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DISCERNING GROWTH: LESSONS FROM ONE TLI PARTNERSHIP

Zanny Alter, Bryn Mawr College, 2009

At the close of my first year of graduate school studying Education I was given a simple assignment that took me weeks to complete. The prompt was a seemingly straightforward piece of reflective writing, yet I struggled to answer this question: *Over the past nine months, in what area have you grown the most?*

I was curious as to why this question left me paralyzed and quickly came to realize that it had to do with the idea of “growth.” Growth is something positive that so often we are implicitly or explicitly striving toward. However, in the midst of a process that might be the most growth inducing, it is generally the hardest to recognize. For me, the idea of growth implies constructive and forward-moving change. It conjures up images of flowers blooming in spring or the process of a scrawny tree establishing deep and sustaining roots. Too often, these positive elements of growth are difficult, if not impossible, to see, on our own. They are even harder to recognize when we are steeped in an intense and often emotional experience.

While I knew on an intellectual level that I had grown, in fact quite a great deal, my knee-jerk response to the prompt was, “I haven’t grown at all.” The time I spent grappling with this question sent me down an inevitable path of self-reflection that led me to a surprising place—a particular partnership I had in the TLI program. My experience working with a range of colleagues during my experience in the TLI, and taking the time, in each case, to reflect on our work, allowed me to recognize growth during and after the experience.

During the fall of my senior year at Bryn Mawr I began my second TLI partnership with a new professor at Haverford College. Despite the fact that I was majoring in this professor’s discipline, after our first meeting together I doubted my own qualifications and ability to be a helpful partner in this work. My faculty partner was incredibly knowledgeable in her field and I felt a little intimidated. What did I have to offer? Although I had developed confidence in my perspective through my previous TLI experience, starting again in this new partnership put me back to a place of less confidence and clarity. Although I had found a voice as a student consultant, rooted in my experiences as a student and my capacity to reflect critically on those experiences, starting a new dialogue with a new faculty member made it seem to me like I was starting over in my own process of growth.

I began to build the partnership believing I would make meaning of this new experience and overcome the doubt and insecurity I felt early on. But for the first half of the semester, I didn’t feel that was actually happening. Instead, I felt mired in frustration and self-doubt, all of which felt counter to my goal to experience *growth*. Part way into the semester, I was still trying to find my voice in this partnership — trying to find ways to analyze and communicate about pedagogy, which is at once a professional and a personal practice that is not often the subject of discussion between a faculty member and a student not enrolled in that faculty member’s course. Looking back, I can see that I was moving through a challenging and difficult-to-discern phase of growth

toward greater confidence and connection — the underground and thus invisible branching of roots that is a necessary part of growth. But at the time I didn't discern it.

At the mid-way point in the semester I was actively discouraged. I felt I was not making a positive difference in helping my partner. When it came time to do mid-course feedback with the class, my partner was hesitant, and that hesitation increased my own discomfort. Despite my experience with conducting mid-course feedback and what I knew from other student consultants' experiences, I worried that it might not go well.

Despite these concerns, during the class before the College's fall break I asked students in the class to fill out anonymous mid-course feedback and facilitated a brief discussion on the course. I was pleasantly surprised by the positive feedback students offered on the material and the professor's pedagogy. I had great insights to report back to my partner! These weren't simply hollow platitudes but specific pieces of affirmation that the material was not only engaging, but it was sinking in. As I began to type the student responses to the midcourse feedback I emailed my partner to express my excitement about how the process had gone and the constructive feedback students had offered. She wrote back expressing her relief and gratitude, as well as her excitement, and indicating that she looked forward to discussing the feedback.

Reflecting on this experience now, I can see clearly how this exchange drastically changed my working relationship with my partner. It was a moment of growth, one that we had been building to. By stepping back and asking students to reflect on their own learning and growth, I was also able to discern the growth that had been imperceptibly taking place in our partnership and in the work we had been doing together in relation to the class. The roots of the scrawny tree had been stretching through the soil, even though I hadn't perceived that growth. Both that growth and my perception of it were made possible by the weeks of work together and by the taking of a risk to assess what we had been striving toward.

The process of debating whether to do the midcourse feedback, taking the risk to do it, and receiving positive and productive feedback was affirming. It affirmed that I had a role and positive impact as student consultant, and it affirmed the power of the partnership we had been building in the TLI. From that point on I felt more confident in providing my partner with feedback. It took a long time for me to truly recognize and feel thankful for the *growth* I had been searching for. The partnership itself, and my reflection on our work, helped me discern that growth.

Although it hadn't been clear to me at the time, as I went back through our email exchanges during that semester, my growth was evident. I had in fact developed both trust and confidence through my partnership, and I not only (re)discovered my voice but also learned to speak easily with my faculty partner in ways that affirmed what was working in her classroom and let us talk together about what could be working better. Toward the end of the semester, I was able to write and speak confidently with my faculty partner about how much I appreciated her work and how much thought she put into it.

Growth, like most change, is highly incremental. It is even harder to see when you are always looking for it. In struggling to find areas of growth in my first nine months of graduate school I

am reminded by my TLI experience that growth may be most easily identified when we least expect to find it (e.g., in the process of conducting the mid-course feedback). If growth is the goal, but constantly searching it out diminishes our capacity to discern it, maybe our emphasis should be on patience, respect and belief in the process, and trusting those outside ourselves to help us find it.

Reflecting back on my partnerships in the TLI, and now my first year of graduate school, I am reminded of the importance of intentionally making the space and taking the time to reflect on my own growth throughout the process — not relentlessly looking for evidence but rather stepping back, after deep engagement, and analyzing the process in which we have been engaged. Doing so requires that we invite others into this reflective space with us, ensuring that in the process of engagement we gain a more nuanced and complex understanding of ourselves and our relations to others and the world.