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Benefits of Community: Students-as-Partners Work by an Undergraduate Student, a Graduate Student, and a Faculty Member

ABSTRACT

Unfamiliarity and uncertainty can be disorienting, but when provided space to collectively navigate such challenges, opportunities arise for novel ways of engaging, collaborating, and navigating in our varied communities—including those in higher education. This article builds on previous students-as-partners (SaP) research by describing a collaborative investigation into teaching and learning and how the three authors of this article (an undergraduate student, a graduate student, and a faculty member) worked together to address challenges in their personal and professional spheres. We recount exploratory mixed-methods work that highlights the natural evolution of a unique community of practice (CoP) through a SaP partnership, and the collaborative benefits for teaching, learning, and research that developed within this “partnership learning community” over the course of a semester. Analyzing systematic discussion mappings of our meetings, transcripts from those meetings, and personal reflections, we describe our developing roles through sharing and listening to each other. Even though our CoP was set within the space of higher education and grounded by goals of SaP research, this community building partnership, in which members move beyond novice/expert relationships, has implications beyond higher education.

KEYWORDS

communities of practice, students-as-partners, partnership learning communities, role development

INTRODUCTION

I think we’re taking from [Carrie’s] store of knowledge, that has been built up over a long time. And we’re taking from Elizabeth’s store of knowledge, of someone who is living it right now... I don’t yet have an established style, so I’m willing to try anything and do anything and listen to anything. (Anna, Transcript 6)

By mid-2020, COVID-19 had spread across the globe and almost everyone’s day-to-day life had changed. Beyond this, the United States of America was beset by anger and hate, as national groups battled for rights and power. Living and working through this, our local and global spheres encountered disruptions and a myriad of unknowns. Uncertainty can be disorienting, but when forced to adjust to

challenges, opportunities may arise for novel ways of engaging and collaborating in our varied communities. The three authors of this article experienced this firsthand.

Indeed, as teachers, students, and researchers, our conventional ways of interacting in social and professional communities changed to better address the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic and the growing social unrest in the United States in 2020. For example, when it was no longer safe to be in person, our university mandated remote instruction through the video conferencing program Zoom. In this new space, teachers and learners adopted new repertoires to describe our new format, including terms like breakout-room and asynchronous-task. We also altered the way we communicated and completed activities in our digital classrooms. Finding new ways to speak, listen, and question resulted in learning, and over time, our learning resulted in shared practices within new communities (Wenger 1999, 45).

This article describes how the three of us—Anna, Elizabeth, and Carrie—also engaged, explored, and adapted this new context to our students-as-partners (SaP) work (see Healey, Flint, and Harrington 2014, 2016). From September to December 2020, we met weekly via Zoom. In this space, we voiced our concerns, exchanged ideas, and developed shared repertoires. Over time, we witnessed professional and personal growth in this new community. This article reports on our experience, highlighting the natural evolution of a community of practice (CoP [see Wenger 1999]) through a SaP partnership, and the collaborative benefits for teaching, learning, and research that developed within this partnership learning community (see Healey, Flint, and Harrington 2014, 2016) over the course of a semester.

BACKGROUND

It was September 2020 and the three of us belonged to the Second Language Acquisition (SLA) lab at our R1 (research-oriented) university, which is in the northeast USA. Our University Park campus of the Pennsylvania State University is in a small city in rural Pennsylvania and boasts 40,000 undergraduate and 6,000 graduate students.

Carrie

I am a professor of German and linguistics with 16 years' experience, and I run our SLA lab, which consists of undergraduate, graduate, and postdoctoral students sharing an interest in advancing SLA knowledge and collaborating on various research projects. In my teaching and research, I strive to identify ways to facilitate second language learning. Recently, I have expanded my research program by applying experimental research findings to the development of more effective materials for language instruction.

In April 2020, I began working with colleagues to increase student-faculty collaboration in humanities-based research. As part of this endeavor, I read several SaP articles (e.g., Bovill, Cook-Sather, and Felten 2011; Cook-Sather 2014). I was to teach an intermediate German speaking and listening course starting September 2020 and foresaw value in nurturing strategy-based learning, encouraging students to take ownership of the learning process. With the switch to remote or hybrid learning, many of the usual means for helping keep students on track were simply less available. I wondered whether developing a SaP collaboration with an undergraduate student consultant could provide valuable insight into my German course (while simultaneously providing an opportunity to put SaP ideas into practice) and whether such a partnership might also benefit graduate instructors. I reached out to Anna.

Anna

I am a PhD student, pursuing a dual title degree in German linguistics and language science, and I was in my fifth semester of a ten-semester program when approached about this project. As part of my training, I teach university students German. As the primary instructor, I am given substantial leeway in my teaching. I readily create my own curricular materials and implement innovative teaching paradigms based on discussions with my students. I have always been fascinated by foreign language pedagogy, having taught multiple languages in the United States and abroad. It felt natural to join the SLA lab and research classroom-based foreign language learning through developing original pedagogy.

In light of surging public movements, particularly social justice efforts (e.g., Black Lives Matter, pride parades, and climate activism), I have striven to implement curricular materials that support diverse and student-centered pedagogy in my own German language courses. Additionally, in response to the pandemic, my own teaching had been moved to remote instruction and I stretched to cater to the new environment and its demands. When Carrie reached out to me with an invitation to join her in discussing and implementing SaP work in our courses, I jumped at the opportunity.

Elizabeth

I was in my seventh semester of an eight-semester BA program in German and world language education when approached about the research project.¹ I had spent September–December of 2019 as a research assistant in the SLA lab, but then took a semester off to study abroad in Germany. Unfortunately, my semester abroad was interrupted due to the pandemic, and thus I rejoined the lab to fulfill remaining major requirements.

When the opportunity arose to investigate more student-centered teaching methods, I saw how this chance to learn from other German educators might inform my own language teaching. Furthermore, I was interested in better understanding what a group of individuals could accomplish in an ever-changing environment.

With our overlapping interests concerning teaching and learning and our collective experience navigating new spheres in uncertain worlds, we joined forces to form a SaP partnership of an undergraduate student, a graduate student, and a faculty member. New to partnership work, we anticipated change within our professional spheres—in line with SaP literature we had read. Through supportive interaction, establishment of shared repertoires and values, and productive collaboration, we experienced flexibility in novice/expert roles within our partnership learning community. Yet we also came to conceptualize our work within a CoP framework, recognizing that professional development would not have been possible without personal, relational growth. We see the concept of partnership learning communities addressing this overlap.

THEORETICAL FRAMING

Our partnership work was informed by research in the SaP space, which aims to transform the traditional relationship of student and staff by viewing teaching and learning from more diverse perspectives. SaP is the idea of creating “respectful, mutually beneficial learning partnerships” (Matthews 2017, 1) through “a collaborative, reciprocal process through which all participants have the opportunity to contribute equally, although not necessarily in the same ways to curricular or pedagogical conceptualization, decision making, implementation, investigation, or analysis” (Cook-Sather, Bovill,

and Felten 2014, 6–7). SaP partnerships vary in size, constitution, and purpose, though common to all is their experiential and relational process, a “reflection and transformation in relation to oneself and with others” (Healey, Flint, and Harrington 2014, 55).

Mercer-Mapstone et al. (2017) found partnerships most commonly included teaching staff and one to five students. Of all student-partners in the study, 74% were undergraduates and 20% were graduate students. Most partnerships were categorized as a student consultant initiative, whereby students worked with instructors to improve course instruction (Healey, Flint, and Harrington 2014). Our own partnership drew insight from prior partnership work of undergraduate student, graduate student, and faculty triads (e.g., Kehler, Verwood, and Smith 2017) and virtual partnerships (e.g., Ntem et al. 2020), especially those that forged student consultancies during the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., Riddell, Gadoury-Sansfaçon, and Stoddard 2021). The pandemic motivated Riddle and colleagues to “re-think traditional modes of design and delivery” (112). They trained a cohort of student consultants to guide instructors in navigating this new teaching space. This relational, pedagogic space of partnership is not a practice, so much as an “emergent property of an ongoing process of communication and cooperation between individuals” (Dwyer 2018, 11). Within this liminal space, partners act outside typically defined boundaries, allowing these boundaries to become less salient.

This spatial, relational conceptualization of SaP parallels our understanding of CoP. The term communities of practice emerged from the collaborative work of Lave and Wenger (Wenger 1999). Discussing this literature, the three of us co-constructed the concept as: a group of people sharing the same practice, whereby everyone has some degree of mastery. We coalesced around the idea that CoPs necessitate a feeling of commonality, where participants learn together, teach one another, and endeavor toward shared goals. According to Wenger (1999), each member possesses a set of specialized sensitivities and individualized judgements that make them an expert in those areas. In this way, CoPs are collections of competencies, i.e., diverse roles and stances that may afford a level of constructive conflict and creativity that are often crucial for success.

Wenger (1999) described multiple ways to participate within communities: engaging, imagining, and aligning. Engagement involves active involvement and the ongoing formation and negotiation of meaning within CoPs. Imagination is the extrapolation of one’s experience: the constitutive “creative process of producing ‘new’ images and of generating new relations” (Wenger 1999, 177). Finally, as participants discover how their participation, identities, and communities are connected, their actions become more complex as they coordinate their energy to fit into broader systems. This is alignment. These modes of belonging are neither static nor solitary. Participants can shift between engaging, imagining, and aligning—they can even be combined: reflection (engagement and imagination), adaptation (imagination and alignment), and generalization (engagement and alignment [Wenger 1999]). In educational settings, fostering CoPs of students and academic staff offer students a role as creator, rather than consumer or co-producer, of teaching and learning. Emphasizing their participation within discourses improves the quality of education for all (Streeter and Wise 2009).

Within CoPs, knowledge acquisition is a temporal, constructive process that develops through this combination of engaging over individual experiences to negotiate meaning (comparable to the SaP understanding of joining distinct but complementary perspectives), imagining new ideas through participation (comparable to challenging norms through inclusionary engagement), and reflecting and aligning as a process of connecting and acting (comparable to responding and adapting [Slates and Cook-Sather 2021; Wenger 1999]).

We are not the first to link SaP and CoP frameworks. The concept of partnership learning communities, which draws from the CoP framework (Healey, Flint, and Harrington 2016, 13), is at the center of the SaP model (Healey, Flint, and Harrington 2014). The model is underpinned by CoP values such as trust and inclusivity. Despite kinship between the two frameworks, SaP research often omits reference to CoP (exceptions: Ahmad et al. 2017; Hunt and Hunt 2017). Yet, as argued by Healey, Flint, and Harrington (2016), addressing and understanding community and belonging in SaP research—approaching partnerships holistically—can strengthen engagement (13). Through working under both frameworks, we describe the professional and personal growth within our partnership.

CONTEXT OF PARTNERSHIP

After engaging with SaP student consultancy literature, Carrie and Anna foresaw potential in (co)creating a pedagogic consultancy during their transition to hybrid and remote instruction in German language courses, whereby Elizabeth might observe their instruction and meet with both instructors to share her perspective—all via Zoom. As Carrie and Anna went through the Institutional Review Board (IRB²) process to obtain consent from students to be observed remotely by a student consultant, Elizabeth enrolled in a consultancy training program offered through our university's teaching institute.

While waiting for signed consents and Elizabeth's training, we continued to connect via Zoom and chat informally about articles on teaching and learning scholarship and our own experiences as students and instructors. We discussed relevant topics in language education research, like foreign language anxiety, and matters unique to the context of pandemic teaching, like asynchronous-tasks. We often returned to the SaP literature, such as student-instructor hierarchies and power dynamics (Mercer-Mapstone et al. 2017). Anna even mentioned our meta-awareness of these concepts in the first meeting: "Understanding [SaP] and talking about it beforehand?... How much is that really going to inform us throughout the semester?..." (Transcript 1).

As the semester progressed, our student consultancy never panned out. However, we continued to meet, checking in with one another regarding professional and personal matters, including issues stemming from student inattention and our own Zoom fatigue. We also started bringing in curricular material to workshop. Early in the semester, noting how much information we were sharing, we decided to keep notes and record meetings, affording us the opportunity to later return to these discussions for content and clarity.

Although we were neither the first undergraduate/graduate student/faculty triad nor the first virtual partnership attempting student consultancy, this SaP partnership was a first for us. Somewhat naïve to the type and scope of relationships that might develop, we initially foresaw partnership work as dismantling faculty/student hierarchies and nurturing student voices. Yet through discussing these topics (and others) and through analyzing our discussions, we came to understand how opportunities arise when we are forced to adjust to new contexts. Although we grounded our work within a SaP framework, we now recognize how CoP aspects evolved during our semester-long partnership. We discuss how these two frameworks can complement each other—presenting a spatial, relational take on SaP. The following sections illustrate our professional and personal development through discussion-mapping, transcription, and reflection data that emerged from our weekly meetings.

ANALYSIS

We knew our partnership consisted of an experienced researcher and professor, who might offer wisdom and guidance; an undergraduate student, who might benefit from that offering; and a graduate student, positioned somewhere in between. However, as we discussed SaP literature and workshopped pedagogical materials, we felt that an outsider would have witnessed us move through more fluid stances, each of us taking on both expert and novice roles as knowledge providers and knowledge receivers—our positions as student and/or faculty were not analogous to learner and/or teacher. We even discussed this, demonstrating meta-awareness. We came to embody these notions through adapting to our evolving community and requesting/offering support while experiencing uncertainty.

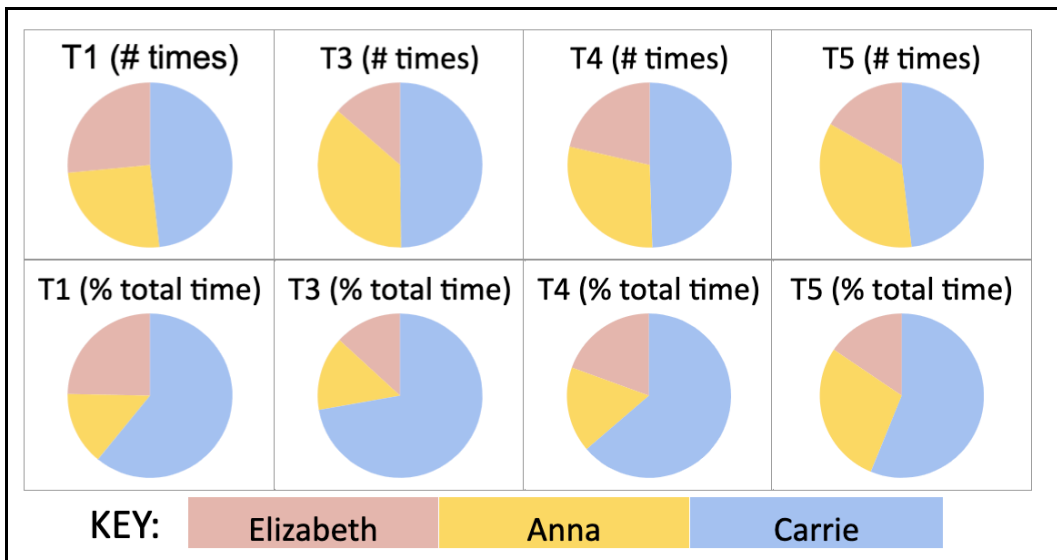
To better understand our development, we used quantitative and qualitative data from a representative sampling of our meetings, which we recorded, mapped, and transcribed. Between September and December 2020, we recorded nine meetings. Of these meetings, the first two, the middle three, and last two were transcribed (these will be referred to as T1 through T7) and T1, T3, T4, and T5 were mapped. We also analyzed reflections we wrote.

Mapping data

As an initial analysis, we made systematic mappings of our meetings to understand how we each contributed to our collaboration (Zola 2018). Elizabeth listened to each recording and tracked who talked using the application Equity Maps (<https://equitymaps.com>). Such mapping data are often described via discussion maps, the weblike process that connects individuals as they speak to group members (e.g., Abbot, Cook-Sather, and Hein 2014). However, with just three people, the conversation flow is always a triangle and not reflective of communication patterns developing over time. Thus, we turned to other data from Equity Maps, namely the number of times and the total time (in minutes) that each person spoke during these meetings, hoping this would provide initial insight into the development of participation over time—a potential proxy of partnership. Nonverbal utterances (e.g., “mhm” and “huh”) were excluded and durations of silence—times when no one was speaking—were subtracted from meetings’ durations.

Mapping data (see Figure 1) demonstrate that Carrie spoke more often and for longer than Anna and Elizabeth in every meeting. Carrie’s remarks during meetings made up roughly half of all remarks for all four meetings, and these remarks encompassed between 60% and 75% of the meetings’ spoken interaction time. Meanwhile, Anna and Elizabeth spoke less overall and exhibited greater variety across meetings, as measured by both the number of turns and the total time spoken.

Carrie had brought us together, thus it seemed logical for her to guide those first meetings in leading discussions and vocalizing initial directions. Yet mapping data seem to support that Carrie dominated the conversations throughout the term and Anna and Elizabeth did not grow to contribute more as the semester progressed. These data surprised us. We felt a more balanced collaboration space developed over the semester, but mapping data did not illustrate this. We became hesitant to use these data to indicate whether we truly nurtured a SaP partnership. To better understand our evolving relational space, we turned to meeting transcriptions and reflection data to construct a more informed understanding of professional and personal growth.

Figure 1: Number of times and % of total time that each member spoke**Transcription data**

After Zoom software automatically generated transcriptions from meeting recordings, we proofread them. Meetings were 45–70 minutes in length and, in total, over 55,000 words were transcribed. We approached these transcripts deductively by identifying quotations concerning the following concepts: supportive interaction, shared repertoires and values, productive collaboration, and flexibility in expert/novice roles. In this way, thematic development was directed by existing concepts present in both SaP and CoP frameworks. Quotations were pulled through reflective engagement with the transcripts and analytic process. We, the speakers, transcribers, and coders, also approached these transcripts latently. We were necessarily subjective, locating more underlying meanings in the quotations.

Transcription data demonstrate that we came into our partnership with certain beliefs. For instance, Elizabeth commented that she was not “very well versed” (T1) in higher education because she worked with primary and secondary education and Anna stated that a student/instructor hierarchy was “definitely prevalent” (T1) in higher education. Carrie laughed and joked it was “back in the dinosaur age” (T1) when she was last a student. Like the SaP partnerships we had read about, we were prepared to work through these professional preconceptions concerning novices/experts and students/instructors. For instance, Carrie noted the discrepancy between what instructors think they do versus what they actually do and admitted she “might well fall into that too” (T1) and Elizabeth shared that focusing on breaking down hierarchical structures and diversifying voices of authority in higher education was important to her.

We were surprised, however, that actually enacting and embodying these notions necessitated a process of establishing trust and respect. Through supportive interaction, establishing shared repertoires and values, and productive collaboration, we slowly became a community—a shared social sphere with new social roles. Although we went in with a SaP ethos, ready to discuss our professional spheres, through sharing and listening, a partnership learning community evolved, undergirded by CoP tenets. It became our space, emerging through our interactions (Dwyer 2018). We can trace this evolution in transcripts, unlike with mapping data.

Supportive interaction

From the outset, we adopted supportive ways of encouraging one another to share, offer opinions, and comment on others' contributions. Such support is evidenced by the following representative comments. In discussion of SaP literature, Carrie asked, "And Anna, what's your take?" (T1). In project development for Anna's German course, Anna asked, "Do you have anything else to add, Elizabeth?" (T5). When we offered our thoughts, we couched them in phrases like: "at least from what I've figured out" (Anna, T2); "I also feel like, in general" (Carrie, T3); and "I know that, like me personally" (Elizabeth, T7). The hedges I think, I feel (like), and I mean appeared over 300 times across the seven transcripts. These hedges qualified our opinions, demonstrating an understanding of the difference between how words are heard and what a speaker wants to assert—a tactical choice of subjectivity to foster open discussion.

Finally, we often provided affirmation for others' contributions. For example, Anna noted that she "really liked" how Carrie had thought through a grading rubric (T3) and during a discussion on a classroom project that Anna was designing, Carrie thought it "awesome" and Elizabeth said it "looks good" (T5). Such remarks highlight a commitment to listen to and acknowledge the value of others' ideas.

Establishing shared repertoires and values

This pattern of supportive discussion is found across all transcripts, aided through identification and development of shared repertoires and values. These facilitated further engagement (Wegner 1999) because they provided shortcuts to ideas. Terms need not be defined at each mention. Entering our partnership, we already possessed certain shared repertoires, including a knowledge of German as a foreign language and a knowledge of Zoom terminology. We also discovered that we shared certain experiences as learners and student-teachers of German. Working from these shared understandings, we discussed facets of remote instruction, like software programs to use in class (e.g., Google Docs), and found a balance between overwhelming students and providing them the work and the interaction they needed to succeed.

While collaborating and coalescing on certain understandings, we began to develop new repertoires. A common topic was the difference between Zoom and in-person classrooms. Anna shared early on (T2):

The three of us were saying, how our students, when they can't see other students, [...] they feel this feeling of, "I know nothing in this class, my teacher knows everything, I'm floundering." And [they] can't. If you walked into a real classroom and saw your real classmates, you're like, "okay, we're all in this boat together." [...] Our students are missing that.

A week later, we discussed this distinction in terms of the lack of a community in (some) remote learning environments. Anna and Elizabeth described how "black boxes"—Zoom participants' dark screens when their cameras are off—made it hard to put a face to classmates. Anna admitted that she didn't like participating in her graduate classes anymore, because she was uncertain how her words might be received. She expressed that she hated "being paired with black boxes" because she had "no

idea” (T3) to whom she was talking. Elizabeth agreed that it was hard to form bonds in this remote world. Later in the semester, Anna believed her own students were not participating because “in this Zoom environment, there’s so many things they could be doing” (T6).

We also discussed the relative (dis)advantages of Zoom regarding our students’ foreign language anxiety, i.e., “the worry and negative emotional reaction aroused when learning or using a second language” (MacIntyre 1999, 27). Carrie noted, “when you map that into Zoom, it’s... your classic, new and improved, or unimproved, version of foreign language anxiety” (T2). Later, however, Carrie added that she did not think the teaching, learning, and community within Zoom were better or worse, “just different” (T6).

We embodied Carrie’s belief through our own cognitive and emotional development during our virtual partnership. Anna even mentioned how excited she was for our meetings, describing the partnership as “more than just a sounding board [for ideas], it’s also a support system” (T6)—suggesting that our virtual partnership might be providing the community we craved. Our partnership was developing a shared understanding that certain environments lead individuals to learn and interact differently, guiding us (as instructors) in recognizing the role of context when designing pedagogical materials.

Productive collaboration

When provided space to discuss teaching and learning with diverse, like-minded individuals, we enjoyed productive collaboration. Initially we discussed SaP literature, the proposed student consultancy, and research avenues. For example, Elizabeth suggested that comparing relative foreign language anxiety with semester-standing would be interesting. Then Carrie, informed by her community of academic advisors, commented on the differences between first-year undergraduate students and undergraduate students with at least one year of university: “the switch to all remote and/or primarily remote, is a much bigger switch for [the former] than it is for [the latter]” (T2). Anna contributed too. She had asked her first-year undergraduate students about the differences between university and high school (i.e., the four-years secondary schooling for students usually aged 14–18 years) learning environments. In short, in-person high school was “very different” (T2) than Zoom university. Here we used our diverse perspectives to coalesce on a prospective research direction.

Later in the semester, our work together took on a higher-level function, when we began to collaborate and receive feedback on more day-to-day projects. We helped Carrie with a participation rubric inspired by contract-grading frameworks (e.g., Hiller and Hietapelto 2001) and several vocabulary activities for her intermediate German course. We were also a sounding board for Anna as she designed an end-of-semester project for her beginner learners of German. During the semester, Anna’s students had completed a weekly assignment, and this was the final installment that built upon predecessors. The following passage occurred while Anna screen-shared the handout for this assignment (T5) and is characteristic of our joint collaboration:

Carrie: Elizabeth, what are your thoughts with this?

Elizabeth [to Anna]: I really like how you’ve color-coded. I think that for me, but I’m also pretty type-A... I think it’s really helpful to have it all color-coded. And then at the bottom you bring back the colors and you say: Oh, Teil [translation: section] 1 here, Teil 2 here.

...

Carrie: Color coding's good. I'm getting lost in the noise.

Anna: Mm. There's a lot there.

Elizabeth: Honestly, an easy fix might just be, to put a couple of spaces between each Teil.

Carrie: That's certainly one thing to do. But it's also. Okay.

Carrie and Anna: [reading off German out loud]

Carrie: So, are they then supposed to do the [assignment-name] with one of the same things you've done a [previous assignment-name] with?

Anna: Yes.

Carrie: Okay. Then one thing I will do is... scroll down to your table.

Anna: [scrolling in the screen-shared document to a table]. This table?

Carrie: Yeah. I would probably only give them what the [previous assignment-name] actually was, as opposed to the other things you were learning at the time.

Anna: Oh. So, do not give them these things? [highlighting certain sections of the screen-shared document]

Carrie: Yeah. Okay. Again, I'm just trying to figure out ways to simplify.

Anna: Mhm.

Carrie began by respectfully asking for Elizabeth's opinion—which Elizabeth voiced with the hedge “I think that for me, but I'm also pretty type A.” Endeavoring to support Elizabeth's opinion, Carrie agreed with Elizabeth before adding in her own judgment of “I'm getting lost in the noise.” Anna took this into account but waited for more. Elizabeth then offered that an “easy fix might be...” — hedging with might. Carrie once more affirmed Elizabeth's suggestion but followed this with her own. Then, while discussing both the screen-shared document and previous assignments, Carrie and Anna fluidly moved between reviewing and questioning in both English and German. In this way, how we communicated and what we shared became a productive foundation for collaboration.

Flexibility of roles

Over the past few years, Anna and Elizabeth had attended classes and viewed themselves primarily as students, learning from their instructors. In our initial meeting, Anna shared that she “definitely respected” her instructors, because they had “expertise” that she did not (T1). Elizabeth even remembered fearing her German teachers (T1). When Elizabeth thought of herself as a future instructor, she mentioned: “I don't want them to be scared of me” (T1). Carrie laughed and responded: “I'd prefer they not be scared of me too” (T1). These data underscore our own perception of a division between those who learn and those who teach, perhaps something ingrained in us through titles like student and professor and neoliberal structures that identify the former as consumers and the latter as producers (see Molesworth, Scullion, and Nixon 2011).

However, through developing supportive interaction, shared repertoires, and productive collaboration, which contributed to a sense of community within our partnership, we witnessed greater flexibility in terms of who was viewed as a novice (someone there to learn) and who was viewed as an expert (someone there to teach). As we each shared and listened, we learned from one another (Cook-Sather, Bovill, and Felten 2014, 9), which exemplifies CoP notions of personal development and fluid

modes of belonging and aligns with SaP goals of positioning “both students and faculty as learners as well as teachers” (Cook-Sather, Bovill, and Felten 2014, 7). Both Elizabeth and Anna increasingly recognized that their roles as students could offer Carrie a unique and valuable perspective, derived from their first-hand experience as learners in remote classrooms. This expertise benefited our collaboration on peer review assignments (T4) or the navigability of Canvas, our university’s web-based learning management system (T7).

Carrie also used conversations with Anna and Elizabeth to help understand her own students’ behavior. For example, Carrie described how a student confided that they were more comfortable speaking to instructors in front of the entire class than to peers in a breakout room. Carrie reported her immediate reaction: “I thought that was really interesting” (T3) and then walked through this student’s thought process with Anna and Elizabeth. This student saw Carrie as a supportive professor able to help students. Meanwhile, there was uncertainty with a peer. As Carrie summarized, a student doesn’t know “how it’s going to go” (T3) in a breakout room. Anna and Elizabeth agreed, whereby Anna noted how classmates were often unreadable black boxes (but instructors had cameras on) and Elizabeth added that peers paid more attention to you in a breakout room, and this was intimidating. A few weeks later, Carrie reported that discovering her students were more anxious in group work “was not something I expected, but now it makes sense, once I talk with [my students] and once I talk to Elizabeth and Anna” (T5). Although Carrie noted that this was the “exact opposite of what it would be in a regular classroom setting” (T5), she could take this revelation and adapt her own remote teaching. These dialogues demonstrate how, at least within our partnership, the traditional role for students as learners was flipped. Elizabeth and Anna operationalized their student status and became knowledge providers—an effort supported by Carrie and representative of the reciprocity of SaP partnerships (Cook-Sather, Bovill, and Felten 2014) and the power-sharing of teaching and learning CoPs (Streeting and Wise 2009).

Within our partnership, the role of faculty was also in flux. Carrie wanted to know what Anna and Elizabeth thought, with questions like: “Can you think of things? From the student perspective? Because I don’t see it?” (T3). Especially initially, Carrie valued Elizabeth’s role as providing a perspective that would parallel that of her undergraduate students, framing questions with phrases like, “Elizabeth, if you were a student in this class...” (T4). In contrast, Carrie valued Anna’s perspective as someone deeply involved in language teaching through her instruction in the department’s basic language program. While discussing the success of different classroom vocabulary activities, Carrie commented on the heightened importance of such activities in Anna’s beginner classes, as they were “building up the basic vocab,” (T7) and acknowledged how Anna’s understandings of vocabulary activities were valuable to Carrie’s teaching of more advanced German classes. Towards the end of the semester, Carrie commented that there were times when she needed to hear from Anna and Elizabeth, when she couldn’t “figure [something] out” (T5) or to see if what she was doing was “okay” (T6). When Anna and Elizabeth began to trust that their own knowledge and experience were valued, collaborations became more productive. In turn, Carrie, the tenured faculty member, came to trust two student-teacher-researchers to help her teach. Such communication, which Matthews (2017) terms “power-sharing learning,” helped dismantle ingrained hierarchies within our partnership—in line with previous SaP research outcomes (e.g., Curran 2017, Lubicz-Nawrocka 2018).

Transcription data also suggest personal growth. In our first meeting, Elizabeth noted that she was a learner and that teachers were learners too—in essence, espousing an understanding that everyone is a learner. Throughout the semester, however, supported by Anna and Carrie with comments like “Do

you have any ideas, Elizabeth?” (Carrie, T4), Elizabeth began to feel “particularly included” (T6) and to contribute more often and more substantially. For example, while discussing the mapping of Zoom classes (T6), Carrie said, “Elizabeth, since you know more about it... what kinds of things do you think might be useful to look at?” Elizabeth replied, “the chat box” and how typed contributions might “work in a classroom mapping situation”—Anna added her perspective and Carrie thought this idea “cool.” In developing confidence to share her expertise, not only as an undergraduate student but also as a researcher making significant contributions to the research endeavor, Elizabeth adopted a parallel understanding: everyone can be an expert.

Anna also expanded her understanding of the balance of learning and teaching. Initially, she felt that graduate students were in a “weird liminal middle position” (T5), which had recently been further complicated when her own instructors never adapted their pedagogy for the Zoom format (unlike what was happening in undergraduate courses, T3) and when Carrie commented how unfair it was to have a graduate student instructing Elizabeth’s Student Teaching course (T3). Anna might be a learner, but she was different from undergraduates; she might be a teacher, but she was not traditional faculty.

As if embodying the uncertainty she felt, Anna was hesitant in those initial meetings, often just agreeing with what had already been discussed and reluctant to ask for guidance. Yet Anna progressively recognized and practiced this duality of learner and teacher, i.e., her “rich layers of diversity” (T6), offering recommendations and bringing her own work to the partnership for feedback. She came to see benefits of this duality in her graduate classes, where she could teach and learn from classmates, and in her graduate teaching, where she could teach and learn from students. She also came to understand this duality within our partnership, as demonstrated by the following quote from T6:

If I was to write a [n] [article] right now, what I would focus on is... it’s like two extra parts of my brain are Carrie and Elizabeth. And so, when I think about preparing my lessons or how I’m going about being a student in my own lessons, I’m reflecting on these conversations.

This quotation also highlights Anna’s growing understanding of another role for herself—one as researcher, a role that further matured during her work on this article.

Finally, Carrie has long aspired to be a faculty mentor who sees her graduate students, and to varying degrees her undergraduate students, as equal collaborators in research. Yet as our partnership learning community developed, she came to see how sharing and connecting—including over personal matters—can facilitate more collaborative research. Through acknowledging holes in her own knowledge, like stating Anna might “give us insights, because... this is outside my wheelhouse” (T5), or through offering personal anecdotes, like fighting off urges to constantly wear comfortable leggings when teaching in-person (T7), Carrie came to embody multiple roles in our community. She was a storyteller and confidant, mentor and mentee, researcher and research participant.

Reflection data

Although mapping and transcription data provide a snapshot of real-time behavior, our written reflections from the end of the semester describe personal takeaways from the partnership. In addition to this, Anna had kept an informal journal during the semester, jotting day-to-day thoughts about our partnership. Like the transcription data, we approached these texts deductively. We looked at each for

individual takeaways. Since these documents were our own writings, containing our affective reactions and opinions, we again approached these data latently.

Carrie

In my reflection, I described what we shared, including an “interest in incorporating best pedagogical practices” and how we complemented each other as a faculty member, graduate student, and undergraduate student—facets that were “critical to the success of our weekly zoom sessions.” Backing up transcription data, I noted how Elizabeth provided a “checks and balances” system, helping me understand whether my assignments and activities fit into the student-centered course model I hoped to build. I wrote: “I could not have arrived at such insights on my own as the senior professor whose last classroom experience as a language learner was over 20 years ago.” I also saw Anna’s status as a graduate student, who taught in my department’s basic German language program, as valuable. I described Anna as “constantly coming up with creative teaching ideas to keep even less-motivated students engaged with the German language.” In this way, through listening to and recognizing the strengths of new perspectives, I learned about my students, my partners, and myself.

Elizabeth

Looking back at my reflection, I noted a turning point in my participation during T3. We had been discussing how to design an assignment of Carrie’s to be more student-centered, and during this conversation I noticed that “Carrie and Anna asked me for my opinion.” I then reasoned that they wanted my input because I “knew something they didn’t.” In short: “I was a student and could better explain” peers’ needs and wants. I felt as if my participation increased, as compared to previous meetings, because I had “more room to speak.” I recognized how my opinions “mattered” and were “valuable” to the discussion. I described our partnership as “a community”—a “helpful” space to share and suggest.

Beyond this affective development, I also reflected on how I benefited professionally. Having Anna and Carrie as “peers who are much more experienced in my future line of work,” allowed me the “flexibility” to be creative in my contributions to our partnership. I noticed how I came to use Anna and Carrie “as a resource.” For example, I later incorporated several of the student-centered practices and activities that we had discussed into my own teaching. After experiencing “the art of teaching as research” firsthand, I now desire to explore how teachers might use community building practices in their own classrooms.

Anna

I was initially enthusiastic about our partnership, though I also saw a perceived hierarchy of three levels. Carrie was at the top, but the proposed student consultancy project “beg[an] with Elizabeth.” Meanwhile, I felt “passive” and inadequate during those first meetings. When only a few of my students consented to take part in our consultancy research, I felt like I had “already let down this project.” Such undervaluing translated into “feelings of inferiority.” It took over a month to trust myself to “contribute with confidence” and believe that what I said was “worth hearing.” Becoming aware of my participation as a knowledge receiver, I began to “enjoy” and “learn,” and as a knowledge provider, I recognized how I contributed and gained self-confidence. I noted a “meta moment” when I consciously asked Elizabeth for her thoughts on an assignment in my course—at this juncture, I was both someone who instructed a course and one looking to learn from another’s insights.

At the end of the semester, we were still an undergraduate, a graduate student, and a faculty member. Yet the roles associated with those titles could be more flexible than I had originally perceived. They seemed to depend on the learning community, and in ours, teaching and learning became a “community property” (Shulman, 2004) and I was part of this. Furthermore, I became aware that I was “not the only one feeling isolated, overwhelmed, and challenged by daily life, both academically and personally” and my writing moved away from the singular (e.g., “I am a little flustered”) to the collective (e.g., “we worry about our students, we all care so much”). Like Elizabeth, I became aware of my growth and was emboldened by it.

DISCUSSION

From September to December 2020, a partnership learning community developed via Zoom. Although originally conceived as a SaP consultancy, through connecting and reflecting on the craziness of our worlds during that semester, we all experienced professional and personal gains. Professionally, we moved beyond conceptions of instructor/knowledge provider and student/knowledge consumer through witnessing how diverse perspectives and (co)constructing understandings and materials through inclusionary mutual engagement (Wenger 1999) resulted in more informed understandings. Personally, Elizabeth and Anna gained confidence in sharing their knowledge and Carrie developed effective ways to support that sharing. Despite these advantageous outcomes, our partnership was a way of “doing things, rather than an outcome in itself” (Healey, Flint, and Harrington 2016, 2). Our environments, lifestyles, and even plans, like establishing a student consultancy, changed, and this uncertainty caused “bad days” (Carrie, T2). Yet through developing supportive interaction, shared repertoires, and productive collaboration, we navigated these bad days. Our partnership learning community became “a useful lens” (Healey, Flint, and Harrington 2016, 13) to reconsider and explore our own teaching and learning.

Even as the semester ended, our partnership continued. We wrote this article—engaging over understandings of SaP, CoP, and partnership learning communities; imagining how best to illustrate our development through data; and aligning this higher education experience with other communities.

Beyond mapping data

More than halfway through the semester, Anna asked: “What would it be like to map the conversations that we’re having right now?” (T6). Yet when we mapped them, the results surprised us. We rephrased the question: What would happen if we viewed our meetings as worthy of analysis? Through this lens, we reviewed transcripts, revisited reflections, and (re)interpreted discussion mapping data, finding that through supportive interaction, we developed a shared repertoire and value system to collaborate productively. Our attempt at a SaP consultancy has been reimaged as a rewarding partnership learning community.

After reinterpreting mapping data, we postulate two explanations for the surprising results. First, the topics in each meeting likely impacted who led the discussion. In T3 and T4 Carrie brought pedagogical material to workshop. Anna did so in T5. These meeting details are important, as they can help explain why Carrie dominates conversation in T3 and T4, while Anna’s contributions increase in T5. The second concerns different forms of participation. There are ways to actively participate, e.g., through non-verbal behavior and attentiveness, that were not captured within mapping data. Even though Anna and Elizabeth did not speak as often, this does not indicate lower levels of participation.

We argue that equality of conversation space is not the only way to measure contribution. To feel that one's voice is heard and that one makes valuable contributions may not always correspond with an increase in speaking time. To illustrate, Elizabeth notes a turning point in T3, whereby she felt her participation increased (as compared to previous meetings). In her reflection, Elizabeth then described how this "room to speak" continued in subsequent meetings. Yet, this turning point is not reflected in the mapping data. On the contrary, Elizabeth speaks less often and for less time (as a percentage) in T3, compared to earlier on in T1 or towards the end of the semester in T5. Yet, as indicated by her reflection data and the content analysis of the transcripts, even Elizabeth's brief and infrequent remarks were meaningful to her and helpful to Anna and Carrie. If quantitative mapping data were the only description of our meetings, such nuances might have gone unnoticed. This highlights the need to contextually ground quantitative data and to take different modes of participation into account.

This is not to say that the mapping data are not valuable. When viewed in conjunction with transcripts and reflections, these data demonstrate that alternative modes of participation exist. The discrepancy between these two measures might encourage partners to recognize a distinction between quantity and quality of verbal participation. Mapping data also help us understand that inequities (may) still exist—something of which we would be unaware in analyzing only qualitative data.

Beyond core and peripheral members

CoP terminology includes "core" and "peripheral" members, whereby the former shares their know-how with the latter, who focuses on superficial tasks under their guidance (Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder 2002). Rather than employ these terms, we have chosen to understand our partnership through acts of engagement, imagination, and alignment (which all members may enact). Within our partnership, we all shared and guided because all of us had something unique to contribute. While one of us was "teaching," two were listening and learning. In this way, learners were never alone in their inexperience, counteracting feelings of inferiority.

We were an undergraduate, a graduate student-teacher, and a professor—three distinct voices of diverse experiences, expertise, and ideas—meeting in a shared space of teaching and learning. It was this balance of different and shared perspectives that made our partnership so valuable, highlighting how diverse perspectives can create social systems that are more than the sum of their parts (Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder 2002, 34).

Beyond higher education

Even though our CoP was set within the university and grounded by the goals of SaP, the community building partnership that we have described has implications beyond higher education. There is value in creating such a collaborative community, in which members move beyond a novice and expert relationship, in a wide variety of workplace or extracurricular settings. While teaching, learning, and exploring within this community, those typically described as novices (e.g., learners, mentees, entry-level members) may come to realize their own abilities and be empowered by their own experiences. Meanwhile, those typically described as experts (e.g., teachers, mentors, senior-level members) may gain insights by listening to new voices and reflecting on their own experiences. These valuable collaborations only come about when all parties involved move towards co-constructing knowledge and de-constructing authoritative hierarchies—through sharing, listening, and working through uncertainties and challenges.

One benefit for creating such communities in higher education, is helping faculty identify students' needs and design ways to address these needs in the classroom. In the workplace, fostering the notion that everyone has some type of expertise to offer the group encourages both self-worth and respect for others. This type of mindset may strengthen team-based collaboration and the development of common goals (e.g., Seely Brown and Duguid 1991). In turn, nurturing greater community and support may help to prevent burnout and turnover, especially in higher stress professions, like K–12 education (e.g., Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond 2019).

CONCLUSION

Everyone encounters challenges—personally and professionally—throughout their lives. In the 2020–2021 academic year, the three of us were challenged to teach, learn, and live during a time of social unrest and a global health pandemic. Coming together as a SaP partnership and reconceptualizing this partnership through CoP, the partnership learning community that emerged provided a space to converse, create, and collaborate on things that were important to us. Our partnership provides a model for creating communities in which all members are invited to share their respective expertise, receive critical feedback needed to grow and explore—helping individuals and communities overcome challenges, regardless of what they may be.

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Carrie Jackson is a professor of German and Linguistics and runs the Second Language Acquisition lab at the Pennsylvania State University (USA). Her work focuses on understanding second language learning and use, using behavioral and neuroscientific research methods.

NOTES

1. Elizabeth has graduated and is now a high school German teacher.
2. Under United States' Food and Drug Administration regulations, organizations' IRBs oversee human participant research, assuring that steps are taken to protect the rights and welfare of human subjects. More information can be found at <https://www.fda.gov>.

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