Faculty-Student Partnerships in Assessment

Mariam Mousa Matta Abdelmalak
Assiut University

The purpose of the current comparative multiple-case study was to understand graduate students' perceptions of the collaborative construction of course assignments. Data were gathered from the graduate student interviews, class observations, and relevant student artifacts. With this collected data, six case studies were generated. The study revealed that being able to design assignments based on student perceived goals gave these participants a sense of control over their own learning. This in turn encouraged them to take responsibility for their own learning and motivated their involvement. However, some participants expressed that their previous experiences of being dependent on teachers to make decisions for them made it difficult to be fully involved in the assessment process. The current study also claims that student lack of self-confidence in their knowledge and power relations between students hindered some participants from giving feedback to their peers on the assignments. The study draws attentions to the need for a partnership between faculty and graduate students in assessment. In such partnership, the instructor and students jointly own assessment.

Adult learning theory and research indicate that adult students want more autonomy than younger students. Adult students have a deep need to be self-directing; therefore, they resent and resist situations in which they feel others are imposing their wills on them (Knowles, 1980; Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2005). Knowles (1995) argues that adults have a deep need to be perceived and treated by others as capable in taking responsibility for themselves. According to Knowles (1980), when adult students participate in making (or planning) a decision (or an activity), they feel committed to it. Cervero and Wilson (2006) also agree that adult student involvement in planning learning activities creates a sense of ownership, helps build motivation, results in more relevant educational experiences, and provides a democratic procedure that is valued by most adults. Adulthood should be understood from the perspective of continuum, and learners in college settings certainly fall somewhere on that continuum (Beaman, 1998). Therefore, those with innovative ideas about impacting higher education can learn much from the literature and theories of adult learning.

The principles of adult learning theories are challenged, however, when the moment arrives for the instructor to grade or evaluate adult learners. Traditionally instructors have been all powerful in the assessment process (Boud, 2007; Boud & Prosser, 1980; Falchikov, 2005; Leach, Neutze, & Zepke, 2001). Typically assessment comprises a number of acts: instructors defining tasks and instructing students in the performance of the tasks; students replicating the prescribed tasks; and instructors judging student's work, marking and grading, and conferring credentials (Leach et al., 2001). The instructor is central to the decision-making in the conduct of this process. According to Knowles (1980), traditional grading and assessment methods, in which assessment is a one-way process from staff to students, are inconsistent with adult's self-concept of self-directivity. Knowles goes further to argue that traditional assessment treats adults as children and shows them disrespect:

> The crowning instance of incongruity between traditional educational practice and the adult's self-concept of self-directivity is the act of a teacher giving a grade to a student. Nothing makes an adult feel more childlike than being judged by another adult; it is the ultimate sign of disrespect and dependency as the one who is being judged experiences it. (p. 49)

Unilateral control of assessment assumed by academic staff reinforces the power imbalance between instructors and students and is driven by the needs of the instructor rather than needs of students (Falchikov, 2005). Unilateral assessment is disempowering for students and forces students to be passive consumers of what is thrown at them (Boud, 2007; Falchikov, 2005). Students come to see themselves as powerless in their own education and see professors as having a majority of power to educate and to produce learning. Manor, Bloch-Schulman, Flannery, and Felten (2010) illustrate two problems that could occur when students perceive professors as having the majority of power to educate. First, the assumption that professors possess all the course-related knowledge and that students have none contributes to a misunderstanding that learning essentially is the transfer of knowledge from professor to students rather than a process that allows making meaning from knowledge. Second, the students' perceived powerlessness in their own education translates into a lack of their taking responsibility for their own education (Manor et al., 2010). Additionally, instructors' unilateral decisions passively affect students' motivation, interest, confidence, enthusiasm for learning, and ability to think independently (Kreisberg, 1992; Shor, 1992; Weimer, 2002), all of which harmfully impact the quality of learning.

It is argued, therefore, that assessment in adult settings needs to be carried out in a partnership between students and faculty (Beaman, 1998; Leach et al., 2001). Assessment of adult students needs to move to "a mutual undertaking" between the instructor and students (Knowles, 1980, p. 49) in which the assessment of learning is "jointly owned by both staff and students" (Boud & Prosser, 1980, p. 26). Leach and colleagues (2001) argue that "adult learners have a legitimate role in an assessment partnership" (p. 293). Consequently, students experience education as something they do, not as something done to them. Shor (1992) argues, "education is not something done by teachers to students for their own good but it is something students co-develop for themselves, led by a critical and democratic teacher" (p. 20). Freire (1993) also emphasizes the partnership between educators and students in a way that "they become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow" (p. 61). To accomplish such partnership, Freire explains, there should be a horizontal relationship between educators and students in which the role of the educator is "to create, together with students," the conditions of learning (p. 62).

Collaborative construction of course assignments is one approach to assessment partnerships. Involving students in creating course assignments embodies Kresiberg's (1992) notion of "power with" relations between faculty and students, in which they both "do" and "act" together and participate in decision-making. Giving students the opportunity to create their own assignments seems to provide the foundations for "diffusing authority along horizontal lines" (Giroux, 1988, p. 39). Involving students in creating their own assignments shifts students from the role of educational consumers to "co-creators of a common life" in the classroom (Hudd, 2003, p. 159). Additionally, Hudd found that faculty-student collaboration in creating assignments was an effective tool for promoting students' participation and their sense of ownership of the class. Collegial partnerships between faculty and students in creating assignments also enhance both student learning and personal satisfaction (Boles, 1999) and increase students' domain knowledge (Vreman-deOlde & Jong, 2004). However, enhancing student participation in creating assignments does not replace instructors' expertise and their role in facilitating learning. It is also important to note that co-creation can be threatening to students who are used to teachers dominating the classroom and thus may be resistant to deviating from this norm (Shor, 1992).

Research abounds with examples of the partnership with students in assessment. Many studies investigated peer assessment (e.g., Cho & MacArthur, 2010; Patton, 2012; Topping, 2009; Weaver & Esposto, 2012), self-assessment (e.g., Tan, 2009; Taras, 2010; White, 2009), and peer feedback (Fluckiger, Vigil, Pasco, &

Danielson, 2010; Liu & Carless, 2006; Zheng, 2012). To date, research regarding to student partnership in constructing course assignments is limited. Previous studies that investigated faculty-student partnerships in creating course assignments focused on exploring the design of student-generated assignments (Vreman-deOlde & Jong, 2004), examining the impact of involving students in preparing class assignments on student learning (Boles, 1999; Vreman-deOlde & Jong, 2004), and investigating the instructor experience of co-creation of class assignments (Hudd, 2003). However, little is known about students' perceptions of the collaborative construction of course assignments.

The purpose of the current study was to understand graduate students' perceptions of the collaborative construction of course assignments. The study acknowledges the significance of student perspectives as an important source of information to inform, guide teaching and learning, and build capacity for educational change. The sharing of student perceptions helps increase awareness about the possibility of student involvement in assessment decisions. The current study presents an attempt to minimize the anti-democratic culture of higher education and maximize the democratic and participatory relationship between students and faculty in a graduate program.

Methodology

The qualitative comparative multiple-case study was used to understand students' perceptions of the collaborative construction of course assignments. The case study includes two variants, the single-case and multiple-case study. The unit of analysis (Yin, 2009) in a study can help determine whether a single-case or multiple-case study is appropriate. In the current study, the unit of analysis was EDTECH student participant. EDTECH was a 15-week graduate-level education course at a medium-sized university in the Southwest US. This course was designed to introduce prospective and in-service teachers to research tools that use computer applications. A set of graduate student participants who shared similarities was treated as separate cases. Data were gathered from the graduate student participant interviews, class observations, and relevant student artifacts. With this collected data, six case studies were generated.

This particular class was chosen for the study based on the course instructor's apparent commitment to student involvement in decision-making regarding assessment. Bogdan and Biklen (1992) discuss this approach to case studies in which researchers do not identify the "type" of person they want to interview and look for appropriate examples, but rather they already know a person or persons who inspire a line of inquiry and decide to pursue it. An intrinsic interest on the part

of the researcher is also a common reason for using the case study method (Merriam, 1998).

The Participants

The participants in the current study were six volunteer graduate students with the pseudonyms Tina, Sammy, Sara, Antony, Karl, and Sonia. After securing IRB approval for the study, a recruitment email was sent to all students. Nine students agreed to participate in the study and signed the informed consent forms. However, three students could not participate in the study because of their schedules. The six participants include five doctoral level students—self-identifying Caucasian female (2) and Mexican male (3)—and one graduate student in the education specialist program (self-identifying Caucasian female). The students' ages range from 38 to 55 years.

Data Sources

Interviews. In-depth interviews were conducted to deeply explore the participant's point of view, feelings and perspectives. According to Seidman (2006), in-depth interviewing is an open-ended interviewing method that is used to understand other people's experiences and their "subjective meaning" of their experiences (p. 10). Two in-depth interviews (approximately 60 minute each) were conducted with each participant at the beginning and at the end of the semester. The major stimulus questions within the interview protocol of the students included: What benefits did you get from being involved in creating your own assignments? What disadvantages or challenges? What meanings or messages did you get from involving students in creating your own assignments? A digital voice recorder was used to help collect accurate information from the interviewees.

Observations. Observations are considered essential in qualitative research. They provide the researcher with a rich understanding of the phenomenon being studied (McMillan, 2008). In the current study, the researcher observed naturally occurring practices and class activities in regards to the collaborative construction of course assignments. The class was observed for two and a half hours per week for one semester (15 weeks semester). An observation protocol was used in all observations. This observation protocol includes both the processes of co-constructing the course assignments and the physical manifestations of participants' responses to the learning experience.

Documents. The course syllabus was reviewed to give a better idea of the co-construction process and the course structure. Students' coursework such as assignments and presentations were also collected and analyzed in order to better understand students' responses to the learning experience.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using the cross case analysis (Yin, 2009). The students' interviews served as the primary data source. The interviews were transcribed to produce a narrative of each participant. Appropriate information from student coursework (information regarding students' responses to the learning experience and the quality of student work) and all information from the observation field notes were added to the interview narratives. The narratives were then subjected to an iterative analysis process until no additional themes were uncovered. The individual narratives for each participant were compared to the other participants to identify common themes. Comparative analysis was carried out using a matrix approach to allow comparison of similarities and differences across cases (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Findings

Generating Course Assignments

In the current study, the graduate students collaboratively created course assignments, developed criteria to judge their work, and made their own decisions about how they wanted to be assessed. In the first class meeting, the instructor explained to the students that they, collaboratively with her, would develop the course content and assessment. Afterward, the instructor distributed the course syllabus, which included the course description, learning theory and instructional methods, recommended readings, and the class policy. No learning objectives, topics, and assignments appeared on the syllabus, and students were told that their first task of the semester would be to design content for the course. Using small group techniques and negotiation as a whole class, the students came up with the course objectives and topics. The instructor and the graduate students spent two weeks collaboratively constructing the course content and assessment.

In order to help students in the process of building course assignments, the instructor designed specific instructions in the form of a graded assignment (see Figure 1). The students were asked to work in groups for 30 minutes to brainstorm ideas for assignments to address the agreed upon objectives and topics. The students then gathered as a whole class to discuss the ideas they came up with. The instructor and the students engaged in what the instructor called "collapsing the data", where they searched for common themes in students' ideas for assignments. Using "collapsing the

Figure 1
A Graded Assignment to Build Course Assignments and Activities

data", the instructor and the students identified four assignments that captured students' ideas: Reading Log, Doc Journey Timeline, Research Tools Evaluation, and Research Paper.

After the students and the instructor agreed upon the assignment topics, they negotiated how their performance could be assessed. In order to help students in the process of determining how their learning could be assessed, the instructor designed specific instructions in the form of a graded assignment (see Figure 2). Collaboratively, the students and the instructor created the performance criteria for assessing the Reading Log, Doc Student Timeline, and Research Tools Evaluation assignments. For the Research Paper assignment, some students expressed their desire to have peers to review their papers. During the class meeting, the instructor negotiated with students about whether they would like to grade each other's work or provide feedback for improvement without giving grades. The students chose to provide written feedback to each other based on a rubric provided by the author. The instructor invited students to choose two peers that they would want to review their papers. Based on the negotiation process, the instructor formatted instructions for the peer review assignment.

Before the students started working on the Research Paper assignment, the instructor provided scaffolds to help students build their own rubrics so their peers could use it in assessing their papers. Before the day that was scheduled to build the rubric, the instructor posted the article "Understanding Rubrics" by Heidi Andrade, in which the steps for building a rubric were clearly described in order to help students build a foundation. Additionally, during the class meeting, the instructor brought a packet of some gummy chocolate bears and asked students to build a rubric for good gummy chocolate bears. Then she invited students to build their own rubric for the criteria they would like their project to be graded based on. On the other hand, the instructor provided the students with a rubric that they could start with and change to meet their needs. Students were asked to use peer review feedback to improve their papers. They then submitted their final version for the instructor to review and grade.

Graduate Students' Perceptions

The study's findings identified five themes that captured the participating students' perceptions of the collaborative construction of course assignments. The following section discusses each of these themes.

Student control. Some participants determined that being involved in creating course assignments gave them a sense of control over the learning process. When

Figure 2
A Graded Assignment to Determine Performance Criteria
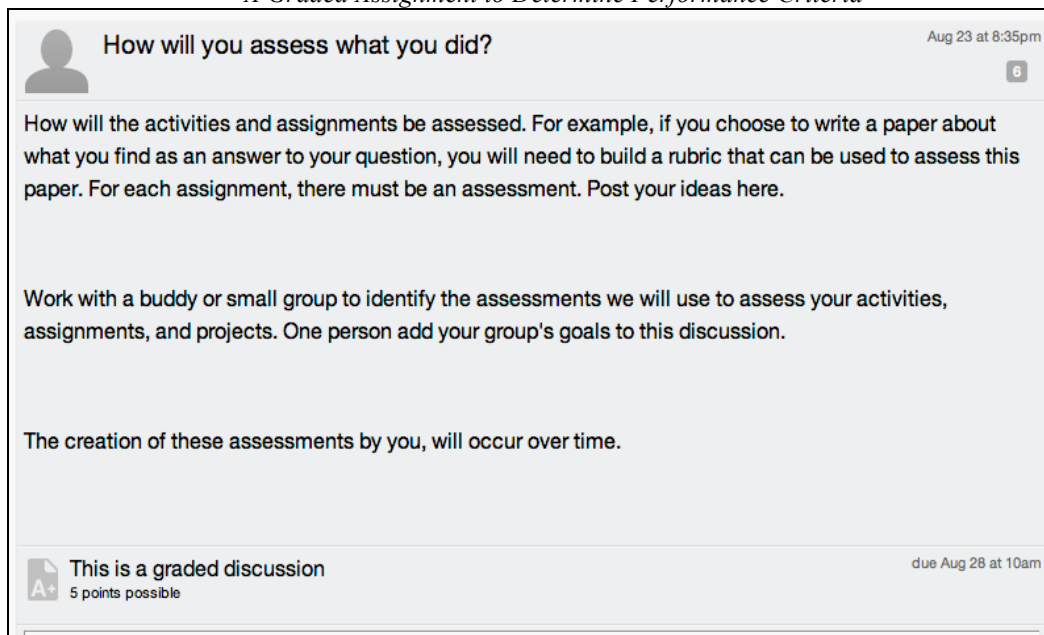
the instructor invited students to create course assignments, this allowed the participants to create assignments based on their perceived needs, which gave them a sense of control. As in these participants' experiences:

[The collaborative construction of course assignments] gives us control and say over what needs to be done as goal (Tina).

If you are setting goals for yourself and how you are going to achieve them, you have more control over your learning process because you know what is going on. You are more in control on what is happening (Sonia).

Being able to come up with the assignments allows us to have some control of the class. I believe giving some control of the class to the students allows us to get more out of it (Sammy).

Being able to create assignments based on students' perceived needs encouraged Sara and Tina to take responsibility for the assignments and for their learning:

I took responsibility for my own learning. I wrote chapter three (of the dissertation), the entire chapter three. I spent hours and hours doing it, even though I was not sure what I was

doing! I totally completed chapter three because that was what I wanted (Sara).

Being involved in creating the assignments gives us the buy-in, the responsibility. It makes you accountable for learning that assignment and for the class (Tina).

Tina expressed that students, after spending many years in the traditional educational system, fear having control in their education:

All these years of schooling, years and years, from elementary schools to the graduate programs, we do not have that power in the classroom. When somebody is giving you that power I think you are fearful, you are afraid to take that part.

Motivation to learn. Some participants expressed that being able to create assignments based on their personal learning needs motivated them to learn. Involving the graduate students in assessment enabled some participants to personalize assessment to accommodate personal needs and interests. Personalizing assignments in terms of themes of high prior interest to students intrinsically motivated these graduate students to want to learn. Tina, Sara, and Sammy built an opposed to somebody says, "This is what you have to do in order to get a grade in the class," rather I created assignments that could help me to work on what I personally need,

to help me move toward my assignment that could help them with writing the methodology chapter of the dissertation. Antony, Karl, and Sonia developed an assignment that could help them with investigating technology tools for conducting research. This in turn provoked these graduate students to learn in depth. As stated by these participants:

> It allows me to design something I will be using in my dissertation. It makes me want to learn more about what I am studying because I am working on what I need to work on. It makes me strive to meet my needs (Sara).

> To be able to create the assignments, you could personalize it more to meet your needs and what you are researching and what you are doing, which is a motivating thing, like: I want to do this because it is something I am interested in. I am more motivated to learn when it is something I like to do, instead of just being told what to do (Sammy).

> We are contributing to what we need to learn in a specific way to grow and develop into researchers. It is meaningful to me. It is producing meaningful knowledge for me and for my work. That impacted my learning in this course. To pick and choose what works for you and talk with other people about it, even outside the class, it makes me want to learn more (Tina).

> When I decide to do the project, I go far more in depth and I learn more than other people tell me what to do because I like it. I will have patience in learning (Antony).

Instructor as facilitator. From their experience with the collaborative construction of course assignments, some participants perceived the important role of the instructor as a facilitator of student learning. Sammy and Antony expressed the importance of the instructor's involvement in the process of creating course assignments rather than being removed from the process. The instructor was involved in every step of the process of creating the course assignments to offer guidance, hints, explanation, critique, and encouragement. The instructor also did not repress her own ideas; rather, she allowed students complete control over the content and added her ideas and suggestions. As mentioned by Antony:

> [The instructor] told us to select whatever we wanted to do, but she guided us in some ways like: "Do you want to read something? Do you want a lecture? Why do not we have hands-on assignments? Do you think this increases your

knowledge?" [The instructor] wanted to make sure that we had the readings, the lecture, and we have some activities. I like that because if she did not ask us to read, I did not like to read, so I would do whatever I want. […] Instructors need to guide but not be too much involved in it because obviously the course will be theirs not yours.

Sara and Sonia expressed the important role of the instructor as a facilitator who guides along the way without telling them what they should do:

> It will be great to go do whatever I want to do and what suits me and what I want to seek out, but I need someone in the road, someone who understands the outcomes expected in the product. I need the instructor to set *[sic]* back and help me get that product without telling me what to do, like guiding me to that end product (Sara).

> She is a facilitator more than she is telling us what we should be searching for. She is a facilitator more than a distributor of knowledge (Sonia).

Peer feedback. The instructor and students discussed whether the students would like to grade each other's work or provide feedback for improvement without giving grades to each other. The students decided that the peer review should entail providing written feedback. The instructor formatted instructions for the peer review assignment asking students to provide each other with feedback to improve their paper before submitting the paper to the instructor for grading. However, most of the participants did not provide their peers with feedback. They basically reviewed each other's papers based on the rubric criteria and checked whether their peers' papers met the criteria or not without providing feedback. Some participants were not happy with using the rubric for checking whether they met the rubric criteria or not; they felt that feedback would have been more useful, as noted in these participants' experiences:

> A peer review is a peer review where I get feedback on the content to improve my paper. It is not just using the rubric and grading the paper (Sara).

> I get feedback that is not really helpful. It is not critical, they say something like, "Yeah, it is a great paper!" Saying that will not benefit me! I do not need to hear that! I need to hear an honest critique to benefit my learning (Tina).

The study indicates two main reasons that hindered some participants from providing their peers with feedback. The first reason was students' lack of self-

confidence in their knowledge. Some participants expressed that they had less knowledge and experience with the subject than their peers, which created a challenge for them to provide constructive feedback to their peers, as in these participants' experiences:

> They are more advanced than me in the program. They have taken more classes, so they know more about what is needed in the methodology chapter than me. I am still not at their level. I did not have the knowledge to make their papers better. How can I tell them, 'You are missing this or missing that!'? (Antony).

> [Student X] is more advanced than I am. I really did not know where I could guide her as far as what to do next. I have less experience than her. Doing a dissertation and doing these things I am learning myself. Knowing what she is missing and giving her feedback was a big challenge for me (Sammy).

The second reason that obstructed some participants from providing feedback to their peers was power relations between students. Some participants felt that to assess their peers was to have power over them. As a result, they resisted critiquing their peers' papers and granted full points for their papers because they did not want to have power over them. As explained by Karl:

> They are friends of mine so it is hard to critique them. They are classmates in the same program I am going through. Who am I to critique them?! I am a student like them. I feel bad when I critique someone. I want everybody to succeed so I do not want to critique them. I gave them 4, 4, 4 [full points in each criterion of the rubric] because I want them to succeed.

Being "conditioned" that instructors have absolute power. Some participants expressed that the way they were taught in the past—being told what to do and learn—hindered their full involvement in building course assignments. They explained that it was hard for them to make decisions about course assignments because they were not used to making these decisions in education.

> I think because we are not used to making decisions in our education, it is hard to pass that and take that responsibility. It was hard for me at times. I was raised very much on 'sit and be quiet; do what the teacher says and do not talk back; raise your hand only if you have a correct answer.' (Tina).

We are not used to building assignments. In the bachelor's degree, Master's, and Ph.D. program, we have the syllabus; we have assignments and activities to work on. We do not really collaborate too much on building assignments. We are used to the instructor just giving the syllabus. Then you want to break all of that and ask us to develop assignments?! It is hard. When [the instructor] asked us to design course assignments, I thought, 'Wow, do we need to put the assignments together, why should we?!' I do not know if I benefit from that. I do not think it really matters to have input in creating course assignments. It is nice, but I do not think I benefit from that (Karl).

Discussion and Implications

In the current study, involving graduate students in creating course assignments gave the participants a sense of control over their own learning. This claim corresponds with Hubb's (2003) study who found that students who collaborated in constructing their assignments felt "in control" over their learning. In the current study, being able to develop assignments based on their perceived needs and goals established the condition for the participants to feel in control of their learning. The shift of assessment from being the instructor's sole possession to something that was presented in response to the expressed interests and needs of students contributed to these graduate students' sense of control. This indicates that educators of graduate students need to be flexible and sensitive in responding to students' learning needs and the direction in which the students want to take the assessment.

Additionally, perceived control of the assessment process encouraged some participants to take responsibility for their own learning. This claim corresponds with Manor and colleague's (2010) assertion of the strong relationship between students' control over their learning and their sense of responsibility for their learning. Manor and colleagues argue, "Greater power means a greater ability to act and thus a greater sense of responsibility to do so. Similarly, less power (or worse, powerlessness) equates to less ability to act and less responsibility" (p. 10). This correlation between control and responsibility suggests that the traditional role, in which educators of graduate students have unilateral authority to make decisions for students, needs to change into a partnership. In this partnership, graduate students are encouraged to take some control of their education, including some control over their own assessment.

The study also illustrates that involving graduate students in developing course assignments motivated the participants to learn. Having the opportunity to develop course assignments allowed the participants to

determine assignment themes from their personal interests and needs, which facilitated deep learning. The participating graduate students were deeply motivated to learn what they perceived they needed to learn and what had personal value to them. Adult learning theory and research indicate that adults tend to be motivated toward learning that is important to their personal values and perspectives (Knowles, 1980; Knowles et al., 2005; Wlodkowski, 1999). In his book, *Enhancing Adult Motivation to Learn*, Wlodkowski (1999) asserts that adult students experience intrinsic motivation when they successfully learn something they want to learn and something they value. This indicates the significance of creating a space for graduate students to develop assignments for themselves based on their felt needs and interests for student motivation and engagement. However, this does not mean that graduate students have complete control over developing assessment. Students might not have enough or might not have the right kind of knowledge and skills to participate in the assessment of learning. Therefore, there should be shared control between the instructor and students.

Although the participants determined the importance of having some control over their learning for student motivation and engagement, they still needed the instructor as a facilitator to guide them to the approved end product: showing them how to do the work, but not to do the work for them. The participating graduate students expressed the importance of the instructor's intervention through the process of creating course assignments, rather than leaving them to their own devices. The instructor's guidance, however, did not undermine students from assuming responsibility in the pursuit of understanding and developing new knowledge. This urges educators willing to involve students in assessment decisions to maintain some authority. Educators need to remain authoritative without being authoritarian in guiding and facilitating students' learning. Educators of graduate students need to find a way to balance an instructor's guidance and student control. Faculty need to lead students with their expertise, but they also need to listen closely to students' perspectives and offer many spaces for students to explore their evolving ideas.

While the participants had experienced some benefits of peer review, they expressed dissatisfaction about the quality of peer feedback. The participants believed that if peer review was to be relevant, it should benefit subsequent learning processes. The participants expressed that the best way to achieve this would be to have peers provide each other with valuable feedback independent from the rubric. This finding is consistent with earlier studies (Ku & Lohr, 2003; Patton, 2012; Sluijsmans, Moerkerke, Van Merrienboer, & Dochy, 2001) that showed that many students expressed that peer assessment would be more beneficial to their

learning if peers provided constructive feedback. On the whole, the peer review approach applied in the current study needs improvement. One improvement could be providing students with explanations and evidence that carrying out peer review brings benefits for them. If graduate students believed in the importance of a peer review to their own learning, they would do their best to seriously review other students' papers. As adult learners, graduate students need to know the reasons for participating in an activity. Adult students, as Grow (1991) argues, "may be unused to blindly doing what they are told without understanding why […] They do not jump through hoops just because somebody says to" (p. 138).

The current study claims that students were reluctant to give feedback on the assignments because of lack of self-confidence and trust in their knowledge and experience. This finding is different than previous research on student attitudes towards peer involvement in assessment. Previous research (Brammer & Rees, 2007; Liu & Carless, 2006; Vu & Dall'Alba, 2007) explained that students don't trust the evaluation of their peers, rather than not trusting themselves. Although the participants found the co-development of assignments to be beneficial, they still appeared to struggle to overcome habits developed from previous experiences in instructor-centered classes. Student dependency on the instructor to define tasks, judge students' work, and grade passively affected their self-confidence and trust in their capability to give feedback to their peers. Weimer (2002) and Shor (1992) argue that students' confidence in their capability to learn is adversely affected when teachers control the processes through and by which they learn. It is suggested by some researchers that development of learner autonomy has a direct connection to student motivation and confidence. According to Usuki (2002), learners who develop autonomy have greater self-confidence and trust in their capability to focus their learning potential to maximize their educational experience. Kimball (2007) also states that autonomy is a major factor in why people staying motivated towards activities that challenge them. This means that creating an environment in which learners develop autonomy is of great importance in order to raise students' motivation and confidence levels.

On the other hand, the current study claims that power relations between students obstructed some participants from providing feedback to their peers. Some participants felt that to assess their peers was to have power over them. As a result, they resisted critiquing their peers' work and granted full points for their papers. This finding is consistent with a study done by Liu and Carless (2006) who found that power relations between students were one of the main reasons for students' resistance to the peer assessment process. Brew (1999) argues that to assess is to have power over

a person, and sharing assessment with students leads to sharing of the teacher's power. Therefore, in the current study, some students felt discomfort with critiquing their peers because they disliked having power over their peers, resulting in over-marking their papers.

Lastly, the study found that students' familiarity with authoritative teaching, where they were used to being dependent on teachers to teach them and make decisions for them, made it difficult to be fully involved in the assessment process. As Shor (1992, 1996) and Brubaker (2012) note, students, after spending so many years in "traditional" educational settings, were hesitant to abandon the notion that the teacher was the absolute authority. They have been deeply conditioned by their previous schooling to perceive that the appropriate role of a learner was to follow the path set out by a teacher. The study urges educators to consider possible difficulties that students may experience due to their familiarity with an education system in which teachers have dominated the classroom. Educators need to help students move toward partnership relation rather than plunging them into the process in the first class. For example, it would be reasonable for the educator to provide one or two introductory classes on student-teacher partnerships to help them understand the rationale of these partnerships as well as the benefits they may get from them. Importantly, educators need to engage in critical reflection to understand the dynamics of power in the classroom and to uncover the hegemonies that drive undemocratic practices. As Brookfield (1995) argues, "Becoming alert to the oppressive dimensions of our practices (many of which reflect an unquestioned acceptance of values, norms, and practices defined for us by others) is often the first step in working more democratically and cooperatively with students" (p. 9). Educators need to be alert to the presence of power in the classrooms and its potential for misuse. This may help them to be more aware of the effects they are having on students.

Limitations and Future Study

There are some limitations in the present study, and the ideas for future research noted below may address these limitations. First, the context is a small graduate course which was designed for doctoral students. Doctoral students ought to be more open to this kind of initiative than the general population of adult learners. Future research may study the possibility of the collaborative construction of course assignments in large undergraduate level classes. Second, the participants in this study assign great meanings to the learning experience. However, it is not clear if involving students in creating course assignments impacted student performance and achievement in the course. Future research may consider the impact of the collaborative creation of the course assignments on student learning and achievement.

Closing Remarks

This graduate-level education course makes a small but powerful argument in higher education that educators can develop partnerships with students for the purpose of enhancing learning and developing independent responsible learners. It brings hope to find an instructor who welcomes students as partners in decision-making. I can imagine higher education in which opportunities for partnerships between faculty and graduate students in assessment are encouraged and supported. In such partnership, the instructor and students jointly own assessment. Not every student would be fully engaged in assessment in every course certainly, but he or she would encounter different kinds of involvement at different points in the learning process in ways that add up to a qualitatively different and more powerful educational experience. Yet, involving students in assessment as active and authoritative collaborators is a difficult task. However, doing so is an integral step for improving learning and teaching, and thus research in this area should continue.

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MARIAM ABDELMALAK, PhD, is a Lecturer in the New Valley College of Education, Assiut University, Egypt. Her research interests include curriculum design, democratic education, student voice, and curriculum based technology integration.