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LEARNING TO BE BRAVE WITHIN AND BEYOND PARTNERSHIP

Anita Ntem, Bryn Mawr College Class of 2018

When I was asked to be a student consultant for the Students as Learners and Teachers (SaLT) program at Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges, I was very excited and was ready to take on anything! I had heard about this program once before from a colleague of mine, and my initial reaction was, “That’s amazing but also seems very time consuming.” I was an outsider who was intrigued and in awe of students who took on this responsibility, even though I did not know the depth of the program entirely. Working with a 360 course my first time out—a course that was part of a cluster of courses developed around a theme—could be a challenge for me as opposed to partnering with a faculty member in a regular, conventional classroom setting. So, I knew going into the experience that I would have to be brave in several ways, but I did not know all the ways that this would play out: in relation to my faculty partner, in relation to the other faculty member teaching a course in the cluster, in relation to the students enrolled in the course and the students at a middle school we partnered with, and in relation to other areas of my life.

Preparing to embark on my partnership, I had a few worries and I had a few excitements. My worries were that I did not want to disappoint anyone who had put their trust in me. Considering that I was recommended by my dear Professor Lesnick, I did not want to disappoint anyone if I were to enter the program and not be as useful as previous student consultants had been. I wanted to show them that I was and am a valuable asset to the team. At the same time, I was excited because this was something that was a breath of fresh air for me where I would be able to work collaboratively with a professor on pedagogical classroom issues and more. I was also excited because as intimidating yet intriguing as it was to be involved with a 360 course initially, I have never taken a 360 course myself, so it was the perfect opportunity to allow me to see if I too would be able to handle what comes with a 360. Looking back on that time now, I see that I needed to be brave in both a personal and an academic sense—to believe in myself as a person in meaningful relationships and as a student drawing on and further developing my expertise.

My experience with my faculty partner, a professor in the Theater Department, was amazing. I started off entering the course a little nervous because I knew I was entering the “territory” of a course that seemed to be an intense step towards the theater world. The course included not only the production of a play in which the students and the professor performed but also a partnership with students at a middle school in Philadelphia, most of whom are African American. Every week, we visited the middle school and worked with the students as they prepared their own production of Shakespeare’s KING LEAR. Surprisingly, the young students seemed very loving and embracing of my presence, making me feel more comfortable in my endeavors with them. Their response to me contributed to the development of the courage I needed to help make the course be the best it could be for everyone involved.

As I met with my faculty partner, she spoke to me about certain themes she wanted to focus on, and one of the great themes was pedagogical. She felt that often when volunteers go into urban public schools, there is a “savior complex” that all participants in the partnership buy into: how fortunate the young students are to be mentored by the older students, how much they will learn, etc. In this model, all of the benefit and learning seems one-sided. This is something that Paulo Freire (1970) referred to as the “banking” model of education, where all of the knowledge was to

be bestowed on the students. An important element of the class was the notion of co-learners, and the belief that *all* participants had knowledge to share and things to teach. It was important that my faculty partner and I found ways to work against the assumption that we were there to save our Philadelphia student partners.

So, in our work together, we tried to break away from these assumptions in part through giving the 8th graders opportunities to be directors and actors themselves, and to be stakeholders in the decision-making process. Instead of the college students always taking the initiative to create the games we played in order to develop acting abilities and more, we asked more responsibilities of the middle school students. They took important roles where they had the opportunity to exercise their power over the college students. They had the power and courage of being directors and informing us, and the college students, what to do, what Shakespeare's language might mean, where to stand and how to portray ourselves in a scene. This way, the middle school students felt the power of their opinions, and knew that those mattered just as much as the college students' opinions. Also, this allowed the middle school students to see the kind of leaders they are and what kind of leaders they would like to be. We wanted to eliminate any feelings or impressions of hierarchy and increase confidence and assurance.

Something I noticed throughout my work with my faculty partner was the underlying psychological effects of a teacher's relationship, where in a 360 you are forced to sacrifice a lot of your normal routines for the sake of the students as well as for the sake of the cooperation with another professor, especially if it is someone of power. Personally, I noticed that even though it is intimidating to be working with a professor who is in the position of power that is higher than you, my partner always showed her capabilities and strengths that she had and has in contributing ideas, advice and suggestions when interacting with the college students. It would hurt me to see, hear, or feel as though someone as brilliant as my partner might not see the shine and the effect that she has on her students and even me. In moments like this, I felt courageous to be able to provide as much affirmative response as I could and even demonstrate the beauty of her teaching style that is unique and special to her. I thought it was amazing to see how the years of teaching and acting she has could sometimes fall into question at the blink of a moment when or if she was feeling intimidated by external factors beyond her control. So, it was amazing to be a person of affirmation and to be a person who witnesses the grace and elegance of someone's teaching despite intimidation, fear or hierarchy of power. It was through watching her style of teaching that I gained strength to be more confident in facing any obstacle or situation I face.

Being a student consultant, I entered the 360 world as an active participant and also being the ear for the students who worked tremendously hard every day of the week to pull off a great production and to plan what they would do with the middle school students. I felt the need to be that shoulder to lean on whenever the students felt they were frustrated, angered or confused, just as I felt the need to be the shoulder to lean on when it came to providing my partner with encouragement or strength when need be. Being a part of the intimate circles once a week where we reflected on our visits to the middle school gave me the opportunity to hear feedback from the students and even incorporate my own feedback, ending, when possible, with a positive message. It was partly my relationship with the college students, middle school students, and the professors that gave me the courage to offer the help, love, and support that I did as well as encouraged and affirmed me to be as driven and as motivated as they were throughout the course.

Reflecting on myself as a student consultant, I see that this program gives me the ability to also see who I am outside the classroom. I have the urge to always want to be useful and fix everything. I have grown to realize that sometimes it is okay to sit in uncertainty and not always know the answer to everything. That is the whole part of learning. Creating that space where you may not always know the answer to something or may not be skilled in a specific asset but can still give and receive love, support, and positive encouragement to all realms of the spectrum makes everything worthwhile. That was where I felt brave and reassured that I could make a difference and have a positive effect on this partnership. This program gave me the ability to be brave in multiple settings where I am not only the consultant for my partner, but I became a consultant or partner for my colleagues and to the middle school students. I became braver as a person, both in what I am able to do and in sitting peacefully with what is beyond my reach to change.

Reference

Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Herder & Herder.