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Engaging students as partners in learning and teaching

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Abstract

Research (Cook-Sather et al., 2014; Healey et al., 2016) indicates the importance of student-faculty partnership. Students as Partners (SaP) initiatives, mainly in the form of Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL), have been seen in but are not limited to universities in the UK, US, Canada and Australia. Despite that, it is still an emerging yet contested topic in higher education to actively and intellectually engage students as partners in learning and teaching, considering the inclusivity of involvement, faculty buy-in and so on (Matthews et al., 2018; Matthews, 2019). Thus, this case study of a pilot SaP initiative at Duke Kunshan University, a young joint venture university in China, aims to enrich the literature and inform further discussion about its values, challenges and practices.

1   Introduction

The Center for Teaching and Learning at Duke Kunshan University plays a key role in helping faculty to create the highest quality educational experiences for students. We work with faculty to implement evidence-based strategies for effective student learning, by offering training on educational technology, consultation on syllabi, and instruction in specific classroom techniques. However, it is always challenging for us to present student voices to showcase excellence in teaching as well as to empower students to be more active agents in their own learning experiences. Healey et al. (2014) mapped out multiple ways of student involvement. In reality, though student course evaluation is weighted and student-faculty collaboration in subject-based research is common, very limited opportunities have been provided to stimulate intellectual conversations about teaching among these stakeholders. We piloted the *Undergraduate Student Partners of Teaching and Learning Initiative* for one year and endeavored to engage students in pedagogical dialogues and course development. This paper illustrates the implementation of this pilot initiative and highlights partnership activities to empower students. In a full paper to be submitted for peer review, we will discuss the challenges we encountered, the impacts and further recommendations.

Since the launch of our undergraduate program in AY 2018-2019, we have offered a few signature programs for faculty. These include the annual Learning Innovation Fellowship, co-led with Duke University and designed for new faculty to get the basics of course design and active learning techniques in the new teaching environment; mid-term Small Group Instructional Feedback; the Visit a Classroom program; the Teaching & Learning at Lunch

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series; and one-on-one consultations on pedagogy and instructional technology. To better prepare faculty for teaching, we analysed the situational factors, such as students' cultural backgrounds, academic preparation, and language proficiencies, to help faculty better understand the student profile. We also facilitated focus groups to gain a deeper insight into the student academic experience, in order to help faculty develop best practices of teaching. Then we realized that student voices and their learning experience are not only critical to inform our strategic planning, but also to showcase the best teaching practices of faculty. Most importantly, students will increase their awareness and ownership of learning when being heard.

We learnt different models from literature and conversations with colleagues in educational development. Some had recruited juniors or seniors to conduct educational inquiries into their capstone experiences; some worked closely with graduate students to explore the effective use of technologies in teaching; and some engaged students in program evaluation projects. However, as a new and growing institution we encountered several challenges. First, the first cohort of our undergraduate students were rising sophomores who may not be able to demonstrate professionalism or confidence when talking about teaching and learning, especially with their professors. Second, given that the overall curriculum was still under development, we had little opportunity to engage students in evaluation projects like other institutions'. Third, we promote liberal arts education, so students are encouraged to take courses across disciplines. Thus, the chances are high that faculty may meet and know every single student. Conflicts of interest are inevitable when inviting students to share their learning experiences.

2   Implementation

Engaging students to play a significant role in educational development is supported by prior research (Healey, 2014; Cook, 2016) and cases in other institutions around the world, such as the *Student Partners Program* at MacPherson Institute and the *StudentShapers Program* at Imperial College London. Facing with these challenges, we started with baby steps by communicating with university leadership and divisional chairs frequently to seek their support. When interviewing student applicants, we valued their reflectivity on learning and acute observations about teaching. By August 2019, we had formed a team of three student partners and six student advisory board members, whose major interests vary across arts & humanities, social sciences, and natural & applied sciences.

Last year, these students gained exposure to teaching and learning by partnering with faculty in pedagogical discussions and course design.

2.1   Teaching stories

Continuing our tradition of sharing excellent teaching stories, student partners helped to interview five faculty members across divisions, researched pedagogical approaches, collected student feedback, and collaborated with faculty to tell their stories. These stories have been posted on our Center's communication channel and have received positive feedback, especially from new faculty. Through this project, faculty shared their teaching philosophy with students naturally and then built trust, which is the foundation of any future partnership.

2.2   Student panels

We intend to incorporate student voices as early as possible, so as to foster a transparent and positive teaching and learning environment. During the Learning Innovation Fellowship, we collaborated with faculty representatives and student partners and offered a panel to discuss the key considerations in course design. New faculty really appreciated such a conversation early on to reach a consensus on course expectations. Close to the end of each semester, we

also invited students to celebrate their professors' excellence in teaching by sharing their learning experiences and expressing gratitude to their professors in person. After hearing the positive feedback from their students, faculty tend to be more comfortable when articulating questions and challenges to seek further advice.

2.3   Teaching showcase

We also encourage faculty to present in the annual teaching showcase, which targets a wider audience. Engaging in many pedagogical conversations, student are confident and competitive enough to collaborate with faculty in the presentations. Their involvement and facilitation in last year's showcase were highly praised by multiple stakeholders at the university.

2.4   Course development projects

Once trust is built, faculty members are more willing to actively engage students in future projects. So far, student partners have contributed to three course development projects: assisting the development of course materials, reflecting on the effectiveness of interdisciplinary learning, and contributing to resilient teaching preparation under crisis.

3   Discussion

The first-year pilot was successful in building trust and communication among faculty, students and us.

3.1   Faculty buy-in

When we interviewed faculty to share experiences with newcomers, they emphasized the value of student voices in course development, recommended events represented by the teaching showcase and student panels, and spoke highly of the community with student involvement. In addition, the student panel was ranked first among all Learning Innovation Fellowship activities.

This year, the challenge of face-to-face instruction posed by the COVID-19 pandemic needs to be addressed wisely to maximize the student learning experience. Under great uncertainty, faculty are spontaneously partnering with students to build a resilient teaching plan together.

3.2   Student reflection

Alberto Najarro and Lingli Tang are among the first cohort of student partners and have participated in all the projects above. Alberto Najarro reflected on the pilot program:

> *It is key for students to have a more active role in paving the road towards their academic success. By creating more collaboration platforms between faculty, students, and educational professionals, higher-quality and more engaging academic experiences can be developed. When different stakeholders come together it can be undeniably challenging at first; however, in the long run, we all seek to configure a cooperation hub that makes it easier for all to achieve the goal of high-quality education.*

Lingli Tang is particularly grateful for the student panel. She shared that "Professors cherish students' feedback and voices so that I can share my perspectives and discuss with them freely. This is exactly what a traditional Chinese saying 教学相长 stands for – teaching and learning enhance each other."

4   Conclusions

We hope our experience in the pilot initiative can inspire and encourage those who want to launch or enhance student-faculty partnership in learning and teaching, as well as stimulate further discussion on building a reliable and sustainable model of engaging students.

Acknowledgements

References

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