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## Teaching and Learning as Learning To Be: Finding My Place and Voice as a Leader

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## **TEACHING AND LEARNING AS LEARNING TO BE: FINDING MY PLACE AND VOICE AS A LEADER**

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The process of becoming a student consultant through the Teaching and Learning Institute (TLI) at Bryn Mawr College allowed me to think of myself as a leader for the first time. During my first semester in the role, I developed confidence and trust in myself that extends beyond the TLI into all areas of my life. In looking back upon my semester-long partnership with a new faculty member, I see myriad ways that she came to trust herself and move toward becoming the teacher she wants to be (see her discussion in this issue), and I see the theme of trust characterizing my own trajectory of growth: as a teacher, learner, interlocutor, and person. In this essay, I share my realization that it is possible to be introverted and a leader, and I focus on the process of developing teaching and learning in partnership as a means of building insights that have allowed me to work towards the fullest expression of my natural capabilities.

### **How a History of Uncertainty Initially Informed My Approach to Partnership**

For as long as I can remember, I have avoided taking on what I thought of as leadership roles and doubted the value of my insights and contributions. I have never been one to jump at the opportunity to coordinate large groups of people; the thought of heading a student club or being class president makes me cringe. Furthermore, I have struggled to feel as if I have opinions about certain subjects, especially in relation to many of my peers who so passionately speak of their perspectives on many issues. Even when I have had an opinion about a topic, I have often felt insecure sharing or defending it for fear that my viewpoint was not valid. Taken together, these experiences have always seemed to me to be signs of my own inherent inability to lead. This has left me feeling non-committal and inadequate, and my self-confidence and esteem have suffered at the expense of these beliefs.

These worries and insecurities carried over into the beginning of my experience as a student consultant. I knew I would have numerous leadership responsibilities — observing my faculty partner's teaching and deciding what to make note of; initiating weekly discussions with my faculty partner about my perceptions and suggestions; and contributing constructive and insightful thoughts and ideas to weekly meetings with student consultants. I think back to our initial orientation meeting at the very beginning of the semester, in which Alison Cook-Sather, in her role as Coordinator of the TLI, asked us each to write down one concern that we had about participating in the program. It would be an understatement to say that I was nervous to take on this role. I remember what I wrote clearly — ‘What can I possibly offer?’

My greatest concern came from envisioning myself sitting in my faculty partner's class and simply *not having* any comments or insights on the class dynamics that I could write in my observation notes. I also envisioned myself sitting in our weekly meetings, staring blankly at my partner for lack of any constructive comments to share. *How* exactly could I — someone apparently so un-opinionated — be useful in this work? Early on, I also anticipated writing my weekly observation notes, and I worried: What if my opinions or observations were completely off-base? If Alison or any other consultant were present and we shared our observations, I felt

certain that I would have missed something fundamental or that my impressions would be superficial.

### **Beginning to Recognize Introversion as a Resource for Leadership**

I now see that my insecurities perfectly exemplify what author and lawyer Susan Cain explores in her revolutionary book, *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking*. My story comprises yet another example of the struggles faced by a largely introverted person living in an extrovert's world. In such a world, qualities like extreme sociability, outspokenness, and a competitive nature dominate over those of introspection, collaboration, and an ability to embrace solitude constructively. What my own reflections and Cain's book have helped me to understand is that I can be introverted and also successfully take on a leadership role.

Contrary to my long-held beliefs, the TLI has allowed me to understand that I am in fact very much a leader. Because this work is built upon close, collaborative relationships, the TLI creates a space in which my unique and inherent skills are not only valued but prove fundamental to my and my partnership's success; in this environment my abilities with introspection, active listening, communication, and compassion define leadership. To therefore frame the TLI within a larger context, our work combats this narrow definition of 'leadership' that we often blindly promote — as Cain shows, to the disadvantage of nearly half our population.

From my first meeting with my faculty partner before the semester even started, I drew upon my more introverted skills to build a strong base for our partnership. Although our work clearly centers on my partner's role as professor, our relationship is rooted in a deep concern and appreciation for one another as whole people. I remember from this initial meeting asking about her move and adjustment to Philadelphia, as well as to Bryn Mawr. In every subsequent meeting I continued to ask about this transition and provided any orienting information that I could, for example that regarding college traditions and culture or the norms surrounding course reading load. As our relationship and knowledge of one another quickly grew, so did the scope of our other conversation topics, all interwoven seamlessly with our discussion of her pedagogy and the specific course about which we were consulting. This genuine interest worked both ways, and from the beginning my partner took an equal interest in me and my life: She always asked about and passed along articles for my developing thesis and suggested new restaurants and exhibits in the city that I might explore. I thrive in this kind of situation — a mutual investment in one another's growth — and my love of and ability for building close and meaningful relationships make me a natural fit for this work.

### **Evolving into a Leader as Well as a New Kind of Learner**

As I progressed through the first few weeks of my partnership, buoyed by this emerging new self-image and increasing successes with my partner, I began to trust that I did indeed have thoughts and insights to contribute. As my confidence grew, however, I found myself increasingly eager to speak during our weekly meetings. For example, I often tried to relate every question or concern that my partner shared about her current course to a personal experience in one of my own past classes: I would eagerly jump into the conversation to suggest a lesson plan or a class organization strategy that worked well in a previous course. I thought that

my vocalization of concrete solutions to my partner's concerns would serve as tangible evidence of my worth.

I see now that my new understanding of leadership came into conflict with inherited assumptions about what leadership looks like. I found that at times I was simply so eager to share my thoughts that I did not dedicate enough attention to first fully understanding what my partner was actually saying. The TLI is fundamentally grounded in the knowledge bases that student consultants harbor by virtue of being students. And although in our partnership it often was useful for me to relate questions or struggles from my partner's current course back to my previous course experience, I learned that my role was not to solve every problem that arose.

As I was still adjusting to my role as a consultant and as a leader, however, in some ways I felt that I needed to address every problem in order to validate my competence — perhaps equally as much to myself as to my partner. I soon realized, though, that not everything that my partner shared needed or would even be best served by my attempts to fix it; often, my partner instead benefitted more from the chance to voice her developing reflections and questions as a way of thinking aloud. Once I recognized this, I found it extremely freeing to focus entirely on her words rather than in part on what I wanted to say next. This shift was important as I clarified for myself what my style of leadership can be and began to enact it. It was as though I needed to give myself permission to actively listen instead of talk to bring my practice more in line with my new understanding.

### **Finding My Voice and Place as a Leader in Partnership**

Although I already knew from my academic studies that education looks and sounds like many different scenarios, I never thought to apply this perspective to leadership. As I have continued to complicate and to re-frame my conception of leadership, however, I have come to understand that leading also looks and sounds like many different things, not only the extroverted model of a CEO commanding a board room full of employees. My leadership, for example, looks like an intricate dance of work done first independently in solitude and then in close collaboration with others. In the TLI, this looks like my paying witness to my partner's growth and then reflecting back to her the continuity of this trajectory. My leadership therefore looks much more like a mirror or a well-used chalkboard, not an instruction manual.

Reflecting this new understanding, my interaction with my faculty partner evolved to look much more like this: I grew into a witness for my partner's evolution, a notebook to document her growth. I kept mental and written records of the reflections that she brought to each meeting, for example: Frustration regarding how to balance the lecture and discussion sections of class time; concerns regarding whether students were truly challenging their thinking or merely accumulating new facts; and questions regarding how to spark disagreement among students in their discussions. I was able to categorize some of her recurring areas for focus, one of which we referred to as the dynamic between coverage of course material and student-driven inquiry.

I came to see these continually evolving questions as the real root of this work of teaching, learning, and being. When at times my partner became frustrated, I repeated back to her this understanding that I was simultaneously gaining: Week after week, her reflections and questions

exposed different aspects the lie at the core of what it means to teach, questions that educators continue to explore and develop over the entirety of their lives and careers.

Although neither she nor I could definitively answer any of these fundamental questions in the span of a single consultant meeting or even a semester, I learned to celebrate the smaller changes that she did make towards improving her pedagogy and aligning it with her overarching goals. For example, there is no one right way to provide feedback on student work, but in this particular course, once my partner began writing weekly comments on students' response papers, their ability to ground their contributions to class discussions in their outside reading assignments dramatically increased. For my partner and me, this small change did much to advance the level of student engagement. Because of the heightened appreciation for the process that this work allowed me to grasp, I was able to act as a leader by reflecting this journey and progress back to both my partner and me.

Similarly, I came to learn that my leadership sounds different than I had always thought that it should: Most importantly, my leadership often sounds a lot like silence; in fact, it is rooted here. In the TLI I began my work by critically reflecting on myself as a student and learner, in tandem with my process of observation and note-taking. Each week as I typed, interpreted, and expanded upon my hand-written notes for my partner, I returned to — mentally if not literally — the goals and areas for focus that she and I defined during our first meeting together. Like a vast mental flow chart, I was able to help plot her evolution across the semester, linking each week's observations and reflections to the overarching threads that guide our work. For instance, at the semester's beginning she identified a concern for student participation and ownership of discussions as one of her top areas for improvement. I was able to follow this theme through each class meeting, noting its high and lows. Following the first class in which she had students facilitate their own group discussion based on questions that they had personally generated, I underscored the lesson's success in my notes by drawing her attention back to this original goal.

My faculty partner is wonderfully intentional in all of her pedagogy, but I saw my work as striving to create even greater and more explicit continuity between her intentions and practice as it can be difficult to see these connections in one's own work. This work necessarily began with my individual reflection and analysis so that before we even came to our weekly meetings, she and I had each carried out the core of our work — this reflection and meaning making — without ever speaking out loud.

Then, finally together in person, I heard my own voice much less than I originally thought that I both would and should. In this setting, my leadership sounds more like my asking questions meant to help us both more genuinely understand what my partner aims to express and then listening intently to her answers. For anyone eavesdropping, this sounds like using my voice — but equally as important, my silence — to hold open space, whose purpose is to support my partner as she names and unravels her questions, frustrations, and celebrations. Consequently, this involves me talking and offering solutions much less than I had at first imagined.

As I grew increasingly comfortable with myself and my own confidence, I became more comfortable embracing this role of paying witness to her continuing growth. I came to understand that creating and holding such space for and with my partner was equally if not more valuable than offering a 'concrete' suggestion to address each of her concerns. My leadership

style therefore sounds more like a megaphone used to amplify the combination of my partner and my voices rather than a microphone for either one of ours on its own.

### **How My New Definition of Leadership Affects My Life More Broadly**

The effects of this work in the TLI reach far beyond my specific role as a student consultant. Working with my faculty partner allowed me to continue developing my understanding of when I need to continue listening and when my input would actually prove constructive and valuable to the conversation. Although I would not describe myself as someone whose voice often dominates a space, my TLI partnership forced me to critically evaluate in new ways the roles that my voice and silence do play. This awareness has carried over into all of my personal relationships so that I now observe myself engaging this same level of mindfulness when talking with my parents, close friends, and peers.

Although perhaps subtle, this shift in perspective has allowed me to feel a greater sense of ease and fluidity in my communication with others. When I engage this mindfulness I feel more present within the space of each conversation, and the exchanges themselves seem more alive. By tuning in to this balance of silence and voice and by attempting to make the words that I do speak truly contributory, I often also leave these conversations feeling more heard and fulfilled than previously. I feel that this comes from a heightened sense of personal trust, a trusting in myself that I will be able to evaluate the kind of communication that would best serve a situation.

### **Conclusion: Some Final Thoughts on Voice and Leadership**

In the process of crafting this essay, I remembered that the TLI work collectively falls under the category of ‘student voice’ research. Previously, I took this title quite literally, in the sense that our partnerships help to bring the voices of other students into spaces where they are not typically heard or valued in order to improve the educational experience. Initially, I viewed my role as consultant akin to that of an ambassador, serving as a liaison between students and faculty. Although this does form a core component of the program and of my personal work, I had never thought to apply this title to my own *personal* voice. Clearly, though, this work has provided me the opportunity to both fundamentally explore and to hone my own voice (of speaking and of silence).

This experience has not only allowed me to further develop one of my natural skill sets but has also permitted me to accord it explicit value in a professional setting. No longer am I simply ‘a good listener,’ as I have been all my life, but I now deeply understand the power and versatility that my inherent abilities hold, and I have used them to support a new faculty member as she acclimates to a new college culture and develops into the kind of teacher that she hopes to be. My voice and leadership have, I hope, created a space for her to become her best self in this context.

Overall, then, my experience with the TLI has allowed me to give myself permission to be: Learning to value my innate leadership style forms part of my larger journey of finding increasing permission to accept and to honor myself in a multitude of ways. Learning how to best embody and be myself through my work with the TLI allows me to be a fuller and more authentic self in my life as a whole.