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EMBRACING PRODUCTIVE DISRUPTIONS

Jody Cohen, Alison Cook-Sather, and Tiffany Shumate

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This discussion builds on two papers, one entitled “‘Culturally Responsive Teaching Has Been Redefined for Me’: What Happens When Underrepresented Students Work as Pedagogical Consultants to College Faculty,” which Alison, Jody, and Tiffany presented at the Ethnography in Education Conference at the University of Pennsylvania on February 27, 2009, and the other called “Creating More Culturally Responsive Classrooms: Underrepresented Students as Pedagogical Consultants in Student-Directed Professional Development,” which Alison and Jody presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association in San Diego, CA., on April 14, 2009. It draws as well on observation notes, discussions, and reflections all three of us generated through our participation in The Andrew W. Mellon Teaching and Learning Institute (TLI) at Bryn Mawr College.

Braiding our voices together here, sometimes speaking collectively and sometimes individually, we introduce a project in which we have participated called Toward Culturally Responsive Classrooms and provide some working definitions of culture that illuminate the challenges with which we have wrestled. We then provide a glimpse of a single moment in Jody’s classroom that occurred in 2008 that, through her dialogue with Tiffany, emerged not only as a defining one in her evolution of a more inclusive and responsive classroom but also constituted a “productive disruption” of assumptions, perspectives, and roles. We conclude our discussion with some reflections on learnings we all take forward, and we give the final word to a wider group of student consultants who have participated in this project and who helped generate recommendations for creating more culturally responsive classrooms, which are included in an appendix.

Introduction

Both research literature and anecdotal reports reveal that students from underrepresented groups do not find many classrooms in which they feel that their diverse identities are welcomed and valued and in which the content and processes of the course are responsive to their needs and strengths as learners. Supported by a grant from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, a project called Toward Culturally Responsive Classrooms (TCRC) created a rare forum for faculty to talk with one another and with undergraduate students positioned as pedagogical consultants regarding how to make teaching and learning experiences more responsive to diverse learners. Through this project, undergraduates at Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges from underrepresented groups were not the “‘acted upon’ or the objects in education” (Asante, 1991, p. 171) but rather subjects and actors in the project of working to create more inclusive

classrooms. The insights they generated have informed work through Bryn Mawr's Teaching and Learning Institute (TLI) since.

In the spring of 2007, five Bryn Mawr and Haverford College faculty members, including Jody, worked with five undergraduate students of color in the role of pedagogical consultant, including Tiffany, in the pilot phase of TCRC, facilitated by Alison. In each faculty-student partnership that was formed during the pilot phase, the student consultant observed the faculty member's class each week and met weekly with her faculty partner to try to identify culturally responsive approaches in classrooms — those that were already being practiced and those that could be. Alison also met weekly with the student consultants and occasionally with the faculty members.

A year later, in the spring of 2008, five faculty members, again including Jody working with Tiffany a second time, participated in a second phase of this project, a seminar supported by an expanded grant from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the Provosts at both Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges, and the Office of Intercultural Affairs at Bryn Mawr College. As part of this project, faculty participants:

- met in a weekly 2-hour seminar facilitated by Alison
- posted to a weekly, closed blog
- were observed each week by a student consultant, who identified existing and potential culturally responsive practices
- met weekly with their respective student consultants to talk about how to make their classrooms more culturally responsive, and
- created a portfolio at the end of the semester that represented their work throughout the semester.

Alison also met weekly with all student consultants to talk about how best to support faculty in this work. At this time, Tiffany was completing her minor in Educational Studies in addition to her major in Sociology, and she was working in an intensive independent study with Alison focused on culturally responsive teaching.

Since these first two phases of the project, explicit conversation about creating more culturally responsive classrooms has been integrated into all faculty pedagogy seminars offered through the TLI. The report generated at the end of the pilot year to document participant findings, and in particular the recommendations for creating more culturally responsive classrooms (see appendix), are included among the readings for each seminar and serve as jumping off points for our ongoing efforts to explore, complicate, and clarify these complex issues.

In this discussion we highlight how this work constitutes various forms of “productive disruption” — what Glasser and Powers (2011) define as “disruptions to the roles of ‘faculty’ and ‘students,’ perhaps even leading some to identify as equal ‘learners’ and ‘contributors.’” As a program, for us collectively, and for us individually, TCRC invited and challenged us to critically analyze definitions of culture, re-examine our assumptions, and reconceptualize and reposition ourselves in relation to one another and to others involved in the ever-evolving development of culturally responsive classrooms.

Dimensions of Culture in the Classroom Context

Several dimensions of culture emerged as salient during TCRC, and we continue to wrestle with these as our work through the TLI unfolds. Four of the formal definitions of culture intersected in complicated ways: (1) the totality of socially transmitted behavior patterns, arts, beliefs, institutions, and all other products of human work and thought; (2) intellectual and artistic activity and the works produced by it; (3) development of the intellect through training or education; and (4) a high degree of taste and refinement formed by aesthetic and intellectual training. (All definitions from *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, 4th Edition*.) Culture, then, is about cultivation, as its root implies, and about the passing on of what is cultivated. There are tensions in the definitions between fixedness and formation, between what is established and what is evolving. In the realm of education as elsewhere, there is often a tension between, on the one hand, the commitment to cultivating and passing on the products of human work and thought that belong to a particular subset of a population—the dominant one—and, on the other hand, respect for, attention to, and passing on of the culture(s) of the wide variety of origins from which students issue. Finally, there are tensions in different definitions of culture between what is considered desirable and what is considered disadvantageous—between culture as a resource or benefit and culture as a disability or deficit.

These basic definitions and tensions revealed themselves within TCRC as between the notion of *being* “cultured”—cultivated, enlightened, and refined—a state acquired by intellectual and aesthetic training (*Webster’s International, 2nd edition, unabridged*)—and *having* culture as experienced by individuals and groups of students. The former variation of culture (being cultured) highlights a particular process of refinement—a movement toward a particular state of development—but throws into relief as well the fixedness of that desired state: a cultured person has a particular “structured cultural relationship,” as one faculty member put it, to a particular kind of knowledge. There was some disagreement among the student consultants who piloted TCRC as to whether being cultured in this way was elitist or just “the educated ideal” (Discussion among Student Consultants, 2/16/07). This variation of “culture” we found to be in marked contrast to the “culture” many non-mainstream students associate with their own identities—the historical, social selves they inhabit. These cultures are sets of particular values, attitudes, and practices that characterize groups that have been designated different kinds of status in the United States. In focus group discussions in Fall 2006 that Jody and Alison held and in which Tiffany participated as we prepared to launch the pilot phase of TCRC, non-mainstream students shared some of the experiences they have had in Bryn Mawr College classrooms, highlighting this variation of culture:

They look at me and they say, “Oh, Asian girl.” I’ve definitely had that happen in class. And my professor wrote on my paper: “Is English your second language?” I’m fifth generation Chinese American.

I was in a class and we were talking about some theory that applied differently to people of color, and [the professor] looked at a girl who happens to be Asian but she’s from South Africa, and the professor said to her, “What do you think?” And she said, “I’m South African.”

I usually don't feel comfortable speaking the way I would speak at home or with my friends just because I always feel that there's a stigma attached to it and also you are perpetuating stereotypes. I don't want people to attach that to my group of friends and attach that to my entire race. I feel like people at Bryn Mawr tend to do that. Professors and students will ask, "Well, as a Latina..." and you're supposed to speak for the race, you're supposed to speak for the population.

The faculty members who participated in the pilot phase of the project both expected and were confronted with these definitions, tensions, and student experiences. Four of the faculty members who participated were white and one identified as mixed heritage (white and Latina). Since “whites are taught to think of their lives as morally neutral, normative, and average, and also ideal” (McIntosh, 1990, p. 31), to question their pedagogical approaches and to ask for feedback on them represented an awareness on the part of these faculty members that “white culture... is different from others, but it doesn't get named as different. It gets named as normal” (Lee, 2004, p. 141). Having students of color in particular assume the role of consultant would, we hoped, call that assumed normalcy into question, as one faculty member both desired and feared: “There was something slightly threatening about having a student of color [as a consultant]: On the one hand I felt that she had a certain legitimacy as an informant, but it also made me feel more exposed—that she would be able to see all the things that were problems.” Despite the threat of being revealed as culturally insensitive, this same faculty member stated: “There is a perspective that only she can provide, and it seems to me an important one. You could bring experienced multicultural education people in and they wouldn't see the same things.”

As the faculty/student partnerships supported by TCRC—and those supported through the TLI since then—unfolded, these various dimensions of ‘culture’ were questioned and complicated, catalyzing and supporting various forms of productive disruption.

Striving for Productive Disruption

Alison: My goal as Coordinator of the TLI and of TCRC in particular has been to invite and support disruptions of the norms according to which faculty lead and students follow; faculty and students avoid direct confrontation regarding differences of culture, of perspective based on experience, of goals and expectations; and faculty, perhaps largely unconsciously, privilege certain identities and knowledge and, as in the examples from students' experiences cited above, make detrimental assumption about students. I do not mean to imply that all faculty embrace these norms; rather, I mean to name these as norms in relation to which faculty must position themselves. By creating spaces outside of regular class time and faculty/student interaction, by positioning both students and faculty differently in relation to one another, and by naming what often goes unnamed in relation to cultural differences, I aimed to provide a forum within which such confrontations could unfold as supported conversations — opportunities to turn the disruptions into new possibilities for increased awareness and respect and more collaborative engagement.

TCRC — and all TLI forums — disrupt typical patterns of experience and analysis of what happens in classrooms by affording faculty members a rare opportunity to get inside students' heads and by affording students the rare opportunity of having their voices and perspectives

complicate and enrich faculty members' (and their own) perspectives. In addition, TCRC invites faculty members to engage more intentionally and explicitly with the issues around which they generally sustain only internal dialogue. While teaching their courses, faculty members have regular opportunities to step back from their practice and analyze it with the input of an interested student but not one enrolled in the class itself. Being in dialogue with students for an entire semester affords faculty members insights into what goes on in students' minds as well as a sustained opportunity to articulate and examine what goes on in their own minds.

Getting Inside Students' Heads

Faculty members talked about how TCRC provided them with access to what is happening in students' minds and in their experiences that had previously been unattainable:

[I was surprised] that [my student consultant] would be willing to tell me so much of what was going on in her head when she listened and in the students' heads about ways they felt that were not rational—"It makes me comfortable when you do this. This is uncomfortable for me or difficult for me." I think that that was something that I had not quite reached with students before.

Jody commented on this dimension of TCRC when she participated in the pilot phase:

Getting to hear [my student consultant's] daily experience was really informative because she is not the only one having these experiences. [Her] role was a powerful reminder of how much students can tell you and how much it matters who they are friends with and how they are thinking of other people in the class. You're teaching students, not content.

In reflecting on her first semester working with Tiffany through TCRC, Jody talked about how conversations with Tiffany ensured that she "thought about students in different ways" because Tiffany "would bring up things about them and their engagement and what they were thinking." She elaborated on this point:

There were a number of times when [Tiffany] was bringing positive observations that I also wouldn't necessarily have known— that so-and-so was feeling particularly interested and engaged by a topic or a teaching approach that I wouldn't have necessarily thought about. I often felt like, Oh, I didn't see it that way, and now I do; now I have that perspective.

Making voices of underrepresented and uniquely positioned students audible, putting them in dialogue with faculty members' own voices and perspectives, constitutes a productive disruption of the sense faculty make on their own — or even in consultation with students enrolled in their courses — of what students experience. Such dialogues have the potential to address more directly the tensions among the various definitions of culture listed above: between working toward the 'educated ideal' — being cultured (cultivated, enlightened, refined) — and having (and valuing and sustaining) the culture(s) individual students bring. It does so by giving voice to and bringing into dialogue what otherwise can remain assumed and unspoken perspectives.

Engaging in Dialogue about What's in Their Own Heads

Having the opportunity to get inside students' heads is complemented for faculty by having time and a mirror to look at what happens in their own heads. Some brought this expectation to the project. Jody stated: "I had the expectation that it would be great to talk explicitly about things that I was just struggling with in my head." Others discovered this benefit during the project:

I enjoyed having a colleague to think about teaching with. [My student consultant] had questions she wanted the answers to that sometimes weren't really related to what was on the table for the class—such as how did I think about constructing a class from the ground up...Listening to her reactions made me think about what I might do in general with framing with class. That was among the unexpected benefits. Having that extra perspective was really good for my teaching.

The faculty member above emphasizes how engaging in dialogue with the student consultant helped her reflect on and clarify her existing rationale behind and choices about teaching. Other faculty members talked about how the dialogue changed their thinking:

[The student consultant] changed my thinking in probably half a dozen instances. I was already thinking along some of these lines, but she also really shifted my thinking.

These faculty members felt they gained perspective they could not otherwise have had, particularly regarding how to make their classrooms more inclusive. Because the dialogue was extended and focused, unfolding over an entire semester, faculty members felt that they better understood what students in their classes were experiencing and thinking over time and in various situations and could therefore make pedagogical choices that were more responsive to the diverse students in those classes. Thus, these disruptions of what are usually almost entirely internal thought processes were productive of deeper insight and capacity to respond to the variously positioned — and cultured, in both senses — students in their classes.

Embracing these two forms of productive disruption regarding how faculty perceived and understood student experiences and how they conceptualized their own pedagogical planning for student learning catalyzed changes in how faculty members conceptualized themselves. Engaging in a more informed dialogue — with student consultants and in their own minds — faculty seek and are receptive to other forms of productive disruption: for instance, of their own identities and how those inform or could inform the level of responsiveness of their classrooms.

An Illustrative Moment in the Evolution of a More Culturally Responsive Classroom: Putting the Self Out There

Jody: Working with Alison, other faculty, and student consultants has both supported and challenged me in my classroom practice. One of the most productive disruptions I have experienced is in my sense of myself as a white middle-class women committed to urban education. Below I narrate a series of pivotal moments that unfolded in the spring of 2008, adapted from my TLI portfolio and including some of Tiffany's words, which threw this productive disruption into relief:

Early in [the semester that I was teaching “Schools in American Cities”], the class had drafted aspirations for how we wanted to be as a learning community. About mid-way through, Tiffany and I were talking about the class as a community, and who seemed to feel a part of that community, or not; as we began to problematize this notion of the ‘learning community,’ we decided that I would revisit the aspirations with the class. This turned out to be not an easy discussion. Afterwards, I received this email from Tiffany. I felt myself both resonating with and resisting her insights.

Even though Beth and Ariel [two white women in the class] seemed to be taking a step in speaking honestly, I felt as if they were exercising a privilege that made it ok for them to be ‘audience participants.’ From my understanding, they were saying that they did not feel connected to the experiences of the students in the text and therefore, did not feel as if they had the authority to speak about urban education issues. This enables them to read without challenging the authors or critically analyzing the text. In class, they can also say “My experience is not relevant in this case, so I have nothing to add to this conversation.” I feel as if this audience participant role discourages students from grappling with their privilege. Instead of asking “Why is my experience different from yours?” or “What privileges have I had (and still might have) that adds to this inequity?” they observe and listen. This collapses the dynamic experiences of students of color and those who have attended urban schools. These experiences are front and center while other students have the privilege to detach themselves from the text. So the question is: how do we create a classroom environment in which the dominate voice is de-centered, yet also in dialogue with the other voices? I have a suggestion: Today in class, you told the students that Schools in American Cities was the course that is “closest to [your] heart.” I am wondering if the students hear you saying “I am a white, middle class, suburban woman and I still have to grapple with these issues,” if they will be able to model your engagement with topics that do not necessarily reflect your identity. I have been wanting to speak more with you about this approach...

Tiffany’s reflections on this issue were difficult for me to hear in several regards: I had read Beth and Ariel somewhat differently — as owning their identities and acknowledging what they didn’t know — and now needed to reconsider this understanding, and to see it (uncomfortably) in light of my own positioning as a white person. Furthermore, Tiffany’s highlighting of the issue of how I bring myself into the classroom made me conscious of my self in an unaccustomed and uneasy way, in particular as a white middle-class woman passionate about and engaged with urban education, and also teaching a large number of white students at elite liberal arts colleges. I had to struggle through some embarrassment in order to revisit my motives and my commitment in order to claim and model this identity for students. So I needed to not only be myself but to name and claim that self in terms of a privileged social location but with active, forward-moving recognition rather than effacement or guilt.

Tiffany helped me to locate some ways I could do this. And I did — dealing with my discomfort noticeably, at least to me; like swallowing a large pill... And within a class period or two several also noticeable shifts occurred whereby white students began to claim a new kind of space in the classroom. They raised issues/questions like:

When a white person comes to work in an urban classroom, there's this pause, like what are you doing here.

and

What does it mean for me as a white woman to want to work with urban students? Should I do this and how can I do it well?

The way students of color were taking up their positions in the classroom also shifted; as if they physically moved over, allowing that space for classmates, and yet also spoke themselves from what appeared to be a sense of greater ease and space. Community began to feel different in this classroom.

I'm still left with questions like, were the white people in the classroom directing their/our questions to the students of color, e.g. for some kind of permission?

Although part of me wanted to discount Tiffany's insights and suggestions, I also became aware that this was a symptom of a desire to act from my identity as the professor—read “morally neutral” and owner of the “cultured stated” acquired through “intellectual training.” Tiffany was asking me to claim instead my own “historical, social self” because in that claiming I could make visible and viable our diversity of historically and socially positioned selves. Rather than engaging in business as usual, which perpetuated but also masked a perspective defined by a single, dominant state, our dialogue guided me to resituate culture in our classroom in terms of who had it and what it meant for our work together.

Since the semester described here, these kinds of productive disruptions have continued to shape my thinking and practice. Although I've always seen myself as a teacher who is open to and even inviting of students' perspectives, this experience of working with Tiffany in the context of TCRC unsettled my notion of what it means to learn from and with my students. More specifically, I became aware of a strong tendency in myself to perceive positive stability in the classroom: I want to feel, and may unconsciously promote the feeling that all is well—that all students and all cultures are welcome in my classroom. The experience of working with Tiffany in the TCRC, however, acts as a continual albeit sometimes subtle rub, keeping me slightly off balance with the memory/awareness that while I have to trust my own sense of what's going on, I also can't fully trust this, and must also rely on others' perspectives to generate the productive tensions that characterize a fully alive classroom.

Tiffany: My first year as a student consultant, in the spring of 2007, I had not quite settled in my role. I believed being a student consultant was my job and my duties were to observe the classroom and offer suggestions to Jody. That was it. Even though Jody invited me to participate in discussions, I was hesitant. I felt that if I participated, I would run the risk of “over-participating” rather than observing. I spoke with Alison about the difficulty of straddling the observer and student roles, and she encouraged me to embrace them. She reminded me the purpose of my role was to share insights with Jody from my position. I believe I struggled with embracing the student consultant position at first because I was unsure of my “authority.” As a student, I was conditioned to be the learner; a learner in the sense that I am receiving information

from the teacher. As a student consultant, I was asked to forge this new position as student and teacher. Understanding and creating that position simultaneously opened me up to challenging experiences.

During the second time I was a student consultant for Jody, there is one class, I believe in retrospect, that served as a turning point in my role. We were having an energetic discussion about the African History mandate in Philadelphia's high schools. Jody read the statement "I agree with the African History mandate" and had the students arrange themselves according to strongly agree, agree, strongly disagree, and disagree. One student responded she did not agree with the mandate because history is from the perspective of the persons writing it. She continued to explain that the new African History curriculum was only teaching students a biased history from an African perspective. I was furious! Who was she, someone I assumed to be white, to comment about this mandate? What authority did she have to comment on a reform effort that does not apply to her? I was shocked by my reaction because I was so upset. I wanted to say something, maybe even yell. But I could not find words. I sat there. I remember leaving the class and feeling like something had been ripped from me. I felt robbed and I did not know why.

My reaction to this student's comment pushed me to understand and embrace my role as a student consultant. I had been looking at my position as dual roles: I was one part student, one part consultant. Taking on this role meant accepting the complexities of how my 'student-teacher' self interacts with my environments. I am an African American woman and my observations are filtered through that lens. Because of that, I saw the mandate as an opportunity for children of African descent to see themselves as subjects in their education. Teaching African history represented resistance to the white norm. Yet, my perspective is influenced by my identity. Embracing the student consultant position meant including those complexities and sharing those insights with my faculty colleague. Below is an excerpt from a response paper I wrote two weeks after the class:

What I learned from reading this evaluation and working with Jody and Darla [the TA for the class] is that being in a classroom community is a give-take relationship. Professors have an obligation to the students as well as the students to the Professors. A classroom community should not be a silent space where students are only on the receiving end of the education; the whole idea behind community is relationship, and students are responsible for actively participating in that relationship. If someone chooses not to uphold their end or is partially involved, the relationship crumbles.

What is interesting about the Professor-student dynamic in this case is that both the Professor and student's education are compromised. In this example of the student's evaluation, it is also her responsibility to speak up in class to challenge other students and the Professor. At the same time, like Jody pointed out, students should not have to feel pressured to speak for marginalized ideas/opinions. It stunts their growth and hinders community building in the classroom. Yet, everyone in the community should understand that their roles are fluid; in a classroom, both teacher and student characters shift and are interchangeable.

In my student-consultant role, I could not occupy dual roles; my student role was my teacher role and vice versa. Bringing my whole self into the role was the purpose.

As a first-year teacher, I am learning that straddling two identities – teacher and student – can be just as detrimental to learning as it is beneficial. I sometimes catch myself taking the liberty to prepare lessons based on what I would have wanted to learn as an African American student. This feels like I'm working towards a culturally responsive classroom, but when my students resist through disengagement, I realize that I am running the risk of collapsing their identities based on my own. In bringing my whole self into my teaching, I sometimes minimize the complexity of being African American to fit a lens that makes sense to me – It is like I am projecting my identity onto my students. I am constantly learning that being a culturally responsive teacher not only means acknowledging their cultural identities, but also allowing them to co-create the learning environment. I am realizing that this means I have to genuinely become the student and relinquish my authority as the head of the class. This has been a difficult process, especially teaching in an established school culture that maintains the teacher as the leader of the class. Yet, I am determined to help my students take ownership of their own learning. I am working at this by asking more questions in class, “stepping back” in my teaching and allowing students to guide discussions.

Embracing Productive Disruptions

In this penultimate section of this discussion, we reflect on how each of us embraced the productive disruptions that TCRC catalyzes. We each express, from our respective perspectives, how we experienced the claim that — “culturally responsive teaching has been redefined for me” — which was spoken by another student consultant who participated in this project. Her explanation of what she meant by that statement speaks directly to our experience of productive disruptions not only of experiences and expectations but also of identities and roles. She wrote:

I assumed I would be looking at race – so how many students of color are in the classroom, etc. Culturally responsive teaching has been redefined for me as not just visible diversity but rather the culture of the classroom that you can work within. My expectation was to look narrowly at what culture meant, and it evolved to much bigger than that.

The phrase “the culture of the classroom” illuminates the potentially productive (or, conversely, the potentially unproductive) intersection in a classroom of efforts to cultivate both deeper shared knowledge and respective identities. “Culturally responsive teaching,” this student consultant suggests, has to do with the values, patterns of engagement, and integration of differences that is nuanced, inclusive, and responsive. As the person with the greater institutional power (and often greater cultural capital as well), the teacher must be conscious and intentional in how she creates a culturally responsive classroom.

Jody: Sometimes I bring myself into the classroom without thinking about it, but when doing this deliberately I notice my own resistance, which comes in the form of questioning my taking of ‘center stage’ this way. Working with my resistance is a powerful way for me to connect with the risks students take when they put their selves out in the classroom. I'd assumed that because as teacher I'm often center stage in the sense that I shape what's going on, I was already putting my self out there. But I'm often doing this in a way that I've become comfortable with, that's about my teacher persona; this other way of bring my self in is also deliberate, but makes me open, exposed to *their* assumptions and suppositions, just as they risk this with each other. For

example, if I talk about myself as a white person, although I was obviously white before, now I'm white in an explicit way that invites students to see me in light of whiteness in our shared texts and lives. In this light, I now see students' risks differently, as they too become vulnerable to all the perceptions and assumptions in the room (and beyond—no matter how much we agree that 'what's said here, stays here').

The willingness to be vulnerable in ways that extend and deepen our pursuits isn't in any course contract that I know, nor is it in my syllabus. And yet this is a core issue in this course, and always has been, although I hadn't seen it this way before. Maybe the question is how to create similarly vulnerable situations for students of color and white students; in order to do this, Tiffany suggested that I needed to be vulnerable. Perhaps all of us have to put ourselves in a vulnerable position to receive someone else's vulnerability.

This all goes back to a recommendation from the TCRC report, as Tiffany pointed out to me:

(4) Recommendations for Sharing Your Own Experiences

- Consider your own 'social location' in your thinking about what and how to share aspects of your life.
- Think ahead of time—before you begin teaching a particular class—about the kinds of things you feel are comfortable and appropriate to share with students within the context of exploring the subject matter of any given course, and be aware as you move through the course of opportunities to share your own personal angles on or experiences of the subject.

This recommendation seemed fairly obvious and even rudimentary to me until this realization that this too happens in layers of depth and real-ness. This is a powerful reminder to me of how learning/understanding comes in layers.

And I would now add: Know that thinking ahead of time about what I'm comfortable sharing is only helpful insofar as it helps me to think and feel more honestly and truly in the moment, and to be open to what I'm uncomfortable sharing. At first this past semester I thought I couldn't do this at all without Tiffany, but then I realized, as I said to Tiffany: "You're not there, but you're in my head."

Tiffany: As a student consultant, I was a colleague. I was invited to be an active participant in creating an environment that was rooted in equity. What I often offered was unfiltered through my identity as an African American woman. That lens was not seen as biased, but as part of multiple lenses that make up a class. Culturally responsive teaching is about seeing the classroom as made of multiple lenses. In this sense, such teaching is a pedagogy of communication. It allows people to maintain their own identities while providing open spaces to engage with others. Using the African history mandate example, embracing my whole identity would have enabled me to communicate my perspective without feeling threatened. I would have also been able to see the other student's comment as another perspective from which to see the mandate.

I am often reminded of this experience and my reaction to it. The greatest part that remains with me is how crippled I felt by the student's comment. If I had such a powerful reaction to it, why did I not respond? Jody's class was definitely a learning environment in which students were encouraged to grapple with difficult issues and to challenge each other. So why did I remain silent at that particular moment? I believe, whether consciously or unconsciously, I internalized my position as the distanced "observer" and consultant. Although Jody encouraged my active participation, I did not feel as if I had a right to speak out so strongly – I did not want to overstep my boundary. But was my silence a reaction to the boundary I created as a student consultant, or was it a response to something deeper? I believe it was both. As an African American woman in a predominately white environment, it was a risk to bring my whole self to class. I did not want to be on stage and did not want my peers to judge my race based on my views. To truly unveil myself would have meant that I participated without boundaries. Yet, it was that boundary that protected me from being put on display. I now believe the silence I experienced in that moment also served as a protective barrier – It gave me a safe space in which to have that visceral reaction without being judged. I believe this space is necessary for underrepresented students in predominately white environments because it is a space we can embrace as our own. It allows for time to think and construct. The silence I experienced allowed me to articulate what her comments meant to me as an African American *and* a student consultant. I was also able to reflect on how I might respond actively if presented a similar situation. My silence also stunted me. In that moment, I felt as if she had taken something away from me. How could I not speak up about something I claimed to be so passionate? I was disappointed in myself for not having the words or the courage to respond right away. I see now that it was not necessarily her, but the boundary that neither she nor I could cross. Although the culture of the class was open and student voices were welcomed, I believe it is necessary to also let students know that active silence is welcomed as well – active silence being a space in which students can reflect and revisit at a later time. As an educator, I grapple with the question of how to create this class that both gives "silent" space and allows underrepresented students to take ownership of their learning by using their voices.

Alison: Jody and Tiffany are always in my head now, too, as are many of the other participants, faculty members and student consultants, in these conversations about creating more culturally responsive classrooms. Their struggles and eloquent expressions of what they realize and what they hope to carry forward in practice inform how I structure the forums to support such explorations as well as my own practice.

Like both Jody and Tiffany, I am more conscious of my identity (as a privileged white woman) and positioning (as a professor and coordinator of this program) as a result of this work, particularly when a culturally charged issue comes up in our student consultant meetings or in the faculty seminar. I have worked on developing a language to facilitate exploration of these issues, and as with learning any language, the more you practice speaking it, the more able you are to speak it. The ability to speak more clearly about the issues doesn't eliminate or solve them, and it doesn't remove the raw feeling of risk I still experience when trying to address directly these complex issues of identity and role that are informed by cultural — and other — differences, but it makes exploration of and action based on them more informed.

Work through the TLI, and particularly around developing more culturally responsive classrooms, makes it clearer and clearer to me that this work has to be collaborative. In reflecting on the semester that we all worked together, I wrote, echoing some of what Tiffany has articulated: “I see the work of creating culturally responsive classrooms as a shared project, a joint responsibility of faculty members and students.” That shared responsibility includes developing a critical perspective on both the dominant and the underrepresented cultures at play in any classroom, it includes wrestling with the tensions students — and faculty — experience between being cultured and having culture, and it includes bringing into productive, respectful, and also risky dialogue the particular people in any given classroom. As Stillman & Struthers (2011) contend, one “cannot construct a relevant curriculum preemptively, but must rely instead on students’ voices and expressions of how they ‘live culturally every day’ (Gutiérrez, 2009) as they attempt to create relevant learning experiences.” This is the challenge of developing culturally responsive classrooms: it is context- and participant-specific work.

I conceptualized this project to create space within which faculty and students could engage in reflection, develop meta-cognitive awareness, and participate in open dialogue in order to develop insights, language, and capacity to continue this ongoing work. I hope that the particular productive disruptions it has thus far fostered will catalyze other, as yet unanticipated, productive disruptions.

Student Consultants’ Experiences of Working Toward Culturally Responsive Classrooms

In this final section, the student consultants who participated in the pilot phase of TCRC describe the insights and revisions they experienced through their work. We let these statements speak for themselves, without framing or comment from us. Student consultants experienced the following:

- Gaining perspective and a better understanding of experiences of others in the classroom — students and professors
- Having the opportunity to engage in deeper critical thinking about teaching, learning, and culture
- Building a greater sense of comfort and confidence; and
- Developing a sense of agency as students and, in some cases, as teachers.

Gaining Perspective on Others’ Experiences

[I am] more aware as to what’s going on in the classroom. I really feel that as a student in the class I wasn’t so aware. I knew I wasn’t so aware to see other perspectives of students so well. (S5)

I began to understand people’s expectations of courses and the fact that they are different. So seeing people answer or not answer certain questions is not an indication of how other people are doing, just an indication of how that student is doing. (S1)

Engaging in Deeper Critical Thinking about Teaching, Learning, and Culture

Reconsidering Teaching

Participating in this project made me start to think about how profs have goals for how they want students to come out of the classroom. It made me think about what are the broader things that profs want students to take away as social beings in the world. It wasn't always just about knowing this or that for the final paper, but what is it that you want your students to take from this as people. As a future educator that's a question I feel that I would want to have inform the pedagogical approaches I want to take on in the classroom. It's not just how do you make sense of this in this space, but how does it speak to you and your personal experiences from here on out. Placing education in a social context. (S3)

I am more aware as a learner and as a teacher. I understand that if I am at the front of the classroom, there are a lot of things that I may not notice that are also brought into the classroom, and that talking to students about those things is the best way to get insight into them, if I don't have a teacher's aide or an observer. Just understanding there is always something else going on besides teaching that class. (S4)

Reconsidering Learning

I didn't expect this to affect me in other classes as much as it did. Especially midway through when we were having these discussions in our student observer meetings about how we as students help or do not help students to learn. Blurting out answers in class or not leaving enough time for other people to process things. Going back to expectations: I might be in the class and want to break it down to a basic level, but others don't. My asking a question that seems irrelevant to other students or relevant to them. I definitely think now more before I ask or answer questions. I get more impatient with other students in this class; I think they should wait a little longer before talking. (S1)

You really don't understand the way you learn and how others learn until you can step back from it and are not in the class with the main aim to learn the material of the class but more to understand what is going on in the class and what is going through people's minds as they relate with that material. I just feel like it helps in general life to be able to look at any process you are involved in a bit more objectively. Learning is really big, there are so many layers to it. It's a good experience to be able to change roles and see things from a different perspective. It just enriches your life as a student in general. (S1)

Reconsidering Culture

I found myself thinking a whole lot more than I thought I would and analyzing, like, when they made a joke. Things I normally wouldn't think of had I not been put in this position. Because of that I would notice things in my other classrooms and think, "This is inappropriate! This is not culturally responsive!" It changed the way I looked at all of the classrooms, not just the classrooms I observed. (S2)

I assumed I would be looking at race – so how many students of color are in the classroom, etc. Culturally responsive teaching has been redefined for me as not just visible diversity but rather the culture of the classroom that you can work within. My expectation was to look narrowly at what culture meant, and it evolved to much bigger than that. (S3)

Increased Comfort and Confidence as Students

I feel like this way able to separate myself a bit, sort of be more objective, and that helped me to express what was really going on. It felt more that problems I was seeing were more like general student problems instead of being just my problems. I felt more comfortable saying, “I think this is something that is a problem with classes at Bryn Mawr.” That gave me more confidence in talking about things. (S1)

At first I was kind of skeptical because you are a student and these profs have been doing this for quite some time they have advanced degrees, you’re a kid with some college. And you are trying to come in and say, “Do this better, do that.” And you could easily be dismissed. And I didn’t want to have that experience. I am honored that things I say have any value. It was so good that people wanted to hear and took into the perspective that I was bring. It was so nice to think I had a perspective I hadn’t thought about. And then she would say things I had thought about. So it challenged both of us. So it just made me think a whole lot more about issues that aren’t always on the forefront of my mind. (S2)

I feel like now my role is more than just the student. In past discussions I’ve always been talking about what the profs do to us and it’s been a one-way street. And now I am able to look at it as a relationship in the classroom; if we’re complaining about something that is going on, it’s also the students’ role to step up and say something about that. (S4)

Just being able to approach the professor and not be afraid to tell them that something is wrong. And not just in this case but in any situation. Usually I just follow what the professor says – everyone does the same thing to get the good grade, but it’s OK to speak up but at the same time be careful. (S5)

Developing a Sense of Empowerment

As a learner, you have the right to go to your professor and say, “This way of teaching may not be helping me.” You have that right to walk up and go up to them and say, “Are there other ways you could do this so I could understand the material and be more engaged in the classroom?” Asking for a rationale. I did a lot of that with [the professor I worked with]: Why are you doing this and why this means. It forces the prof to really think about it or articulate things they aren’t asked to articulate. Being able to feel like I can have that kind of professional relationship with my profs as a learner. That’s definitely over time that I’ve developed that: before they were the authority. (S3)

I definitely feel as if being a part of the project I have been able to talk to my own profs a little more about what I’d like to see in the classroom and what I feel isn’t noticed in the classroom. For example, there was a class, my psych class, and we were talking about ethnic identity

development, and all of the students of color were speaking and the white students were not. I mentioned that to the prof that evening, and she divided us into groups the next day and changed the reading — she included an article that was about white ethnic development. So that article got the class talking. So being aware that I am an student and there are things my prof might not see, that I have the right to say, “Hey did you notice this?” (S4)

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Appendix: Recommendations for Culturally Responsive Classroom Practice

These recommendations emerged from audiotapes of the reflective meetings of all student consultants and the coordinator of this project and written assessment forms completed by all faculty and student participants.

(1) Be Explicit about Stance and Pedagogical Rationale

- State explicitly and repeatedly the reason why you are doing something or asking students to do something.
- Be clear about but not impositional with your own biases and commitments. They inform your practice regardless of whether you name them or not, so naming them makes for a more genuine dialogue.

(2) Make Expectations Explicit

- **Regarding the class:** At the beginning of the semester, ideally the first or second class meeting, distribute index cards to students and ask them to take a few minutes and write down why they are taking the class and what they hope to get out of it. Tell them you will collect these. Have a conversation with students after they have written on their cards. Also, take the cards away and read them and, if it seems appropriate, share the student statements in generic form (i.e., not with names or any other identifying information) so that everyone knows the range of reasons why people are in the class.
- **Regarding Disciplinary Approaches:** Find occasions (in class) and forums (e.g., syllabus, in framing assignments) to make explicit (a) general expectations regarding discipline-specific ways of thinking and writing and (b) your own particular expectations regarding these in a particular course. Ask students for their experiences of and feedback on these.
- **Regarding Assignments:** With any forum for participation in the class, graded or ungraded but particularly graded, be explicit up front (in syllabus, in introducing the class or an assignment) about what your goals and expectations are for the assignment and check in with students regularly about how they are experiencing the assignment, what they are getting out of it, and what their frustrations with it are. This kind of ongoing dialogue takes time, but it is worth it so that students feel clear about and engaged in the assignments.

Professors' Expectations:

- When asking students to write down why they are taking the class and what they hope to get out of it, answer those questions yourself and share them with the class.
- Clarify and articulate for yourself (a) general expectations regarding discipline-specific ways of thinking and writing and (b) your own particular expectations regarding these in a particular course and find occasions (in class) and forums (e.g., syllabus, in framing assignments) to make those explicit.
- With any forum for participation in the class, be explicit up front (in syllabus, in introducing the class or an assignment) about what your goals and expectations for the assignment are and check in with students regularly about how they are experiencing the assignment, what they are getting out of it, and what their frustrations with it are. Then make choices about how to clarify or modify your expectations.
- Find ways early in the semester to get to know your students, such a questionnaire or an interest or experience survey.

(3) Get to Know Students

Sources for ideas:

- What Kids Can Do. (2003). "First Ask, Then Listen."
- MacBeath et al. (2003). *Consulting Pupils: A Toolkit for Teachers*

(4) Share Your Own Experiences

- Consider your own 'social location' in your thinking about what and how to share aspects of your life.
- Think ahead of time—before you begin teaching a particular class—about the kinds of things you feel are comfortable and appropriate to share with students within the context of exploring the subject matter of any given course, and be aware as you move through the course of opportunities to share your own personal angles on or experiences of the subject.
- Think about the nature of participation you want from students—listening and taking notes, engaging in discussion, etc.—and think about what different learning styles, cultural and otherwise, students bring to your classroom, then configure the room in various ways at different times so that it is most conducive to each of those modes and styles.
- For active student participation, create smaller, structured forums—talking briefly with one other student; writing for a minute, then sharing with a partner, then sharing with the larger group; etc.—within which students can clarify and deepen their own ideas, gain confidence, and prepare to contribute to larger class discussion.

(5) Provide Various Forums for Participation

(6) Use Multiple, Inclusive Examples and Illustrations

- Analyze the examples you use to illustrate concepts or points and consider whether you are making assumptions about background knowledge and experiences.
- Building on what you learn from getting to know students and what you are comfortable sharing from your own experiences, generate a range of examples that illustrate different concepts or points, and include more than one example or illustration in your discussions.
- During the course of a class, be conscious of allowing for student silence—and remaining silent yourself—while students have the chance to think and formulate their thoughts.
- Create regular opportunities—short writing times, memos, Blackboard forums, etc.—for students to have silent times during and outside of class to process what they are learning.
- Consider ways to bring a variety of student voices into dialogue within the class without making students too vulnerable, such as reading aloud anonymous journal excerpts and framing/facilitating discussion around them.

(7) Consider the Role of Silence

(8) Be Allies and Advocates

- Make conscious with whom you align yourself and why and try to complicate, question, and perhaps expand that positioning.
- Find ways to be clear about how you position yourself in relation to students and speak with students whose voices are often marginalized or silenced but without silencing other voices.
- Find ways to bring various students' voices into dialogue.
- Consider ways you can make yourself vulnerable and take risks comparable to—not necessarily the same as—the ones you ask students to take.

(9) Become More Conscious and Deliberate

- Identify the choices we make for particular pedagogical reasons and then analyze them for how they might also address other pedagogical issues, particularly, how they might be responsive to diverse students;
- Take a step back from the choices we make regarding how we construct and facilitate a course and ask ourselves if there are other choices we could make that would be more responsive to diverse students.
- Step back and try to look at the content of our courses with the eye of someone unfamiliar with it and think about what might need to be flagged or highlighted; and
- Find and develop a relationship with a long-term consultant, ideally someone in a cognitive place that is very different than your own.