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## The invisible line: Students as partners or students as colleagues?

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## REFLECTIVE ESSAY

**The Invisible Line: Students as Partners or Students as Colleagues?**

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As pedagogy continues to evolve, some perceptions and institutional conformities of higher education are resistant to change. Professors' relationships with PhD students are one example of this. For years I (Michelle) had been told by my supervisors and colleagues that it was best to keep PhD students at an arm's length. It was explained that my duty was to educate, and not to befriend students. Inviting students to spend time together outside of the supervisor/student relationship could lead to complications, I was warned. This came across to me as a rather archaic approach to supervising PhD students. I have always valued connection and relationships with those I work with (including the students I supervise), which is perhaps why I enjoy conferences so much.

Conferences provide a variety of professional development and networking opportunities. However, it is often difficult to find a conference where you feel a sense of belonging. Coming home from my first International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (ISSOTL) conference in 2015, I felt that I had really found "my conference." You know, the one that you refuse to miss, where you have found your "people"? I decided at that point that I didn't want my current students to have to wait to find "their" conference, so I extended an invitation for one of my students (Corinne), who was embarking on a PhD, to the ISSOTL16 conference. For decades I had attended conferences and made connections that were short lived, and I didn't want this to happen to my student.

I had an established relationship with Corinne that had developed over time (see Figure 1). She started out as an undergraduate student, then went on to complete her Honours under my supervision, became my research assistant, and finally began her PhD in 2017 under my supervision.

At ISSOTL16, we met people from Ireland and the United States with whom we really clicked and began having significant conversations. Inspired by a conference presentation from Poole, Verwoord, and Iqbal (2016), we decided that we would try to use synchronous technology to create a Small Significant Online Network Group (SSONG) with these international colleagues. Our goals were to meet regularly online, continue our initial discussions, encourage collaboration, and then present together at ISSOTL17. Further detail about how we established our SSONG and what it enabled us to achieve can be found in Eady et al. (2019) and Green et al. (2020).

I (Michelle) was keen to include Corinne in the SSONG as a research colleague and co-author. What caught us off guard, however, was how our relationship had evolved over this time into a Students-as-Partners (SaP) opportunity. Crucially, through our continued collaborations, we could see that any separation between us had, in fact, dovetailed into an invisible line (see Figure 1). This essay focuses on our experience of this developing relationship.

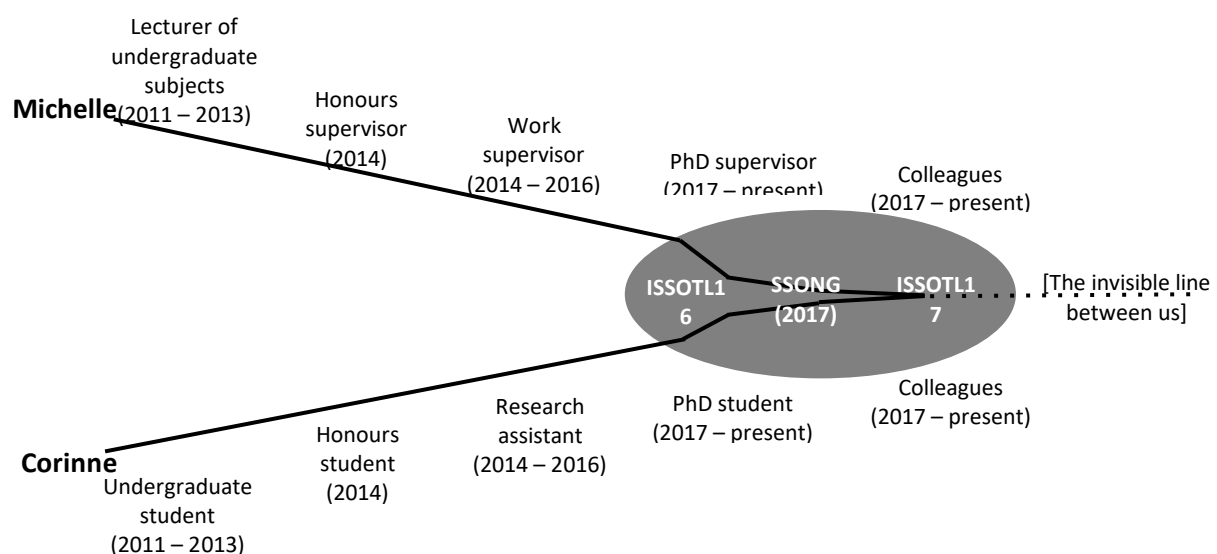


Figure 1: Visual representation of Michelle and Corinne's various roles and developing professional relationship over time. The circle represents the focus of this paper.

#### REFLECTIONS FROM THE PHD STUDENT'S PERSPECTIVE (CORINNE)

Michelle invited me to attend the ISSOTL16 conference as a co-presenter of a project I had worked on in my role as her research assistant. This was the first time I had attended an academic conference, let alone an international one, and I was excited about the opportunity it presented. The conference content was immediately intriguing to me as I got a crash course in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) as well as SaP—terms I had not encountered prior. I also swiftly made connections with people from around the world, meeting some through workshops and presentations, and others through Michelle's introduction. In particular, I felt an immediate connection with those who would become our SSONG.

The “pinky promise” that we made one another at the end of the conference—that we would meet up online at least once—was fulfilled less than one month after our return home. Michelle was particularly motivated to ensure that this would happen, given her previous experiences of short-lived conference connections, and I was quickly caught up in her efforts. We became the combined co-ordinators of the group, sending out reflective journals and prompts and establishing a common meeting time. The meetings we held via videoconference were incredibly valuable as we explored SoTL together within a small, significant network.

Somewhere along the way, I noticed that Michelle subtly stepped back and handed me the reins for the logistics of each SSONG meeting. I became the chair in what was a rather non-hierarchical group, responsible for keeping our discussions on track and ensuring that everyone's contribution was heard. Although this happened so smoothly that I barely noticed it in the moment, I relished the opportunity it provided. It showed that Michelle had faith in my capacity to lead the SSONG discussions, and made me feel affirmed and valued as a colleague. I knew that I was supported in this role, with Michelle and I continuing to have “think aloud” discussions about what needed to be done.

When it was time to begin planning our SSONG presentation for ISSOTL17, I happily took the lead as an extension of the work I had already been doing within the group. I was

glad to provide direction and collate the contributions of each group member into a cohesive presentation. Meeting again at ISSOTL17 was a joyous occasion, with us all united in our enthusiasm for how the SSONG had brought us together as equals.

I have appreciated the opportunities that I have had to work alongside Michelle over the past few years. When I speak with other post-graduate students, I realise how unique it is that I have such a positive connection with my PhD supervisor. More than that, I know that our working relationship extends beyond my studies and has fundamentally impacted my professional development and career opportunities.

#### REFLECTIONS FROM THE FACULTY MEMBER'S PERSPECTIVE (MICHELLE)

I think that academics know when a special kind of student crosses our path. These students have research interests and pursuits aligned to our own, and they demonstrate that they are dedicated to the craft, have an inquiring mind, and a passion for their work. While not meaning to suggest that there are other students who should be excluded from the partnership approach we are proposing, I do want to acknowledge that sometimes relationships just “click.”

Nevertheless, inviting a student to a conference is both exciting and daunting. At times in my career I have been cautioned about being “too kind,” and a raised brow can follow a working bee outside of the university or lunchtime walk and talks. Being passionate about teaching (especially its relational nature) has, I fear, reduced me in the eyes of my research colleagues from the heights of academic royalty to a lowly, empathetic, approachable human being. Now, here I was, with luggage in hand, meeting Corinne at the airport and traveling internationally with a desire to share everything SoTL.

It is a refreshing experience to accompany a student to a conference—it brings the excitement of it all back to the surface. Helping Corinne to register, going through the list of speakers, and proudly introducing her to an international network of colleagues gave me a new angle on the familiar. Establishing the SSONG, alongside Corinne, provided a valuable opportunity to continue the conversations we began at the conference. In the same way that I tell my PhD students that it is our job as supervisors to “give them wings to fly,” I decided that I could ease my control of the online group and give space for Corinne to bloom as leader in the online environment—which she did! When we reunited with our SSONG colleagues in person at ISSOTL17, there were familiar faces and hugs all around.

There was a surprise in store for me, however, when after our SSONG presentation a colleague enlightened us by commenting, “You do know that this is an excellent example of Students as Partners, you should consider publishing this work in that context.” I turned and looked at our research group, and confirmed four of the seven of us were indeed students. SaP was a new term to me, although it was still curious that not once had I differentiated the students from the other group members. I certainly didn't think of this work as a SaP investigation. It led me to wonder how many other academics find themselves in similar partnership situations and have not labelled it as such, nor seen the work through the lens of SaP.

This experience has really made me think about PhD students in a different way. Students are engaging with literature that is perhaps even more current than we (as overloaded academics) have read ourselves. They are writing, thinking, analysing all the time; they are really a walking, talking, eager, fresh resource by our sides. We need to see them less as students and more as colleagues and the future leaders in our field.

## FOOD FOR THOUGHT

As we (Corinne and Michelle) have been crafting this formal reflective piece, we have been prompted to consider how our experience connects to the body of SaP literature. We have been guided by Matthews' (2017) editorial piece, which outlines five propositions underpinning genuine SaP approaches: fostering inclusive partnerships, nurturing power-sharing relationships through dialogue and reflection, accepting partnership as a process with uncertain outcomes, engaging in ethical partnerships, and enacting partnerships for transformation. Viewing our relationship through the lens of SaP, and Matthews' (2017) work in particular, has helped to frame our understanding of how and why we work together as we do in a new way. It has deepened our insights, which we are pleased to share with you here.

### **Fostering inclusive partnerships**

Pairing "like students" with "like staff" can be an inherent risk in SaP work. In fact, Mercer-Mapstone et al.'s (2017) systematic literature review revealed this type of pairing was evident in most of the literature and cautioned that it "potentially prioritises voices that are already privileged and engaged" (p. 17). We acknowledge that this is a limitation of our partnership—while we have varied life experiences and expertise, our backgrounds and interests are nevertheless broadly similar. Michelle has always made the effort to provide equitable personalised investments for all students she supervises. Even so, after delving into the SaP literature we are both now more aware of the need for partnerships that are inclusive of "unlike" pairings, and we commit to pursuing these in the future.

### **Nurturing power-sharing relationships through dialogue and reflection**

As Matthews (2017) explains, good practice in SaP work involves the sharing of power, recognition of differing expertise, and "ongoing dialogue about expertise and contributions, and continuous reflection" (p. 3). This was absolutely the case with our work together. We have frequently engaged in conversations—sometimes initiated by Michelle, other times initiated by Corinne—about our work, the boundaries of our relationship, and the expertise we could draw on. We have shared and shifted power, such as by alternating lead author for publications and conference presentations related to our work together. While we are both passionate about the work we do together, we are also both committed to ensuring that suitable compensation is provided to Corinne through payment for work completed, subsidised travel to conferences, and authorship on publications. With regards to her PhD study, Corinne has always been the driving force behind its completion—setting goals, directing meetings, pursuing publication opportunities—while Michelle provides support as a guide on the side.

Over many years of working together, we have developed a robust relationship that facilitates these open and reflective discussions. These practices have become even more intentional since ISSOTL16, where we both first learned about SaP and Corinne was formally introduced to SoTL. This paper represents a culmination of these informal reflections, as well as providing us with the chance to reflect more formally on how we work together.

### **Accepting partnership as a process with uncertain outcomes**

Healey, Flint, and Harrington (2014) argue that SaP "is a way of doing things, rather than an outcome in itself" (p. 7). We believe this accurately describes our ongoing

professional relationship, which has been motivated by our desire to continue working together for the foreseeable future. While we have set certain goals along the way, such as supporting Corinne to complete her thesis, or presenting research findings at a conference, we do not envisage these milestones to be the finish line for our working relationship.

There have been a variety of benefits that accompany this SaP partnership. Some are mutually beneficial, such as bouncing ideas off someone who is like minded, and feeling confident that either one of you could present at a conference and communicate the same underlying message. Michelle has learned a lot from Corinne's commitment to protecting a distinction between her professional and personal life (both with regards to relationships and how she spends her time). Corinne has grown to feel more confident both as a researcher and in teaching large cohorts of undergraduate students. While our relationship is much different from the traditional student-supervisor approach, we have come to realise that what we can accomplish together as partners is greater than what we can achieve alone.

The human element of this relational work can contribute to, and complicate, the nature of SaP (Felten, 2017; Matthews, 2017). The inherent uncertainty with regards to how the relationship will develop has played on our minds at various times over the past few years. We have established and adjusted the dynamic boundaries for our relationship as time goes on, through reflective dialogue of what we do (and don't) expect from each other. There have been a few blunders along the way, such as when I (Michelle) unintentionally strayed too close to a parental role by advising Corinne on a personal matter. Corinne reasserted the boundaries of our relationship by making clear, "You're not my mother, Michelle!" I humbly apologised for this slip, and we were able to work past the inadvertently awkward moment thanks to our resilient relationship. For others looking to engage in a similar approach, we encourage you to embrace this uncertainty and participate in ongoing, open, and frank dialogue to establish and uphold boundaries that work for you.

### **Engaging in ethical partnerships**

Matthews (2017) makes clear the importance of ethical practice within SaP work, stating that "good SaP is good for all involved" (p. 5). Our work together has been founded on ethical principles, with reciprocity, power-sharing, and fair treatment important to both of us. Our ongoing discussions about our practices and approaches, with each other and other colleagues, has ensured the partnership is mutually beneficial and based in proper conduct. We believe that our partnership can impact a broader movement by encouraging collaborative and productive relationships, as demonstrated (in part) by this paper.

### **Enacting partnership for transformation**

Finally, Matthews (2017) talks about the power of SaP as "an act of resistance to the traditional, often implicit, but accepted, hierarchical structure where staff have *power over* students" (p. 6, emphasis in original). I (Corinne) am, at times, caught between these two camps. On one hand, I must navigate the hierarchical structures of our institution as a student and as a casual faculty member. Both roles typically place me at the bottom of the ladder with regards to the power structures of the university. However, on the other hand, I have a strong partnership with Michelle who I know has and will advocate for me when I don't have a voice of my own. I can see a trajectory for our partnership that disrupts the traditional structures for ourselves and for others. Through our work together, and in

collaboration with fellow SaP practitioners, we can be “part of a movement seeking to transform education more broadly” (Matthews, 2017, p. 6).

#### CONCLUSION

While it was a surprise to discover that we were doing SaP work, it has been delightful and very rewarding to work in partnership together. Upon reflection, we have realised that this is perhaps how the best SaP projects should be. If you can get to the point where the students are equal contributors, where their voices and perspectives are given the same amount of respect and value as anyone else’s, and where all parties are viewed as equal colleagues, then you may well have achieved true partnership. This may be particularly pertinent for partnerships with post-graduate students, which Mercer-Mapstone et al. (2017) identified as an “under-explored or under-reported arena” (p. 16). Our hope is to convince you to rethink the grandfathered or antiquated means of working with PhD students where faculty exert power over students. We would like to suggest that seeing students as colleagues is an extension of seeing them as partners and is particularly appropriate when working with PhD students. In this way, you too can work in such a way that the separation between you is all but an invisible line. This metaphor suggests that while there is still a line that separates us—after all, we are not the same person, and there are institutional policies that apply to us differently—its impact is invisible and imperceptible.

We hope to play a small role in transforming the culture of student/supervisor relationships so that the grandfathered approach is no longer the norm. We hope you will take our accidental discoveries and newfound insights and turn them into intentional actions that lead to fruitful collaborations. We encourage you—whether student or academic—to consider how you can partner with your colleagues in different, creative, and productive ways.

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#### NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

**Michelle J. Eady** is an Associate Professor at the University of Wollongong, Australia. She is a HERDSA fellow, SFHEA and holds a national teaching citation for her work in quality teacher preparation. Michelle looks forward to collaborations with anyone who has a passion for the *Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*.

**Corinne A. Green** is an aspiring academic and PhD student at the University of Wollongong, Australia. She has relished opportunities to collaborate with local and international colleagues on projects in the field of teacher education, as well as related to the *Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*.



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