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TEACHING AND LEARNING INSIGHTS

In this issue's section of "Teaching and Learning Insights," we focus on the issue of confidence - how key it is to teaching and learning and how to build it through collaborative engagement among faculty members and student consultants. The following are selected faculty and student responses to three questions: (1) How do you define confidence? (2) Is it important to teaching and learning? and (3) In what ways, if any, did/does your faculty/student partnerships affect your confidence?

Defining "confidence"

In defining confidence, both faculty members and student consultants highlight the balance between inner calm or comfort and outward capacity to engage and proceed, even - indeed, especially - when uncertain of outcomes.

Faculty Perspectives:

"Projecting a comfort with course materials and one's role as the class leader...and...being open to various kinds of student questioning."

"A sense of naturalness of myself as a teacher, so that I'm not concerned with striving for security or foundation or sense of self in the classroom but rather can put all or most focus on the intersection of students with materials/issues/questions at hand."

"The strength to stick with hard-won conclusions/thoughts/ideas/practices in the face of opposition; the strength to stand up to withering criticism and defend unpopular positions - and the complete opposite: the strength to abandon/revise/ hard-won conclusions/thoughts/ideas/practices in the face of opposition and the ability to be gracious in accepting withering criticism and finding the good in it."

"Readiness: whatever comes is likely to include some unexpected things but I am prepared enough to address them as they come."

Student Perspectives:

"Those who speak with assertiveness and are not afraid to make bold statements. Confidence also has to do with knowing that you cannot do everything alone. People who are confident will ask for help and also help others."

"Expectations (more confidence, more expectations), risks (the ability to take them), faith (that one might fail but it will still be worthwhile), and a sense of certainty (certain expectations about how a situation might turn out)."

"Confidence is the state of believing in your own self-worth and belief in your ideas. This doesn't mean thinking you are always right, but it means believing in your ability to contribute to whatever community you are in."

"Perhaps in a college environment self confidence is also linked to the feeling of belonging at a given college or university. Confidence in others also comes into play in a classroom setting: we as students must have confidence in our educators in order to perform our best, and the teachers must have confidence in their students in order for maximum potential to be reached."

Is confidence important to teaching and learning?

Here faculty members and student consultants identify what they see at the heart of teaching and learning - openness to risk and discomfort necessary for learning, capacity to revise and change one's understanding, the important balance between ownership and responsiveness in teaching and learning.

Faculty Perspectives:

"It is of utmost importance. Otherwise, no movement or progress will ever be made in teaching as one will be paralyzed into...never taking risks...One does not need confidence in oneself per se, just confidence in the process of taking risks and trying new strategies."

"It is important because I need it to be innovative, to follow my heart, my leadings, and my own 'take' on the subjects, literatures, and problems at hand . . . and to be open to students' doing the same. Confidence lets me offer challenge as well as support - it lets me feel clearer and easier about where I bend and where I hold firm, where I hold on and where I let go."

"Confidence allows me to live with greater discomfort, which in terms prompts a reaching for understanding and expression."

"It's crucial: it's that sense of readiness that allows me to a) keep my focus on a few key outcomes/insights I want my students to have and b) follow them in the unexpected directions they want to go in. Teaching is like riding a bike: it's about getting used to constantly being out of balance, and constantly correcting, in a way that allows one to head in some direction one wants to go. Learning is similarly like riding a bike - being continuously out of balance but in a productive way, that allows for progress in some direction."

Student Perspectives:

"I think that learning truly happens when one does not simply regurgitate what the professor says but is able to absorb what is thought, reflect on it, and come up with their own conclusions. The ability to then articulate those conclusions and defend them in your own terms, I think is a crucial part of learning and requires some confidence."

"I believe that confidence is important to my learning because confidence allows me to feel more empowered to talk in the classroom and express/share my opinion and it enables me to speak up when I am unsure or feel like a class is not working with my learning style or meeting my learning goals. Confidence also helps me persevere when a topic or content area is new or challenging because I have the confidence that I can learn it if I just continue working."

"I think confidence helps me learn. When I encounter something new and strange, I have to act with hope and maybe faith that I will gain a tiny bit of ground - knowledge, experience, or both - that will give me a modicum of confidence. From that confidence I can stand a little taller inside and out, making it easier for me to try new things and more willing to make mistakes."

"Having confidence allows for me to take on challenges and continue to learn in ways that I might not have done if I felt like I could not take it on."

How do faculty/student partnerships build confidence?

These responses powerfully illustrate the "productive disruptions" that collaboration among faculty and students can foster - and the greater capacity one can develop as a result. Faculty and students highlight disruptions of expectation and perspective, they contrast the haphazard and uninformed approaches we take when we have only a limited set of expectations and perspective with the more informed and enriched vision one has with multiply informed perspective, and they discuss the increased risk taking and learning that ensues when one builds confidence.

Faculty Perspectives:

"Participating in the TLI seminar [and working] with a student consultant shook my confidence to the bone. At the same time it gave me enough support to continue taking risks, adapting and problem-solving. In a sense, it deconstructed my confidence only to have me emerge after with more trust in my abilities."

"Hearing *why* something in the classroom worked allows it to be more easily reproducible, rather than simply 'getting lucky' over and over again. The 'getting lucky' mentality makes teaching feel draining. In contrast, confidence makes me feel as if I can get up and do it again more easily tomorrow. I think confidence is also linked to trust in others and the ability to forgive oneself - if you're confident that you teach well in general, it's easier to forgive oneself for a difficult day. Working with the consultant, who sees you over time, helps develop this sense of self-trust and self-confidence."

"Participation in the TLI seminar and working with a student consultant have increased and deepened my confidence. I think this has to do partly with draining some of the privacy from teaching, so that issues like in/security, dis/comfort, and confidence can get out on the table, be part of conversation with student and faculty colleagues, and thus become more conscious, shared, and available, thus less liable to circumvent my teaching on a less conscious level. When you're confident, you take more (thoughtful) risks - or at least that's one way it can go."

"I think it really helped to get the outside reassurance that we teachers experience the same things in class time and again and that we are not alone in our issues and that we can learn from each other. The student consultant was a second set of eyes and ears confirming what I already sense both for good and ill in the classroom - another way to be confident that I was making the right choices in the classroom."

Student Perspectives:

"I think because of my TLI experience, I have the courage to take a more active role in class, like asking questions, sharing my thoughts, coming to office hours more often because I understand that faculty are actually open to voices from students' side through my partnership. After I do these things, I usually become more confident to do them again. Interestingly I notice it indicates how being active creates confidence. So I think these two parts are just two highly relevant components of learning."

"Engaging in conversations with faculty members about the choices they make when planning courses has greatly increased my confidence in my educators, and makes it much easier for me to be an understanding student (as opposed to a frustrated student at times). In addition, the fact that the faculty members care about my opinion and are interested in what I have to say increases my confidence in my own point of view. It has increased my confidence such that I am not only confident in my ability to perform tasks in an academic setting but I am also confident in the legitimacy of my point of view."

"To sit down with professors, people who are often intimidating, and actually call them your colleague builds confidence, the confidence that your perspective matters and is valuable information for your professors to learn. This program engages the active process of learning and creates a dialogue that can often be lost in a classroom setting. This experience translates to so many aspects of my life. I have the confidence it takes to talk with my superiors rather than allow myself to be talked at. I have confidence that my unique perspective matters. I have the confidence to be sure in my tone, my approach and my attitude when interacting with others. Being a part of TLI also gave me confidence in knowing that information I gather and possess that form my point of view, is not only unique, but it is also worth sharing."

"Participating in TLI has helped me to find my voice as a student when interacting with professors. That has definitely bolstered my confidence. I think that I am now more able to articulate my thoughts, concerns or comments to my professors and it has also helped me to find the language to properly articulate my thoughts regarding pedagogical issues."