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REFLECTIONS ON A SUCCESSFUL STUDENT-PROFESSOR COLLABORATION

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Introduction: An Opportunity for Partnership

During the summer of 2014, I had the very fortunate opportunity to collaborate with Professor Chris Bjork on a research project regarding education reform. Professor Bjork, the chair of the education department at Vassar College, was designing a new senior seminar for education students, which he was calling “The Corporatization of American Education.” It would be offered for the first time in the spring semester of 2015 for advanced students in the education department, and would be required for students graduating with a major in educational studies. Professor Bjork had decided to co-create the course in partnership with an undergraduate student through the Ford Scholars Program at Vassar College, which promotes student and faculty collaboration and mentorship by supporting projects in the humanities and social sciences.

When I learned that Professor Bjork would be participating in the Ford program, I enthusiastically applied. The study of contemporary school reform is a passion of mine, especially from the critical perspective with which Professor Bjork was approaching the subject. On a personal level, I knew Professor Bjork was friendly and incredibly knowledgeable; working with him would be a privilege and would certainly contribute to my academic development. Finally, as an aspiring educator, I knew the opportunity to develop an entire course syllabus with a talented professor of education would be the perfect way to continue developing my pedagogical skills, in preparation for the day I have a classroom of my own.

I was thrilled when my application to work with Professor Bjork was accepted, and I looked forward to working with a professor I respected on a subject I was passionate about. In my excitement, however, I did not consider what such a collaboration would entail. I had worked with Professor Bjork as a student in one of his courses, “International and Comparative Education.” From this experience, I knew him to be an engaging lecturer who actively encouraged discussion and participation among his students, incorporated many forms of media into his lessons, and occasionally provoked students into defending viewpoints that they might otherwise take for granted. As a student in his class, I recall feeling actively engaged in the coursework and participated to the best of my ability, in spite of the course’s 9:00 am start time, a timeslot widely considered “early” by the Vassar student population.

Clearly, I knew what it was like to work with Professor Bjork as a student in one of his classes. But what would it be like to work with him as a collaborator?

The Beginning of a Partnership

When I arrived in Professor Bjork’s office on a rainy Wednesday at the end of May, my role in the project was made clear. I would be providing a student’s perspective on the new course, proposing content and assignments that would engage my peers. To fulfill this objective, I would be given broad autonomy during the early stages of the project. This unexpected degree of independence provided both an opportunity and a challenge. I would have the rare opportunity to

design the course as I would want it to be, but I would ultimately be responsible to Professor Bjork for quality of my work.

This arrangement raises an important concern that characterizes many professor-student collaborations; how much autonomy is too much? Of course, the greatest fear of many student research assistants is to be relegated to the stereotypical role of the put-upon, coffee-fetching intern. But it is vital to keep in mind that one of the most important elements for the student half of any professor-student collaboration is the mentorship opportunity available through working with a professor one-on-one. If a student's work is conducted with too much independence, the student may miss out on the myriad benefits of collaborating with an experienced professor.

From Autonomy to Collaboration

During the first few days the project, I worked to determine how exactly my newfound autonomy would play out. Predictably, I initially spent many hours in the library, pouring over texts on neoliberalism, the politics and history of education in America, and contemporary education reform, among other topics. Some days involved multiple trips across the academic quad between the library and the education department with tall stacks of books, which quickly filled the drawers of my desk. My interactions with Professor Bjork during these times were brief, and typically involved one empirical research article or another that he would leave on my desk in a binder clip for me to discover when I returned from lunch.

During this portion of the project, I played an important but solitary role in the creation of the course syllabus. In this role, I benefitted greatly from the large volume of scholarly texts I encountered. These readings reinforced and expanded on the knowledge I have gained from several semesters studying issues in American education. By the time I had gathered enough readings to start organizing a syllabus, I felt exceptionally confident in my ability to effectively translate my knowledge of education reform into the new course. But I wondered, how would my partnership with Professor Bjork change in this next phase of the project?

As the first days and weeks of the project passed, my interactions with Professor Bjork became longer and more frequent. We would meet several times a week to discuss my progress with the syllabus or to share ideas about potential assignments for the course. At this point in the project, I began to benefit from Professor Bjork's expertise as he helpfully passed along the insight and direction necessary to carry out my responsibilities and move the project forward.

One particularly meaningful lesson Professor Bjork taught me was his process for crafting essential questions before tasking me with the creation of essential questions for our course. He advised me to write anywhere between ten and fifteen comprehension and essential questions for each week in the course. After that, we would together go through each list and retain only the best four or five questions for the syllabus, ensuring the high quality of each question. This process was profoundly helpful as an aspiring educator, and was one of the highlights of my partnership with Professor Bjork.

In turn, I was able to give Professor Bjork a student's insight on many aspects of the course. For example, I helped Professor Bjork consider the merits of assigning many smaller projects over

the course of a semester, versus a large, final project. From a student's perspective, I was able to explain to him that several smaller projects are less intimidating and more approachable for students, as the final grade for the entire semester is not overly dependent on one or two large assignments. I could also vouch for the fact that students are often unable to produce their best possible work during the final weeks of the semester, when they are often tasked with several large projects across many classes. These insights certainly encouraged Professor Bjork to opt for several smaller assignments spread throughout the semester as the best way to assess his students in this course.

Professor Bjork and I also discussed the various means that he could utilize to ensure that students were completing the assigned weekly readings. At Vassar, the most common ways to accomplish this goal is to either have students submit a weekly written reflection on the assigned readings, or to have students periodically post comments on the course Moodle page, the online educational platform utilized by the college. Professor Bjork and I determined that neither of these options was ideal; both compelled students to respond to the readings without necessarily engaging with them. To encourage students to engage more deeply with their readings, I proposed that Professor Bjork require students to maintain their own blogs during the course of the semester, publishing posts on the readings intended to inform casual readers about the issues surrounding education reform. Professor Bjork and I hope that this system will provide students with an interesting and practical experience as they complete their weekly readings.

As the weeks passed by, our collaboration increasingly became an equal partnership, as we each benefitted from the insights of the other. It was incredibly gratifying to collaborate with Professor Bjork on this project. By providing me with the opportunity to further develop my knowledge on the subject of school reform, my initial autonomy in the partnership prepared me to actively engage with Professor Bjork during the later stages of the project. As our partnership moved from autonomy to collaboration, Professor Bjork and I were able to bring together our past experiences as professor and student to create a course syllabus that was superior to any we could have created independently. In the end, I was tremendously pleased when Professor Bjork told me the syllabus was more thoughtfully designed than any he had previously created.

Elements of a Successful Collaboration

As I contemplate my successful collaboration with Professor Bjork, I think back to the many previous partnerships I have experienced, some with markedly less success. Retrospectively, I recognize that the most important factor that differentiates the successful and unsuccessful partnerships in my experience is the quality of communication between my collaborator and myself.

Any collaboration between a professor or mentor and a student will be most effective if both parties are able to clearly communicate their wants and needs to one another. In some of my previous experiences collaborating with a mentor figure, I now see how the inability or unwillingness to communicate with my partner foreshadowed an unfulfilling collaboration. It is up to the professor or mentor figure to provide opportunities for the student to share his or her thoughts and opinions, but it is up to the student to seize those opportunities when they come.

Ideally, collaborative communication is characterized by a high degree of mutual respect, trust, and openness. Both partners must respect the other's experiences and contributions to the partnership. Each partner must trust the other to fulfill his or her obligations to the partnership without micromanaging the other. Finally, both partners must be open to the suggestions, comments, or complaints of the other, accepting the reality that each will experience the partnership in a different way. With consideration of these three elements, an effective mentor has a concrete vision for success and provides the mentee with a balance of support and independence to successfully complete the task.

In my experience this past summer, Professor Bjork and I were able to determine how to make the most of our partnership. I look forward to continuing to reap the benefits of our partnership when I assist Professor Bjork in implementing a variety of the activities I planned during the seminar this coming spring. By keeping in mind the elements that made our partnership successful this past summer, I have no doubt that our success will continue next spring.