge and position of authority over students. Thus, partnership can be perceived as a threat to their respective identity roles and a challenge to the traditional expectations that they have of each other's roles (Kaur, 2020). This may also incite challenges with enacting partnership values such as respect, reciprocity, and responsibility (Cook-Sather et al., 2014; Kaur, 2020; Kaur & Yong Bing, 2020). Similarly, cultural translations of the language of pedagogical partnerships could also disrupt partnerships (Cook-Sather et. al., (in press); Leota & Sutherland, 2020).

While SaP may seem to run contrary to the norm in Asian contexts, these initiatives offer options for us to challenge traditional teaching and learning hierarchies and engage students differently (Kaur, 2020). Yet, SaP initiatives in South Asia are rare. In this case study we offer insights from the development and implementation of the Pedagogical Partnership Program (PPP)—a SaP initiative to enhance teaching and learning at Lahore University of Management Sciences (LUMS) in Pakistan. We use the term “pedagogical partnership” to refer to student and faculty/staff partnerships on course design and delivery to improve teaching and learning in classrooms. The PPP was unique in two ways: (a) it was the first of its kind in Pakistan and South Asia and (b) it was piloted in the summer of 2020, in the early days of COVID-19. Through our analysis of lessons learned, we aim to add a new contextual perspective on partnerships in South Asia as a developing area of the world for SaP initiatives.

LOCAL AND INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT

LUMS is a 35-year-old not-for-profit university serving around 5,000 students across its five schools including business, law, education, science and engineering, humanities, and social sciences. The LUMS Learning Institute (LLI) was created to support the enhancement of quality teaching and learning at the institution. In 2020, the PPP was launched as a flagship initiative of the LLI to support faculty development and student engagement in learning and teaching. Although faculty at LUMS traditionally worked with students working as paid research assistants (RAs) and teaching assistants (TAs), the idea of student involvement in improving learning and teaching through course design and delivery was new. In Pakistan, like other collectivist Asian cultures, SaP runs contrary to dominant cultural narratives that position students and teachers in strictly hierarchical relationships (Kaur & Yong Bing, 2020; Liang & Mathews, 2020; Sim, 2019).

A key feature of the Pakistani sociocultural context is deference to age and authority legitimized through cultural interpretations of Islam—the dominant religion here. Islam provides a cultural map of meaning that underlies Pakistan's social fabric and affects how social relations “are experienced, understood and interpreted” (Clarke et al., 1976 as cited in Pardhan, 2011, p. 931). These intersubjective understandings are present in educational

institutions and evident through an unquestionable higher status given to teachers, their knowledge, and their right to speak the truth (Foucault, 1972). Consequently, students are seen as passive receivers of education who need guidance but are not knowledge creators (Kaur, 2020). Thus, knowing the context-dependent nature of partnership programs, practices, and policies (Bovill et al., 2016; Healey & Healey, 2018), we knew that developing the PPP in Pakistan would be challenging.

PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT

We began planning the PPP in October 2019 during meetings with a core group of key stakeholders including faculty, administrators, and students from across our five schools. Our aim was to build on the existing strengths of partnership work that we thought might be happening at LUMS (Cook-Sather et al., 2020) and gauge people's perceptions of the possibilities of partnership at LUMS. We used Cook-Sather, Bahti, and Ntem's (2019) guidebook over several meetings to define partnerships at LUMS and articulate the program aims, core values, and scope within our context. These conversations revealed two things. First, although faculty commonly worked with student RAs and TAs, they did not see them as equal partners. Second, faculty rarely invited students to be co-authors on papers or sought their feedback on teaching during the semester or in co-designing courses. We conducted two institution-wide needs-assessment surveys which confirmed these findings (Ansari, 2021). Our meetings and surveys taught us that our community would likely benefit most from partnerships that involved student feedback on course delivery and course design. We also chose to support pedagogical research projects to start promoting pedagogical scholarship across campus.

The PPP was modeled after other established partnership programs (e.g., Cook-Sather et al., 2019). For example, we were inspired by McMaster University's Student Partner Program, which informed the processes we used for recruiting partners using calls for faculty projects and prospective student partners and our internal proposal adjudication process. Student partners were paid a monthly stipend, equivalent to the amount RAs are paid at LUMS. All four authors comprised the PPP team, and we co-led orientation meetings, mid-point meetings, and closing meetings with all partners to share experiences, address challenges, and celebrate their collaborations. Each partnership team submitted a final report to share key learnings from working in partnership. To date, we have supported 46 partnerships with more than 52 student partners and 41 faculty/staff partners.

In the remainder of this case study, we share several lessons learned from our experiences leading the PPP and from the feedback we received from student and faculty/staff partners in meetings and their final reports. These lessons have been critical to how we continued to think about the evolution of the program and its impact on students and faculty/staff at LUMS.

LESSONS LEARNED

Cultural translations and tensions in defining partnership

Several key examples in the literature highlight the context-dependent nature of partnership programs, practices, and policies (Bovill et al., 2016; Healey & Healey, 2018). Furthermore, those who have shared experiences of implementing SaP initiatives have

expanded conceptions of how core values of partnership are enacted differently across institutions worldwide (Cook-Sather, 2013, 2018; Leota & Sutherland, 2020).

In our initial planning meeting for the PPP, people were subdivided into four groups to develop an indigenous definition of pedagogical partnerships drawing on five definitions from the literature (Cook-Sather et al., 2014; Cook-Sather & Felten, 2017; Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2013; Williamson, 2013). Subsequent analysis of the group's definitions revealed the following terms were common across all groups: reciprocity, respect, shared responsibility, common shared purpose, trust and honesty, and collaboration. Most groups agreed that a combination of the common partnership definitions from the literature would work for the PPP (e.g., Cook-Sather et al., 2014, pp. 6-7; Healey et al., 2016). However, we also added the equal but different contributions of partners (Cook-Sather et al., 2014) to stay true to the ethos of SaP initiatives. No indigenous term for partnership was suggested by the group. In retrospect, we think by giving the choice to choose from pre-selected, mainly Western-derived definitions could have shaped how people approached the definition task. These definitions were intended to be enabling constraints to support discussion; however, they could have limited the creativity of the group to develop a more context-specific definition of partnership.

We also found it notable that no one suggested to include "equal relationship" (Williamson, 2013, p. 8) in the partnership definition. There could be a couple of reasons for this exclusion. First, it may be that the notion of equal roles was implicitly understood in the constructs of respect, reciprocity, and shared responsibility, so it was not indicated separately. Or the absence of equality could have indicated some resistance from the group, stemming from their understandings of the hierarchical status between faculty and students (Kaur, 2020). For example, "respect" in Urdu, the shared language of the group, translates into "izzat," a deference to age and authority. The term emphasizes hierarchy, where the respected person is older or holds higher social status (e.g., as a teacher, parent, grandparent, etc.). Respect also ascribes the right to those with higher status to speak and be heard, to have their knowledge and opinions accepted as truth (Foucault, 1972), to make major decisions, and to be obeyed. Hence, a respectful relationship between students and teachers can mean that the student acknowledges a teacher's higher status and power by never questioning them, while the teacher shows respect by caring for students' needs and wellbeing. Likewise, "collaborating," which translates to "mil ker kaam karna" could have meant working together in the expected hierarchical roles. Our group could have easily endorsed all these terms in defining partnerships, instead of challenging their meaning associated with the culturally embedded power imbalance between faculty and students. It was interesting that rather than finding the western language to be intruding and wanting to scrutinize it (Kaur, 2020), our group willingly accepted the options for definitions that we presented to them.

The intersubjectively held understandings of the hierarchy between teachers and students naturally permeated the partnerships between students and faculty/staff as well. This hierarchy was evident where shared responsibility and reciprocity meant that faculty delegated work and students complied and completed tasks without challenging the process. Take, for example, two partnerships that did not work out and where partners decided to end their collaboration. The common reason was a difference in expectations for their roles (Kaur, 2020). At first, partners experienced a communication gap, and then either

the students did not feel confident to express their opinions or the faculty/staff did not seek student input in shaping the project and simply delegated tasks to them.

In retrospect, we feel that these issues can be traced back to the acceptance of Western definitions of PPP without critically engaging with them. This lack of critical engagement may have stemmed from two factors. First, most LUMS faculty have earned degrees from the West and often adapt western perspectives and resources in their classrooms. Therefore, adopting a Western definition of PPP would be normal given the propensity for people in Pakistan to privilege Western knowledge as superior. Second, this initiative was supported by the Vice Chancellor (VC), and one of the program developers was a white female consultant from Canada. Thus, it could have been seen as oppositional for people to express any disagreements with definitions for partnership that were presented or perceived as if they were trying to disrupt and derail the initiative. Also, culturally speaking, showing disagreement might also have been considered disrespectful towards the consultant. When we began, we felt that there was more of a need to focus on coming to a consensus rather than critically dealing with the definition to devise a suitable indigenous definition for partnerships. We recognized the need for a decolonisation stance and a robust critical discussion of how partnership would be defined and enacted within the LUMS culture.

These above factors influenced our decision to develop a contract for partners to complete together to articulate their roles, communication plans, goals, and approaches for addressing conflict. The shared responsibility of contributing to the contract required an open discussion between the partners and was intended to encourage trust among them. The contracts have helped us to better navigate conversations with partners when they reached out to us for support.

Making partnerships work

We have realized that keeping an ear to the ground helped us to understand the kind of support systems that were needed at different stages to make partnerships work. This meant retaining flexibility in the kinds of support we offered, acknowledging that partnership may not appeal to everyone (Healey & Healey, 2021), and remaining sensitive to our context (Healey & Healey, 2018). Going forward, we aim to encourage continuous dialogue more actively between faculty/staff and students to prompt them to think about their experiences and develop strategies to set up clear goals and expectations for their joint work. We also learned that it can be difficult to get a partnership back on track once it has been derailed by mutual feelings of mistrust. A close examination of some partners' experiences in these circumstances also highlighted the need to be more proactive in our support and be sensitive to the initial signals of disruption amongst partners, such as inadequate communication, frustration, or not meeting soon enough.

In addition, partners often displayed a strong sense of vulnerability if the partnerships did not work, as they took failure as something personal that caused them to lose face (Chng, 2019; Seow, 2019; Sim, 2019). To address the issue, we incorporated a dedicated discussion in our meetings about how to navigate difficult situations, what to do when partnerships do not work out, and the reminder that some partnerships may not work out in the end. We emphasized that partnerships are also a form of relationship where emotions are involved (Felten, 2017) and that sometimes it is better for both partners to part ways amicably with a shared understanding of each other's differing perspectives.

Online partnerships and widening access

In March 2020, LUMS, like most universities, moved all teaching and learning online. This uncertainty meant that faculty and students faced many challenges, including isolation from peers and colleagues and the distress of disease, death, and loss of income in multi-generational households. In several cases, students struggled to learn online as many lost access to campus and experienced major internet connectivity issues, which are common in Pakistan. We introduced the PPP as a platform for students and faculty to reconnect and embrace the opportunities and constraints that came with learning and teaching online. Initially we were apprehensive about initiating such a unique program at the start of the pandemic; however, after the summer program offering, we realized that we made the right call.

Although students and faculty sometimes lamented the lack of face-to-face meetings, most partnerships went very well. The three common factors across all successful partnerships were mutual trust, clarity of goals and expectations, and continuous, clear communication. Additionally, the virtual space allowed off-campus faculty and students to stay connected and focused on teaching and learning goals. Partners were encouraged to share their perspectives about working online while tweaking and designing courses that would be engaging, enriching, and relevant to students. Thus, moving online helped us to widen access to the PPP for students and faculty to engage in partnerships and remain connected with each other while they were away from campus.

For several faculty who worried about online teaching, some shared with us that their student partner helped them to regain comfort and confidence in teaching. It was helpful for faculty to know that their partners had some understanding of the student perspective during such a challenging time. Student partners' feedback encouraged faculty to reflect on their teaching and navigate the uncertainties of adapting to online teaching. Students expressed a strong sense of ownership in their partners' courses and felt they had a voice in shaping their own and their peers' learning experiences. This seemed to have translated into empathy for the faculty and a reflection on their own learning experiences (Cook-Sather, 2015). Other partners described their experiences as meaningfully challenging their notions of the roles of teachers and students (Kaur; 2020; Kaur & Yong Bing, 2020).

FUTURE CHALLENGES

A cross-institutional study by Cook-Sather, Gauthier, and Foster (2020) reported that the top four conditions of support for partnership programs at the institutional level included (a) the location of a partnership program in a center, (b) campus culture, (c) grassroots support, and (d) administrative support. At LUMS, the vice chancellor's support, the Learning Institute, budget, and dedicated staff were critical to formalizing the PPP and generating buy-in across campus. Since the idea of the PPP was introduced and fully endorsed by the vice chancellor, we had his support along with deans and other key stakeholders (i.e., faculty and student representatives) in the program planning committee from the very beginning. This enabled us to accelerate the implementation of PPP at LUMS and support faculty and students during disruption caused by COVID. Without this institutional and administrative support, the implementation of PPP would have been more challenging. We realize that the future of the PPP will not only require sustained funding and institutional support but importantly a dedicated team of faculty and students to run it and help it evolve.

Another challenge we continue to face involves drawing boundaries around what is and what is not a partnership that will be a part of the PPP. On an institutional level, the term “student partnership” is being used to describe many pre-existing and new opportunities for students, such as internships and other work programs. However, typically, students and faculty/staff perpetuate pre-existing hierarchical roles in such programs, which is understandable given this is the cultural frame of reference within which they live and work. The challenge we would like to explore more is how to broadly organize and shape these collaborations by encouraging people to adopt partnership values. The PPP then could be one of several SaP initiatives at LUMS that continues to elevate student voice and student positions in shaping their own educational experiences. We also recognize the need to further explore what partnership values mean in our context to conceptualize a broader SaP initiative that people will buy into (Cook-Sather, 2018; Cook-Sather et al., (in press). One small study has currently been done to explore students’ perceptions of respect in partnerships in Pakistani culture (i.e., Gauthier & Iftikhar, (in press), and we hope to collaborate with other universities to initiate a dialogue to negotiate the values of PPP within Pakistani institutions. It is critical that partnership is not seen as a top-down initiative but a bottom-up movement of faculty/ staff and students working together for enhancing teaching and learning in higher education.

With regards to inclusion, we have realized that, most of the time, faculty either choose student partners from the top 2% of their class or pre-select their student partners before the call for applications has been sent to students. This makes inclusion problematic, especially when it has been noticed that students from underprivileged backgrounds may find it difficult to participate in SaP initiatives (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017). This inclusion is critical at LUMS as a little over 10% of the student population are from underprivileged backgrounds and attend based on merit scholarships. For this, we plan to hold a dialogue between faculty and students from across LUMS, jointly initiated by the School of Education and the LLI, to find pathways to the inclusion of all students and faculty who are interested in partnership work. We also suspect that the current program evaluation that is being conducted will reveal some recommendations for inclusivity and greater buy-in across campus.

CONCLUSION

This case study discussed the conceptualization and implementation of the PPP at LUMS in Pakistan where it was the first SaP initiative of its kind. We also shared lessons learned and challenges from developing the PPP during the unique time of COVID-19 where faculty and students navigated the trials and triumphs of online partnerships. Many of our realizations about challenges to partnerships occurred to us in retrospect as we learned from comments from faculty/staff and student partners during meetings and in their final partnership reports. At the time of writing this case study, we are also exploring how partnership values are being translated in partnership practices in our context, and a comprehensive program evaluation of the PPP is just being completed by some graduate students in the School of Education. We hope these next steps will help us to address challenges in our program and add to the body of knowledge about partnership in South Asian contexts.

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