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Power and Expertise: Student-Faculty Collaboration in Course Design and the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning

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This essay describes the process of using a team of faculty and undergraduate students to redesign a university course, and outlines the research we conducted on student and faculty learning from the redesign process. We focus particular attention on power relations and issues of expertise, raising questions with implications for faculty who wish to engage students in similar course design projects, regardless of academic discipline, and who partner with undergraduates in Scholarship of Teaching and Learning research.

Keywords

Faculty-student partnership, Course redesign, Power Expertise

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Abstract

This essay describes the process of using a team of faculty and undergraduate students to redesign a university course, and outlines the research we conducted on student and faculty learning from the redesign process. We focus particular attention on power relations and issues of expertise, raising questions with implications for faculty who wish to engage students in similar course design projects, regardless of academic discipline, and who partner with undergraduates in Scholarship of Teaching and Learning research.

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Introduction

First one student...then another...then nearly the entire class! What began early in the semester as a trickle soon turned into a flood of complaints. Students, outraged by the perceived shortcomings of a required course, Classroom Management for Elementary Teachers, stormed our offices to relay concerns to us, their major advisors. They voiced a wide range of dissatisfaction: "This course isn't meeting our needs." "We hate the textbook." "The professor is terrible."

The more we talked about what we were hearing (with distressing frequency) from our advisees, the more we realized we did not fully understand their concerns. "What *specific* needs aren't being met?" What's *really* wrong with the text?" "What do the students mean by 'terrible'?" We could not answer these questions, but we knew who could—the students. This realization led to a unique opportunity to involve students in the redesign of a university course. What began as an informal discussion with students soon evolved into both a course design project and a Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) inquiry.

This essay describes the process of using a team of faculty and undergraduate students to redesign a university course, and outlines the research we conducted on student and faculty learning from the redesign process. We focus particular attention on power relations and issues of expertise, raising questions with implications for faculty who wish to engage

students in similar course design projects, regardless of academic discipline, and who partner with undergraduates in Scholarship of Teaching and Learning research.

In Search of a Better Course

In an attempt to address student concerns, two of us (a professor in her twentieth year of teaching and a first year faculty member) considered meeting with students to discuss the course. Although neither of us had taught the course, we both felt a responsibility for improving this upper-level required class. The course needed to be relevant, thought-provoking and challenging since it is pivotal for our graduates' future success as classroom teachers. Since the current class seemed to have none of these qualities, we began to consider several options for course improvement.

First, we could simply hire someone new to teach the course. We could analyze final course evaluations and provide the new instructor with guidelines for making appropriate adjustments. This would be an efficient and typical response, but we suspected that it would not fully resolve the problems that students were expressing.

Another idea was to hold a focus group discussion with students to gather further information; however, we suspected that such a meeting would be no more fruitful than other feedback sessions that we had experienced in the past. Often the power dynamics in these meetings remain the same as they are in the classroom. The professors facilitating the discussion would have the authority to reconsider (or not) the curriculum and materials of the course. Faculty would be perceived as the experts and students might be hesitant to be *too* honest (after all, they might be in another class with this professor). Would the result of such a meeting be a truly better course or simply a course that had been tweaked to make it somewhat more palatable to students? We concluded that a focus group probably would produce little substantive change in the course goals, the assignments, or the texts.

As we considered a third alternative, involving students in the actual redesign of the course, we had reservations. We questioned whether undergraduate students had sufficient pedagogical expertise and disciplinary knowledge to fully participate in the design of a university course. We also questioned whether we were willing to relinquish control over the process of restructuring a class. We recognized that the task of redesigning a course with undergraduate students would necessitate that we become facilitators of change, creating learning situations where power was shared, not held (Smith & Waller, 1997). We knew that we had to be *truly* willing to share power with the students and not simply give lip service to collaboration. Were we really willing to defer to the students when we disagreed—and should we?

Students as Partners in Course Design and SoTL Research

With some trepidation, we decided to partner with students in a course redesign. Our goal was to honor the students' needs while maintaining the integrity of the course content.

To achieve that goal, we decided to seek help in the process of course design from the director of our university's Center for the Advancement of Teaching and Learning (CATL). He responded enthusiastically to our idea for redesigning this course, and suggested we put

together a team of both faculty and students. We invited him to join us on the project since his presence and facilitation might change the power dynamics in the collaborative venture between faculty and students in the same department.

The CATL Director also suggested that this was not *just* about redesigning a course; we should consider studying the actual process and workings of the course design team in order to explore how students *and* faculty participants might change in such a collaborative effort. This idea appealed to us because our university has both a culture that supports

student-faculty research partnerships and a history of integrating students into SoTL projects. Our work also would explore an emerging theme in the SoTL literature. Pat Hutchings, for example, had recently argued that “Having voice in matters pedagogical would make students better learners” (2005). Later that same year, Mary Huber and Pat Hutchings made the case that “students need to be part of the discussion about learning.” (2005, p. 113) Our research project seemed perfectly timed to test that assertion.

The SoTL portion of this project concentrated on three questions:

1. Are students changed as learners by participating in a course design team?
2. Are faculty changed as teachers by participating in a course design team?
3. How does such a partnership change the nature of the course being designed?

To gather evidence related to our questions, the CATL director conducted three rounds of interviews with all course design team members—before the team met for the first time, shortly after the final team meeting, and three months after the process. All participants also kept journals throughout this process in order to capture individual perspectives. Finally, we took detailed notes of the team meetings to track how participation changed and how ideas transformed over time. We also decided to partner with a few students to analyze the data we would collect in this SoTL inquiry.

With a research plan outlined and permission granted from our university’s Institutional Review Board, we were ready to begin selecting student participants for the course design team.

Student Interest in Participating

We all agreed that an application for participation in the Course Design Team (CDT) would be necessary. We needed to keep the number of participants manageable and we wanted to balance the team in several ways, including a student’s year in the Education program, experience level with the course in question (some who had taken it, some who had not), and, if possible, gender (typically, we have more females than males in our major).

When we met with all education majors to explain the project, the student response was overwhelming. Applications came pouring in. Student applications provided us with compelling reasons for moving forward with this effort. Students wrote that this experience would be “unique” and a “once in a lifetime opportunity.” Many applicants indicated that although they wanted to learn through the process, they believed that they had something positive to offer to the CDT and the reinvention of this particular course; for example, one

wrote that “My work with the university’s leadership program has provided me with many skills I could use during this project.” No less importantly, the students used words such as *fun*, *interesting*, and *exciting*. This project had sparked the students’ interest so we knew we were embarking on something meaningful and different.

Power Sharing Through Collaboration

After reviewing all applications for the CDT, we selected seven upper-level undergraduate students. Three had taken the course in question, while four had not. The Center for the Advancement of Teaching and Learning paid students \$450 stipends and, since we met over the noon hour, box lunches were provided at each meeting. Our team was formed, the meeting schedule was set (twelve meetings over three months), and our work began.

Our first order of business was to develop goals for the redesigned course. We knew that the ability to transfer the knowledge and skills acquired in this course to a variety of new situations would be critical to our students’ future success. It was crucial, therefore, that the course be organized around one or two essential understandings or “big ideas” that would lend themselves to transfer (Bruner, 1960, 1977, 1996). By beginning with goals, we followed the backward design process that Wiggins and McTighe (1998), Fink (2003), and others advocate.

This approach to course design presented us with a critical problem. Research on learning demonstrates that an expert organizes her knowledge around core concepts in her field, whereas novices “are more likely to approach problems by searching for correct formulas and pat answers that fit their everyday intuitions.” (National Research Council, 2000, p. 49) We knew we needed to design this course with the big ideas of the discipline at the forefront. However, we worried that our undergraduate partners on the team, who were closer to novices than experts in our discipline, might not be capable of identifying the *appropriate* big ideas for the course. Did they have the expertise necessary to do this work?

Despite our worries, we followed the backwards design process and brainstormed about:

- What enduring understandings (big ideas) are critical to this course?
- What is essential for students in this course to know or be able to do?

As we began prioritizing our diverse responses to those questions, we noticed disconnects between student and faculty thinking. The students focused on the concrete and practical. Students, for example, maintained that being able to effectively arrange classroom space was “essential knowledge” for our course on classroom management. The faculty, on the other hand, thought that an understanding of child psychology was at the heart of the course. This pattern itself repeated throughout our discussion of big ideas. The students’ concentrated almost exclusively on the practical considerations of new teachers, while the faculty were more concerned with the underlying principles and theories that should inform any classroom teacher’s decisions.

We quickly realized that plowing ahead with our own “expert” agenda would be ineffective and counterproductive to the process. On the other hand, simply giving students what they thought they needed would be professionally irresponsible. John Dewey (1902, 1956),

pragmatist and philosopher of education, provided us with insight into this dilemma. He wrote,

. . . We realize that the [student] and the curriculum are simply two limits which define a single process. Just as two points define a straight line, so the present standpoint of the [student] and the facts and truths of studies define instruction. It is a continuous reconstruction, moving from the [student's] present experience out into that represented by the organized bodies of truth that we call studies. . . . To see the outcome is to know in what direction the present experience is moving . . . The far away point . . . becomes of huge importance the moment we take it as defining a present direction of movement. Taken in this way it is no remote and distant result to be achieved, but a guiding method in dealing with the present. (pp. 11-13)

Although we began with the goal of co-creating a syllabus for the course, the team's initial polarization over big ideas helped us to see that our goal should be to *listen* to the students and to learn what was important to *them*. Listening served as an important first step in engaging our team more fully in the experience and in understanding the variety of perspectives (Hudd, 2003). We had to acknowledge that the students were, in fact, the experts on being college students; the CDT needed this expert understanding of the student experience just as much as the team needed our disciplinary expertise. This recognition represented an important shift in power for the entire team.

At times in our discussions, the professors became the learners and the students became the teachers—a complete flip from what was the norm. Throughout this process, students' comments and suggestions about the student experience were honored; however, the team also deferred to the professors' content expertise periodically. By working together to take full advantage of all of the team's expertise, we began to understand the true meaning and importance of shared power through collaboration. Interestingly, as we co-created the framework for the course, we found that students were simultaneously gaining expertise as learners and increasing their disciplinary knowledge and skills. For example, one student wrote, "The whole backwards design plan, I'm really now a huge advocate for that . . . At first I was skeptical, but I've definitely come around to . . . believing that this is the best way to go about [curriculum design]."

Once we had established a framework for the course and developed a new course description (which ultimately appeared in the university's course catalog), we were ready to begin dealing with the particulars of the course. We engaged students in the process of selecting and designing course materials, assignments, and tasks. Once again, our goal was to honor students' needs while, at the same time, maintaining the integrity of the course.

To select required texts that would help us reach the intended goals and objectives of the course, we asked each member of the CDT to review three to five textbooks that had been gathered by the instructors (the team reviewed a total of 25 possible textbooks). Team members were to review each textbook critically, evaluating it in terms of alignment with course goals, objectives, and big ideas. In addition they were asked to consider readability, appropriateness for the intended audience, and overall quality. Specific guidelines were established to guide the evaluation process (see appendix).

After students had rated each book, we discussed the results. Books that received low ratings from all reviewers were automatically excluded from the selection process. These

automatic exclusions delighted the student members of the team; one student commented, "Wow. We [the students] really just cut those books!" We then discussed the remaining books (those that had received ratings in the middle to high range of our scale), and clarified the reasoning behind rating decisions. After narrowing our focus to a handful of possibilities, the remaining textbooks were redistributed to all members of the team for a second review and cross-check. This process continued until the CDT students had selected the book they felt best met the agreed upon criteria.

At this point, the students and the professors came to different conclusions regarding text selection. The students wanted a text that was practical and easy to read, while the faculty preferred a text that emphasized theory. In our discussion about how to proceed, students on the team acknowledged the importance of theories, but stressed that a purely theoretical text might not seem relevant to practical-minded students who were about to begin classroom teaching for the first time. Students proposed articles and more interactive approaches (discussions, debates, etc.) to deal with theoretical aspects of the course. We, as the faculty, decided that this balance was entirely possible. We could offer supplemental readings, videos, and tasks that would deepen our students' understandings of the important theories, while simultaneously providing students in the newly designed course with the practical knowledge that we now knew they wanted and needed.

The final selection of the course's core text, the one recommended by students, was a turning point -- we had become true partners in the process. The student members of the team quickly became more independent and vocal in our team discussions, disagreeing with the professors (and each other) more frequently and even taking on the role of devil's advocate, a position that only faculty had played to this point. The increased sense of empowerment extended beyond the design team's work, and we began to see evidence that students were carrying their new found confidence into other aspects of their lives. One student, who was student-teaching in an elementary school at the time, wrote in her journal, "I didn't like what my cooperating teacher was doing [for classroom management] today. . . so I took a different approach. The students did fine. They did really fine . . . I really thought about that and decided what I wanted in my own classroom." As faculty, we changed as well. We gained confidence that together we would design something that was better than any of us could create without the input and expertise of the other. In a very short time we all began to recognize the transformative nature of our work together.

After our text was selected, the students on the CDT were asked to review supplemental course materials (DVDs, videos, and websites) that might assist in addressing course goals, objectives, and theoretical underpinnings. We used a similar process and guidelines as with the textbook review process. Once again, not all materials the students deemed appropriate coincided with our opinions for appropriate resources. For example, students favored a video interview of a young teacher whose language ("the punishment should fit the crime") conveyed a message that was counter to the goals the team had set for the course. The students on the team remained committed to the video interview despite our concerns, and we ultimately used it when we taught the class. As the student team members predicted, the video provided us with an opportunity to deconstruct the ways teachers talk about classroom discipline, leading to a powerful and thought-provoking discussion in class.

As the course design process evolved, we became more willing to trust our student partners because they possessed real expertise and insight into the expectations and needs of the students who would take our course. Ironically, the CDT taught us something we often tell

our own students as they prepare to enter the classroom - consider the developmental appropriateness of course materials when planning a lesson. Without these CDT meetings, we would not have arrived at this understanding, and we would have repeated the mistakes made by prior instructors in this course.

Our final CDT meetings focused on creating assignments and experiences that would tightly align with the goals of the new course. One such discussion centered on the use of journaling. A student on the design team had suggested assigning a journal response after each reading. The other students questioned the reasoning behind her proposal. They felt that some journaling would be appropriate, but to assign a daily journal response would quickly become tedious and nonproductive. After a short discussion, the student who had made the original suggestion said, "Why did I suggest that? I hate daily journal writing and I don't find it to be useful." At this point, we all realized that if we were going to develop an effective course, then we needed to think beyond traditional assignments. We all agreed that journaling, in moderation, was a viable option, but that we needed to be strategic in our decision about how to use (or not use) any one assignment.

As CDT students developed and recognized their own expertise, they began to openly and professionally question both ours and fellow classmates' suggestions. Their questioning showed that there was a shift in power taking place. The shift was not one-sided, but more balanced. The assignments we crafted as a team required future students of the course to critically think at various levels. It was clear that the CDT students were not using their power to make the course into an easy "A," but rather to make the course more meaningful. In the end, when we team taught the newly designed course, we found that the assignments for the course were much more effective than ones we might have chosen had we developed the new course ourselves.

Putting It All Together

With our meetings concluded, ideas for assignments and tasks discussed, and a textbook selected, the faculty completed the construction of the syllabus for the newly designed course we would teach the following semester. We were reenergized and excited about the possibilities for this course. Actually, we had never felt more connected to our students.

We now are in the process of analyzing data collected from both the students on the CDT (journal reflections of the process, video interviews and researcher observations), as well as students who recently took the newly designed course (mid and end-point external course evaluations). Doing this work with undergraduate partners presents both opportunities and challenges. The students bring fresh eyes and keen insight to the data we have collected, but they also are relative novices in qualitative research. Faculty can (and indeed must) lead the research team with their methodological expertise, but also must listen closely for

student perspectives and offer plenty of space for students to explore their evolving ideas. We will share our findings when those analyses are complete.

Our preliminary conclusions are that students on the course design team gained significant new disciplinary knowledge, developed what Hutchings (2005) calls their "pedagogical intelligence" ("an understanding about how learning happens, and a disposition and capacity to shape one's own learning"), and became more capable of and confident in expressing their own expertise in academic settings. Students enrolled in the newly redesigned course

appear to have learned at least as much as students in prior versions of the class; additionally, they reported significantly higher satisfaction with the class, in part because they appreciated that peers had helped to design the course. For instance, a student who enrolled in the redesigned course and now is a new classroom teacher recently emailed, "It has hands-down been the most challenging year of my life, but at the same time the most rewarding! . . . I can't tell you how much I have referred to our classroom management class while teaching and how beneficial it has been to me!"

We, as faculty, also have changed. We have learned the value of really listening to our students. We now teach all our courses somewhat differently because we are more attuned to student needs and expertise, and we have wholeheartedly embraced the concept of student collaboration in course design. We are witness to the assertion that "student empowerment can lead to increased motivation and participation and improved problem-solving skills" (Haynes, 2001 in Hudd, 2003). One of our design team students said it best: "Even in college, even now, I think some teachers... are so focused on getting stuff done that they don't pay attention to their students, who I think are the most valuable resources [in a classroom]."

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Appendix

Text Book Selection Criteria

- Does this text contain a foreword and/or preface to the textbook? If so, what's the message, philosophy, and/or reasoning for the textbook?
- In examining the table of contents, what are the major concepts, foci, learnings, and/or topics?
- Based on what you know, are there topics missing from the table of contents that you feel should be included? If so, what and why do you feel this way?
- Preview/skim several chapters and read at least one (1) chapter. Address the following (providing examples when appropriate):
 - How did the chapters speak to you?
 - Was the reading "user friendly" (most college students would find it easy to follow, read, and understand)?
 - Was the message of the chapter(s) clear?
 - Would teacher candidates gain knowledge, skills, and/or dispositions from using this text?
 - Were illustrations, charts, tables, etc. included to enhance the information in the chapter?
- On a scale of 1 – 5, what do you rate this text and why? Please provide an explicit rationale for your rating.

1 = not a good text to use for EDU 346

2 = not a good text for students in EDU 346 to purchase, but may be good text for instructors to use as a resource

3 = text contains topics/issues which teacher candidates should be familiar with. This text might be a good recommended class text.

4 = text contains topics/issues which teacher candidates should know and be able to do. This text would be worth the money spent.

5 = text contains topics/issues with "enduring" or vital understandings. ALL teacher candidates should/must read this text!