



THE TOOLBOX

A Teaching and Learning Resource for Instructors

PARTNERING WITH STUDENTS IN TEACHING AND LEARNING

Professor Oren Smith (pseudonym), a music professor at Oak Grove University (pseudonym), had a problem. Many students in his first-year music theory class struggled to learn a core disciplinary skill: ear training. To succeed in future music courses—and in their out-of-class musical pursuits—students needed to master this foundational skill. Yet for Smith, an expert, ear training was as natural as riding a bike; he couldn't even remember what it felt like to not be an expert. Smith needed to figure out how and why students were getting stuck in order to more effectively teach them to surpass this learning threshold.

To approach the problem, Smith consulted students who had recently mastered ear training to understand how they learned and why so many of their peers had not. Smith invited three former students to meet with him regularly over a semester to plan for the next time he taught first-year music theory. This quartet looked carefully at Smith's past teaching strategies, read literature together on teaching this particular skill, reflected on their own experiences with ear training, and interviewed current students in a similar course about the topic.

In this course redesign team, Smith and his three students acted as partners in teaching and learning.

Defining Partnership

Student–faculty partnerships draw on the distinct strengths that each group brings to a teaching and learning challenge. Instructors have deep disciplinary knowledge and often are experienced in their field. They know what students need to learn and what it looks like when they have done so. That expertise is invaluable, but instructors often struggle to understand the experiences and motivations of students in their courses. Most instructors have not been undergraduates for many years and might not recall what it's like to be a novice in the discipline they teach.

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“
Teamwork is the ability to work together toward a common vision. The ability to direct individual accomplishment toward organizational objectives. It is the fuel that allows common people to attain uncommon results.”

— Andrew Carnegie

These gaps in experience can be particularly significant in courses and programs that enroll first-year and transfer students.

Working together, instructors and students can bring their complementary knowledge to bear on teaching and learning problems. This kind of partnership is a “reciprocal process through which all participants have the opportunity to contribute equally, although not necessarily in the same ways” (Cook-Sather, Bovill, & Felten, 2014, pp. 6-7).

What it Looks Like in Practice

Partnerships in teaching and learning can take many forms. Three common strategies are:

- » **Creating course design teams.** Students can be valuable partners in the design of new courses or the redesign of existing ones, as Smith’s case illustrates. The ideal student partners on design teams have experience with a course and can provide insight into the instructor’s questions about the student experience. For example, if you want to revise a course to better serve the needs of non-majors, your student partners probably should be non-majors. Course design teams often meet multiple times, using a backward-design approach to collaboratively explore the goals, pedagogies, and assessment strategies of a course. Students typically outnumber faculty on the design team, ensuring that diverse student perspectives are heard. Teams may invite a faculty developer to help facilitate the group process and add insights from the research on learning and teaching.
- » **TILting assignments.** Instructors sometimes cannot gauge whether a new assignment is appropriately clear and rigorous; at other times, they can be surprised when students appear to put in a lot of effort but do not respond as expected to the assignment’s prompts. Partnering with students, then, can help instructors understand how and why students in their classes respond to specific assignments. One effective approach is to workshop draft assignments in student–faculty groups. The authors have adapted the Transparency in Learning and Teaching (TILT) framework (Winkelmes, 2018) to develop questions that students and faculty can respond to together when analyzing an assignment sheet:

1. What knowledge and skills will you learn by doing this assignment? Why is that learning important or valuable to students?
2. What specific steps will you take to complete this assignment? What steps are you unsure about, if any?
3. How confident are you that you are doing the task effectively and excellently? What about the assignment makes you feel more or less confident?

While instructors can also delve into their assignments alone, partnering with students often brings helpful—and sometimes surprising—insights about the expectations and experiences of undergraduates. Think carefully about the right students to TILT an assignment. To understand how first-year students will interpret an assignment in a general education course, for instance, be sure to partner with students who can remember what it was like to be in those shoes. Also, integrating this assignment activity into new-faculty orientations or

other faculty development programs, as the authors have, can spark valuable conversations about both particular assignments and your institution's broader teaching and learning culture.

- » **Making sense of feedback.** Student partners can demonstrate valuable insight through processing course feedback. In this case, they typically are not currently enrolled in the course in question, giving them a mediating advantage. They can still identify with current students and their experience, while being removed enough from the course to establish a professional relationship with the instructor. Student partners can help instructors do the following:
 - » **Design feedback surveys.** This involves forming useful and strategic feedback questions that are (a) relevant to the instructor's goals or concerns for the course and (b) understandable to students.
 - » **Distribute and discuss feedback.** Student partners can circulate paper or email surveys to the class, and well-trained partners can facilitate a class discussion (with the instructor absent) to gather even more detailed perspectives from students.
 - » **Analyze the results.** Student partners can help the instructor focus on the most significant patterns (both positive and negative) from the feedback, rather than getting sidetracked by less important concerns.
 - » **Respond.** Based on their analysis, student partners can brainstorm with the instructor about ways to give constructive answers to feedback.

Research Points to Benefits

Using the data they collected, Smith and his three student partners worked to redesign his approach to teaching ear training, putting more emphasis on small-group work with familiar music early in the semester (to build students' skills and confidence) before moving to more difficult individual work later in the course. This redesigned approach has proven effective. Smith has seen consistently better student performance on ear training. His students now finish his course with a stronger foundation in this disciplinary skill and more confidence in their ability to learn difficult material in subsequent music courses.

Along with benefits to learning, research has demonstrated that partnership approaches to teaching and learning can increase engagement and motivation, self-awareness, positive classroom experiences, and sense of belonging for instructors and students (Cook-Sather, Des-Ogugua, & Bahti, 2017; Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017).

Starting the Process

Launching a teaching-learning partnership can feel daunting, but it need not be overwhelming. To begin:

- » **Start small, be patient:** Not everything needs to change at once. Instructors who partner with students often begin by revising one



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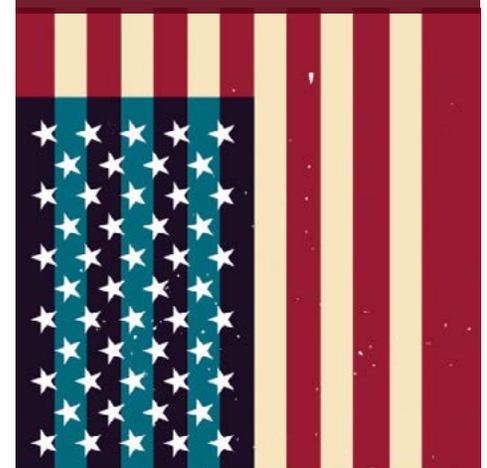
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assignment or exploring one aspect of feedback, then building on that experience to move toward larger and longer-lasting partnerships.

- » **Invite students:** Like many instructors, students typically are unfamiliar with teaching–learning partnerships. And many students have busy lives full of classwork, jobs, and personal obligations. To make partnership appealing to them, invite a few (probably former) students to consider joining in a project rather than requiring an entire class to take part. This ensures that all partners are willing and able to make the necessary commitment.
- » **Have specific goals in mind:** Even though instructors usually are the ones initiating the partnership, they should aim to create a shared purpose and project with student partners. This means talking openly about goals, listening carefully, and finding ways to incorporate each partner’s perspective into both the process and the products of the project.
- » **Integrate partnerships into ongoing work:** Instructors already have so many demands on their time that few have room for new work. Rather than launch a new project to practice partnership, build that partnership into your ongoing work and goals.
- » **Cultivate allies:** Partnership is collaborative, and instructors often benefit from having colleagues doing similar projects at the same time. A handful of instructors, for instance, can partner with students to workshop an assignment from several different courses or from different sections of the same course. Faculty developers and teaching centers can also be helpful allies in teaching–learning partnerships.

The most important first step is recognizing that students can be effective partners in teaching and learning. When instructors see students as allies, the potential for partnership can be transformational (Cook-Sather & Abbot, 2016). As a student partner explained: “I think some faculty . . . 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 the classroom” (Cook-Sather et al., 2014, p. 209).

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