

RESEARCH ARTICLE

“Being Patient Through the Quiet”: Partnering in Problem-Based Learning in a Graduate Seminar

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ABSTRACT

This paper draws connections between scholarship on problem-based learning (PBL) and Students as Partners to frame a case study from a graduate seminar in Public Rhetorics for Social Change. Students partnered with each other and the instructor to decide on a public project, approaching the partnership as a pedagogical problem to explore, discuss, and collaboratively define. Drawing on student and teacher reflections about the partnership, the study’s findings highlight important themes about partnering with students: partnering with students may result in uncertainty and discomfort, takes time, values different perspectives, and can make teachers and students vulnerable to each other. Responding to a phrase from one student’s reflection—“being patient through the quiet”—the study argues that patience and quiet are necessary for supporting a successful partnership with students but that caution is needed to prevent dominant narratives from silencing marginalized student perspectives.

KEYWORDS

problem-based learning, SoTL, students as partners, public rhetoric, graduate pedagogy

As a teacher-scholar committed to partnering with both students and local community groups, my course designs strive to incorporate “high-impact educational practices” (Kuh, 2008) such as service-learning and public engagement projects. The high-impact practices in my classes invite students to learn actively and collaboratively (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2010), to become involved in local communities through experiential learning (Crossling & Heagney, 2009; Roberts, 2018) and to envision themselves as agents of change in the classroom and in public spheres beyond the classroom (Cook-Sather, Bovill, & Felten, 2014; Cushman, 1996; Flower, 2008). While in the past I have coordinated with university staff to establish community partnerships for experiential learning, I saw an opportunity for a different model when teaching a newly developed graduate seminar in my university’s English department. I approached public engagement as a pedagogical problem to explore, discuss, and collaboratively define through

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student-instructor partnership, rather than a pre-defined (i.e., instructor-defined) community-based project.

In the following study, I use a combination of teacher reflections and students' end-of-course reflections to recount the negotiations we went through in partnering to define a collaborative public project. Our pedagogical collaboration aligned with how Alison Cook-Sather, Catherine Bovill, and Peter Felten (2014) define student-faculty partnership as "a collaborative, reciprocal process through which all participants have the opportunity to contribute equally . . . to curricular or pedagogical conceptualization, decision making, implementation, or analysis" (pp. 6-7). My approach to partnership in this graduate seminar was grounded in reciprocity, mutual respect, and care. I argue that a valuable component of partnering with students is modeling the time-consuming processes of problem solving in partnership and making ourselves vulnerable to our students (Felten, 2017; Holmes, 2015)—that indeed these are often indicators that we have moved the classroom toward a collaborative culture of learning. The case study analyzes the findings from the data which show that partnering with students:

- may result in uncertainty and discomfort,
- takes time,
- values different perspectives, and
- can make teachers and students vulnerable to each other.

Responding to a phrase from one student's reflection—"being patient through the quiet"—the study examines how patience and quiet are necessary for supporting a successful partnership with students but cautions readers to consider how these traits can allow for dominant narratives to silence marginalized student perspectives. Before delving into the study, I articulate the important connections between problem-based learning (PBL) and Students as Partners (SaP).

PROBLEM-BASED LEARNING & STUDENTS AS PARTNERS

Problem-based learning is a pedagogy that embraces inquiry and uncertainty, modeling for students the realities of the "wicked problems" (Rittel & Webber, 1973) they will continue to face beyond our courses. As Anna Kwan (2009) explains, one of the most comprehensive definitions of PBL is a "total education strategy based on the principle of using real-world problems as a starting point for the acquisition and integration of new knowledge" (p. 91). Because PBL provides an opportunity to apply course content knowledge to the ongoing work of tackling society's problems, it seemed especially apt for the Public Rhetorics for Social Change course. I hoped students would enact a public project that addressed a real-world problem, using what they learned of public rhetoric to move towards change in the world around them.

While not all approaches to PBL align with the scholarship on SaP, the two pedagogical approaches meaningfully reinforce each other in course design. As this study demonstrates, instructors who employ PBL join the problem-solving processes with their students and assume "the role of facilitators and co-learners" (Kwan, 2009, p. 91) rather than that of observers of students' problem-solving from a distanced, all-knowing position. As partners in learning,

teachers model co-inquiry grounded in reciprocity to develop a mutually beneficial and respectful partnership. Both PBL and SaP scholarship highlight the importance of setting a course context that moves away from the “sage on the stage” model to support all learners (i.e., students *and* teachers) in exploration of the problem. As Kwan (2009) argues, “PBL is more than an instructional method, but a nurturing environment” (p. 91). Similarly, SaP practitioners envision partnerships as “creating the conditions for curiosity and common inquiry” (Cook-Sather et al., 2014, p. 10), and central to these conditions is establishing an environment that helps all partners feel respected and nurtured through the collaborative processes of inquiry.

THE COURSE & PARTNERSHIP

The student-faculty partnership referenced in this case study occurred during a graduate seminar titled Public Rhetorics for Social Change, which was a special topics course within the English department at Georgia State University (GSU)—an urban, public, research university located in downtown Atlanta in the United States. The course invited students to consider the ways citizens, activists, and scholars use writing and rhetoric in public contexts to address injustices, collaborate with community groups, and advocate for social change. Seven graduate students enrolled in the course, the majority of whom were graduate teaching assistants pursuing their M.A. or Ph.D. in English, though one student was pursuing a degree in Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies.

The Public Rhetorics for Social Change graduate seminar met for two and a half hours one day each week during a 14-week semester from August to December. The design of the course balanced theoretical readings on public and counter-public spheres, social movements, and community literacy with individual student research projects and a collaborative application project—what I called a “public project.” The course grade was determined as follows: 25% Individual Weekly Reading Responses, 40% Individual Final Research Essay and Exam Presentation, and 35% Collaborative Public Project.

I decided to leave the public project open-ended, with the only requirement that our class collaboratively partner to define this work, as explained in this excerpt from the syllabus:

During the first few weeks of the semester, we will devote a portion of our class time to discussing how we might enact some of the issues from the course readings. This public project may take many forms, but I would like for us to consider ways that we might take public action and/or move toward social change. One of the major challenges of this project will simply be defining the task at hand. As the project takes shape, you will gain a better sense of what you need to contribute for this component of the course.

What I originally envisioned as “the first few weeks of the semester” for defining the project turned into nearly two-thirds of the semester (approximately nine of the 14 weeks). Through this extended time of dialogue, the partnership with graduate students aligned with a problem-based learning model. Our problem to solve was to collaboratively define a public project. We spent thirty minutes to one hour of each week’s two-and-a-half-hour seminar discussing the public project—writing about our interests, sharing ideas, making lists on the board, and conducting informal research.

The process of building a nurturing environment of respect and reciprocity began during our first-class sessions and continued throughout the semester. For example, I scheduled our seminar in a conference room with one large table and I brought coffee each week. The design of the space decentered my authority because I took a seat alongside students, and the small kindness of offering coffee led students—of their own volition—to bring sugar and creamer, further supporting self-care and a nurturing classroom environment. I also strived to build a nurturing environment by inviting students to share their personal values and commitments when we discussed the public project; I made time for each student to share their perspective, even if that meant delaying our discussion of the reading for that day. A final decentering strategy was simply handing off the marker: often, when our discussions resulted in notetaking on the board, I asked a student to record the discussion, rather than me controlling what content made it onto the board and how it was phrased and organized. This also positioned me as a co-inquirer brainstorming possibilities together with students.

At the end of the semester, I assigned students a reflection (graded pass/fail for submission) about their experiences of partnering to negotiate the public project. I included a disclaimer to remind them of the tendency for reflections to demonstrate growth, progress, and enlightenment, as well as narratives of praise for the teacher or course (Emmons, 2003); I wanted students to interrogate their experiences with partnership and problem solving in the ways Sarah L. Ash and Patti H. Clayton (2009) have written about in their discussion of the power for critical reflection to generate, deepen, and document learning. These student reflections became part of the data set for the study, and I quote from them throughout the analysis to document student voices.

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative research was designed as a case study; as Creswell (2014) explains, case studies involve “in-depth analysis of a case, often a program, event, activity, process, or one or more individuals” and thus are “bounded by time and activity” (p. 14). In this case, the study focused on a particular course (i.e., Public Rhetorics for Social Change graduate seminar) and the specific processes of partnership among seven graduate students and their instructor in the fall semester of 2013. The research protocol for this study was reviewed and given approval from GSU’s Institutional Review Board (IRB). Students were invited to participate in the study during the final week of the course, and participation allowed me to quote from their course writing using pseudonyms.

One challenge of engaging in PBL and SaP was decentering my authority as a teacher-researcher to build a respectful partnership with students, while necessarily needing to step into these roles at times by grading assignments or asking for consent in a research project. Shuttling between these roles was a constant balancing act: releasing the reins entirely could lead to disaster but gripping them too tightly could distort the goals of partnership. I asked students to consider consenting to allow me to read through their work not only as a teacher but also as a researcher, once grades had been submitted. The course assignments students completed were requirements for the course to demonstrate their learning and application of concepts regardless of whether they consented to the study.

Considering my dual roles as teacher and researcher, I took additional precautions to minimize the sense of coercion students might feel in the consenting process. For example, after introducing the study, I asked one student to collect signed or unsigned forms to seal in an envelope, and I left the room while students considered signing the forms. The consent forms were sealed in an envelope and submitted by the student to my department Chair, who securely stored them until semester's end. As the instructor, I did not know who had consented to participate in the study until after grades were submitted.

During the consent process, I highlighted statements on the form that were intended to minimize potential coercion:

Participation in research is voluntary. You do not have to be in this study. If you decide to be in the study and change your mind, you have the right to drop out at any time and without any penalty to your grade in this course. . . . Your choice to participate or not participate will have no impact (positive or negative) on your grade for this course, nor in my personal opinions of you (e.g., it will not hurt my feelings if you choose not to participate).

The first part of this excerpt from the consent form was boilerplate language from my IRB's template. However, the last sentence was my own addition; it was important to me, especially coming out of a classroom environment built around nurturance and partnership, that I mitigate students' feeling badly about not consenting—as though it would make me not like them or hurt my feelings—or, alternatively, that I would like them more or be happier if they consented. Being clear about the implications of consent or non-consent was also important for these graduate students because I continued to advise many of them after the conclusion of the class. In the end, all seven students enrolled in the course consented to be in the study.

The data collected for the case study included (a) pedagogical materials, such as the syllabus and assignment descriptions; (b) student writing, such as discussion board posts, reading responses, reflections, and writing assignments (including seminar papers and group writing for the public project); (c) teacher reflections by the researcher kept as notes in a reflective teaching journal; and (d) pictures of notes on the classroom whiteboard after class discussions.

Once final grades were submitted, I accessed the consent forms and began compiling data. Each student was given a pseudonym, and all identifying information was redacted. While the research for this study is informed by the entire data set, students' end-of-course reflections about the public project, combined with my reflections, became the primary data sets for the findings analyzed here; these collected materials better captured our reactions, opinions, and feelings about the process of partnering to define the public project. Appendix A lists the reflective questions students were asked to answer in their end-of-semester reflection.

As a teacher-researcher, I approached data collection and analysis as a participant-observer, acknowledging that it is nearly impossible to obtain a fully objective analysis, nor is it necessarily preferable, when conducting research in a class that one is also teaching. As Lee Nickoson (2012) argues, "'Teacher' and 'researcher' identities are difficult if not impossible to

separate” (p. 105), and, because of their participation in the classroom culture, teacher-researchers are “experiential experts” (p. 103) who will ideally bring a hybrid, outsider-within approach to teacher-research. Shuttling between the insider-teacher and outsider-researcher, my engagement with students during the course and my analysis of the data set as a researcher at the conclusion of the course positioned me to “learn not only *about* [my] students but also—and crucially—*from* them” (Nickoson, 2012, p. 111). Indeed, this is why I quote heavily from student reflections in the following analysis.

I conducted two cycles of coding for students’ reflections. First, I used descriptive coding to develop a list of codes for common words, trends, or themes. Descriptive coding “summarizes in a word or short phrase the basic topic of a passage” (Saldaña, 2009, p. 70). For example, I used the code “uncomfortable” to mark comments such as “they forced me out of the comfort of the ideas I had.” Because “descriptive coding leads primarily to a categorized inventory, tabular account, summary, or index of the data’s contents” (Saldaña, 2009, p. 72), it provides the groundwork for a second cycle of coding, which involved developing the broader categories outlined in the findings of this study.

FINDINGS

In the following pages, I explore the main themes that emerged from students’ and my own reflections. While many of the themes here align with what scholars studying Students as Partners already know to be true (Matthews, 2017; O’Shea, 2018; Peters & Mathias, 2018), they highlight student reactions—in the words of students themselves—to the experiences of partnership, ranging from the discomfort of uncertainty to the rewards of learning from diverse perspectives that challenge our own perspectives.

Partnering with students may result in uncertainty and discomfort

One of the first challenges that arose in our partnership was that students were anxious about the task at hand. In reflecting back on partnering with students, I recognize that working through this uncertainty and discomfort became an important component of building trust. For example, one student who I will call Leslie wrote in her reflection at the end of the term: “I was slightly uneasy with the open-ended nature of the project as it was initially introduced, and I saw immediately the challenges it would present with regard to the variety of schedules and personalities.”

Similarly, another student, Beth, noted that the process of partnering to define the public project was “arduous” and “occasionally frustrating,” but she ultimately saw the value in such an approach, likening it to some of her own pedagogies as a teacher of writing: “pedagogically, this is a strong method: I recognized some of the same discomfort and resistance in myself as I do in my students when they must design an assignment beginning from learning goals.”

As Matthews (2017) argued, because partnering with students is grounded in reciprocity that involves collaborative negotiation, “the outcomes of SaP are unknown at the beginning of the joint endeavor” (p. 4). This became evident from students’ perspectives as they reflected on the ways they had to embrace the unknowns of the project. In her reflection, Beth “recognized the value of not simply being assigned a project, or even given a list of options to choose from

because formulation of the problem turned out in some sense more difficult than the solution.” Even though the unknowns of the process were unnerving for students at times, Beth concluded that she was

encouraged that there is no neat bow for this project. . . . This feels authentic and pleasingly open-ended. . . . There is more work to be done, and the “real world” constraints do not allow everything to be wrapped up by semester close.

Beth’s focus on the “real world” here further aligns our partnership with PBL pedagogies, as “learners explore open-ended and real-world problems” through “self-directed learning” and by “work[ing] collaboratively in small groups to support each other” (Kwan, 2009, p. 91)—all similar goals for SaP as well.

Another student—Skylar, who identifies as non-binary and uses “they” pronouns—noted in their reflection that some discomfort arose in bringing a different disciplinary perspective from “feminist studies” to a class of primarily English majors: “being outside of my ‘home’ in feminist studies made me see things differently,” and Skylar acknowledged that this resulted in some discomfort. Partnership, in this case, meant working through our different disciplinary values and worldviews to define the public project.

From my perspective as the instructor, I also had to become comfortable with uncertainty and work to not overtake the reins of the project. Leslie noticed this and commented:

In your decision not to coerce us—or even steer us—you put a tremendous amount of faith in us as a class and as burgeoning scholars. As a result, it seems that we really do feel like we own this project, and, consequently, we have a different level of investment. . . . I don’t say this to flatter but to genuinely applaud your restraint.

At times I questioned whether the burden of problem-solving and partnering to define the project was taking away from course time that may have been devoted to content. As a new hire teaching my second graduate seminar, I also wondered if decentering my authority in the name of partnership would undermine my credibility as an advisor and scholar.

While students and I experienced discomfort at times, we balanced this with building trust and a shared sense of responsibility. Leslie commented on the importance of trust and faith in her reflection: “in the spirit of true collaboration . . . we trusted one another to contribute where we could,” and we had to have “faith that [classmates] . . . would step up.” Similarly, Yang, who is from China, explained how the process of partnership helped her gain a “deeper understanding of ‘community’ in the US context . . . a community is a place where every member . . . take[s] responsibility. Community is based on the active participation of each member.” Trusting ourselves and each other to uphold our responsibilities and commitments to the work of partnership was an essential component of the project.

As these student reflections suggest, the lessons learned from partnership were a valuable use of class time, modeling the messy processes of negotiation we go through to solve

real-world problems. And, even though the process felt “arduous” at times, we came to see that time as essential to a well-formed partnership with students.

Partnering with students takes time

Our partnership to define the public project took months instead of weeks; however, this gave us the time we needed to voice our opinions, share our concerns, and move the group forward—even if slowly at times—toward defining a project. As Maggie Berg and Barbara Seeber argue in *The Slow Professor* (2016), we can apply lessons from the slow foods movement to higher education. Their work calls us to fight the cultures of speed and efficiency: “Slow professors act with purpose, cultivating emotional and intellectual resilience to the effects of corporatization in the academy” (Berg & Seeber, 2016, p. 90). Research on SaP continues to emphasize the necessity of partnership as a process that takes time to develop (Healey, Flint, & Harrington, 2014; Matthews, 2017). However, “efficiency” has risen as a critique of PBL, with some research suggesting that “PBL curricula cover about 80% of what might be accomplished in a conventional curriculum in the same period” (Kwan, 2009, p. 104). In the face of these challenges, SaP and PBL practitioners must be prepared to defend the value of such approaches.

The process of partnership in my course truly tested the value of slowing down in a culture of speed. While mid-semester some students expressed concern about how long it was taking to decide on a project, end-of-course reflections highlighted how important these discussions were and the necessity of time to work through them. For example, Andrea commented: “just finding a project we could all agree on . . . turned out to be the most difficult part, yet it was also the most rewarding part of the project.” Our negotiations during the partnership resulted in thoughtful consideration of issues of sustainability, ethics, purpose, and audience for the public project. Students brought different kinds of interests and investments—activist, pedagogical, or service-based. Our partnership modeled for students the improvisational and sometimes scrambling processes of starting public projects from scratch to solve real-world problems.

Without time for the partnership, not all voices might have been heard, not all positions expressed—a lesson in the value of diverse perspectives that I explore in the coming pages. One student, Leslie, beautifully articulated the value of taking our time, reflecting that she learned “the value of being patient through the quiet, remaining calm through apparent indecision, and having faith.” Throughout the partnership, each member of the class and I as the instructor had to take turns being patient and waiting through the quiet of apparent indecision. Indeed, this is a benefit of slowing down and giving partnerships the time they need to develop and flourish.

It is not always easy in a partnership to be “patient through the quiet”—those moments of silence in the room when I as the instructor question this pedagogical approach, when students question the purpose or value of partnership, when our group has reached a point of apparent indecision. In choosing to be patient through the quiet, though, we build trust, reinforce our mutual respect, and can begin to make progress. Part of how we build trust in moments of quiet is by making sure we have reconnected as a group before moving ahead; in reflecting on whether or not the weekly breaks between class meetings delayed our decision-

making processes, Andrea commented that the slower pacing insured “the public project was a better reflection of the group as a whole—instead of an idea that one person pushed until everyone else agreed to it.”

Partnering with students values different perspectives

One of the rewards of partnership was the significance of each person’s unique perspective; within our small class, we had two international students, one student from another discipline, and two students returning to school after years of full-time teaching. This wealth of diversity in experience really demonstrated to me the power of partnering with students—it gave each student a stake in our pedagogical work and allowed them to bring their worldviews and life experiences to bear on our discussions. One student, Karen, reflected: “I loved . . . hearing about other people’s ideas and talking through the different values that we held about how the project should be shaped.”

Through our partnership, we learned how our different perspectives and backgrounds impacted how we defined the problem and potential projects. Yang underscored this point in her reflection:

I would say the process of working out a focused area in which every member of our class might have a chance to contribute her expertise is the most prominent benefit, yet also greatest challenge we have been through. In this class, the classmates’ backgrounds vary greatly in terms of education, culture, and profession. . . . The various backgrounds are of great value to our project because it can always bring in fresh ideas and new angles to look at things.

This is not to say that there was always agreement across difference. Karen recounted a heated exchange during one class discussion when a peer challenged “our ideas about working for some kind of ‘other’”; for Karen, the challenge to her ideas about what the public project should be and who it should serve were, in her words, “useful” because they “forced [her] out of the comfort of the ideas [she] had.” These moments of disagreement in our class discussions also challenged my dual role as teacher and partner: part of me wanted to jump in and help resolve the issue, but I also recognized the importance of letting student partners work to resolve differences on their own terms. Decentering my authority to move towards more equitable power dynamics resulted in letting student discussion proceed without much interference from me. However, I also tried to balance my roles of co-learner and partner with being a facilitator—a central role for the teacher in PBL (Kwan, 2009)—by posing questions and re-directing our attention back to the task at hand.

Another student, Beth, reflected on the “moments of tension and even dread” when our course conversations about the project caused “political and social agendas [to] clash”: she asked “what might a ‘social justice’ project look like, to make such a range of passionate, informed minds unite behind a purpose?” Realizing that this kind of clashing is not unique to our classroom partnership, Beth contended that “these discussions and disagreements were rehearsals for the kind of resistance and defensiveness one might meet from a community one hoped to be involved with.” Similarly, Yang explained, “It is never an easy task to unite and

organize a group of people among whom the individual experience is extremely different; it requires communication, mutual understanding of one another, appreciation of each others' expertise and knowledge." Mutual understanding and appreciation became core components of our group's partnership—without them we would not have been able to communicate across our differences to move the project forward.

Karen, who also teaches writing, noted some of the challenges of partnership while reflecting on similar experiences of her students:

It was a challenge to me to accept that I didn't get everything I wanted out of the project. . . . I hope that the experience of not getting my way . . . will make me more empathetic about how my students feel a lot of the time. Not everyone gets to be doing their favorite thing all the time.

When we came to an agreement about the public project, we all experienced give and take—getting part of what we wanted while having to sacrifice other parts. This negotiation was, as students aptly noted, challenging and frustrating at times, but the partnership allowed us to talk through disagreements and move toward collaborative action.

Partnership can make us and our students vulnerable to each other

As the theme explained above demonstrates, partnering with students may result in uncertainty and discomfort, which can make teachers and students vulnerable to each other. This vulnerability often emerges as a result of putting ourselves and students in what can feel like a risky situation. As bell hooks emphasizes in *Teaching to Transgress*, engaged pedagogies involve teachers making themselves “vulnerable while encouraging students to take risks” (hooks 21). Indeed, partnering with students to define such a major component of a course—as we did with the public project—is somewhat risky: risky for teachers to trust in our students' abilities to successfully collaborate and come to a decision, and risky for students to trust in an unfamiliar process when their grade depends on it. Even though the public project was a pedagogic effort constructed in partnership, I took on the role of evaluator at the end of the course, which may have resulted in a tipping of the scales: less risk for me in a position of grade-wielding power, more risk for students to agree to an unknown collaborative project. While I was asking students to partner through the uncertainty of defining the public project, there was vulnerability in their discomfort. And, when our group reached an initial agreement, I had to reveal some of my vulnerabilities as a not yet tenured professor.

The class initially agreed to a project that involved leading an on-campus forum for students, faculty, and administrators to discuss the challenges non-native English speaking students face at our institution. However, after sending initial inquiries to gather support from key stakeholders, I received considerable pushback from a more senior colleague in another department. In the next class session, I decided to share my concerns with students about proceeding with the project—making myself vulnerable by expressing my frustration with the fact that I felt hemmed in by my untenured status, not wanting to be perceived as a problematic new colleague. I agreed to proceed with the project if the majority of the class thought it was for the best, but students listened and carefully considered my position,

acknowledging my feelings of concern and offering “reciprocal care” in choosing a different project (Holmes, 2015). As Cook-Sather, Bovill, and Felten (2014) argue, “because faculty roles and responsibilities vary widely,” instructors need to “think carefully about how partnership . . . fits into [their] career development” (22). For me, this was an unanticipated complication of partnering with students that ultimately built further trust among us as we listened and learned from each other.

I also learned through the end-of-course student reflections that one student was made to feel vulnerable about their gender identity. Skylar explained how they were “surprised by some of the assumptions” their peers made when a classmate stated during a brainstorming session that “we are all women” as a basis for pursuing a women’s issue public project. Skylar reflected on how they tried to explain that “not everyone in this room wants to be labeled as a ‘woman’,” but ultimately they “felt like my point did not get across—my masculinity was not legible in this space . . . it felt like my own assertion about naming and gender was erased.” Skylar’s experience with partnership has caused me to question the ways in which traditional power structures, privileged perspectives, assumptions, and dominant narratives are not magically erased even when authority in the classroom is decentered through partnering with students. Recent scholarship on Students as Partners has increased attention and focus on power dynamics, ethics, and inclusivity in partnerships (Matthews, 2017; O’Shea, 2018; Peter & Mathias, 2018). As Peters and Mathias (2018) note, “genuine partnership requires more than consultation, involvement, or active participation of students as consumers”; their work draws on Paulo Freire’s liberatory pedagogies to achieve “genuine partnership” and resist appropriation of this work for neoliberal purposes (p. 54).

In reflecting back, my own choices as an instructor to sometimes sit back in silence—being “patient through the quiet”—to allow for what I thought was a diversity of perspectives, was in this case replicating some of the same damaging power dynamics I was hoping to disrupt. While making ourselves vulnerable to each other can be productive in partnership, this student’s experience has called me to take more responsibility as the instructor to ensure that what the majority of the class has experienced as a diversity of perspectives is the reality for all students in the partnership. Instructors partnering with their students should continue to be patient and quiet, not allowing our privileged voice to dominate the partnership; however, Skylar’s reflection reminds us that there are also times when inequities demand our *impatience* and *outcry*—to call out each others’ assumptions and privilege, to highlight alternate narratives of the diverse life experiences and identities represented in our partnerships. Had I known this student felt silenced in partnership, I could have worked to address this inequitable positioning through our ongoing partnership.

As SaP practitioners we must continue to, as Matthews (2017) argues, “nurture power-sharing relationships through dialogue and reflection” (3). This example from Skylar’s end-of-semester reflection further supports recommendations in the SaP literature that reflection during partnership should be ongoing (Matthews, 2017). In the case study presented here, I learned that student partners need to be given opportunities for both individual and group reflection throughout the partnership process. Had I asked for individual reflections throughout the semester, I might have been able to address some of Skylar’s concerns before the course ended. Because of the sensitive nature of their comments, the privacy of an individual

reflection may have allowed Skylar to voice their concerns more comfortably in writing than in a shared group space of the classroom. Instead, I practiced in-process verbal group reflections about partnership as a way of “checking in” with students; unfortunately, this group style of verbal reflection served to replicate and re-inscribe power dynamics that silenced Skylar in the first place. To reinforce what Matthews (2017) claims, reflection—both individual and collaborative—should be an ongoing, in-process component of student partnership, rather than an after-the-fact consideration.

CONCLUSION

This case study from a graduate seminar on Public Rhetorics for Social Change highlights how theories about Students as Partners are instantiated when that partnership is approached from a problem-based learning perspective. Because both pedagogical approaches are grounded in co-inquiry, SaP and PBL can work in tandem to help build a classroom culture of nurturance, mutual respect, and trust as we together work toward exploring a common problem. Moreover, the lens of PBL reminds SaP practitioners to embrace the messy, uncomfortable, or ill-structured problems that may arise in partnership, acknowledging that these markers suggest that our partnerships have formed stronger foundations from putting time and collaborative energy into working through challenges that inevitably arise in partnership. Given the relatively small class size and the graduate level of the seminar, there are some limitations to the applicability of the findings. However, the value in this case study lies in the way it documents student reactions to partnership, reinforcing and adding a cautionary perspective on this valuable pedagogical approach.

“Being patient through the quiet” provides practitioners with a productive phrase that both calls us to be resolute during the slow development of partnerships and to take turns being silent to allow for a diversity of perspectives; it also calls attention to the limits of patience and quietude in the face of inequities that may arise through differences in partnership. As Kwan (2009) argued, an essential condition for students to have positive learning experiences from PBL is “a good facilitator who is effective in communicating learning outcomes and expectations to students, and in working with students to create a nurturing environment” (p. 103). Similarly, in applying PBL to SaP, we must remember that the teacher’s role in partnership is not a silent bystander but an active participant and facilitator; in our efforts to decenter our power and authority in the classroom, instructors must still facilitate the process of partnership and the construction of a nurturing environment. Keeping reciprocity, open communication, and mutual respect at the core of our partnerships with students helps us remember that we have so much to learn from each other.

This research was successfully reviewed by the author’s Institutional Review Board (IRB).

NOTE ON CONTRIBUTOR

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