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LEARNING TO TEACH AND TEACHING TO LEARN: INSIGHTS FROM A YEAR-LONG PARTNERSHIP INTO TEACHERS' AND STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES AND PRACTICES

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Introduction (Erin)

During the course of the 2014-2015 academic year I had the opportunity to participate in a pedagogy seminar for junior faculty through the Teaching and Learning Institute at Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges. A tenured faculty member in the Education Program at Bryn Mawr College taught the seminar, and fourteen newly appointed junior faculty members from both Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges participated in the course. While the weekly class sessions were extremely informative—particularly when it came to thinking, writing, and talking about our pedagogical strategies and development—for me, the most significant aspect of this seminar was the opportunity to work with a Student Consultant.

The role of the Student Consultant—a collaborative partner who visited my class on a weekly basis to observe my teaching, provide me with detailed feedback, help me develop and revise lesson plans, assignments, and activities, and, ultimately, offer a student's voice and perspective toward the ongoing development of my pedagogy and practice—was crucial to my growth and success in the classroom. The relationship that my Student Consultant, Juliana Montinola, and I developed over the course of the 2014-2015 academic year was transformative.

Working together provided us the opportunity to learn from one another's perspectives and to develop pedagogical strategies that are based within a productive faculty-student partnership. Throughout this yearlong process of learning from Juliana, my teaching improved significantly and I gained a better understanding of the type of teacher I want to be in the classroom. For Juliana, this yearlong partnership shaped her understanding of the teaching process and her role as a student in the classroom.

In this essay, we share our respective insights about student perspectives, about teaching, and about learning. We alternate between our perspectives, reproducing the back-and-forth dialogue we had through our yearlong partnership as we were learning to teach and teaching to learn.

Insights about Student Perspectives (Erin)

While this was not my first year teaching in the classroom, in many ways it felt new because of the opportunity for ongoing student-input, advice, and feedback from someone who had no personal stake in the course beyond working with me to improve my teaching. One of the most salient aspects missing from my graduate school education was learning *how* to teach. During my years in graduate school, I became an expert in the field of East Asian Art and Visual culture, competent in modern and classical Japanese language, and skilled at researching and writing.

Yet, although I worked as a Teaching Assistant in graduate school, completed a teaching certificate, was awarded a Teaching Post-Doctoral Fellowship, and have taught for the past two years at a liberal arts college, I still felt like there was something fundamentally missing from my pedagogy and practice.

The first year or two teaching—fresh out of graduate school—was intense. Developing new courses, syllabi, lectures, assignments, class discussion activities, assessment, and grading was relentless. During the first year in particular, I told myself, just stay one week ahead of the students and you will make it. I learned a lot through observation and by working with my faculty advisors and mentors during graduate school and while on my Post-Doc. However, in the midst of preparing and teaching my courses, I had no concrete sense of where things stood with the students until the end of the semester course evaluations. Course feedback during the semester typically came in the form of in-class observations by senior faculty mentors or supervisors. While their feedback was extremely useful, it only provided me with one perspective—that of the faculty—and I was acutely aware of the fact that I was missing the student perspective.

My partnership with Juliana changed that. One of the greatest assets in teaching a new film course “Postwar Japanese Cinema” during the Fall 2014 semester was Juliana’s ability to share with me the thoughts, views, and, ultimately, voices of students. She served as my sounding board and provided important observational feedback regarding course content, lectures, discussion sessions, assignments, and the overall classroom dynamic. With Juliana’s help I was able to articulate my concerns and anticipate the challenges involved in teaching a course anchored by a semester-long creative assignment in which students had to write, direct, and produce a short film.

One of the most beneficial aspects of my relationship with Juliana was her ability to provide constructive feedback regarding the balance between content and technology. As an outside observer she was able to assess the continuity between student work and participation during class, lab-sessions, and weekly film screenings. If there were issues relating to the weekly structure of class or labs, time management, volume of work, and/or my ability to communicate effectively with the students regarding course material and the film project, she was able to pinpoint the problem and help me develop effective solutions.

Juliana’s collaboration with me throughout the semester offered a certain level of critical distance and support to my teaching strategies, which not only mitigated my concerns but helped me to solicit, manage, and address the practical challenges of executing a short film project. One of the most helpful examples of this was when Juliana gathered mid-semester feedback reports from all of the students in the course and made herself available to the students outside of class for anonymous conversation. During my first two years of teaching I had decided to forgo mid-semester feedback evaluations, thinking that checking-in with students one-on-one throughout the semester to inquire about the course content, workload, and assignments would be more personal and thus more productive. In retrospect I realize that this approach was met with mixed results. Some students were more than happy to share their insights. Most of their feedback was helpful; yet, at times I wondered how much of what they were saying was based on their assumptions of what I wanted to hear. Other students, however, were more reticent and it was

clear that they felt uncomfortable critiquing the course in front of me. In the end, the most honest, and, often times, constructive feedback that I received was not until the very end of the term when I circulated anonymous semester-long course evaluations. At that point, however, it was too late for me to respond to the feedback and implement significant changes until the next time I taught the course.

It was Juliana who strongly encouraged me to reconsider using mid-semester course evaluations as an assessment tool. Working with her, we drafted a one-page questionnaire with two goals in mind. The first was to help me gain a better sense of how the course was going; determine areas for improvement; assess student learning; and revisit course expectations. The second was to encourage students to take stock in the course at the half-way point as well as to think more deeply about their own critical engagement and contributions in class. The results were fantastic. Through Juliana's thoughtful facilitation and conversation of the mid-semester evaluations with my students, I was able to gain an incredible amount of feedback that helped me revise and revamp the course during the second half of the semester. In many cases, I learned what modes of teaching and visual aids were the most effective (PowerPoint and film clips were a plus!) as well as what areas of classroom organization required improvement, such as group discussions and time management. As a result, I was able to streamline the course structure and content in ways both large and small that directly benefitted my students during the second half of the term.

With regard to the short film project, the mid-semester course feedback alerted me to some of the inevitable issues that come up from working in groups. To varying degrees, all four of the student film groups were dealing problems relating to compatibility, the allocation of work and division of labor, differences in opinion regarding artistic, stylistic, and narrative choices, as well as those relating to leadership and time-management. In most cases, I was able to address individual concerns as well as those of the larger group, and solve the problems students were having before they became too big to fix. Additionally, through this evaluation process my students were able to reflect upon their role in the class and take some ownership in their behavior and commitment to the success of the course as well as their film projects. This resulted in the students working through their differences among themselves without my intervention.

Juliana also encouraged me to continue to think about ways in which I could pair this form of teaching assessment and feedback with the previous format of one-on-one conversations (when appropriate) with the students. Ultimately, I found that using both formats of assessment in combination with each other was more productive and provided my students with various ways of sharing their insights and perspectives throughout the semester.

During the Spring 2015 semester I taught the course, "Modern and Contemporary East Asian Art," which was a class I had offered the previous year but it was in need of some revision. Due to conflicting teaching and class schedules, Juliana was unable to attend my weekly class sessions. However, because we had developed such a strong working relationship during the Fall 2014 semester, we continued to work together in a different capacity. Rather than consult through direct observation of the class, Juliana took on the role of a dialogue partner—a person with whom the professor can share ideas and plans regarding the course and its development throughout the semester.

Because I had already taught the course once and received end of the semester feedback, I had a clear sense of what worked, what needed improvement, and a number of ideas about how to go about revising the course and content. What I was not anticipating was the challenges of a changing classroom size and dynamic. The first time I taught this course I had a smaller enrollment of students and as a result I ran it more like a seminar with an emphasis on student-led discussion. This year I was extremely pleased to see that my course enrollment had doubled. However, with the increase in students it was necessary for me to readapt the structure to a format that could meet the needs of a larger group. Additionally, within the first two weeks of teaching I noticed how quiet this class was. Whether it was shyness or a lack of familiarity with the material, or both, my students were extremely restrained when it came to speaking up or sharing their thoughts and opinions with each other. I quickly realized that the challenges I faced this semester were not grounded in communicating the course content but in getting my students to engage with the material and with each other.

In her role as a dialogue partner Juliana was able to continue working with me on a weekly basis to advise and discuss the status and progress of my course. I was able to share with her the challenges and successes of this new class and dynamic, brainstorm ideas, troubleshoot problem areas, and initiate changes. The most significant area of support that Juliana offered was in helping me implement “active learning” techniques that promoted collaborative and cooperative learning between faculty and students. Depending upon the course material and weekly assignments, we would try out different strategies for encouraging students to engage with the material and each other on a deeper level. One of the most effective strategies was simply changing the physical environment of the classroom. Rather than keeping the desks lined up in rows, at the start of each class, I would have the students move them to form a large circle, small group clusters, half moon, etc. in an effort to facilitate more direct conversation and discussion. We also implemented activities—with varying degrees of success—that facilitated engagement with the material on an individual level, a small group level, and a large group level. Examples of successful active learning techniques included activities such as:

“Think/Pair/Share” in which after presenting a short lecture on the class content or reading, I had students reflect on the topic or set of questions for a few minutes on their own. Then I had them form pairs and share their responses with a classmate. Finally, I asked the representatives from the pairs to share their ideas/finding with the entire class.

“Group Annotation and Analysis of Art” in which small groups (2-3 students) would review and critique a work of art that we were studying in class. In many cases this was an opportunity for me to introduce art historical methodologies such as formal or cultural analysis as well as key terms, concepts, and ideas covered in the weekly readings. Students would work together in their groups to review and critique the work of art based upon a set of questions I had provided. This was done on paper or in some instances through an online application. Once they had completed their annotation and analysis they would present their findings to the rest of the class.

“Concept Mapping” and “Chalk Talk” in which I would write key terms or statements on the blackboard and circle them. Then I would invite all of the students to get up out of their seats and come up to the board to silently 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 were added to the board, students could draw lines out from those circled responses and “speak” to them. When students finished writing, I then gave them some time to read what they collectively wrote on the board. Then I would use the content they created to facilitate a class discussion with the as an entire group where we would talk about what everyone had written.

Each week during our meetings Juliana and I would review and discuss the different active learning techniques I had used in class. While Juliana was not directly observing the class, she was still able to offer constructive feedback regarding the various activities we developed to facilitate class discussions with a particularly shy group of students. She also encouraged me to follow-up with my students—on an individual and group basis—to gather their insights and perspectives regarding the effectiveness of the various active learning activities, while we continued to develop effective solutions.

Insights about Faculty Perspectives (Juliana)

Personally, I found that Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges have allowed me to experience education in ways that I never had before. Before arriving in the States, I studied in a local, Catholic school in Manila, Philippines for the entirety of middle school and for half of high school, while the other half of was spent in an International British school in Milan, Italy. In addition, I spent a year after high school attending a large university in the Philippines. Through these different schools, I was able to experience a fair amount of teaching styles, classroom strategies, and institutional systems. Growing up, there were many things that I loved and loathed across these three different schools, but the main things that were strikingly diverse were the teaching styles and the teacher-student relationships.

While I attended high school in Manila, I encountered a number of warm teachers who exhibited a genuine concern for their students' learning and well-being. However, there were just as many who were not very skilled at conveying information to the class. Even at the university, there were a few professors whose teaching styles appeared to be limited to just one strategy, namely, reading from the textbook. Conversely, the professors in my high school felt like excellent instructors by comparison; I learned new material rapidly, and with a sudden hunger for knowledge that I'd previously never felt. However, these teachers felt strictly professional. The distance (and perhaps slight apathy) that they emitted was only mitigated by the small class size. Of course, this dichotomy between isn't as stark as it sounds, and there was so much more to the vibe in each school than I can describe right now, but I hope I've managed to convey a general idea.

For my college education, I sought a balance between excellence in teaching and a genuine concern for students. And, for better or for worse, these past experiences led me to apply to be a student consultant through the Teaching and Learning Institute at Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges to both learn more about pedagogy and to make use of what I have witnessed in the classroom growing up. After becoming a student consultant, the very first thing I came to appreciate was how much thought my faculty partner—and probably most of the professors on campus—put into her work. In addition to designing syllabi, lectures, and activities, I noticed how my partner, Professor Schoneveld, was constantly working on making connections. As a

facilitator of learning, she made constant connections between ideas, and between herself and the students. This increased my respect for Professor Schoneveld immensely, and I believe that this respect was very beneficial to our professor-consultant relationship; I saw the intellectual work and continuous evolving plan in her class and I felt more motivated than ever to help her in her endeavors as a professor.

Throughout the semester, Professor Schoneveld was often concerned about the students' learning experience, what they were taking away from it, and whether there were any little adjustments that could be made to enhance this. I saw how her concern for her students fed into her receptiveness to students' midcourse feedback, as well as her willingness to adjust her class to better support the students' learning. Throughout the Fall semester, we struggled to strike a balance between being adaptable and sensitive to the students' needs without sacrificing all the structure in her Post-War Japanese Cinema class. We looked for common themes among the midcourse feedback and thought up simple adjustments to address them. At the same time, we were also bouncing ideas to improve time management, since the discussions always seemed to get cut short. By shifting the content of the lecture portion (veering away from the introductory section of the film), enforcing a stricter presentation time limit, and adjusting the weekly readings, Professor Schoneveld was able to not only address the students' concerns, but also able to add an extra fifteen minutes to the discussion portion of her class.

What I Have Learned about Teaching (Erin)

Through my working relationship with Juliana I have learned three important things about my teaching. First, communication is key. Do not assume prior knowledge or experience when it comes to a shared set of class expectations. One of the things that I have learned this over the course of this year is that students are not mind readers and neither are professors! If you want students to know and understand your expectations regarding class participation, assignments, teaching, availability, etc. you must be explicit and *tell* them—again and again—through different forms of communication. Some of the biggest problems I experienced this year have been related to my assumption(s) that students are the same as me and “know” what is expected of them in and outside the classroom.

I am not suggesting that students are immature or require a significant amount of oversight. On the contrary, all of the students—freshman through seniors—have taken my courses very seriously. However, if you do not make your intentions and expectations clear, there can be misunderstandings on both the part of the professor and the student, which can lead to problems that distract everyone from teaching and learning. With this in mind, I have to constantly remind myself to be explicit—from the beginning of the semester to the end—about what I expect of the students and what they can expect of me. This means listing in the syllabus what the course goals are, how weekly reading and writing assignments should be handled, in-class behavior regarding participation, student interaction, class absences, and so on. This must also be followed up with verbal reminders and conversations (individually or as a group), emails, and feedback.

Second, learn to let go. One of my greatest strengths and weaknesses is that I am a perfectionist. For me perfectionism means planning, controlling, and overseeing every last part of the syllabus, class lecture and lesson plan, PowerPoint presentation, Moodle course page design, weekly and

semester-long assignments, etc. It is hard not to agonize over the details. That means being more flexible in the classroom and having the confidence that I can teach the class and course even if the lesson plan and PowerPoint are not perfect. It also means allowing myself to prioritize different aspects of the course—lecture, class discussion, active learning activities, assignments, individual and group work, etc.—week to week. In doing so, I try to remind myself that that if one thing is not as perfect as I wanted it to be, there is always next class, and I can try again. I have also found that letting go of being perfect—especially in the classroom—allows me to be more spontaneous, flexible, and open minded to move in new directions (especially when none of the students are excited to discuss the reading assignment, or they are falling asleep during lecture!)

Third, do not be afraid to ask for help. As I mentioned earlier, the jump from graduate school to my first teaching job was a big one and I found that there are a lot of things I did not know. Whether it was creating stronger lesson plans and syllabi, to administrative protocols for submitting a new course proposal, to communicating with the deans when a student was struggling in class, I was learning on the fly. That said, being able *and* willing to ask for help, especially from Juliana, has been critical to the success of my classes and teaching. Learning how to successfully develop, manage, and execute new courses—or ones that you have previously taught—is extremely challenging. There are so many moving parts that go into teaching a course as well as connecting with your students. You will never master them all on your first attempt. But reaching out for advice, support, and feedback, particularly from a student perspective, is extremely important. In many cases, Juliana was able to see things both positive and negative in the class environment that I simply could not from my perspective as the professor. The advice and perspective of the student consultant—who knows how they learn and what teaching strategies work and do not work—can make all the difference.

What I Have Learned about Teaching (Juliana)

If there is one thing that I have learned about teaching this year, it is that there is far more work than many students realize! Needless to say, my respect for professors increased tenfold after I became a student consultant. There are many other traits that I have come to appreciate in professors. However, if I had to choose three that are essential to be a great professor it would be receptivity, adaptability, and a genuine concern for students' learning. I believe that the last trait is what jumpstarts the first two traits, and the first two traits are what allow a professor to seriously consider student feedback.

Adjusting the class based on feedback is perhaps one of the most challenging aspects of teaching, but this ability is invaluable to a professor as it can greatly improve their students' classroom experience. Professor Schoneveld was particularly sensitive to the needs of her students and tuned into the class atmosphere. She had a clear understanding of where each of her students stood in terms of academic progress, and often reminded them that she was available through email or appointment if they needed extra help. Whenever she felt that she was not supporting a student properly, she contemplated the best strategy to accommodate him or her. This self-correcting behavior took a great deal of creativity and continuous contemplation, but as a result it improved students' learning and built a stronger rapport with the students.

In terms of class structure, I have learned that there is no one-size-fits-all classroom strategy. At most, the syllabus acts as a loose reference, and it is up to the professor (along with helpful student feedback) to tailor the class to the students based on their dynamic and personality. Every class will be different, so it is important to observe what styles work with the student and what do not.

What I Have Learned about Learning (Erin)

Regardless of the course or content of the course that I am teaching my learning goals have always prioritized helping students make meaningful connections between the different areas of study—whether it be language, history, art, literature or religion. Many of the students—Haverford, Bryn Mawr, and Swarthmore—are coming from very different backgrounds and contexts with regard to their interest and exposure East Asian Languages and Cultures. In some cases my students are from China, Japan, and Korea and interested in learning more about their cultural and historical origins from a different academic perspective and/or context. Most of the students who are interested in East Asia or who take courses with me have already had some level of exposure to Japanese/ Chinese language, popular culture, religion, literature, etc. Many have traveled to East Asia, lived in East Asia, are aware of the growing political and economic importance of East Asia within a global context and are interested in learning more about China, Korea, and Japan. As such, I try and establish common ground through which to connect with all of my students as well as provide them with the tools to make their own intellectual discoveries.

While this necessitates expertise in and enthusiasm for the material, I have learned through working with Juliana that it also requires a willingness to collaborate with my students in a variety of different ways. Learning will always be a give and take and I have come to understand that knowledge is subject to change within certain cultural contexts—particularly in the classroom! When it comes to acquiring knowledge or establishing a set of tools for inquiry, my primary goal is to introduce students to new visual and textual materials and cultural content that will enrich their broader understanding of East Asia as well as allow them to develop a critical language for looking. Yet, as Juliana has helped me understand more clearly, there is not “one-size fits all” approach to learning.

However, through active communication with the students and a willingness to be open to their feedback, there are daily opportunities to fine-tune my teaching strategies that can accommodate a variety of learning styles. This approach has proven invaluable to me in the classroom because it gives me the freedom to try (and sometimes fail!) different methods or activities that build upon and support different ways which students learn material and acquire knowledge. I have been able to move between lecture, discussion, small group work, large group work, individual tutorials, as well as assigning projects that require students to pursue independently outside of the classroom throughout the semester. Depending on the day, the content, and the activity, some approaches work better than others. However, being able to continuously assess and reassess the success different approaches to learning has allowed me to transform the classroom experience for everyone involved.

What I Have Learned about Learning (Juliana)

As a student consultant who has had the opportunity to work with a faculty partner, I have come to understand that successful learning is ultimately a collaborative endeavor between professors and students, where both parties exert an equal amount of effort. A professor's role is to support a student's learning as well as he or she can, and a student can best support a professor by offering constructive feedback on which strategies are most effective. This is why open lines of communication are instrumental in any ongoing relationship between faculty and students.

Of course, my experience as a student consultant has inevitably affected me as an everyday student. I've come to understand that learning is a two-way street. Unlike my previous idea of students in an exclusively receiving role, I now know that students can go beyond absorbing information and take up a more active role in the classroom. We can ask questions, be attentive to what works and what doesn't in the classroom, and make suggestions if we think there is a better alternative. Student input, if we're willing to share it, can play heavily into an improved classroom experience.

In addition, working as a student consultant has helped me shift my perspective on the professor-student relationship. I have learned to think of professors as approachable guides as opposed to intimidating and rigid authority figures, and this small change reminds me that I have a voice in my own classroom experience. I now know that I should not be afraid to give feedback if I know that it could better support my learning in the future, and I should have more faith that professors will be open to what their students have to say.

Conclusion (Juliana)

My yearlong partnership with Professor Schoneveld has taught me more than I ever imagined. I now see that teaching is not a straight line from point professor to point student. Rather, it looks more like a loop, where professors and students are constantly feeding one another with insights, questions, and suggestions, and subsequently evolving from them. In other words, higher learning is not a static method: It can be far more organic, innovative, challenging, and fulfilling than many people realize. However, we can only push the boundaries of learning if we—the students and professors—are willing to thoughtfully communicate with one another and value what the other has to say. I believe that teaching and learning is essentially a question of collaboration and mutual respect. With these in place, professors and students can create a space that will make for an incredible classroom experience.

Conclusion (Erin)

The opportunity to work with Juliana throughout the 2014-2015 academic year has been incredible. Our yearlong partnership provided me with so many important student perspectives into my ongoing pedagogical development and practice. Juliana's consistent, thoughtful, and constructive insights have empowered me to build upon my previous teaching experience through developing a new set of skills grounded in continuous student engagement and feedback. I have learned to embrace the challenges that come with different classroom dynamics, student learning styles, and expectations. Most importantly, however, the opportunity to continuously learn from students throughout the semester—rather than at the end—helped me recognize teaching and learning as a fluid and improvisational process. Every time I step into the classroom

there is the potential for unscripted growth and discovery between my students and me. Sometimes it can be uncomfortable and the uncertainty of the various directions in which we can move is simultaneously overwhelming and exhilarating. We will all make mistakes, learn from them and one another, and continue moving forward to create a shared learning environment that is both productive and collaborative.