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## **IDEALISM, CONFLICT, LEADERSHIP, AND LABELS: REFLECTIONS ON CO-FACILITATION AS PARTNERSHIP PRACTICE**

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### **Introduction**

In this reflective essay we explore the process of ‘walking the walk’ of partnership by reflecting on our experiences of working in student-academic/student-student partnership to co-facilitate workshops on ‘students as partners.’ This partnership co-facilitation took place in the context of the [Summer Institute on ‘Students as Partners,’](#) a four-day event organized by colleagues at McMaster University in Canada. Our involvement in the Summer Institute (SI) arose from Kelly’s link to the conference organizers, who invited her to lead workshops along with students. Our essay includes an explanation of who we are and how we co-facilitated in terms of process and delivery, a collective description of our process of reflection, our individual reflections on the experience of co-facilitating, and an analysis of themes that cut across our reflections. These themes—idealism, conflict, leadership, and labels—illuminate the challenges and opportunities of partnership as a model for co-facilitation.

### **Who We Are and How We Prepared for Co-facilitation**

We are two undergraduate students, one postgraduate student, and one academic (‘faculty’ in North America) from a research-intensive Australian university. Lauren completed a three-year degree in science and enrolled in an optional fourth honors year in 2016. Lucie D completed a dual degree in science and arts, and subsequently started an honors degree in health science in 2016. Lucy M completed dual Bachelors in science and journalism including a scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) honours year and started a PhD in natural resource management in 2015. Kelly started working at the university in 2006 and in 2010 shifted from professional staff role to an academic role and is currently a senior lecturer in higher education.

Our approach to co-facilitation was as follows: Kelly invited three students to co-facilitate with her, Lucie D and Lucy M, with whom she was co-authoring on differing projects, and Lauren who was starting her honors project on ‘students as partners’ in the sciences with Kelly as a co-supervisor. Our involvement in the SI was to facilitate two, two-day workshops focused respectively on ‘*Students as Partners*’ in *Subject-based Research & Inquiry* and ‘*Students as Partners*’ in the *Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*.

We started our partnership through planning the workshops four months before the start of the SI by having weekly two- to four-hour meetings. We employed a flat collaboration structure throughout our planning with no dedicated hierarchy or leadership roles. This meant rotating chair, note-taker, and organizer for each meeting. All decisions were made during these meetings and based on group discussion. We strived to share responsibility for the creation of the workshop ethos and aims, while pragmatically taking individual responsibility for creating of content and materials (for example, slide shows or worksheets). We worked in pairs outside of the whole-group meetings so each of us had some ongoing support throughout the process, with each pair taking responsibility for the content for one day of each workshop.

We planned individual workshops so that each was comprised of four, half-day sessions over the length of two days. Each team member led one of these sessions supported by another. For example, on the first day Lucy M led session one and was supported by Kelly and Kelly led session two and was supported by Lucy M. Overall, each person thus led two half-day sessions across four days (one in each workshop) and supported two half-day sessions, whilst engaging as participants in the sessions they were not actively co-facilitating.

### **Process for Reflection**

We were inspired to embark on this reflection process by an article written by Seale *et al.* (2015) that drew on written reflections on partnership explored through the lens of power and resistance. We decided to draft individual written reflections of our experiences co-facilitating as partnership practice at the SI, guided by two questions:

1. In your opinion, what worked in our co-facilitation process and approach? Why did it work?
2. In your opinion, what did not work in our co-facilitation process and approach? Why did it not work and what should we have done differently?

We shared and read these written reflections and then met to ‘reflect on our reflections.’ Over two hours we discussed how they resonated as a group, and what seemed worth elaborating on. We immediately noted the very different approaches to reflections we adopted and the interplay between reflecting on the planning process and the actual facilitation of the workshops. Ultimately, we continued to come back to prominent threads across our reflections that resonated with us all: idealism and conflict, and labels and leadership. We have shared our individual written reflections below followed by a discussion of those reflections framed by those prominent threads to reflect our verbal discussions.

### **Personal Reflections on Co-facilitation as Partnership: What Did and Didn’t Work**

#### ***Lucie D***

The partnership was very stressful at times, but always hugely rewarding. When all is said and done, I think we played well to our individual strengths and weaknesses. For example, this being my first time facilitating, I often had trouble stopping people from talking too long and thus keeping on track with the time and topic. Lucy M, who is a more experienced facilitator, was considerably more skilled in this area, and helped me curb some of the more enthusiastic speakers during my

workshops, as well as give me tips on how to proceed with them. By the end of the week, I was much more capable in this skill.

As is typical of mixed ability groups, some of us didn't know as much about the topic. During the planning phase, we always took the time to explain and thoroughly explore different concepts, ensuring everyone was comfortable before moving on. The amount of respect during this stage of planning created a great work environment and fostered trust in the group. Unfortunately, it also led to us sometimes get derailed around concepts that were not necessarily useful. Whilst this is an important part of the learning process and I'm glad that we were given the space to do it, it definitely slowed us down during our preparation. I don't think there's necessarily a way around this, other than being more experienced at the start of this whole project or starting our planning much earlier to allow time for this learning curve.

During our planning phase, we could definitely have improved on our meetings. I was amazed at how much work went into planning a workshop. My lack of experience meant that I was utterly unprepared for the amount of work that creating good content would take. I think we should have tried to divide and conquer much earlier than we did, and assign ourselves more specific roles in the partnership to work towards our common goal. This would have perhaps improved our planning efficiency. As time went on, our meetings did improve in efficiency, we just didn't fully get there in time.

Finally, the Summer Institute (SI) was incredibly non-stop. All the facilitators and most of the participants were accommodated in the same hotel, so breakfast was spent with everyone, talking about our field. We then moved to the institute and facilitated workshops until lunch. Lunch was more like a meeting with everyone, followed by a plenary, followed by the afternoon workshops, followed by a dinner meet with the team, followed usually by an after-dinner work session to prepare for the next day. I admit I was not prepared for that, and became quite stressed as a result, especially on days I was meant to facilitate. Looking back, I think all of us had this stress, but we failed to communicate it adequately to each other, resulting in us all feeling isolated, which put further strain on us all.

### *Lauren*

An aspect of our approach that worked well was a loosely structured approach to SI planning meetings. While certain tasks were set, the relaxed approach allowed for the discussion to flow naturally, with a variety of aspects explored which would not necessarily have been possible with a rigid structure. The informal, conversational nature of discussion helped to ensure that there was not as much of an academic-student divide; rather we were just four co-facilitators all with valuable input to bring to the table.

While the planning and delivery of the workshops was generally successful, a suggested improvement for next time would be to finalize the workshop planning stage earlier to allow for time to practice delivery of the content and activities. The reasoning behind this suggestion is that not every co-facilitator had previous experience facilitating workshops, which is something to be expected with student co-facilitators, meaning that comfort levels with delivery were not as high as they could have been. While all group members had attended workshops to further their understanding of delivery and presentation, this is not sufficiently similar to a practice run.

A second aspect of co-facilitation that could be improved upon is decisions regarding the acceptability of interjecting when another member is facilitating their section. There was a murky general understanding that this was to be acceptable, even welcomed, but in practice it can throw the session's lead facilitator off and possibly be misconstrued. Neither allowing nor disallowing interjection is necessarily correct as it depends on group dynamics and individual personalities, however there does need to be a clear consensus before the workshops.

### ***Kelly***

In our process leading to the event, we started planning early and with an open agenda based on a flat structure. Thus, we had a division of labor that everyone agreed to with a plan co-created between the four of us. In regards to the topics, we all engaged in reading some literature and discussing it at meetings. This was designed as a learning activity for us all so we could learn some 'content.' Because partnership is a new, ambiguous concept that is values-based and manifests in differing forms of practice, coming to a shared understanding of 'students as partners' seemed important for us to do together.

While our process for planning started early and intended to engage all of us as collaborators, we did not practice co-facilitating together. With two group members (Lucie D and Lauren) new to facilitating with limited oral presentation experiences, practicing facilitation would have been time well spent. Lucy M and I did practice co-facilitating at small workshops at our university and we invited Lucie D and Lauren to observe with the intention of modeling how our facilitation in practice might work in Canada.

I personally felt like I did not have enough time to spend with each of the students to discuss their presentations and plans for co-facilitating. By dividing up the workshops, we were being pragmatic and sensible given our full schedules. As the group member with the most experience facilitating and co-facilitating, I should have pushed more for our group to have the slides completed in full before leaving for Canada (in fact we were still organizing slides the day before the workshop and rearranging them each evening of the SI) and to ensure we practiced. Partly being very busy and partly not wanting to appear as the leader of the group or the 'bossy one,' I deliberately took a hands-off, 'what the group decides' approach. This was a (my) false premise of partnership, I now believe, which resulted from my inexperience in student-academic partnerships. As someone with something to contribute to achieving the shared group goal, I should have contributed more. Had I been in a co-facilitation with my academic colleagues, I most certainly would have. I have to ask myself why I acted differently when planning for co-facilitation with my student colleagues than I would have with my academic colleagues?

Being out-spoken, assertive, and visibly frustrated with my academic colleagues is somehow easier for me than doing the same with this group of students. Perhaps wanting to be likeable or the pressure to be good at 'partnership with students' resulted in my reliance on politeness to avoid debate, conflict, or friction. Perhaps I trust (feel safe being more myself) with my academic colleagues more or simply care less about what they think of me? Perhaps years of working with my academics colleagues compared to months (case of Lauren) and a year (case of Lucie D and Lucy M) of working with students led to an inevitable 'getting to know you stage'? As trust takes time, I do wonder about the capacity for genuine co-facilitation as a partnership practice.

## *Lucy M*

One of the things I believe worked about our co-facilitation approach was the structural flexibility we made room for during the actual workshops. There was a wide variety of levels of expertise in the room, from novice to expert, and I believe we did a good job in accommodating that diversity through being highly flexible in the activities, language, structure, and approach that we used. This was also aided by successfully setting up a relaxed and dialogic workshop environment where we made sure we, as co-facilitators were ‘interruptible.’ This gave participants the freedom to contribute to the shape of the running of the workshop from the very beginning. For example, we asked participants at the very start to help us shape the ethos of the workshops that we would like to adopt, and then making space for them to indicate what they did or didn’t want to explore in more or less depth throughout the process. This flexible and relaxed approach I think also allowed me as a co-facilitator to develop myself, and my relationships with others, throughout the workshop—given that the feeling was that this was a developmental and learning process for both facilitators and participants.

We worked, in the preparation process, to collaborate in a ‘flat’ model—that is, sharing the leadership. I felt this approach created more freedom for each of us to express ideas or thoughts freely and created a more ‘collegial’ environment of respect than had we had a more hierarchical collaboration model. In a ‘flat’ model there is shared leadership which can also mean that no one is willing to ‘take the lead’ in driving decisions or actions. This meant that sometimes I felt we were taking too long to make progress—like we were being too polite or diplomatic when it came to making a call on whether or not to do something in order to move forward. I felt that this challenge was emphasized because of the context—that we were working in ‘partnership’—and thus expectations for ‘equality’ were attached. Had we had a more defined leader this might not have been the case, but it might also not have fostered that collegial environment that was so positive. The majority of challenges I perceived were in the preparation process and our relaxed approach to collaboration. One of the major challenges I felt was a difference in expectations, including: how to collaborate, approaches to meeting deadlines, and how much work was required for such an intensive week-long workshop. We all seemed to have different approaches, which I felt created tensions where those expectations misaligned.

Ultimately we did not prepare well enough, or far enough in advance. This meant that there was a huge amount of work left to the weekend before, or in the evenings during the week, and that on the day of the workshops there was a lot more stress than might have been necessary had we been more prepared. This was challenging because it raised questions in my mind about commitment to the team, shared workload, and shared responsibilities. For me, this created tensions around feelings of inequity and frustration that I then saw myself expressing in tense or stressful group situations, which was not beneficial for any involved.

Ultimately, however, I did see the workshops as being highly successful and I feel like I learnt a huge amount—and by all accounts the participants did too!

## **Discussion**

Our experiences of partnering through co-facilitation at the SI presented us with a breadth and diversity of challenges and learning opportunities. When we reflected on and analyzed our reflections as a group, it became apparent that there was a multitude of different ways in which we could frame our discussion and many different lenses through which we could view the process, each giving a varied and nuanced perspective. However, we kept coming back to certain threads that for us, acted as vehicles behind many of the topics discussed in those reflections. We delve into these below in the hope that we can share with our readers some of the nuance, depth, messiness, and learning that we encountered through this partnership and reflection experience.

### ***Idealism of Partnership and Capacity for Conflict***

Through our reflective process and discussions, we realized that we were thinking about partnership as an *ideal* or aspiration that we were working toward based on reading literature that tended to emphasize on the positive outcomes of ‘students as partners.’ We discussed the feeling of pressure we each felt by striving to enact our partnership practices to model what we perceived to be as ‘ideal partnership.’ We each aspired to achieve the positive aspects of partnership without leaving space for the nitty-gritty messiness and conflicts that are also an inherent part of the realities of genuine partnership and co-facilitation. For us, this meant being friendly, supportive, respectful, polite, diplomatic—nice.

We came to the realization that individually we had not been behaving in this situation as we might ‘normally.’ We realized that our cautious behaviors were based on our perceived differences between ‘regular’ collaboration or co-facilitation and that which we framed explicitly as partnership in our idealized sense. It became clear that within the idealistic positive connotations that we each seemed to attach to partnership in that context we had become hesitant to disagree, argue, or debate.

What else might have caused this mutual conflict-avoidance strategy we all seemed to adopt? Perhaps it was an effort to avoid the discomfort that can also come with conflict—a feeling that did not fit within our idealistic notion of partnership. We also wondered whether being an all-female group of collaborators contributed to our avoidance of conflict due to that implicit and insidious societal expectation that we (as women) should maintain a polite and agreeable manner. Experience levels also seemed to be at play in this process of dancing around these uncomfortable issues, and more prominently in the process of critically reflecting on our practice. Lauren and Lucie D both discussed being hesitant to critique given a lack of confidence. Kelly and Lucy M both discussed being similarly hesitant to offer critique as a result of being hyper-conscious of not telling others what to do in our ‘flat’ structure of collaboration.

We unintentionally left no space for conflict in our process of partnership. This may have caused our various feelings of frustration, slow progress, and tension through a lack of open and honest communication, and accountability, in our idea of shared responsibility through the partnership process. Perhaps more importantly, we realized this ‘niceness’ may have inhibited our capacity for learning. Functional conflict in collaboration can be a strong driver of collaborative learning, which is an opportunity we may have missed out on given our impetus to enact our idealistic notions of how to ‘do partnership right.’

### ***Labels and Leading in Partnership***

The notion of partnership in practice is that students and academics collaborate in ways that break down traditional identities of ‘being an academic teacher’ and ‘being a student.’ Challenging power structures that create distance between learners and teachers could be considered ‘core business’ in the practice of partnership. Inherent in this process seems to be the removing of those labels that reinforce and define those distinctions between roles. By its very nature however, ‘students as partners’ differentiates between students and academics.

By thinking about what it means to be a student/academic and how that contributes to the richness of diverse perspectives in partnership practices, the label of ‘student’ or ‘academic’ seemed to take on more prominence and importance to each of us individually. Thus our need to defy our labels and transcend our identity resulted in us focusing more on differences between students and academics than similarities. This manifested in a few ways. Our ‘flat structure’ with collective decision-making was an explicit attempt to avoid a hierarchical structure with Kelly (the academic) being the leader. While this resulted in a collegial environment that all of us valued, and felt gave us a voice in co-creating the workshops together, we also viewed the flat structure as problematic. Both Lucy M and Kelly suppressed, albeit in different ways, their tendencies to lead based on an idealism of what ‘doing partnership right’ looks like. As discussed, this was driven by a hyper-awareness of wanting to defy the traditional hierarchy and be a ‘partner,’ rather than an ‘academic’ or ‘PhD candidate’ who out-ranked the ‘honors students.’

This sensitivity to not taking the lead based on our awareness of having a flat structure versus a ‘hierarchy’ had ramifications for the role of ‘leadership’ in partnership. This was particularly clear in our reflections around the pragmatics of the task-orientated work of planning for co-facilitation of workshops. By adhering to the flat model and the idealistic picture of partnership that we each envisioned, we attempted to level the power differences. While leadership is not necessarily one and the same as power, it seems we had attached those two notions as intrinsically linked. This may have resulted in the frustrations around decision-making and planning processes expressed explicitly in reflections by Lucy M and Lucie D and implicitly by Lauren and Kelly as no one was willing to take the lead, or have ‘more power,’ to drive decision-making. In our discussion we questioned the wisdom of failing to discuss our individual roles in the partnership prior to commencing the collaborative process. While the terms ‘leadership’ and ‘partnership’ at times seem contradictory, perhaps in this case it was less about being unwilling to taking responsibility and more about avoiding the labels that we seem so quick to apply in higher education. None of us wanted to assume the label of ‘leader’ and yet all of us at some point felt vexed with our slow progress in the planning process.

### **Conclusion**

The feedback we received from participants and observers on our SI workshops was predominantly positive. In our reflection on ‘walking the walk’ of ‘students as partners’ through our co-facilitation at the SI we wanted to make a space to illuminate the complicated realities of enacting partnership as co-facilitation. The levels of comfort, knowledge, and confidence required to genuinely co-facilitate presents challenges for partnership as a co-facilitation model. We believe that partnership is fundamentally about harnessing the creativity of students and academics who inherently have a diversity of backgrounds and areas of expertise. This nexus between learning together while also



feeling comfortable enough in our knowledge and capacity to co-facilitate, along with misaligned expectations, was challenging. Ultimately, we each felt that we have been through an intensive learning process and we go into future partnerships with our eyes open to both the opportunities, and the challenges and messiness that we now know first-hand are inherent in the partnership process.

It is worthwhile noting that the process of learning through reflection and the related implications for the relationships and practices of our partnerships has been a highly valuable experience. One outcome of the process of reflecting on our co-facilitation as partnership practice through the writing of this essay was a depth of insight into our partners' own perceptions of our shared co-facilitation experience, to which we had previously not been exposed, allowing us to see that each of our lived experiences of the same process differed in meaningful ways. This was primarily a co-learning process but also a significant opportunity for open and honest communication in a format that is perhaps less uncomfortable or confrontational than having those 'hard conversations' in person. The attitude of openness and honesty that we each adopted as we approached writing our individual reflections allowed us to have a consequent discussion in which we were more candid than we had been previously. We feel that this led to a deeper understanding of one another—and of our shared experiences of partnership. This has developed our partnership relationships in a way that allows more space for functional conflict and for having those 'hard conversations' when we face challenges in our future partnership practices.

## **References**

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