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## STUDENT-FACULTY COLLABORATION IN THE RUSSIAN-LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

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### Introduction

This essay reflects upon a yearlong collaboration between a first-year lecturer in Russian and a senior Russian major through the Teaching and Learning Institute (TLI) at Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges. In the fall of 2014, the two of us participated in semester-long seminars for new faculty and student consultants respectively, organized and facilitated by Dr. Alison Cook-Sather. During the fall and for the semester following, Mariana observed Irina's Second-year Intensive Russian classes and met with Irina each week to analyze the effectiveness of each class session. At the end of the first semester of collaboration, we revised the syllabus for the course to reflect our discussions and brainstorming during our weekly meetings.

In our second semester of collaboration (spring, 2015), we focused on the development and refinement of a syllabus for a Russia-centered humanities course Irina would be teaching in English in the fall of 2015. Mariana read two past syllabi for the course and critiqued them. We refined the structure of the course, including its reading assignments, types of quizzes and presentations, final project description, and rubrics for evaluation. Then, Irina gave Mariana several of the course readings (an introductory reading, a literature piece, and a theoretical piece), and Mariana offered her perspective on how students' understanding of those readings ought to be tested.

This was an enlightening and productive collaboration that may serve as an informative model for junior (or senior) faculty and students with an interest in pedagogy. Because we both had experience with the material, both from a student and a teacher perspective, the collaboration was productive and easy. Though both of us were very familiar with the material, it was interesting to see how different pedagogical methods influenced the students' learning. In addition it was eye-opening to learn about the students from Bryn Mawr and Haverford in the Russian-language classroom.

### Embarking on Partnership

**Mariana:** Participating in faculty-student partnerships in foreign language classrooms makes for a rather unique experience. As a senior who had spent six months studying in St. Petersburg, I served as an intermediary between the second-year students, many of whom were preparing to spend time abroad, and the newly-hired instructor, Irina. As a student with a background as a foreign language tutor and teaching assistant, observing Irina's classes provided me with valuable insights that helped me shape and improve my own pedagogical skills. The Intermediate Russian class I observed was small, with four students the first semester and only three students second semester. Fortunately, I felt fully welcomed as a member of the classroom environment.

My initial desire to take the opportunity to engage in the observation of a Russian language classroom and the teaching style of a new faculty member stemmed not only from a yearning to devote time to bettering the classroom experience of others or to reflect on practices of pedagogy. I also hoped to engage with myself, or more specifically, with my history as a student of the Russian language and culture. Through my class observations, I was able to reflect on what I was and was not taught before I went abroad, and how this influenced my experience. For example, I enjoyed having the opportunity to occasionally serve as a “voice of the future,” pointing out things in class that the students planning to go abroad should remember, things I had wished someone had told *me* to take note of.

**Irina:** Because I have taught second-year Russian a few times before, by the beginning of the semester, I was able to foresee the results learners would produce simply by following the textbook and working diligently at home, and I sought to find a way to elevate my students’ experience and productivity so that they might finish the course quite confident in their abilities, and optimally prepared for third-year Russian or the study abroad experience. I also aspired to provide coherent and efficient links to first- and third-year Russian, so that students’ progress would be manageable (in the beginning) and palpable (at the end). Finally, I wanted to create a comprehensive course—a syllabus, a schedule, projects descriptions, and class materials—that I could share with the next instructor of this course.

In my partnership with Mariana, I addressed the following questions: (i) how to create a positive, comfortable, yet professional, space and a sense of community in which students would thrive in learning, (ii) how to raise learners’ meta-cognitive awareness, (iii) how to make the syllabus for the course more prescriptive and positive, and less threatening, and finally (iv) how to inspire students to study Russian further.

Mariana helped me significantly to achieve all of the goals and answer the questions above. As a senior Russian major at Bryn Mawr, she knew the entire Russian curriculum (as she was enrolled in capstone Russian classes her senior year); she offered important insights on my teaching and the experience of her fellow students; and she presented a success story to the second-year students. By sharing with her peers her experiences as a student of Russian both here and abroad, she encouraged students to pursue their studies in a difficult language with optimism and diligence.

Even though Mariana’s formal role in my classes was that of an observer, from the first class she visited, Mariana became an active and valuable participant.

### **Our First Semester Partnership**

**Mariana:** Second-year Russian students tackle some of the most challenging aspects of Russian grammar, concepts with which I, too, struggled. First semester, the students confronted the notorious motion verbs. These are seemingly endless and difficult to conceptualize in English. For instance, there is a seemingly endless number of ways to say “to go,” depending on the directionality, frequency, and mode of the “going.” In the first instance, I glossed over these verbs and put a minimal amount of effort into learning them, and a maximum amount of effort into finding creative ways to avoid them in my speech and writing. In fact, this habit of mine

persisted until senior year. Therefore, I was interested to see how Irina would present these verbs in class.

One issue is that it is very difficult to visualize the differences between these verbs, as numerous verbs translate to one verb in English. I was pleasantly surprised by the amount of visualization presented by Irina related to these verbs. For instance, in mid-November, Irina brought a large, brightly colored poster illustrating a chaotic household scenario. The people in the illustration were *running* around, *carrying* items in and out of rooms, *entering* and *exiting* rooms, etc. Irina spent a significant chunk of time in class having students discuss what they saw in the pictures, i.e. describe the images using the prefixed verbs of motion they were covering in the curriculum.

I found this activity hugely helpful, especially as a person who learns very well through visualization. Irina employed similar approaches throughout her curriculum, asking students to narrate events in a video watched in class or to retell a story in Russian. I have found, far too often, that the teaching of grammar focuses far too much on rote memorization, rather than the visual and aural immersion that far more closely resembles the ways in which humans naturally acquire a first language.

I have to admit that I found essentially nothing worthy of improvement related to Irina's teaching style and pedagogical methods, and had only praise for the way she taught. Therefore, I was able to focus particular attention on the classroom dynamics, and took the opportunity to point out what I thought might be changed in a classroom in order to make the learning environment for the students more harmonious, and how to play up the strengths and interests of individual students.

**Irina:** In the fall semester, while Mariana and I were deconstructing my classes at our weekly meetings, Mariana would often ask me why I chose a certain style of teaching. For example, she asked why in my speech I used certain words with which students could not have been familiar. Her inquiry made me ponder (and not for the last time) one of the central aspects and difficulties of language teaching. My explanation was that the classroom is both a laboratory of learning and an experience of life. And even for the most advanced learner of a second language, there will arise situations that require the learner to decode a statement by pace, intonation, repetition, and gestures.

**Mariana:** As many second-year Russian students were preparing to go abroad, as I had done, I enjoyed having the opportunity to provide the students with insights related to my experiences. When I first arrived to study in Russia, I felt frustrated that my vocabulary was, in some way, "all over the place." For instance, I knew the word for "superstition" (*sueveriye*), but not the word for "trash can" (*musor*). Sometimes I felt like I understood quite a bit and could communicate rather efficiently, and at others, I felt like two years of Russian had left me feeling surprisingly unable to get basic information across. Therefore, in Irina's class, words that I wish I had known would sometimes come up. I could then offer a comment to the students, advising them to remember that particular word, because it would *certainly* appear in Russia ("pay attention, you'll be seeing this word a *lot*").

### **Our Second-Semester Partnership**

**Mariana:** Second semester, our partnership became significantly less focused on class observation, while expanding in new directions. Irina and I were able to “put our heads” together when she was planning out her course in English for the next semester. Irina would ask me to look over the syllabus and explore readings when she was considering her plans for an upcoming class. I have been in several courses, both English-language and not, where the assigned readings, assignments and tests are far more difficult than what I believed the students could manage, therefore, I am grateful that I had the opportunity to have a positive influence on the development of an instructor’s curriculum.

We continued work on materials for the language courses, as well. For instance, Irina once asked me to take a test she was planning on giving her students. I took the test, and she was able to determine whether some of the questions were too tricky, unclear, tested what learners have not learned yet, etc.

**Irina:** Having Mariana critique tests and upcoming readings were two of the most useful practices this year. Both gave me the opportunity to reassess the merits of the assignments and challenges I placed in front of my students.

In addition, as a result of the TLI seminar, I adopted the practice of soliciting mid-semester feedback from students. Mariana administered mid-semester feedback both in the fall (as a conversation with students) and in the spring (as a conversation with the students based on their written notes). In both instances, the mid-semester feedback asked two questions of students: 1) what contributes to your learning and 2) what can be improved to make your learning more effective. We received many more comments in the second semester, and the comments were more positive. After administering mid-semester feedback, I discussed in class my reasoning behind modifying (or maintaining) the elements of the course students had identified in their responses.

This practice inspired me to add anonymous feedback to all of the more substantial projects in my courses. For example, in the fall semester, students in second-year Russian participated in a pen-pal project with students from two other universities in the US and completed an anonymous feedback form at the end both rating their experience and answering open-ended questions. This feedback gave me a better idea of the value of students’ experiences, and how to improve those experiences in the future. I also plan to add a survey at the beginning of the semester to find out why students have chosen Russian (or the course at hand) and what their expectations and goals are for the course. Finally, I will add an assignment at the end of grammar-oriented classes throughout the semester, where I will ask students to write down grammar points with which they feel most confident and points with which they would like more practice.

## **Conclusion**

**Mariana:** My partnership with Irina gave me multiple opportunities to serve as an intermediary between students, their teacher, their learning, and their preparation to study abroad. I had the rare opportunity to help them make connections they might not have seen on their own and to help them gain perspective they could not have achieved yet. In addition, I had the unique

opportunity to reflect on my own learning, revisiting what I already “knew” and deepening my understanding.

Looking towards the future, I hope that my experiences participating in TLI with Irina will contribute to a small cohort in graduate school. Through my partnership, I not only reflected on pedagogical methods, but on classroom dynamics, linguistic and cultural immersion, and strengthened my skills working in a cross-cultural and multilingual environment.

**Irina:** From the outset, my partnership with Mariana in TLI made me contemplate and see the advantages of building a partnership relationship with my students, in which students have a say in the dynamic of a course. Through my conversations with Mariana, I came to understand better how one creates a space in the classroom where everyone is comfortable and professional at the same time, and thereby highly productive; a community in which everyone is an active contributor and everyone is responsible for the success of the course and of their own learning. Considering the intensity of language classes, how relatively few students take each class, and the high level of interaction between students, the role and responsibility of each student is often larger than in other disciplines.

Through TLI generally and particularly due to Mariana’s constant feedback, questions, and analysis, I was able to refine my pedagogical techniques, to share the construction of the course with the students to a greater extent, and open up a space that is more comfortable for everyone’s learning. The upshot, for me, is that it is healthy and necessary for a teacher to question her methods and materials every step of the way, with the goal of elevating the education of all (including herself); and I am grateful to Mariana for this opportunity to do so.