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Selections from the Banff Symposium

Expanding a Professional Learning Community to Focus on Inclusion, Belonging, and Student Success

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Article abstract

Student success, particularly for students from marginalized populations, depends on a number of co-existing factors, not the least of which are a sense of belonging and the institution's focus on inclusion. This article showcases the lessons learned from a professional learning community (PLC) for faculty, staff, and students, which was intentionally designed to create awareness of these issues and the need for courageous conversations to support change. The article discusses one particular PLC, a form of virtual "book club," which occurred during the Fall 2021 semester (September–December). This PLC was focused on Anthony Jack's text The Privileged Poor: How Elite Colleges Are Failing Disadvantaged Students, published in 2019, and encouraged a unique dialogue on student experience, co-facilitated by a team who critiqued aspects such as race, class, and first-generation status from different vantage points in higher education.

Expanding a Professional Learning Community to Focus on Inclusion, Belonging, and Student Success

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ABSTRACT

Student success, particularly for students from marginalized populations, depends on a number of co-existing factors, not the least of which are a sense of belonging and the institution's focus on inclusion. This article showcases the lessons learned from a professional learning community (PLC) for faculty, staff, and students, which was intentionally designed to create awareness of these issues and the need for courageous conversations to support change. The article discusses one particular PLC, a form of virtual "book club," which occurred during the Fall 2021 semester (September–December). This PLC was focused on Anthony Jack's text *The Privileged Poor: How Elite Colleges Are Failing Disadvantaged Students*, published in 2019, and encouraged a unique dialogue on student experience, co-facilitated by a team who critiqued aspects such as race, class, and first-generation status from different vantage points in higher education.

This article explores the intentional design and lessons learned from a professional learning community (PLC) at Nipissing University in the Fall 2021 semester, with participation from faculty, staff, and students. It offers perspective from the three PLC facilitators (the co-authors), who are situated in three different roles at the institution. This PLC focused on the student experience and highlighted barriers faced by low-income, first-generation students. The PLC used the anchor text *The Privileged Poor: How Elite Colleges Are Failing Disadvantaged Students* by Anthony Abraham Jack*,* which examines issues of race, class, and first-generation student status in higher education. Reflecting on this example of SoTL in practice reveals much about the new avenues SoTL practitioners can take to facilitate student success and intentional communities of care, especially with an expanded scope, which includes students and staff who do not typically engage with teaching and learning centres.

We believe that SoTL in practice can have a positive impact on entire university communities and can expand scope beyond faculty development and instructional practices by meaningfully engaging stakeholders from across the university—especially students—in facilitating student success.

THE CONTEXT OF NIPISSING UNIVERSITY

Nipissing University (NU) is located on the territory of the Robinson-Huron Treaty of 1850. The land on which we live and learn is the traditional territory of the Nipissing First Nation and the traditional territory of the Anishnabek. NU is a small size (under 5000 full-time equivalent students), primarily undergraduate institution, which prides itself on creating a high-quality learning environment that is student-centered. Throughout the 2010s, investments in the Student Development Services (SDS) office, have resulted in NU receiving national recognition of its SDS unit—indicated by a top score in the Maclean's rankings for this segment[1].

NU is also committed to serving learners who have been historically marginalized by and within systems of higher education, such as Indigenous and first-generation students. Again, earlier funding has resulted in a strong, nationally recognized, Office of Indigenous Initiatives. However, although NU does well in some areas, it tends to overlook its commitment to addressing anti-racist topics more broadly. This is particularly salient as the university's efforts have not always proceeded without missteps.

In the wake of the murder of George Floyd by former Minneapolis Police Officer Derek Chauvin and the subsequent activism of Black Lives Matter movements across the world, NU's president at the time made a statement attempting to address

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[1] Maclean's magazine ranks Canadian universities annually on a variety of criteria. The rankings can be found at the following link: https://education.macleans.ca/rankings/

the issue without use of the word "Black." The president's statement also conflated many social justice issues:

> In light of recent events and long-standing issues regarding equity, diversity, and inclusion around the world and here at home, we support all those speaking out and our thoughts and hearts are with you. While the issue of racism is top of mind, we are also reminded that this month is Pride month and National Indigenous History month. It is now a time for us to reflect on our role in making our communities welcoming and safer, and a place to thrive. (DeGagné, June 3, 2020)

NU administration was quickly humbled by the criticism of this response by its own students, which resulted in a follow-up statement from President DeGagné, apologizing for the previous statement and using clearer language to condemn racism (DeGagné, June 4, 2020). Despite the apologetic nature of the follow-up statement, the need for a second message clearly showed a profound discomfort when speaking to, and about, all marginalized groups. The follow-up statement weakly linked our university community to the issue of anti-Black racism and rhetorically centred violence instead of accountability.

Over the subsequent months, Black students at NU, in collaboration with the Students' Union (NUSU), formed the Black Association for Student Expression (NUBASE), and under the direction of a new university president, who arrived in August 2021, the institution became a signatory to the Scarborough Charter. The Scarborough Charter is a commitment by institutions across Canada to combat anti-Black racism and foster Black inclusion in the academy.[2]

In the midst of these various events, Nipissing University's Teaching Hub was launched in October 2019, with a staff of two. A revived focus on teaching and learning, at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, garnered significant institutional and provincial investment, and the Teaching Hub endeavoured to "punch above its weight" as an emerging centre striving to meet the needs of its stakeholders. The needs of the institution, and the student body, changed minute-by-minute in 2020 and 2021. The university required responsiveness, rapid growth, and a sense of political awareness. These were all challenges that the Teaching Hub leadership, staff, and affiliates sought to tackle, which could propel the institution forward on issues of equity, anti-racism, inclusion, and belonging. Given the involvement of NUSU and NUBASE in challenging the institution to do better, the Teaching Hub seized upon a significant opportunity to partner with these enterprising and insightful advocates in order to work together to create meaningful change.

Aligned to the responsiveness needed by NU and the expertise of the Teaching

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[2] Further information on the Scarborough Charter can be found at the following link: https://www.utsc.utoronto.ca/scarborough-charter/

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Hub, in late 2020 the Teaching Hub began its first students-as-partners program. The Online Learning Partners (OLP) program began by providing peer-to-peer support for online learning, but quickly expanded its scope as the students engaged in research projects, presented workshops across the university community on teaching and learning, and contributed to a variety of other Teaching Hub professional learning offerings. The OLP program began with six undergraduate students acting in a generalist capacity, but by 2021 had already expanded to include graduate students and focused hires on topics such as Indigenous pedagogy, anti-racist pedagogy, and Universal Design for Learning (UDL).

This institutional context is shared to lay the groundwork for understanding the project we will reflect on: an expanded professional learning community, which was co-facilitated by faculty, staff, and students with a keen sense of advancing equity at Nipissing University.

HISTORY OF PLC'S AT NIPISSING UNIVERSITY

The idea of hosting professional learning communities (PLCs) at NU began in early 2020. It was one of the first responses to the pandemic, and these "work-focused book clubs" immediately took hold as one of our capstone activities. Thus, many of our first PLCs centred around how to shift teaching online, with books such as *Small Teaching Online* (2019) by Flower Darby and James Lang and *Advancing Online Teaching* (2020) by Kevin Kelly and Todd Zakrajsek. As the pandemic progressed, we strategically pivoted to books such as Kevin Gannon's *Radical Hope: A Teaching Manifesto* (2016) that would stretch faculty/staff conversations about teaching philosophy and mandates. We also chose books such as David Sobel's *Place-Based Education* (2004) that provide unique solutions to pedagogical challenges, such as taking students outdoors.

To discuss issues of equity within our own university context, we selected *The Privileged Poor: How Elite Colleges Are Failing Disadvantaged Students* (2019) by Anthony Abraham Jack as the book we would use in this instance. This book uses a US-based example to reveal institutional barriers to student success. It explores how interactions shape feelings of inclusion, exclusion, and belonging, with a particular focus on first-generation students, low-income students, and racialized students. Corresponding with the chapters found in *The Privileged Poor*, there are three distinct areas of interaction that may shape exclusion: 1) student-to-student, 2) instructor-to-student, and 3) policy-to-student. We hoped that participants would identify similarities and differences between Nipissing

University and the university presented in *The Privileged Poor*.[3]

Old Structure vs. New Structure

In the earlier PLCs at NU (those that ran in 2020/2021), we held only one meeting to discuss the book. We attracted, on average, 12 participants (primarily faculty) to join each experience, led by one facilitator. Based on the nature of *The Privileged Poor*, we chose to have three meetings spread out across an entire semester, each led by a different facilitator and loosely linked to one of the chapters/interactions noted earlier. For this PLC, we attracted 33 registrants, who we then split into two groups/cohorts, comprised of staff members, faculty, and students.

We made intentional advertising choices and facilitation choices to restructure our PLC practices to be more community oriented, with a focus on inclusion and belonging.

We opened up the experience to everyone by marketing on social media channels that have a primarily staff and student audience. As a result, people who joined included not only faculty members, but students (undergraduate and graduate), staff members, managers, senior administration (two vice presidents), and a member of the University Board of Governors. Due to the ongoing pandemic, the PLC was kept entirely virtual in nature, which allowed us to be more inclusive in accommodating participants.

When the cohorts first met, participants of this voluntary PLC expressed a desire to do better and were keen to learn about practices that had unintentionally excluded students. There was a sense that, when co-creating a future, the inclusion of a plurality of voices was necessary in order to expose these unintentionally implied messages. A heightened awareness of unintentionally exclusionary practices is crucial as we move forward with solutions, and as Crant (2020) states, "Institutions need to be aware of the implications of implied messages, such as what a closed office door might signify, especially to students like first-generation students who may be sensitive to these (perhaps unintentional) implied messages that project very real consequences" (p. 137).

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[3] Although the university described in *The Privileged Poor* is given a pseudonym, "Renowned University," it is reasonably well known that the comparator is Harvard University.

A Students'-as-Partners Model for Co-Facilitation

The virtual nature of this PLC, alongside the PLC as a non-traditional way of thinking, learning, and working in higher education, allowed facilitators and participants to view "[our]selves and others as sources of knowledge" (Drago-Severson, 2004, p. 119). Centring each and every participant as a source of knowledge was foundational to our success in the facilitation partnership. The centring of one's experiential reality is supported across the student partnership literature. Cook-Sather (2018) argues that students, especially those from groups that have been historically underserved by higher education, are vital in partnerships that seek to advance equity. These partnerships allow students to be active agents in their own, and their institution's, development.

Thus, when structuring a professional learning community about student success, it is essential to meaningfully engage with students and to ensure that their voices are valued and represented. This philosophy complements insights from *The Privileged Poor*, where Jack (2019) posits that "for a smaller (yet growing) group of students, mainly those from poor families, [social undercurrents] are shocking, painful, maddening, or some combination of all three. … The common response … is for students to distance themselves from their peers and withdraw from the college community" (p. 27). From this, we understand that the involvement of a student facilitator, as a meaningful and equal partner, was an essential role to prevent this distancing and withdrawing of student participants from this PLC.

Notions of power and positionality undergird all partnership experiences. Our approach was informed by Guitman et al.'s (2020) manifesto, which states that "rather than try to unlearn power, we need partnership practices and scholarship that acknowledge and critique existing power structures—practices that aspire toward social change which, as with energy, dynamically transfer and share power throughout the relationship" (p. 64). The facilitation team continually discussed the power structure present both within our team, but also within the wider participant group. We relied on a sense of trust and vulnerability in order to share power in the partnership relationship, and we structured our time together with a social justice approach in order to make visible the power imbalances within the institution and within the PLC.

Co-creating Group Norms

Put simply, bringing together a group whose members spanned across senior administrators, faculty, staff, and students was not without its challenges. The content of the book could be quite triggering for some based on their lived experiences, and the text also placed a spotlight on institutional failings that some folks "in the Zoom room" were responsible for. Moreover, when we ran this PLC, numbers for virtual events were dwindling, due to burnout, a push to "return to

normal," and screen fatigue as we moved towards a "post-pandemic" state.

Understanding the inherent power imbalance within a group of faculty (of all ranks), staff, administrators, and students, we deliberately structured this professional learning community to create norms that would guide our time together. Using the starting point of Singleton and Linton's (2006) *Courageous Conversations About Race* as a base for group norms, we opened our first meeting by inviting participants to practice the following: stay engaged, expect to experience discomfort, speak your truth, and expect and accept a lack of closure. After offering these norms as a starting point, we invited participants to suggest additional norms, which the facilitators adopted. We then began each session by reviewing the co-constructed list. Inviting participants to co-construct the terms of their participation is what Arao and Clemens (2013) classify as "a collectivist approach, wherein all participants have the opportunity to shape the group norms and expectations, … [which is] more consistent with the overall goal of social justice education than one in which the facilitators dictate the terms of learning" (p. 143). Given the diversity of the group, along with elements of the book having the potential to impact participants based on their identities and lived experience, centring a social justice approach in our meeting process was of utmost importance.

In addition, this approach is consistent with the goals of intergroup dialogue, that is, to "strengthen individual and collective capacities for social action by fostering connections and alliances across and in social identity groups and build the confidence, commitment, and skills needed to support coalitional actions for social justice inside and outside the dialogues" (Zúñiga et al., 2007, p.8). By creating a space for members of our university community to come together within our PLC space, we endeavoured to create collective capacity for social justice actions beyond our time together.

CHALLENGES AND BENEFITS

This PLC provided an opportunity for facilitators and participants to connect the literature on first-generation student success to our own context, and the nature of the discussions allowed us to make connections between this work and current policies and practices at our own institution. We believe that professional learning communities are essential for faculty, staff, and students to have a space where they can grow and learn together, which contributes to an organizational learning culture. We are aligned with DuFour and Eaker (1998) who state that they "prefer characterizing learning organizations as 'professional learning communities' for several vital reasons. While the term 'organization' suggests a partnership enhanced by efficiency, expediency, and mutual interests, 'community' places greater emphasis on relationships, shared ideals, and a strong culture" (p. 15). Culture and relationships underpin the success of these types of initiatives at a small institution

like Nipissing University.

Further, Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) found seven widely shared features of effective professional development, four of which we incorporated into the design of this professional learning endeavour:

Supporting collaboration: Our facilitation partnership was inherently collaborative, and we modeled this for all PLC participants. In addition, when opportunities for collaboration arose as a result of the discussion or insights from the book, we actively facilitated connections between members.

Provides coaching and expert support: In our meetings with participants, the facilitators each took a seat as "expert" when it came to the chapter that most aligned with their role at NU. For example, the student facilitator shared personal anecdotes about the student experience at NU and how it differed from and/or aligned with the examples found in the text.

Offers feedback and reflection: The norms (as created by participants) allowed for vulnerability and openness in dialogue throughout our meetings. Participants freely offered responses and feedback to the questions and thoughts of others. Further, facilitators intentionally used long pauses and wait times to allow for real-time reflection.

Sustained duration: The sustained duration of this learning community, meeting three times over the course of one semester as opposed to just once, allowed participants to create a "community of practice" (Wenger, 1998), that is, a group of professionals who interact regularly to enhance, by way of discussion, their practice.

Together, the intentional design of the PLC, as well as the learning culture which had already been cultivated by the Teaching Hub in all of its previous programming, were major factors in the success of this endeavour.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, we argue that our engagement with a larger and more diverse group in this PLC aided our development of a learning culture at Nipissing University. The PLC heightened participants' sense of awareness and commitment to addressing barriers to student success.

We believe that the act of facilitating a space to discuss student success through the lens of SoTL counts as an "institutional support" intended to dismantle the barriers we identify in the process. This is especially true when discussing the challenges that first-generation students face. Crant (2020) bolsters this

understanding, stating that "not only do institutional supports frame positive academic supports for first-generation students, but also institutional supports further increase social capital and reduce cultural and class specific gaps for first-generation post-secondary participants" (p. 170). This is SoTL in practice. Throughout the facilitation of this PLC, both the product and the process of co-constructing meaning allowed participants and facilitators to grow in their understanding of student success and to sharpen their professional practice to make our university a more intentionally inclusive space.

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