# Introduction: Enacting a Pedagogy of Mutual Engagement

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**INTRODUCTION: ENACTING A PEDAGOGY OF MUTUAL ENGAGEMENT**

*This second issue of* <u>Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education</u> *is co-edited by Alison Cook-Sather (Coordinator of The Andrew W. Mellon Teaching and Learning Institute at Bryn Mawr College) and Sarah Brown (Guest Student Editor, Haverford College, 2012).*

In the first issue of *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education*, Advisory Board member Dennis Thiessen suggested that we might understand the work of teaching and learning together in higher education as embracing a "pedagogy of mutual engagement." He argued that such a pedagogy is animated by "reflection and sustained dialogue, inquiry, and collaboration." The reciprocity and mutually enriching premise of such a notion invites us to rethink in profound ways the relationships between faculty and students and the relationship both have to higher education. The contributions to this issue offer various examples of such a rethinking. In this introduction I refer to Thiessen's argument to illustrate how each contribution enacts a pedagogy of mutual engagement. [1]

This issue's installments of "<u>A Semester in the Life</u>," the blog Theresa Tensuan kept during the semester in which she explored how to create a more culturally responsive classroom, reflect a classroom committed to a pedagogy of mutual engagement through "harnessing the knowledge that students bring to their studies and bringing that knowledge into dialogue with faculty knowledge." In these four entries, Tensuan both playfully and seriously defines culture, references how her discussions with her student consultant raise questions and possibilities about what was happening and could happen in her class, and reflects on how the collaboration in which she was engaged (with her student consultant as well as with her faculty colleagues in the TLI faculty pedagogy seminar) prompted her to rethink her own learning experiences as well as the learning experiences of the students enrolled in her course. Tensuan explores and revises her classroom practices to be more responsive to students – and to her own engagement with them – and through both written reflection and dialogue, she engages in ongoing inquiry and collaboration.

A pedagogy of mutual engagement casts students as "capable and active agents in their own development and in the development of classrooms they co-habit and co-construct with faculty members." In **"**<u>Meditations on 'a Taut but Happy' Class</u>," Bret Mulligan provides a visual representation of the revisions he undertook for one of his courses prompted by his collaboration with his student consultant and with his colleagues in a TLI faculty pedagogy seminar. This layered (both visually and conceptually) representation of Mulligan's reflections and revisions shows how his student consultant's comments (excerpted in gold boxes along the left margin of the document) directly informed his analysis and rethinking of assignments and practices in his course. Her questions and suggestions prompted, in turn, Mulligan's reconceptualization of assignments and activities that would afford students in his course greater agency and responsibility as well as the potential to more fully engage with and enjoy the course.

Howard M. Glasser and Margaret A. Powers address the tenets of a pedagogy of mutual engagement in a different way. In "<u>Disrupting Traditional Student-Faculty Roles, 140 Characters at a Time</u>," Glasser and Powers narrate how their respective and shared use of Twitter led them

to experience what they call 'productive disruptions' to their faculty and student roles. They found that Twitter "provided a space and means for us to connect with people who assumed similar or different institutionally-defined positions in new ways that challenged hierarchical divisions and led to more egalitarian exchanges." Such challenges enact a pedagogy of mutual engagement within and beyond the classroom – extending the dialogic and less hierarchical dynamic, in which everyone is a teacher and a learner, into virtual as well as traditional classroom space.

A pedagogy of mutual engagement "includes the search for how best to involve students in decisions that touch every aspect of their lives in higher education classrooms." Such efforts support faculty members and students becoming "co-protagonists in a curriculum production that only they can script, direct, and enact together." This issue's section on "Teaching and Learning Insights" illustrates a pedagogy of mutual engagement through two interrelated sets of understandings and practices that participants in TLI forums develop. Both faculty members and student consultants describe (1) gaining perspective, particularly as such perspective is fostered through partnerships between faculty members and student consultants, and (2) engaging in more intentional communication, both through expression and through consultation.

Each of these four contributions to this issue captures the experience of working in a partnership of one kind or another. The story of Guest Student Editor Sarah Brown provides a window on how a pedagogy of mutual engagement as embodied and extended through The Andrew W. Mellon Teaching and Learning Institute can inform a student's entire undergraduate experience.

## FROM THE STUDENT PERSPECTIVE: THE STORY OF GUEST STUDENT EDITOR, SARAH BROWN



***Sarah Brown*** *is currently a junior at Haverford College. She has participated in The Andrew W. Mellon Teaching and Learning Institute as a student consultant for the past three semesters and as a research assistant since May 2010. She is a psychology major with minors in Educational Studies and Linguistics. She has been a Student Consultant for three semesters and a research assistant since the summer of 2010. In Sarah's Story, she describes how the practices found in the TLI can be applied to other aspects of undergraduate life and how applying these practices made her feel more connected to the school community.*

I enjoyed my freshman year at Haverford College; I was taking classes that truly interested me and was more involved in student life than I had ever imagined I would be. I felt that I was getting a full college experience. It never occurred to me that I would find a way to be more connected to this academic community. Yet, I would come to see that while I was participating fully as a student, there were ways to be a more active member of the Haverford/Bryn Mawr community as a whole.

At the beginning of my sophomore year, I joined the Teaching and Learning Initiative (TLI) as a Student Consultant through the Students as Learners and Teachers (SaLT) program. This role involved meeting with professors and students from both schools and from a variety of

disciplines to discuss pedagogical approaches and class dynamics. The space to engage with a variety of community members and to reflect on those discussions provided an opportunity for me to learn about others' experiences at these two colleges. Through this process, I began to realize that there were aspects of the educational experience of students and faculty that I had been completely unaware of, and I wanted to learn more.

After my first semester with the TLI, I noticed I felt more connected to the college community because I had experienced a new and very different way of interacting with it. I felt like a more genuine member of the community once I had had the opportunity to learn about other community members' perspectives and to explore the community in more in depth. I also felt like I was beginning to contribute something to the schools as well. I was no longer just a student who took classes there.

The TLI promotes thoughtful reflection on what can come to be routine: our roles as students or professors. By taking up this idea of reflection, I have developed a deeper understanding of my own experience as a student and learner at Haverford and Bryn Mawr. Reflection has been one of the most helpful techniques I have adopted in college. Taking the time to step out of the flow of a normal school day to think about my role as a student through a critical lens has changed how I go about those normal school days. Even during my freshman year, I felt pulled into the repetitive nature of education: read, listen, memorize, and regurgitate the information on a test or in a paper, then repeat. This routine can become all-consuming if one does not have a way to step back from it and pause before re-entering the fray. The act of reflection has allowed me to gain some perspective on my role as a student and to better understand my struggles and successes. Being able to use critical reflection and meta-cognitive awareness gives me a space to dissect my own experience and to better understand it, and with that understanding, I am in a better position to move forward to my next assignment or interaction with faculty and other students.

After my first semester as a Student Consultant, I began to sense that the techniques I had encountered in the TLI had changed the ways in which I interacted with my peers, my professors, and with the work itself. Since then I have entered a new level of involvement with the TLI; I am now a research assistant in addition to being a student consultant. In the course of the research, I read students' and professors' reflections about TLI and transcripts of TLI meetings, looking for patterns or underlying themes. Through this process of deeper reflection and meta-cognition, I have come to understand how various techniques I learned in my role as a student consultant have been instrumental in my progression to a more involved and connected member of the community. As I delve deeper into the TLI and spend more time and energy peeling back the layers of meaning that are found in the conversations among student consultants and between faculty members and students, I learn more about the TLI process and more about how that process has affected me.

As I came to understand the ways in which an undergraduate can take some of the strategies and techniques used by student consultants and utilize them in the everyday life of a student, I hoped to share these techniques with students who are not part of the TLI. I discuss my experiences with my faculty partners and ask students in their classes to reflect on their experiences and to offer feedback to the professors, hoping that the general concepts of meta-cognition and having open, respectful conversations about teaching and learning may take root.

This ability to contribute has increased my feeling of connection to the schools. Instead of being "just" a student who is at college to gain experiences and knowledge for herself, I feel like a partner in this educational journey in which the students do learn, but also offer their insights back to the school in hopes that current and future students and professors might benefit from them.

The TLI continues to grow and change, and I hope to witness and be a part of those changes. I look forward to taking up new challenges in the TLI and taking part in new interactions between different groups on campus. This coming semester I will be partnering with a faculty member from Swarthmore College, and I am incredibly excited to be part of the expansion of TLI to other colleges. I hope that through this growth, the TLI can reach students at other institutions who may benefit by adopting the same ideas and techniques from the TLI that I did.

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[1] All quotations taken from: Thiessen, Dennis "From the Advisory Board," *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education*: Iss. 1 (2010), http://repository.brynmawr.edu/cgi/siteview.cgi/tlthe/vol1/iss1/1