REFLECTIVE ESSAY

Pedagogical partnership: Insights from developing an EDI-conscious study aligning with Freirean principles

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In higher education, a hierarchy exists: teachers and researchers, students, and subjects. Deconstructing this system is long overdue; it's time to promote co-creation and strive for equity. This paper provides reflections on pedagogical partnerships and discusses recommendations arising from my experience as an undergraduate student designing an equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI)-conscious study. The study aims to promote EDI in an institution (the McMaster Collaborative for Health and Aging) by understanding the experiences of its older adult and caregiver advisors (herein, advisors). Study insights will be used to improve the institution's approach and practices to promote diversity in representation of advisors and research team, the inclusion of different advisor lived experiences and equity in the Collaborative's activities and operations. Further, the study aims to achieve EDI through its objectives, processes, and methodologies through the partnership between (a) the student researcher (myself) and the research supervisor (the Collaborative's managing director), who make up of the research team and (b) the research team and advisors. We recognize that the partnership model itself is founded upon Freirean principles. We aim to display how awareness of such essence can guide the process and objectives of a project conducted in partnership (Peters & Mathias, 2018). This paper explores the adoption of Freirean-informed approaches to partnership and research, aiming to demystify and provide an example of promoting EDI in research by prioritizing accessibility, equity, and community involvement in study design and development. Ultimately, the goal is to redistribute power in higher education and research.

BACKGROUND

The partnership revolved around developing a study that explores the experience and engagement of advisors within the McMaster Collaborative for Health and Aging (herein, the Collaborative). These advisors come from a variety of different backgrounds (e.g., healthcare providers, caregivers for relatives, etc.). In the Collaborative, the role of the advisors includes but is not limited to consulting on study design in aging research and mobilization of knowledge from research findings. The advisors were both co-designers and participants in this study, which this paper reflects on. The advisors were included as co-designers as this helps ensure that study objectives align with the priorities of those the research aims to serve. This study may promote EDI in its partnered procedures and goals, as study insights will promote changes in practice. The Collaborative aims to further Ontario's capacity in patient-oriented research and improve health

system performance and older adult and caregivers' experiences. This occurs by advancing engagement in health research and decision-making with a focus on aging (McMaster Collaborative for Health and Aging, 2023). The older adult and caregiver advisors meet monthly with the managing director to advise and contribute to Collaborative initiatives. For example, a Ph.D. student discussed plans for a systematic review and sought the team's input on the data extraction form and, later, presented the preliminary findings and discussed the implications and next steps for knowledge mobilization.

This paper defines EDI as per the Government of Canada's (2021) *Best Practices in Equity, Diversity and Inclusion in Research Practice and Design*:

1. Equity: the removal of systemic barriers and biases enabling all individuals to have equal opportunity to access and benefit from the program.
2. Diversity: a state or condition reflecting differences and layers within the community.
3. Inclusion: the practice of ensuring that all individuals are valued and respected for their contributions and are equally supported.

Each of these principles are highlighted throughout the study objectives and process, and their implementation will be discussed below.

INTRODUCTION TO FREIREAN THEORY

It was not my first time working on a research project; however, it was quickly established that this was my first time working on a formal research project grounded in Freirean principles. Paulo Freire was a Brazilian educator and philosopher who critiqued the "banking model" of education in his book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 2005). In the banking model, students are merely empty vessels—passive recipients—waiting to be filled with knowledge by the all-knowing and disciplining teacher. Instead of the banking model, Freire proposed "problem-posing," a method of teaching and partnership emphasizing critical thinking for liberation. Smith and Seal (2021) articulated the following principles of critical pedagogy: developing and relating knowledge to participants' lived experiences and co-creating knowledge with all participants. The aims of critical pedagogy include empowering people to become aware of oppression, developing connections between personal experiences and societal forces, and developing critical thinkers who can co-create knowledge (Smith & Seal, 2021) (Figure 1).

INITIATION OF PARTNERSHIP

From the beginning of our partnership, I was not "assigned" a study with predefined objectives and methodologies. Instead, my supervisor and I had an informal meeting to discuss the Collaborative's current state and our goals for the project. The task was presented as a problem to be solved, encouraging dialogue and inquiry into how we could assess the engagement and experience of the Collaborative advisors. This approach, known as "problem-posing" in Freire's (2005) work, dismantles hierarchical power structures and allows for mutual learning through dialogue between teachers and students. It promotes equity by deconstructing academic power dynamics and valuing students' perspectives within academia. In this inclusive environment, I felt

empowered to share my ideas, knowing they would be respected and considered. This liberation from inferiority fueled spontaneity and creativity, transforming my supervisor and me into co-creators of knowledge.

Figure 1. Critical pedagogy: Principles, aims, approaches (Smith & Seal, 2021)
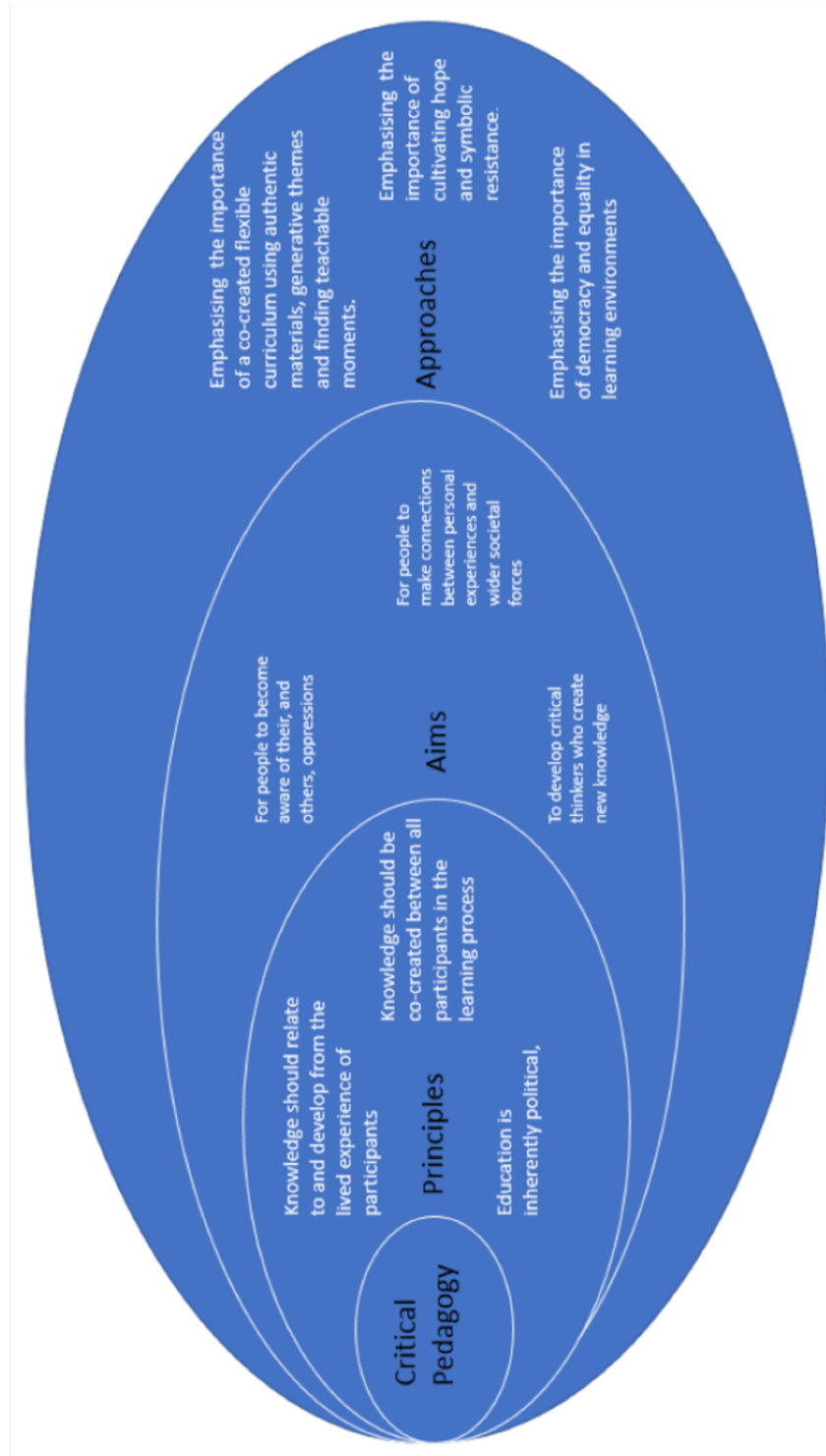
Such initiation of our partnership set the tone for how I would approach the project and further EDI initiatives through Freirean principles.

Recognizing my role as a co-creator of knowledge and the freedom to infuse personal vision and values into the project, I embraced Freirean principles with the support of my supervisor to develop an EDI-conscious study. Our power-deconstructing dynamic allowed me to bring my experiences as an immigrant, female, and non-Caucasian individual to the project and the knowledge gained from courses promoting EDI and question development, such as Interdisciplinary Questions in Health (HTHSCI 1G02) and Praxis Pathways 2 (HTHSCI 2X03) at McMaster (Academic Calendars, 2023a; Academic Calendars 2023b). This partnership fostered an environment where diverse experiences and backgrounds were shared, exemplifying how inclusion enhances diversity. By empowering student partners as collaborators rather than mere executors, we mobilize their skills and perspectives to accelerate progress. This shift from reinforcing superiors' ideas to promoting student empowerment leads to optimal outcomes and exemplifies the potential of such partnerships.

THE PROCESS OF CO-CREATION: STUDENT RESEARCHER AND RESEARCH SUPERVISOR

By materializing the IREC model (Figure 2), which stands for inquire, research and reflect, evaluate, and construct (introduced to myself through the McMaster Bachelor of Health Sciences, Honours curriculum) tasks emerged through the discussion and posing of inquiries in our weekly meetings. Throughout the week, I would browse databases and grey literature, meet with experts and stakeholders, and synthesize knowledge. Findings would be discussed during the following meeting, where conclusions, re-examinations, and further inquiries arose. This cycle repeated.

Figure 2. The IREC model: Inquire, research/reflect, evaluate, and construct (Al et al., 2008)
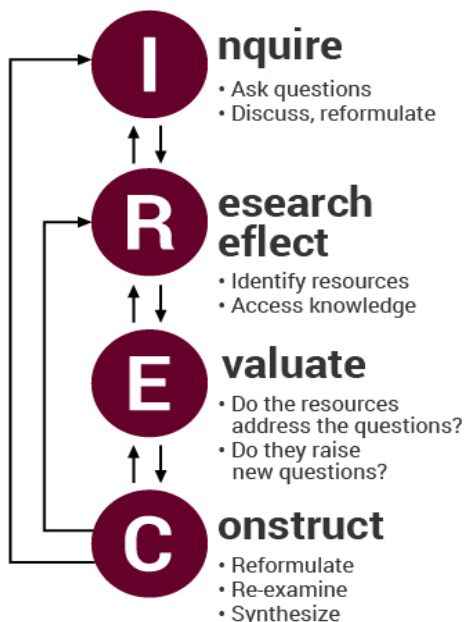
The IREC model outlines elements central to the process of knowledge acquisition and inquiry. Emphasizing the non-linearity of the process, it models the fluidity of the inquiry process.

DESIGNING THE STUDY

Our values as co-creators in partnership guided our decision to adopt a partnered approach in our study. Instead of designing the study as researchers and recruiting the advisors as passive research subjects, the advisors became co-creators of the study. This aligns with Freirean principles and the Collaborative's principles (Collaborative for Health and Aging, 2023; Smith & Seal, 2021). The co-creation model deconstructs power structures within research as marginalized populations gain a seat at the table and lead, exemplifying equity and furthering diversity.

It is important to acknowledge that the mere presence of students and advisors does not promote equity and diversity. Considering intersectionalities and the inclusion of individuals from equity-deserving groups is a critical first step. However, it is only through meaningful participation and empowerment, which provides these individuals with decision-making power in an inclusive environment, that equity and diversity are promoted.

Meetings with the advisors in the co-creation of the study were informed by the critical pedagogy principles and aims. In these meetings we (a) provided the advisors with background information regarding project goals, (b) engaged in dialogue with them regarding their concerns and the challenges they face as a community of older adults and as individuals within diverse populations, and (c) discussed methods of data collection and outcomes which they believed address their needs, the communities they advocate for, and their experience within the Collaborative.

This process was fueled by the Freirean aims of promoting awareness of oppression, incorporating connections between personal experiences and wider societal forces, and developing critical thinkers (among the advisors and student researcher) who can co-create new knowledge (Smith & Seal, 2021). Therefore, the Collaborative advisors could adopt their rightful roles as co-creators of knowledge and leaders in the fight against their own oppression, exemplifying equity by reducing structural barriers.

My supervisor, who modelled guidance within a partnered approach rather than the traditional paternalistic one, inspired my facilitation of these meetings and the dynamic between myself as a student researcher and the advisors. During the facilitation process, practices were implemented to model inclusion and diversity. These included asking open-ended and (relatively) unbiased questions, fostering meaningful dialogue, and prioritizing inquiry rather than persuasion. A safe space was created, empowering the advisors to think critically, express disagreement, and challenge the team. Accommodating attitudes and an awareness of accessibility needs were maintained. These practices actively promoted an inclusive and equitable environment, encouraging diverse voices to be heard and valued. I acted as a facilitator, making academic research accessible and empowering the advisors to make decisions aligned with their needs and goals. This dynamic mirrored the mentorship I received from my supervisor.

The main task of our meetings was to decide on the study methods and experience evaluation tools. We wanted to include quantitative and qualitative tools to gain a holistic understanding of the advisors' experience. As a group, we decided to use the Public and Patient

Engagement Evaluation Tool (PPEET) (Abelson et al., 2016) as our quantitative tool, as well as focus groups and art-based research methods as our qualitative tools.

A voting system, facilitated via a Microsoft Teams form, was employed to determine the focus group questions and select the arts-based method for examining the advisors' experiences in the Collaborative. These focus group questions, formulated jointly by the student researcher and the advisors, aimed to explore the advisors' experiences, focusing on their impact, structural aspects, and principles of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI). Moreover, the advisors concurred on utilizing photovoice as their chosen arts-based method. This method was specifically selected to respond to a prompt about the ideal partnership, which was central to the study's main goal of evaluating the advisors' experiences within the Collaborative. Finally, the advisors actively engaged in these selected methods, participating in both the focus group discussions and the photovoice activity.

A participatory research method, photovoice can encourage personal expression and social change (Budig et al., 2018; Liebenberg, 2018). Participants attended a photovoice workshop and created photo submissions with written descriptions, which were shared with the group, sparking discussions about the captured experiences and emerging themes. This process facilitates collective exploration and the potential for societal transformation.

In itself, the usage of photovoice promotes the democratization of knowledge (Switzer et al., 2019). Photovoice and other arts-based methods offer accessibility to individuals from diverse educational backgrounds, enhancing inclusivity. These methods may mitigate challenges and triggers associated with discussing personal and sensitive topics, creating a safe environment for open dialogue (Nunn, 2022; Switzer et al., 2019). Moreover, they contribute to reducing hierarchies within research by encouraging everyone (Gilchrist et al., 2015), including researchers, to step outside of their comfort zones and engage in activities together. This approach promotes a collaborative and equitable environment as researchers act as guides rather than relying on the traditional one-way "authoritative" communication.

Notice how two modes of decision-making were utilized, consensus and a voting system, to determine the majority decision for the questions to be used in the focus groups. A discussion on what constitutes a majority would have arisen if the voting was not unanimous (which it was). These two modes of decisions were decided unanimously to ensure individuals would be comfortable with the outcome, displaying how partnership was embedded in most aspects of the project. In summary, this process of co-creation may help equate advisors and researchers by using EDI-conscious principles and data collection methods. Therefore, we exemplified Freirean principles within our project and process.

CHALLENGES

Although the partnered approach (between the student researcher and the research supervisor and between the research team and advisors) comes with many benefits and may further EDI, it comes with challenges (especially if this is your first time working in partnership).

Challenge 1: Greater time commitment
The partnered approach in research and education, compared to the banking model, requires more time and resources. It would be quicker for my supervisor to make decisions independently

and provide rigid instructions for me to follow. However, this approach perpetuates inequitable value systems and produces lower-quality outcomes. Similarly, our partnered research with Collaborative advisors took longer due to the investment of time in empowering them and the consensus-based decision-making process. All parties involved need patience and awareness of the time commitment, allowing for proper preparation and assessment of investments made.

Challenge 2: Student confusion
In a partnership-based learning environment, students accustomed to the banking model may initially feel confused and uncomfortable with the shift in their role. The educator must be aware of the student's experiences and capabilities, providing support and empowerment. Effective communication about the partnership's principles and objectives helps students understand the process and develop the necessary skills over time. Acknowledging and addressing these challenges facilitates a smoother transition and enhances the partnership experience.

Challenge 3: Non-linearity
As described above through the IREC model, due to the collaborative and inquiry-oriented nature of partnerships, the process of knowledge acquisition is not linear but cyclical. This may lead to feelings of frustration and lack of accomplishment as it is more difficult to see progress. However, it is important to understand partnership thoroughly and the nature of the knowledge acquisition process to be able to identify progress and setbacks.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This section synthesizes a framework for students and educators as co-creators in partnership to guide the implementation of Freirean principles in partnership in the context of EDI research studies.

To dismantle power structures, awareness of the roles they entail is crucial (Freire, 2005). The "oppressor" manipulates others to sustain their power, while the "oppressed" are exploited and dehumanized. In academia, traditionally, teachers and researchers often assume the oppressor's role, imposing their ideas on passive students and research subjects. Recognizing these roles and the flaws in existing systems is vital for driving change and promoting liberation.

A guiding framework for research students in partnership and community advisors in research (the traditionally oppressed)
Liberation from oppression can only be achieved by the oppressed themselves, as oppressors are driven by paternalism and self-interests. Oppressors who join the liberation fight often exhibit a "saviour" mentality (consciously or subconsciously) rooted in the same oppressive ideologies they claim to challenge (Freire, 2000).

As a student or research partner, it is essential to acknowledge your own capabilities and the value of your experiences. Take the lead in striving for change by:

- Recognizing and addressing biases, injustices, and existing power structures.
- Engaging in reciprocal feedback with others.

- Embracing change and being comfortable with uncertainty, despite the challenges of problem-based learning.
- Seeking and creating opportunities that promote critical thinking, creativity, and the sharing of ideas.
- Avoiding becoming an oppressor in the pursuit of equity.

A guiding framework for researchers and educators in partnership (those who traditionally oppress)

- Recognize the power structure. It is important to acknowledge and talk about the existing injustices. In practice, this can include asking:
    - Who traditionally holds power here? And how have I been opposing or reinforcing such traditions?
    - In what way can this power dynamic be harmful?
    - How can I learn more about this dynamic/injustice from an unbiased source?
    - How can I help cultivate a partnership environment where power structures can be recognized and discussed for the sake of their obliteration?
- Recognize that students and advisors are not empty vessels. In practice, this can include asking:
    - What skills and experiences does each individual bring?
    - How can we best utilize the strengths of each individual?
    - Has each individual been involved in developing the expectations of their role?
    - Is each team member aware of their right to establish boundaries?
    - When does collaboration become disrespectful to professional role boundaries?
    - Do people feel safe discussing boundaries?
    - Is there a process/framework in place to reinforce when boundaries have been disregarded?
    - Is there a process that allows for the progression or updating of boundaries and role responsibilities?
- Aim to develop an accommodating and inviting attitude and environment. In practice, this can look like:
    - Creating an open-door approach for feedback and a structured feedback procedure.
    - Offering multiple avenues for support and participation (e.g., while co-developing the study methodology with the advisors, they had the option to fill out a Google form, call, or Zoom to provide their input).

As a researcher and educator, you must recognize that you are being taught too and are not just teaching. It is important that you be open to innovation and opinions that contradict your own and listen with curiosity to learn and understand rather than persuade.

Guidance for all co-creators of knowledge (the traditional oppressed and oppressors)
Dialogue, according to Freire, is a transformative and egalitarian process that challenges oppressive power dynamics (Ferron, 2022). It is rooted in love, humility, faith, hope, and critical

thinking (Patzer, 2021). Love involves recognizing and exploring our experiences in the world with care and compassion. Humility encourages a commitment to learning and dismantling intelligence labels. Faith in each other fosters genuine engagement rather than paternalistic and meaningless interactions. Hope drives the expectation of progress and meaningful outcomes. Critical thinking promotes transformative dialogue by questioning, analyzing, and striving for growth.

In practice, dialogue is characterized by inquiry and exploration, rather than seeking conformity or persuasion. Co-creators in a partnership can engage in dialogue by using open-ended questions like "what if?," "what do you think?," and expressing curiosity with statements such as "I wonder . . .". This approach encourages the exploration of ideas, fosters learning, and facilitates collaborative problem-solving.

Implementing EDI principles and Freirean principles is an ongoing journey that requires continuous learning and effort. It is important to understand that meeting these recommendations doesn't signify perfection or the achievement of goals. Resistance and challenges may arise in a society rooted in inequity and injustice. Striving for change demands resources, time, and collective support. As the oppressed lead this effort, it is crucial to treat each other with kindness and recognize that the fight for equity requires sustained effort and determination.

CONCLUSION

Reflecting on my own experience as a student partner designing an EDI-conscious study, I have demonstrated how Freirean ideas influenced the process and resulting study design. This paper also offers a framework for traditionally oppressed individuals (students and advisors) and traditionally oppressive roles (educators and researchers) to guide future implementation of Freirean principles in academic partnerships. The aim is to inspire students to embrace their roles as co-creators of knowledge.

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Marfy Abousifein *is an undergraduate student at McMaster University and studies in the Bachelor of Health Sciences (Hons) program.*

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