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LEGITIMIZING STUDENT EXPERTISE IN STUDENT-FACULTY PARTNERSHIPS

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“If we don’t start involving students, and, more importantly, acknowledging when they do make a contribution, students are just going to be turned off. When exactly are their opinions supposed to be good enough to listen to? They have to practice to gain confidence.”

– Faculty partner quoted in Cook-Sather, Bovill, & Felten (2014, in press)

As a student consultant within the Teaching and Learning Institute (TLI) at Bryn Mawr College, I am constantly engaging in an environment of overlapping spheres where I walk, straddle, and sometimes move back and forth across the line between student and teacher. The partnerships in which I take up this shifting role are focused on exploring and revising pedagogical practices within the classrooms of the Bryn Mawr faculty members with whom I partner. As Meacham, Castor and Felten note in their essay in this issue, “Partners As Newcomers: Mixed-Role Partnerships As Communities of Practice,” a boundary-crossing role can be at the same time both uncomfortable and incredibly generative. This essay is about both aspects.

As a student, I have a special skill set and perspective that allows for a general knowledge regarding students’ experiences and needs. But in the role of student-consultant, I am also tasked with moving beyond this student sphere to offer feedback to professors on what is working well and what could be improved from a pedagogical perspective — a perspective that students are not generally asked to take. What, for me, makes this work, and my position within it, so dynamic is that there is no fixed position I am expected to assume and no definite end goal. In different times and places, I am a student, a student-teacher, and/or a teacher. The fluidity between these roles allows me to remain flexible as I encounter different obstacles, opportunities, disciplines and teaching styles within my partnerships. But I find that sustaining this role can be challenging because of the general lack of acknowledgement of student expertise — a lack the TLI aims to counter and that those of us who participate in this kind of work strive to change.

Noting the complexities of similar “mixed-role” partnerships in other contexts, the authors of “Partners as Newcomers” suggest that a more linear transition, rather than the more fluid one I describe, occurs upon establishment of these relationships. They state that “such a trajectory, from newcomer to legitimate peripheral participant, seems to capture a common experience in mixed-role higher education partnerships” (Meacham, Castor, & Felten, 2013). Relying on both personal experience and the experiences of my fellow TLI consultants, however, I believe this linear trajectory can be more nuanced and multi-directional within the dynamic of TLI student-faculty partnerships.

At the most basic level, TLI student-faculty partnerships consist of two separate communities of practice: that of the professor, who is an expert in his or her discipline, and that of the student. In following with linear trajectory scheme described earlier, student-faculty partnerships would involve both parties working towards becoming members of the other sphere. However, given

the complexities and power dynamics of the two groups involved, the interchange between partners is rarely this simple. With a student-faculty partnership, movement from the student sphere to the teacher sphere seems to be a more logical path, as this would generally be considered upward mobility. Conversely, the lack of attention to the student realm as a place of expertise creates a feeling of downgrading, making it harder for professors to reciprocate and follow the same type of trajectory. In fact, I claim that unpacking the question of students' legitimacy as experts is essential to understanding, and then further to improving, mixed-role partnerships between students and professors focused on pedagogical practice.

This undervaluing of the student role in analyses of teaching and learning is emphasized by the fact that student expertise as an idea does not yet exist in academic vernacular outside some of the work done on 'student voice' (Hutchings et al., 2011, pp. 39-40; see also Cook-Sather, 2002, and Hornsby, et al., 2011), emerging work on student-faculty partnerships (Delpish et al., 2010), and some of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (Werder & Otis, 2010). In my partnerships, I am an expert on the student perspective due to the sheer fact that I am a student myself. I am equipped with a set of skills gained from "engag[ing] in a process of collective learning in a shared domain of human endeavor" (Meacham, Castor, & Felten, 2013). While arguably indispensable in the realm of student-faculty partnerships, the act of being a college student is not typically considered "a common interest or competence" and thus it is a struggle for our expertise as students to be seen as legitimate to those unfamiliar with or unreceptive to the notion of students as experts (Meacham, Castor, & Felten, 2013).

This question of legitimacy is evident in the example Mark Meacham, a high school teacher featured in the article "Partners as Newcomers," provides. Meacham discusses the importance of "conferring legitimacy" (Lave & Wenger, 1991), which allowed him to more fluidly move towards becoming an experienced member of the university professor community (Meacham, Castor, & Felten, 2013). Meacham, a teacher with an established career, needed to feel as though his talents and skills were needed in the partnership he experienced with university professors. This then highlights an even greater need for students, whose community's legitimacy is even more in question (which another co-author of that essay, Maggie Castor, addresses from the perspective of a student). Ultimately, in order to create a reciprocal learning experience in mixed-role partnerships, it is necessary for both sides to be seen as having valuable abilities and perspectives that the other can learn from and move towards.

While it is possible to fit student-faculty partnerships focused on pedagogical explorations into this mold, another question arises in which we must ask if this linear trajectory is always usual. I maintain that this is one possible structure or style that a partnership can take. Other times, it can be useful for both students and professors to remain in a novice state. While professors hold degrees in their field, which confirm the legitimacy of their knowledge, this position is not always to the professors' greatest advantage. Students hold a certain expertise not only in that they are students but also by way of the fact that they are not professors. At times, it can be fruitful to embrace our position of amateur, as it can be a tool for helping professors to develop their teaching techniques.

Exemplifying this is the experience of one of my peers, a TLI consultant whose faculty partner taught in a field in which she had no coursework or experience. Initially, the student consultant

felt unsure about her ability to engage within her partnership because she was unfamiliar with the subject matter. Her faculty partner had hoped to co-teach an activity with the consultant, but she felt that she could not do that in a subject she knew nothing about. In reflecting on this phase of her partnership, the consultant said: “that’s when we determined that this partnership might be harder than we thought.”

In this example, the student felt compelled to follow the typical trajectory of moving from her position as a novice toward proficiency in a more professor-like role. While the TLI consultant could have tried to reconcile this issue by studying biological concepts and learning the discipline in an effort to engage as a teacher, she instead decided to remain a novice and use her position as a naïve learner as a tool within her partnership. She was able to assist her professor in improving upon his clarity and effectiveness in explaining difficult concepts just by drawing on her natural role as a newcomer into the field. While ultimately a fruitful tactic, the consultant expressed feeling the need to approach the partnership in a role more similar to co-facilitator, which involves moving into the professors’ realm of expertise.

This speaks again to how students’ expertise can be a valuable, yet under-recognized, addition to pedagogical partnerships. Successful mixed-role partnership experiences such as this reconfirm, for those who may be unexposed or skeptical, the various advantages of inviting student expertise in pedagogical partnerships. Had the student carried through by following the more traditional linear trajectory towards a professor-like role, the benefits her naiveté in the subject brought to the partnership might have been lost.

This example and how it informs the legitimacy of the student consultant’s role underscores the power dynamics that can come into play throughout student-faculty partnerships. Within the various partnerships I have had as a TLI consultant, and more specifically while discussing my observation notes, I have at times felt that speaking from my perspective as a student did not carry as much weight as my partners’ pedagogical or disciplinary logic for their choices within the classroom. I have also experienced how this type of power inequity can bring partnerships to a standstill, making it difficult for the student consultant and the professor to reach a comfortable compromise.

In these situations, I would make an effort to bolster my confidence by reminding myself that as a student myself, I had valuable insight into what was likely working well, and what was not working well, for the class. As I found my own confidence faltering, it worked well to constantly remind myself of this fact. I also made an effort to rethink how I framed any feedback or suggestions that I shared with my partner. I began using phrases such as: “In the past, it was very helpful for me when my professor did this in this situation.” My hope was that introducing my thoughts in such a way would ground what I was saying and confirm that the suggestions I was offering up were realistic; if they had been used successfully by another faculty member, I hoped my professor would find them accessible and implementable as well. This type of framing also invited a productive dialogue between my partner and me about how and why these tactics were effective, putting us on equal footing and creating a more comfortable space for pedagogical conversation within the partnership.

In an attempt to level the playing field and ensure that each partner is recognized for his or her contributions, students and faculty can engage in more explicit conversation about the specific expertise and skill sets each partner brings to the partnership. However, in order to most successfully rely on our role as students to contribute to our partnerships, there needs to be a widespread appreciation and legitimization of this student expertise. This, then, will provide the confidence boost necessary for students to embrace the knowledge that they bring to the table. As discussed, there is not a particularly strong history of students being recognized as experts in their “fields.” TLI and programs like it contribute to this widespread legitimization by placing students in a one-on-one dynamic where they are engaging in genuine partnership with professors, each bringing legitimate, but different, kinds of expertise.

Additionally, having recently participated in a panel for new faculty members, I see this as a forum that can also be used to very clearly establish the expertise of students. In this situation, three student panelists acted as resources for new faculty members, offering up suggestions from the student perspective on how to successfully teach at Haverford and Bryn Mawr Colleges. I remember this being a very empowering experience because this was not information I had studied for or held degrees in. I could confidently speak about the topic because I was drawing from experiences I had amassed simply by taking classes and being a student at Bryn Mawr. Having received follow-up questions both during and after the panel, I felt as though the new faculty were very receptive and appreciative of the advice I gave. This experience worked to validate my role as an expert student, an expertise I often forget I have because it is not typically reconfirmed in such a way. Though I am unsure of what form it would take, it seems clear to me that more students need to have experiences like this, which work to validate their expertise as learners and ensure that they feel confident in bringing this expertise to interactions with their professors.

Mixed-role partnerships in which students and faculty work together are unique in that they represent the overlapping and enmeshing of two spheres. Ultimately, to be successful in their partnerships, each group must rely on the perspectives and skills gained from their individual arenas of expertise and then to step further beyond these arenas. In this article, I explore the question of legitimacy in determining what students can add, and feel comfortable adding, to their partnership. Ultimately, I maintain that the idea of student expertise is an undervalued, but incredibly generative, addition to mixed-role partnerships. Moving forward, I suggest that higher education strive to legitimize students’ role as experts, a practice that will lead to more productive, equal interactions in partnerships between students and professors.

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