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One Year of Collaboration: Reflections on Student-Faculty Partnership

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ONE YEAR OF COLLABORATION: REFLECTIONS ON STUDENT-FACULTY PARTNERSHIP

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Introduction

This essay seeks to illuminate a general model of student-faculty partnership through extended reflection on one particular yearlong partnership. We are Joel Schlosser, Assistant Professor of Political Science at Bryn Mawr College, and Abby Sweeney, Religion Major at Haverford College, Class of 2015, and we began their collaboration through the Teaching and Learning Institute (TLI) at Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges. This partnership came into being as part of the Students as Learners and Teachers (SaLT) program, which supports faculty members and undergraduate students in partnerships through which they explore, affirm, and revise classroom practice. Although our partnership began as part of a cross-disciplinary, semester-long pedagogy seminar offered to Joel as a new full-time faculty member, it continued during a second semester as a supervised work independent study for Abby, which granted her course credit for her continuing participation.

In this reflective essay, we describe how one key aspect of the success of our partnership consisted in how the form of the SaLT program sustained tension between structure and freedom, providing guidelines to support our interactions but also the flexibility to experiment and learn from our mistakes and innovations. The SaLT program allowed us to "hold a space" where we could develop practical wisdom about teaching and learning together while increasing effectiveness during the very semesters during which we collaborated. We begin by describing the parameters of our collaboration before treating three areas of experimentation and learning that we encountered in our work together: transparency, "planned not planning," and aligning pedagogy and evaluation. We conclude with reflections about how this model affected each of us as teachers and as learners.

The Student-Faculty Partnership

Whereas conventional approaches treat classroom teaching as a private activity, undertaken in what Lee Shulman (2004) calls "pedagogical solitude," the SaLT program creates a space for faculty to participate in dialogue with students about their teaching. Student consultants bring their individual perspectives as students while acting as dialogue partners and resources for the tacit knowledge of the institution the faculty member has recently joined. Student consultants typically visit a faculty member's class once a week, observe and take notes, and then meet for an hour (or so) once a week with that faculty member to discuss these notes and what else is happening in the course as well as to brainstorm ideas for upcoming classes. Student consultants can also play a mediating role between faculty and students in the class, providing the latter with a less formal opening for giving feedback or asking questions about the course.

In the fall, we collaborated on Joel's Modern Political Philosophy course, a mid-level seminar with 17 students aimed at introducing students to the modern tradition of political thought including social contract theory, theories of liberal citizenship, and critiques of these models. Every week, Abby attended one of Joel's classes, took observation notes, and met with Joel in person to discuss her observations, exchange ideas for the upcoming classes, and address any concerns. In the fall, these weekly meetings often included the introduction of new pedagogical techniques Joel might like to try, such as the "silent board discussion" or "fish bowl discussion" (see "Notes" at the end of the article for a brief description of these activities.) At mid-October, the halfway point of the semester, Abby helped Joel create questions for mid-course evaluations and facilitated discussion with students about the course. Towards the end of the semester, Abby created a list of Joel's pedagogical strengths and all of the strategies and activities he tried in his course. This list not only described what went well with each of these activities, but also how these same activities could be adjusted or improved when used in the future.

In November, we also began to discuss Joel's initial plans for a course on power he was scheduled to teach in the upcoming semester. Even as we were still collaborating on the Modern Political Philosophy course, then, ideas began to percolate for subsequent work together. During the winter break, we agreed to create an independent study for Abby to continue her work for course credit, with the idea of co-writing about our work together as a final project. Otherwise, the routine remained similar during the winter and spring: Abby visited class once a week and took observation notes; Abby shared these notes with Joel and we discussed the course while developing new ideas; we continued to collaborate to devise new pedagogical strategies.

Yet the work together during the second semester also had a different quality. Because of the respect and trust generated from the success of the first semester, the second semester could proceed in a different register: we knew one another well enough to share our passions; finding enthusiasm in common expanded what we could imagine together. For example, we discovered we were both reading James Baldwin—Abby for her thesis and Joel for an essay he was writing on liberal education—and this found its way into the "Power" syllabus, becoming one of the most beloved readings among the students. It became easier to expect the best from our work together, meaning that our exchange of ideas required less formal structure even as the formal structure had created this trust in the first place.

Over the course of an academic year's worth of work, then, we not only generated hundreds of emails and dozens of pages of notes, but we also built a relationship of respect, honesty, and openness that in turn produced better pedagogical outcomes (such as those we describe in more detail in the following sections). The quality of this relationship was facilitated by the structure of our interactions—e.g. regular observations, regular meetings, responsive communication—but it also made possible experimentation not prescribed by these routines. The process itself was satisfying but it also helped us create a space between the two of us where we could build and develop new ideas.

What We Talk About When We Talk About Learning: Transparency

One way in which the quality of our collaborative relationship led to better pedagogical outcomes concerned transparency. Joel came to Bryn Mawr already committed to giving reasons for what he was doing, that is, explaining to students why a given writing project served a broader purpose; however, teaching first-year students in the fall, Joel realized he could do more to help students understand what kind of thinking he wanted them to do in the course. Joel typically described course goals in terms of Bloom's taxonomy and Abby encouraged him to lay this out to the class early in the semester. Here are Abby's notes from that meeting (with descriptions of the class on the left and Abby's responses on the right):

Description of class	Responses
What makes a liberal arts college a liberal arts college is learning how to think. You pass out a sheet-Bloom's Taxonomy Action Verbs. You explain this is to help develop discussion intentionally. You explain how these verbs describing cognitive activity are also on the syllabus, and then explain the differences between these types.	I've seen this document in Education classes before! I think it's really smart for you to introduce the "why" behind your teaching to the students. I wonder what might have happened if you had asked the students to try and discern where in the course they engage in each kind of thinking, rather than letting them know that the discussion was "synthesis" whereas the Moodle postings are "application." Would they agree with you? Would it be helpful for them to reflect on this again in the semester? Maybe to note how their higher-order thinking has developed as the semester progresses? Ie "I used to use the Moodle as a way to comprehend the material, but now I use it as a forum for real-world application…" (Just some brainstorming here)

In response to Abby's brainstorming at the end, Joel added: "This is really helpful, Abby! When I return to this approach it would be good to have students self-assess as to when they're doing what kinds of learning and why." Identifying a common strategy this way helped to create respect and trust between us.

Abby's suggestion about having students return to this reflection as the semester progressed also allowed us to implement our common strategy. When we read over midcourse evaluations, we realized that we could do more to inspire reflection among students about their learning. When a question asked students to list activities that were either effective or ineffective for their learning, students responded with activities that they liked or disliked. When we discussed the evaluations together as a class, many students again voiced preferences based on what was convenient or comfortable without mentioning how these connected with actual learning. We talked about how

we might have another short evaluation that prompted more reflection. We devised a follow-up evaluation that included this question: "Why do you think that reflecting on your learning (and Professor Schlosser's teaching) is relevant to studying political philosophy?" The responses were terrific. Here are a few:

I think it's important because political philosophy is really a process, and has been for hundreds of years, of people sitting down with these ideas, taking them apart, and trying to apply them to politics. Reflecting on my learning helps me to focus on why it's important to keep participating and asking questions.

Reflection allows people to pause and to see the bigger picture. I think that everybody, especially people in political philosophy, should reflect once in a while. For the class, it allows one to see where they come from, where they stand in terms of knowledge and understanding, and see where they want to head.

I think reflecting on learning is exceptionally helpful for realizing what works best and what doesn't. Before we reflected, I thought that everything in the class was going as best as it could (I still really enjoy the class and think it is run really well!) but it wasn't until students brought up their concerns that I realized that there is always room for improvement.

This is kind of a broad question but the obvious is that if it betters our understanding of the course material it's very relevant. Then there is working in a community to better the learning experience for everyone, and also education is an integral part of any state, as we have learned, and so thinking about the ways in which we learn best and work together is helpful in understanding the importance of education.

I think that reflecting on the way the class is being taught and run is an interesting parallel to how we're reflecting on how societies can be run in class, and I think this whole system of feedback is an interesting exercise in not taking the structure of things for granted and trying to optimize an experience for all parties involved.

I think it's not only relevant to studying political philosophy but to all disciplines. It helps me reflect on how I can learn more effectively.

When we talked about the results of these follow-up evaluations, Joel distributed copies of all of the students' answers to this question and underscored a few. The students' positive response suggested to us that they had understood why reflecting on their learning was not only relevant to the course but also to all of the learning they were doing across their college experiences.

The insightful student responses to our second mid-course evaluation also reminded us that the wording of questions and intentions in teaching is crucial. While students could clearly think about how feedback works, if we wanted students to actively think about their own process of learning and the stakes to this learning, we needed to be explicit in naming transparency and reflection as important course goals, an insight that Abby had identified in her initial comments in September. Having a continuous collaboration that extended beyond just our single course of

work together allowed us to design a course from the beginning that named transparency and reflection as course goals. Figure 1 below is taken from the first page of the syllabus.
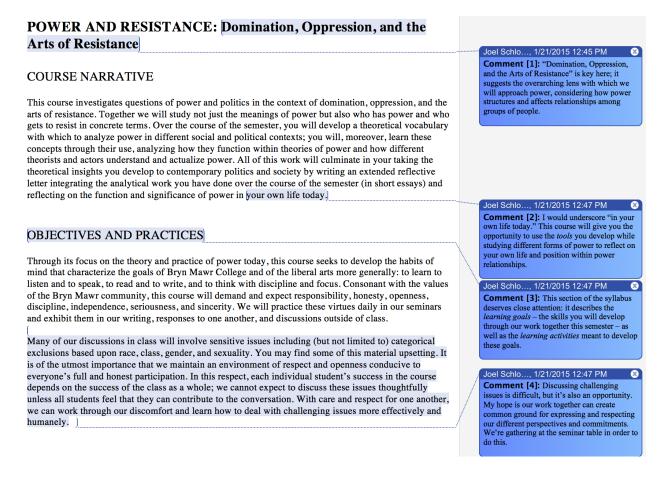
POWER AND RESISTANCE: Domination, Oppression, and the Arts of Resistance

COURSE NARRATIVE

This course investigates questions of power and politics in the context of domination, oppression, and the arts of resistance. Together we will study not just the meanings of power but also who has power and who gets to resist in concrete terms. Over the course of the semester, you will develop a theoretical vocabulary with which to analyze power in different social and political contexts; you will, moreover, learn these concepts through their use, analyzing how they function within theories of power and how different theorists and actors understand and actualize power. All of this work will culminate in your taking the theoretical insights you develop to contemporary politics and society by writing an extended reflective letter integrating the analytical work you have done over the course of the semester (in short essays) and reflecting on the function and significance of power in your own life today.

OBJECTIVES AND PRACTICES

Through its focus on the theory and practice of power today, this course seeks to develop the habits of mind that characterize the goals of Bryn Mawr College and of the liberal arts more generally: to learn to listen and to speak, to read and to write, and to think with discipline and focus. Consonant with the values of the Bryn Mawr community, this course will demand and expect responsibility, honesty, openness, discipline, independence, seriousness, and sincerity. We will practice these virtues daily in our seminars and exhibit them in our writing, responses to one another, and discussions outside of class.

Many of our discussions in class will involve sensitive issues including (but not limited to) categorical exclusions based upon race, class, gender, and sexuality. You may find some of this material upsetting. It is of the utmost importance that we maintain an environment of respect and openness conducive to everyone's full and honest participation. In this respect, each individual student's success in the course depends on the success of the class as a whole; we cannot expect to discuss these issues thoughtfully unless all students feel that they can contribute to the conversation. With care and respect for one another, we can work through our discomfort and learn how to deal with challenging issues more effectively and humanely.

> Joel Schlo…, 1/21/2015 12:45 PM
>
> **Comment [1]:** "Domination, Oppression, and the Arts of Resistance" is key here; it suggests the overarching lens with which we will approach power, considering how power structures and affects relationships among groups of people.

> Joel Schlo…, 1/21/2015 12:47 PM
>
> **Comment [2]:** I would underscore "in your own life today." This course will give you the opportunity to use the *tools* you develop while studying different forms of power to reflect on your own life and position within power relationships.

> Joel Schlo…, 1/21/2015 12:47 PM
>
> **Comment [3]:** This section of the syllabus deserves close attention: it describes the *learning goals* – the skills you will develop through our work together this semester – as well as the *learning activities* meant to develop these goals.

> Joel Schlo…, 1/21/2015 12:47 PM
>
> **Comment [4]:** Discussing challenging issues is difficult, but it's also an opportunity. My hope is our work together can create common ground for expressing and respecting our different perspectives and commitments. We're gathering at the seminar table in order to do this.

Fig. 1: Annotated Syllabus for "Power" course

Because we had established openness and trust around Joel's rationales for teaching as he did as well as processes for explaining and reflecting on these rationales with students, during our second semester of work together we implemented more specific reflection activities into the course. We thus brought this lesson of transparency to the forefront of our work in the spring semester: we created an annotated syllabus (Fig. 1) that highlighted how course activities connected with course goals; when designing course activities we also explicitly asked students to reflect about how well a given task helped their learning; finally, we developed a module approach to staged learning activities (that we describe below) to create and reinforce a developmental approach to learning among the students.

Planned Not Planning: Creating Effective Learning Structures

Another way in which the quality of our collaborative relationship led to better pedagogical outcomes concerned what we came to call "planned not planning." Because of Joel's commitment to student autonomy, he often experimented with group activities to provide spaces for students to work out problems with one another. Abby immediately picked up on this and

helped Joel to see how it could be improved. Frequently throughout our first semester of work together, we tried new combinations of group activities, including fishbowls, silent board discussions, pairing and sharing, group presentations, and other variations on these ideas. After gaining new insights into the importance of transparency, we also framed each of these activities in terms of what they could accomplish according to Bloom's Taxonomy.

Had our collaboration ended with the single semester, we certainly would have learned from the sheer variety of approaches that we generated; however, having a second semester as well as a strong basis of trust and respect allowed us to build on this foundation by creating a structure of student collaboration that incorporated the best parts of our own work together while also leaving plenty of autonomy for them to use these structures as best fit their learning needs. Based on the successes of the first semester, we imagined how to stage and scaffold some of the same class activities according to Joel's learning goals for the students.

Our goal in the second semester was to make explicit the connections between student learning and what happens in the classroom; we were ready to reflect on *why* certain approaches would pair well with specific concepts or authors. Whereas our meetings the first semester required the introduction of new approaches (e.g. "Do you know how a 'fishbowl' conversation works?"), our initial meetings the second semester involved careful consideration as to how certain pedagogical techniques might align with the text or learning objectives for a class period (e.g. "Where would a 'fishbowl' best fit in this unit?"). Our earlier conversations about Bloom's Taxonomy evolved to shape our push for lesson planning that would be developmental throughout the semester.

Before the course began, Joel shared with Abby a map for the course, which listed not only the readings for each class, but also his initial learning goals.

M, 1/26	**Violence, Power, and the State**	Reading: Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth,* "Concerning Violence" Goals: (1) Consider justifications for violence (2) Understand situations when the state must be resisted, perhaps violently – psychological as well as political situations (3) Developing group dynamics through activities together

Joel's learning goals became the starting point for initial brainstorming for class activities but as we began to talk, the space we held together facilitated the generation of even richer ideas. At first we typed up and emailed back and forth these lesson plans, but an earlier discussion

prompted a significant jump in terms of evolution: as we discussed Abby's work at a local Friends School and the students' yoga practice, Joel had the idea that we might model the development of these units in terms of how yoga always has different stages to the poses—and thus that we could see staged sequences as building blocks of the course. In other words, the sharing of our lives outside the boundaries of the relationship focused on Joel's class elicited a new vision of how to collaborate on making the course that much more successful.

With this new structure, "lesson planning" evolved into talking about the mini units of four lessons which we eventually just worked out collaboratively during our weekly meetings. The "planning" became less structured, yet just as responsive (if not more) to the strengths and needs of the students in the room. Because we were familiar with the high energy of the group, we anticipated that students would be receptive to various enactment and acting exercises, which encouraged them to practice Joel's goals of "living" philosophy, that is, of integrating these ideas and theories into their lives.

Just as the ongoing and deepening relationship allowed us to use less structure in course design, relationships with students allowed greater experimentation with pedagogical approaches. Working within the structure we had created, we could also experiment more radically, moving from things with names like "silent board" or "fishbowl" to basically inventing our own class activities that were tailored to what we thought would work in the classroom, such as a mock town hall discussion with students playing the roles of various power groups or enactments of situations of powerlessness inspired by Vaclav Havel's famous essay "The Power of the Powerless" from which students could generate their own theories (see description in Figure 2).

Dynamic Youth:

Did you know Havel was also a famous playwright? In homage to him (and as I wrote over the weekend), for tomorrow we will be enacting situations of domination as a way of considering Havel and Scott's arguments and preparing for your next essay on domination and resistance. Here is a description of what we'll do and why.

What?

1 . In your Moodle group, I would like you to brainstorm a situation of domination that you could act out during class in roughly ten minutes. Prior to class, you should post and respond to one another on Moodle with ideas for what kind of situation you would like to act out. These can come from your own experiences, from the experiences of your friends or relatives, or from something in the news more generally -- it just needs to be contemporary. You can think about how it might be resisted, but need not be prepared to act out the resistance. The green grocer is a vivid example; we're trying to envision analogues closer to real life today.

2. At the beginning of class I will give your group a few minutes to finalize your scenario. Then each group will act out the situation and participate in a discussion.

3. As other groups act out their scenarios, you will be tasked with imagining forms of resistance that might be taking place or could take place in these situations. After a group acts out their scenario, all of us will try to identify these potential forms of resistance; we'll seek to misread the public transcript and identify the hidden transcript. When the audience talks, those who were actors should also feel invited to talk about how acting it out had them think about the real life power and resistance they felt. (When all of you reflect in your final essays, you may well say that this moment in the course allowed you to see oppressive structures that you COULD actually be resisting!)

Why?

1. The purpose of this exercise is to inspire thinking about different situations of domination and the forms of resistance these might entail. As we've often talked about, a given power arrangement may inform very different forms of resistance; Scott and Havel give us a range of examples but we need to work out what these would look like in situations more like our own.

2. In the coming week you will also be working on an essay about domination and resistance in a contemporary situation. This exercise thus gives you a chance to brainstorm different situations as well as the resistance that could be taking place.

I look forward to experiencing your creative inventions!

Fig. 2: Description of Enactment Activity

Reflection Matters: Aligning Pedagogy and Evaluation

A final way in which the yearlong collaboration proved fruitful consisted in how it led us to identify reflection as an important goal and then incorporate explicit activities dedicated to reflection. Both of us were highly reflective learners but this did not mean that our first instincts were towards creating space for reflection among students in the course. Yet as we observed and discussed Modern Political Philosophy during our first semester together, it became clear that we wanted to foster reflection in students so that they could have opportunities to integrate the more abstract or academic knowledge and ideas developed in the course into their own lives. The power of this kind of thinking struck us immediately when we ended the fall course with a

human barometer exercise (Fig. 3). (See "Notes" at the end of the article for a brief description of this activity.) Asking students to place themselves in relation to provocative statements from the history of modern political philosophy and then give reasons demanded a new level of investment that we wanted to elicit even more in the second semester.

Human Barometer: Modern Political Philosophy

On a scale of 1 – 10 (with 10 being the strongest agreement and 1 the strongest

disagreement), do you agree or disagree with the following statements? Why?

1. Hobbes' account of fear as the source of political order is useful for understanding international politics today.

2. Rousseau's theory of the general will has limited applicability to contemporary politics.

3. The categorical imperative continues to be the best way to say what duty is.

4. We need a strong state to preserve harmony among competing factions in civil society.

5. Capitalism continues to prevent genuine freedom; until capitalism is overcome we will never truly be free.

6. The strictures of Christian morality are more threatening to human freedom than any law or institution.

Fig. 3: Statements for "Human Barometer" Exercise

Just as in the previous examples, our continuing collaboration of trust and respect helped to create even more ideas. As we discussed the syllabus for the "Power" course, Abby suggested a reflective letter similar to something she had written in a previous course. This writing project asked students to reflect on the work they had done and to communicate these reflections to a specific recipient to whom the instructor would then send that letter. While this became the final writing students would do, it also provided good reason to return to such reflections throughout the semester. From the first day, we sought to elicit student reflection by asking them to identify their understanding of the key term of the course—"power"—and then to return to this concept periodically (again, following the recurrent structure we employed) to see how their understanding had changed or developed.

Conclusion: "To Teach is to Hold a Space"

In the three ways we have described above—incorporating transparency, developing effective learning structures, and encouraging student reflection about learning—the SaLT collaboration facilitated by the TLI fostered a better learning experience for students in Joel's courses. But the collaboration did not just serve those students. As we have noted repeatedly, the trust and respect that Abby and Joel developed became a resource and a pleasure in itself; this relationship, in fact, held specific benefits for each of them more individually as they sought to self-author their lives as college student and college professor respectively. (See Baxter Magolda, 2007, and Gunersel, Barnett, & Etienne, 2013, for discussions of self authorship.)

For Abby, the relationship provided a basis for recognizing how Joel's passions and interests in political philosophy mirrored her own engagement in thinking about pedagogy and learning. Political philosophy asks students to question society and their own participation in it, which reflected Abby's interest in transparent pedagogy, which asks that both professor and students critically name and develop their own stake in the course material. Although our conversations focused on Joel's class and his pedagogy, Abby found the partnership rewarding because she too was learning valuable lessons informing her own vision of what reflective and inspired teaching looks like.

Before working with Joel, Abby anticipated one of the challenges of teaching as the reality that brainstorming for a lesson rarely reflects the reality of the teaching experience. Through their collaboration, however, Abby learned to see this fluidity of teaching and learning as energizing. Although their initial conceptions of how best to map out the Power class was engaging, their yoga-inspired approach to lesson design was even more enjoyable because of the way "planned not planning" allowed us to tailor class sessions to Joel's students, and thus choose engaging class activities which asked students to take risks. It seemed appropriate that Abby and Joel tried a brainstorming approach requiring more spontaneity, imagination, and risk, especially as the course so often asked students to be vulnerable in their reflections on power and sharing of work with peers. The ways the formal TLI structures allowed for less structured collaboration, then, encouraged Abby to embrace unpredictability as an opportunity in "self-authoring."

In particular, partnering with Joel for an entire year helped Abby "self-author" her perspective as a student as one that was valuable and worthy of contribution. In Abby's application to be a student consultant for the TLI program, she wrote that having a partner "with whom you can talk through a class experience or future strategy helps maintain not only the integrity of your initial goals, but also your self-confidence and sanity as you continue to invite others to learn with and from you." Indeed, Abby found that collaborating with Joel strengthened her confidence in her own voice and ideas. During our second semester, Abby became more comfortable advocating for learning that she imagined students would find fun, challenging, engaging and memorable. Whereas she initially referred to resources for student consultants that listed past successful activities, Abby's brainstorming during the second semester was more original—based on Joel's past successes and her perspective as a student. Ultimately, the TLI taught Abby how powerful student voice is in shaping learning experiences, and even prompted her to envision how her future teaching practices could invite student reflection and perspective.

For Joel, the collaborative relationship provided a safe space in which to take risks and thus push his self-authorship beyond the predictable conventions of college teaching. As a junior faculty member, Joel felt the pressure to return to "lowest common denominator" teaching that required less investment from him. Even at a student-learning-focused community such as Bryn Mawr the implicit message to junior faculty from some senior colleagues was to keep teaching duties to a minimum. Yet Abby's encouragement and engagement reminded him of the joy of teaching and the wonderful opportunities for experimentation and development (both of self and of students) that it provided. The space they held for creative collaboration and experimentation insured that teaching stayed fresh and exciting.

Abby's knowledge of the tacit workings of Bryn Mawr and Haverford and her own affirmation of Joel's intuitions also helped Joel to develop confidence as a new faculty member. Frequently Joel would turn to Abby for her reaction to something outside of the class on which they were collaborating—something with a student, for instance, or an idea for another class in the future. Abby's thoughtful responses were invaluable. Moreover, Abby's enthusiasm extended beyond the course material and included frequent positive feedback about Joel as a professor more generally. Perhaps the highest compliment came when Abby recommended to a senior Bryn Mawr friend of hers that she take Joel's course in the spring—and she did.

Notes

The following activities are recommended by the Teaching and Learning Institute at Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges to help create engaged discussion and contribution:

Silent Board Discussion: After you give the instructions, there should be no talking out loud at all during this activity. Write a key term or statement on the blackboard and circle it. Invite students to come up to the board and define/discuss the term by drawing lines out from the circle (like spokes from the center of a wheel), writing a response at the end of the spoke, and circling it. As responses are added to the board, students can draw lines out from those circled responses and "speak" to them. When students have finished writing, give them a few minutes to read what is up on the board. Then talk out loud about it, referring to what people have written.

Barometer: Designate a continuum with one extreme (at one end of the blackboard or room) being "Agree" and the other (at the other end of the blackboard or room) being "Disagree." Read aloud a statement and students move to and stand at a point on the continuum that reflects their stance on the issue. Then students say why they are standing there. As students speak, other students or the speakers themselves can change positions, if what they hear or say changes their minds, and then they can talk about that. Afterwards, debrief/discuss what students learn from the activity. (If you plan to read statements that might make students feel vulnerable, be sure you have built enough trust in the class first.)

Fish Bowl: Form an inner circle of desks at which 5-10 students sit. Form an outer circle in which remaining students sit. Have inner circle engage in a discussion of some key topic. Outer circle observes and takes notes. After 10-15 minutes, outer circle can either switch into inner circle (individual students in outer circle stand up and tap the shoulder of an inner student and replace him/her) and the discussion continues, or the outer circle can report on their observations

of the inner circle discussion. (If you plan to have the inner circle discuss topics or issues that might make students feel vulnerable, be sure you have built enough trust in the class first.)

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