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Developing “Middle” Pedagogy

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DEVELOPING “MIDDLE” PEDAGOGY

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During the fall semester of my senior year, I had the privilege of working as a student consultant through the Teaching and Learning Institute (TLI) at Bryn Mawr College and being part of the Teaching and Learning Together (TLT) project in my Curriculum & Pedagogy course through the Bryn Mawr/Haverford Education Program. My experience with both programs evoked memories of my immigrant experience and helped me clarify my identity within American society. It also challenged me to express my beliefs about teaching and develop strategies for becoming the best teacher I can be.

My family and I moved from the Philippines to the United States in 2001 when I was ten years old. As I grew older, I had to face the reality that my culture was no longer the mainstream culture. However, even though we encountered many frustrations, I came to believe that being an immigrant is a blessing and not a disadvantage. After all, the experience enabled me to ‘move between worlds.’ As I participated in TLI and TLT, parallels between my immigrant experience and my dual role as a student consultant and dialogue partner emerged. Just as how I alternate between Filipino and American cultures, I found myself constantly tapping into the mindset of teachers and students and juggling the connections between their thinking, attitudes, and behaviors in relation to their surroundings and personal histories. I came to call this skill of navigating multiple cultures and roles the ‘middle.’

‘Middle’ pedagogy is a concept that emerged from my personal experience and prior to TLI and TLT, but I believe it will find its relevance and value in classroom practice. The core idea is constant: middle pedagogy involves operating within more cultural frameworks and educating oneself and others about the various cultural dynamics and norms that transpire in the classroom and in the larger society. I mean ‘cultural’ in the broadest sense possible. It is not limited to people who come from another country. Middle pedagogy also takes into account that within cultural differences, there are also personal differences. To put it more simply, middle pedagogy asks the practitioner to assume and alternate between numerous roles. The goal is always to harmonize relationships and ways of thinking while honoring differences. To achieve this, dialogue is necessary.

Assuming simultaneously a role as a TLI student consultant and a TLT dialogue partner was an ideal setup for developing and engaging in middle pedagogy. The focus for this essay will be on the roles of the teacher and student, specifically of my TLI partner (a professor), my TLT partner (a high school student), and me. As a student consultant I provided feedback for a professor about her classes. I was a student sharing my thoughts and observations with a teacher. As a TLT dialogue partner, I was a prospective teacher learning from a high school student. Both TLI and TLT emphasize that a student *is* a teacher, a teacher *continues* to be a student, and that students and teachers are partners in teaching and learning.

Lessons from My Experience as a TLI Student Consultant

Every Tuesday I would sit in my faculty partner's class, observe, and take notes. On Wednesdays we would discuss our thoughts regarding Tuesday's class. The content of our weekly reflection meetings could be grouped into three overarching categories: affirmation, learning styles, and possible changes. While it is probable that a professor will change her teaching style, change is not the end goal of TLI. With that in mind, I strove for a balance between affirming her teaching and suggesting different approaches.

My faculty partner expressed how helpful it was to read the events that transpired in her class chronologically through my notes and to hear my reasons that suggested why a particular moment seemed effective. The events ranged from issues regarding classroom management and student interaction to delivery of content. For example, many times I noted that the set of questions that she prepared generated thoughtful discussions. The students looked engaged and it showed through their comments and body language. In addition, her classes presented a good balance of lecture and discussion. The discussions not only allowed my faculty partner to check for understanding, but they also promoted dialogue in the classroom. On my part as a student, being able to articulate verbally and in writing why a particular strategy or moment was effective allowed me to generate standards for effective teaching.

A TLI partnership familiarizes both the professor and student consultant with the challenges of responding to various learning styles. As the semester progressed, my partner and I discovered that we have very different ways of learning. When we were reflecting on one of the big group discussions, my faculty partner noted that the same people tended to contribute while others listened. She wondered how she could encourage more students to participate, aside from saying, "Could we hear from those who haven't spoken yet?" I told her that some students are not as comfortable speaking out in big groups. I shared my experience with classes where professors incorporated small group activities and how those were effective in fostering more energy in the classroom. Small groups provide the space that quieter students tend to prefer. They are able to speak out more often and feel safer. I told my partner that I am one of those students who is slow to respond or rarely says anything in a big group, but has in fact been having a silent, internal discussion. While not all quiet students are like me, my predilection for small groups points to the diversity of learning styles in a classroom. Serving *every* learner becomes even more difficult if the teacher does not know how each student learns best.

After I explained my learning preference to my partner, she shared that she was the opposite and that she was comfortable in big groups. Before TLI she had not thought much about how her personal learning style affected her teaching, but now she saw the connection. A sense of wonder filled her voice when she verbalized the change that was sparked by our exchange. I recall that particular reflection meeting vividly precisely because it captured the essence of a teacher-student relationship as reciprocal. Traditionally, a teacher is seen as the holder of knowledge and a student is the receiver. While that may still hold true to some extent, TLI redraws the relationship by showing that a teacher continues to learn from younger teachers: the students themselves.

TLI serves as a good reminder that teaching involves plenty of trial and error. My faculty partner decided to incorporate small groups for their next discussion. When we debriefed that class, I noted that the small groups seemed to have worked well. More students were exchanging ideas and when the whole class reconvened, more hands went up. There were other variations of small groups that we tried — one activity involved putting up the group’s answer on the board and explaining their response to the whole class — and luckily, they all turned out well. If students are able to teach their classmates, then a teacher could see whether or not they truly understood the material.

My partner articulated that she was still adjusting to the process of placing more responsibility on the students for their own learning. Nevertheless, she liked trying out different strategies and activities and found our conversations to be enlightening. For teachers who have followed a routine for many years, it may not be as easy to try new strategies. Yet in this dynamic profession, it is necessary to be creative and open to ideas. Teachers only need to tap into their greatest asset, the students, to see different ways to teach a lesson and even to assess learning.

Lessons from My Experience as a Dialogue Partner

As a prospective teacher, my focus began to shift from thinking about and overcoming the challenges of student life to the pressures that are placed on teachers, such as planning lessons, meeting state standards, and managing a classroom. Even when I provided feedback to my faculty partner, I was becoming more immersed in thinking more like a teacher. However, by having weekly email exchanges with a high school dialogue partner, listening to high school students’ discussions on various topics (intelligence, standards, pedagogy, differentiation, classroom management, etc.), and constantly reflecting on their comments, I was able to understand a different kind of student life and consequently, form connections between my own identity as a student and as a new teacher. For this section of this essay, I will focus on a few lessons that I learned from my dialogue partner, Diana (pseudonym), a junior at that time and someone who also identifies as Asian. We had a lot in common, which made it very easy to communicate with each other; however, our high school experiences could not have been more different.

One’s socioeconomic status can affect one’s decisions in the classroom and perceptions of schooling. I attended a small, college prep high school where many families come from a middleclass or upper-middleclass background. Even though I recognized the privileges that my classmates and I enjoyed in high school, I, like my TLI faculty partner, realized that my student experience could greatly affect my teaching style. Diana helped me to see this; in one message to me she wrote: “I’ve noticed that teachers make the [school] supplies required for the test, a homework assignment when school begins. Some students do not have the financial means to allocate the purchase of those supplies thereby causing a depression in their grade(s).”

My initial response was one of discomfort. I did not understand why school supplies had to be linked with grades. I saw grades as a reflection of one’s effort toward the class and academic subject. By linking school supplies and grades, it sends a wrong message about grades and learning. However, since I became accustomed to an environment where money was not a major concern, I recognized that I could have also unintentionally imposed on my students to provide

certain supplies. Much like my comment as a student consultant about responding to students' learning styles, Diana's comment implies how crucial it is for teachers to know their students' background. Our discussion on social class encouraged me to think more critically about the weight that teachers' decisions carry and the underlying messages that are conveyed to students. It was a good warning to check my biases, consider whether or not they are seeping into my lessons, and if they affect my perception of a student.

Despite the differences in schools, there are similar expectations for an environment that is conducive to learning. Another component of the TLT is a school visit. I shadowed Diana for a day and observed her classes. In one of her classes, I was extremely distracted because a few students across the room kept chatting throughout the class period, but the teacher just talked over them. I felt that the teacher lost her authority over the students because she allowed their behavior to continue. Diana told me after class that she felt that her teacher just gave up on calling out the students. I mentioned that the situation did not seem fair to the students who wanted to learn.

During lunch I asked Diana and her friends if they were happy or satisfied with their school. Their responses indicated that they were tired of the "noise," the constant chatting in classes. They expressed their desire to learn in an environment where the students are "more focused." I could relate to their predicament; her high school experience was similar to my middle school experience. When I entered high school, I was able to immerse myself in a "focused" and stimulating learning environment. As students, Diana, her friends, and I had similar expectations for a school. These expectations naturally carried over and became my expectations as a teacher. Again, I saw how my student experience continued to shape my beliefs about schooling and teaching.

A teacher is, first and foremost, a professional, not a friend to a student. Considering that my colleagues and I were still in our early 20s, we were (and are still) figuring out our professional identities. Therefore, it was important for me to hear how my fellow college students and the high school students perceived teachers. As I was growing up in the Philippines, I saw teachers as strict authority figures so when I moved to the United States, I was shocked at the familiarity that some teachers displayed with their students. They seemed like they were good friends with the way that they casually spoke to each other. I asked Diana about her thoughts on the teacher-student relationship and she responded, "I feel if a teacher can be a teacher AND a friend, and vice versa on the student's behalf, this would allocate an extended amount of comfort and understanding between the two."

On one hand, Diana and I agree that understanding must exist between a teacher and her students. On the other hand, her reluctance to participate in the home visit, which is part of TLT, suggested that there are still set boundaries. I was glad that she voiced her discomfort with the home visit because I also viewed the teacher as someone who should not enter the privacy of homes unless it is for emergency reasons. Based on Diana's thoughts alone, I am more inclined to continue believing that teachers cannot be "friends" with students in the same way that they see friendship with their peers. However, after being acclimated to American society and hearing my colleagues' positive experiences with their home visits, I reevaluated my thinking: I recognize now that the kind of teacher that I want to be incorporates both the confidence and

authority of a professional and the warm, welcoming aura of a friend. To add to Diana’s quote, “if a teacher can be a teacher AND a friend,” then she is also exhibiting middle pedagogy.

Closing Thoughts

The lessons that I learned from TLI and TLT about the expectations for a teacher, the craft of teaching, and the challenges of being a student have better prepared me to navigate through the dynamics of a school and have balanced my idealistic notions of teaching and schooling. The process of alternating between the perspectives of a teacher and a student is an accurate depiction of middle pedagogy. The teacher still holds the official authority in the classroom, but rather than being placed above the students, the teacher’s place is more in the ‘middle.’ It is a tough position because it asks the individual to consciously and continuously understand numerous ways of thinking. Through reflection meetings, email exchanges, and the other discussions that I did not even touch upon in this essay, I gained a broader and more realistic view of education in the United States.

Learning how to see from multiple perspectives and cultural frameworks is the first step of middle pedagogy and it can be achieved through honest dialogue. The subsequent steps will vary since each teacher will encounter situations that are unique to his or her environment. A teacher decides how to synthesize and utilize many perspectives so that the product, whether it is an action or an item (lesson plan, curriculum, project, etc.), empowers participants. TLI, TLT, and middle pedagogy boosted my confidence as a prospective teacher, but most importantly, the experience reminded me that despite the knowledge that I gained, the true lesson is humility. A teacher is at the same time an expert and not an expert. One can never learn enough and one can learn a lot from another person. Through dialogue we can exhibit humility, a quality that nourishes personal and professional growth.

**I thank my dialogue partner for allowing me to share her comments*.