

# Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education

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Volume 1  
Issue 14 *Winter 2015*

Article 4

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January 2015

## Multiple Iterations of Partnership: My Co-Creation Journey as a Student and a Teacher

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### Recommended Citation

O'Hara, Maeve "Multiple Iterations of Partnership: My Co-Creation Journey as a Student and a Teacher," *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education*: Iss. 14 (2015), <https://repository.brynmawr.edu/tithe/vol1/iss14/4>

## **MULTIPLE ITERATIONS OF PARTNERSHIP: MY CO-CREATION JOURNEY AS A STUDENT AND A TEACHER**

*Maeve O'Hara, Former TLI Student Consultant, Participant in TLT, and High School Mathematics Teacher*

### **Introduction: Preparing for Reflection**

Today ends my teaching career in Philadelphia, as I get ready to move across the country and teach in Colorado. It is difficult to leave this city. I came to Philadelphia for Bryn Mawr College, and stayed because I loved teaching the city's youth. Though difficult, it is also the perfect time to reflect on the overwhelming impact Bryn Mawr's Teaching and Learning Initiative had, and continues to have, on my life and career.

This year was my first and only year teaching at an elite private school in Philadelphia, having taught in the School District of Philadelphia for the previous five years. This morning as I prepared to pack up my desk at school, after teaching only a brief year in what felt like a really foreign context, I threw my computer in my bag with the intent of sitting down at a coffee shop and starting this essay. I chose to bring my old PowerBook G4: the laptop I bought as I started my freshman year at Bryn Mawr College. I use this computer about once a year these days, because the hard drive is cluttered, the computer is slow, and the battery doesn't charge anymore. But the keyboard is fantastic. I start typing on this keyboard and the thoughts just flow, like they did so many times in college.

It was on this laptop that I read the email during my sophomore year inviting me to help create a new and exciting program, which became the Teaching and Learning Initiative (TLI) at Bryn Mawr College. It was on this laptop that I typed up my observational notes as a student consultant in the Students as Learners and Teachers (SaLT) program, which became the signature program of the TLI. It was on this laptop that I wrote much of my student teaching portfolio for Alison Cook-Sather who was my professor for Curriculum and Pedagogy and the Practice Teaching Seminar, the culminating courses I took in partial fulfillment of requirements for state certification to teach secondary mathematics. And it was on this laptop that I wrote my first lesson plans as a teacher. So it only seems fitting that I use this laptop to type an essay about my experience as a student helping to develop the TLI, a participant in the Teaching and Learning Together project based in the Curriculum and Pedagogy Seminar, and a teacher carrying partnership principles into my practice.

### **My Experience as a Student Co-Creating a Staff-Student Partnership Program**

My introduction to the TLI was through two staff-student partnership programs I helped to create during my sophomore year in partnership with Alice Lesnick, then Senior Lecturer in Education, Elliott Shore, then Chief Information Officer, and Alison Cook-Sather, then and still Coordinator of the TLI at Bryn Mawr College. A handful of other undergraduates and I were invited to the initial discussions regarding the idea, and we moved forward with the project as co-creators of it.

The first program was designed to address an immediate college need: the service and craft staff members had been given email accounts but did not know how to use them, and those staff members could take courses but did not have the computer skills to access the content they needed for these courses. Our role as students would be to partner with staff and teach them the skills they needed.

The second program had a more radical aim: to redefine the roles of all members of the College community—to engage everyone in the business of both teaching *and* learning. Through the Empowering Learners Partnership program, students identified skills they wanted to learn and service/craft staff members did the same: cooking, a language, computer use, woodworking, piano, crafts, home maintenance, dance, etc. Then, pairs or small groups worked in semester-long partnerships to teach and learn from one another. These partnerships were much more reciprocal and fluid (see Lesnick & Cook-Sather, 2010, for a discussion of this program).

As we went about the business of creating these innovative partnerships, there were four students and four adults involved, and we would meet as colleagues about once a week and discuss how the program was going and what needed to be improved. I felt so important. These meetings were a crucial piece of the process, and were incredibly empowering for me. Working as well with the support of Florence Goff, then Equal Opportunity Officer at Bryn Mawr, we were breaking down class barriers, we were turning students into teachers, we were empowering staff members who are historically and unfortunately “kept in their place”—the housekeepers, the food service workers. We needed to be very thoughtful about the work we were doing, and Florence always helped keep that perspective.

I was like a sponge at that time, soaking up the wisdom of Florence, and all of the faculty and staff I worked with as a creator of the programs. They were patient with me as I engaged in this type of change-making work for the first time, and they taught me how to be both persistent and delicate when trying to change a community. As well as being a co-creator of these programs, I engaged as a participant in both kinds of partnerships over the next two years, with at least three different staff partners. These partnerships taught me those intangible things that college educations so often lack: about perseverance, about honor and integrity, about understanding the difficult decisions that adults have to make, which better prepared me to make my own difficult decisions some day.

### **My Experience as a Student Co-Creating a Faculty-Student Partnership Program**

My junior year, I helped create the Students as Teachers and Learners partnerships (SaLT). To start the partnerships, again a handful of students was gathered, and again we would all meet together in an office. These meetings were a crucial part of the success of the program; the key stakeholders were given a voice, and from a student’s perspective we felt like rebels doing change-making work!

Through these meetings, Alison taught us how to take detailed observational notes of a class; how to phrase our comments and questions in ways that were inviting and not abrasive; and prepped us for the difficult conversations we would have with professors. She trusted us with the precarious work of talking to professors about their teaching, gave us the tools necessary to

succeed, was there for us every step of the way, yet did not micromanage our work so that we could be empowered to thrive on our own.

The ownership Alison gave us stemmed all the way to something as simple as naming ourselves; I remember thinking at the time, “Wow, we are really making this program together, she didn’t even have a name in mind yet!” Helping to generate the name “Student Consultants” and the program name, “Students as Learners and Teachers,” made me feel so powerful and special: I was smart enough to be a consultant; I was knowledgeable enough to be considered a teacher; we were the SaLT to help flavor and enrich the community – wow. Now as a teacher myself, I keep in mind how powerful the simplest things can be in a classroom, and always try to give my students voice and choice like Alison did with me.

I was pumped after every one of our small SaLT meetings with Alison and my fellow consultants, and I felt energized during my initial consultations with my faculty partners and while observing their classes. Typically, the professors asked for open-ended observational notes, and they entered the program happy to get any and all feedback. After observing their class, I would send them my detailed notes prior to our follow-up meetings; this was the nerve-racking part for me. I was so impressed with each professor I worked with, because they were willing to receive feedback, and I wanted the experience to be a good one for them. I knew I represented all of their students, so during these follow-up meetings, my excitement and energy turned into anxiety and trepidation. The training and support I received from my fellow consultants and Alison was crucial to the success of these partnerships. They helped me work past the nerves of enacting the program and fear that my partners would become upset after my feedback instead of refreshed, as was our goal.

There is one partnership particularly that has truly stuck with me over the years. I worked with an English professor who was established and beloved at the College. Unlike when I was working with science and math professors, I felt inept to discuss her pedagogy in context, and felt quite honored to be in her classroom. I remember taking detailed notes while observing the class, and becoming more at ease with each comment that I felt would actually be useful for her. I was able to help the professor become aware of some unconscious habits she had and how they affected the engagement of her students. Perhaps the reason this partnership stuck with me is that, in an interview about her experience in this program, this professor mentioned how she had always known Bryn Mawr students were intelligent, but she developed a whole new appreciation for them after working with a Student Consultant.

### **Moving from Student Co-Creator to Student-Teacher Co-Creator**

During the fall of my senior year, I was enrolled in Curriculum and Pedagogy, the secondary teaching methods course for certification candidates, and as part of that course, those of us enrolled in the course participated in Teaching and Learning Together (TLT). Each of us was paired with a high school student who attended a local school. Each week, we exchanged email messages with our high school partners, and each week the students met as a group at their high school, facilitated by a school-based educator, to share their perspectives. Thus, we participated in both one-on-one exchanges with our partners and had the benefit of hearing their perspectives as a group (see Cook-Sather, 2002, for a description of this program).

To complete my requirements for state certification to teach mathematics, I undertook student teaching during the spring of my senior year at a large comprehensive high school in Philadelphia. The TLI had given me such great experience working with adult learners, SaLT gave me the tools to be critical and reflective regarding classrooms, and working in partnership with high school students helped me learn how to collaborate with those students I was preparing to teach but no one is ever prepared for how challenging managing your own class is. The Practice Teaching Seminar in which I was enrolled that spring gave me a place to vent my frustrations and be heard in meaningful ways as I waded through the deep waters of teaching for the first time. The lessons I had learned through the TLT project helped to shed light on the challenges I was experiencing as a teacher.

My student teaching experience was a sobering one; it was the greatest challenge I had ever faced. I was thankful to have the lessons from all of my work with TLI, and in particular TLT to fall back on. One lesson in particular was that students wanted to be treated and seen as individuals, and that they did not always believe their teachers truly wanted the best for them. I kept that at the forefront of my student teaching. Each day, I would touch-base with the most disruptive students, and told them I believed they could learn the content. I was consistent with this message, and I was unrelenting with my desire to get to know them. Towards the end of my time with them, I started seeing results, and realized that I had gained the trust from many of the “toughest” students.

### **Moving from Student-Teacher Co-Creator to Teacher Co-Creator**

When I left Bryn Mawr and started working as a mathematics teacher in the School District of Philadelphia, I subconsciously assumed I would be heard in the same ways I was in the TLI and TLT. I spoke my mind, asked questions in the non-abrasive way Alison had taught me, and always sought to create positive change. TLI and TLT gave me the mindset that with the right people, change can be made rather quickly, and that a program did not need to be perfect right away. I had learned that you have to *start* the good work you want to do. It became clear rather quickly, however, that most schools do not share that mindset and that my ideas are often looked at as extremely radical. Are the programs we created in the TLI and TLT really that radical? Yes.

I have remained connected to these partnership programs, by leading the high school student end of the TLT project and through my daily interactions with students and institutional change that I push for. I had been a participant in the TLT as a college student prior to my student teaching during my senior year, and I began working with TLT as the school-based educator my third year as a full-time teacher. Through the TLT, I gathered a small group of my high school students and led them in dialogues about teaching and learning once a week throughout the fall semester. Each student was given a college partner, and these dialogues were meant for the college partners to learn from the student’s perspective.

While I was facilitating the learning of the certification candidates and the secondary students, I remained a learner myself. Everything I learned from these dialogues was fantastic. I learned that all teachers have flaws, and that what we intend to do as teachers is often not what the students experience. Thus, it is extremely important to explain my teaching methods to students

so they know why they are being “forced” to engage in some activity, write a certain way, play a particular game, etc. Every secondary student I worked with in the TLT project I had taught at some point, or was teaching at the time, so it was fascinating to hear them speak about their individual needs as students. It was humbling to realize that even with all of my “excellent” pedagogy, I was still not meeting the vast and diverse needs of my students. So I began teaching differently, diversifying/differentiating my approaches so that hopefully I could better reach all students. I started regularly implementing cooperative learning so that each and every student could speak and be heard by at least one other person every class.

### **Reflections on My Teacher-Student Co-Creation Journey**

As I reflect on the huge impact my experiences in the TLI and the TLT have had on me, my life, and my teaching career, I realize that a large part of that impact was the dynamic and fluid relationships that characterized the facilitation of and my participation in the programs. This became clear to me only recently, as I listened to and watched my former students whom I facilitated in TLT as they entered college. Many of them use me as a support in the same way I continued to use the faculty mentors I gained through the TLI. These ever-changing relationships that I built with those students continue to bear fruit for us both; they keep me grounded in why I teach and what I do well as a teacher, as I share in the joy of their triumphs and help them through the challenges that college presents.

In reflecting on these experiences with the TLI and TLT, I see four areas in which they have had a lasting impact. I organize these under the following headings: Empowerment; Impact on Teaching and Students; Program Development; and Impact on My Life and Career.

#### ***Empowerment***

Through the TLI, staff and faculty members became my colleagues. I taught adult learners and could see the impact of my teaching, and I learned both skills and important life lessons from the staff members with whom I worked. In the SaLT program, faculty asked for my input in forming the programs, and they actually implemented some of my ideas. I was listened to and heard differently than I ever had been before. These experiences laid the foundation for my choices to create situations in which other learners could empower themselves.

#### ***Impact on Teaching and Students***

Because of my experiences in TLI and TLT, I see everyone at school as partners in teaching and learning. I am aware of the impact staff have on my students, and I treat them with respect as a part of the students’ learning process. I ask for input from my students regularly; because of my experiences as a student and co-creator, it is such a fluid and normal thing for me to do.

My partnerships with students take many forms. My work with my former student Jamie is an example. Jamie was first my student, and then many other things. She was a member of an after school service club I sponsored, and through that club she was one of two students to earn a service trip to Nepal the year I taught her. I chaperoned the trip, and taught her how to reflect on the intense experience she had as she left Philadelphia for the first time. Our dynamic

relationship continued, as she was once again my student, continued to be a leader of the service club, became a student participant in TLT and worked as a teacher-aid in my classroom her senior year. Jamie and I certainly have a complex, multi-layered relationship. As I reflect on my work in the TLI, and more pointedly my work along side Alison, it is very clear to me that I would never have been able to navigate that relationship with Jamie as well as I did if it were not for the experience I had had as a student and co-creator of TLI. And I am humbled to realize that Jamie's life has been forever influenced by the opportunities I helped facilitate for her.

### ***Program Development***

Aside from learning how to empower students through dynamic and multi-faceted relationships, I also learned how to pilot radical programs. By my fifth year teaching in the School District of Philadelphia, it was blaringly obvious to me that my Math students needed more support and opportunities to revisit material until they could master it. I reflected on the problem, as the TLI had taught me to do, and realized that typical test correction methods did not satisfy the needs of my students. Instead, I developed a one-on-one test correction procedure that was in an interview format. It worked brilliantly. The only problem was that there was only one of me, very limited time after school in which these interview corrections could take place, and content reinforcement that needed to be done before students were ready to correct their work. I discussed my dilemma with a small network of teacher leaders I belonged to called *Teachers Write Now*, supported by Swarthmore College professor Lisa Smulyan. A fellow member of the network, Stacey Carlough, suggested I start a Math Center and gave me advice based on a successful Writing Center she had started, and Lisa partnered me with two of her Swarthmore College students to help me collect qualitative data.

Instead of this being a daunting undertaking, I simply started my Math Center within a week. I knew from my work with the TLI that you need a small, highly motivated and trustworthy group of students to start, so I gathered my group of juniors to become tutors, just as Alison had gathered me and the other students years before. I knew that I had to start small and scale up, so I started by only opening the center to my sophomore Geometry students. I knew that I needed to give the junior tutors ownership of the program, so I elicited their input on a regular basis. They wanted t-shirts, so I made them t-shirts. They wanted more structure, so we developed the idea of a Math Center "sheriff" who would direct the traffic of students as they entered for help. From my own experience of being called a consultant, and from Stacey's stories of how successful her "Writing Center Fellows" were, I knew the juniors needed an empowering title, so I called them "Math Center Fellows."

### ***Impact on my life and career***

I now see institutional change as something that is doable. People simply need to act upon the things they find problematic. I am constantly looking at the structures within an institution and questioning how they could be better, how they could include everyone in a more meaningful way. I started my draft of this article as I ended my career in Philadelphia, and I am finishing the article with a few weeks at my new school in Colorado under my belt. The lens I carry with me as I learn a new school culture and climate is clearly one given to me by the TLI and TLT programs. I have made a point of talking to all members of the community, looking to see if all

members have equitable access to the benefits of working at an educational institution. Already, I have asked questions to my administrators that highlight the systematic and programmatic ways that I look at a school. Already, I have had conversations with my students about pieces of student culture that I have observed and want to change.

I started this article by mentioning how my job last year felt like a foreign context; honestly, it felt foreign because I was engaging in a way that felt foreign to me. I was not the confident, change-making self that the TLI and TLT helped foster. I was timid, I was afraid to jump in and change the problems that I saw. So, I began this new job using my partnership lens proudly. I now understand that my authentic teaching self is one that expands far beyond the scope of my mathematics classroom and is embedded in all aspects of the school community.

The relationships and opportunities I had through TLI and TLT gave me the confidence and the capacity to embrace partnership and make change in ways I never could have imagined. I entered Bryn Mawr wanting to be a mathematics teacher; I left Bryn Mawr as a teacher-leader who sees schools as special institutions in which equity for and empowerment of all members is *imperative* for the growth of its students and its impact in the community.

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