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Introduction: Teaching and Learning Relationships

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INTRODUCTION: TEACHING AND LEARNING RELATIONSHIPS

This third issue of Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education is co-edited by Alison Cook-Sather (Coordinator of The Andrew W. Mellon Teaching and Learning Institute at Bryn Mawr College) and Anna Chiles (Guest Student Editor, Bryn Mawr College, 2011).

Among the generative ideas that emerged to frame the contributions to the first two issues of *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education*, both a pedagogy of mutual engagement and the necessity of productive disruptions throw into relief the potential of teaching and learning to be built on and to build relationships – to support faculty members and students becoming mutually and reciprocally interested in and connected to one another. The first idea, a pedagogy of mutual engagement, is premised on reciprocity; it requires an exchange of perspectives and an interchange between people, both of which embody and inspire engagement in the educational process. The second, the necessity of productive disruptions, is about complicating and expanding roles and modes of interacting; it prompts a rethinking of the positions and capacities of both faculty members and students. Such revisions of traditional teacher-student relationships and pedagogical responsibilities can yield forms of education that are difficult if not impossible to achieve when reciprocity and revision are not central to the dynamic between faculty and students engaged in the educational process.

Contributors to those first two issues of *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education*, authors and advisory board members alike, embrace the challenge and possibility of breaking out of the well-established and potentially isolating practices typical of traditional forms of higher education. In this issue as well, contributors continue to complicate and disrupt expectations, pursue more humanizing and affirming forms of educational practice, and both enact and call for deeper, more demanding pedagogical approaches and ways of life. Placing relationships at the center of teaching and learning demands from teachers and students the taking up of a certain kind of accountability. Not the kind that counts accomplishments in some quantifiable and reductive way but rather one that makes both parties responsible (able and willing to act not only in response to others but also out of their own initiative) and answerable for their actions.[i] This kind of accountability born of relational commitment is a far more promising approach to inspiring both student and faculty engagement and learning than any prescriptive or punitive method.

The student-faculty partnerships that are represented this issue's contributions embody the mutually respectful and informing relationships that define teaching and learning together in higher education as they enact productive disruption and a pedagogy of mutual engagement. The courage and conviction, the vulnerability and strength, and the capacity that these authors demonstrate model the essential qualities not only of teachers and learners but also of citizens of the global era. The ability to listen as well as lead, to change what needs to be changed as well as to sustain what works, and to build together as well as accomplish alone – these are vital in two senses: they are essential to practice and they are necessary to life.

This issue's installments of A Semester in the Life, the blog Theresa Tensuan kept during the semester in which she explored how to create a more culturally responsive classroom at Haverford College, delves into questions of roles (her own and those of students in her class) and

of cultivation – of her own and students’ insights into literature and themselves, and, more metaphorically, of teaching as a form of cultivation: an effort to, in Tensuan’s words, “rework the ground that we hold in common.” She explores how students – and she herself – might experiment with “breaking free of imposed patterns,” try on different roles as readers, and, through such exploration, become different selves. Musing on challenges as disparate as crafting a proposal for institutional funding and engaging with children and parents at her daughter’s daycare, Tensuan explores deep questions of perspective, negotiation, and transformation that can follow from and lead to genuine engagement with and in learning and that support a pedagogy of mutual engagement.

In “Radical Equality: A Dialogue on Building a Partnership – and a Program – through a Cross-Campus Collaboration,” Meredith Goldsmith, Associate Professor of English at Ursinus College, and the student consultant who worked with her, Nicole Gervasio (a 2010 graduate of Bryn Mawr College), describe the process through which they built their working relationship and how they used their partnership not only to reflect on one of Goldsmith’s courses but also to build a student consulting program at Ursinus. This set of reflections, in the form of a dialogue between Goldsmith and Gervasio, provides glimpses into the inner workings of the “productive disruptions” in role and relationship that faculty-student partnerships can inspire. Their reflections highlight as well themes that emerge elsewhere in this issue, particularly the confidence that can develop when a faculty member and student consultant have candid and deep conversations about challenging pedagogical issues and how that confidence and the insights that emerge from the dialogue between faculty-student colleagues can positively influence what happens in the college classrooms in which both current – and prospective – professors and students work.

In “Let’s Scrum: How Scrum Methodology Encourages Students to View Themselves as Collaborators,” Rebecca Pope-Ruark, Assistant Professor of English at Elon University, and three Elon students, Michelle Eichel, Sarah Talbott, and Kasey Thornton, explore an adapted version of Scrum project management methodology – a framework of group meetings and process questions used to organize collaborative teamwork and borrowed from the software development world. Pope-Ruark and her student co-authors describe how this project both created an atmosphere of collaboration for students in semester-long, project-based courses and enabled students to develop and articulate their roles as collaborators. This article both analyzes and enacts a relationship among teachers and learners that constitutes a pedagogy of mutual engagement and gives us insight into “students and faculty together doing the messy work of creating and nurturing more democratic classrooms” (Felten).

This issue’s From the Student Perspective features “Reflections on Seven Core Principles of Facilitating Faculty-Student Partnerships within an Educational Initiative” by 2010 Bryn Mawr College Graduate Margaret A. Powers, who worked as a student consultant throughout her time as an undergraduate. Written shortly after her years as a student consultant came to an end, this set of principles can be discerned in the partnerships represented in this and previous issues of *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education*. The core principles that Powers identifies and upon which she elaborates focus on the teaching and learning relationships that faculty members and students develop through their collaborations. Powers highlights issues of clarity (regarding one’s own position and perspective) and communication (how one engages

with people in and with other positions and perspectives), enacted in mutually respectful ways, as key to building faculty-student relationships.

Finally, this issue's section on Teaching and Learning Insights focuses on the role of confidence in teaching and learning. At base a relational phenomenon, confidence is a matter of trust – in others and in one's self – not necessarily to succeed but to feel able to take risks and to try. The set of reflections on confidence offered by faculty members and student consultants suggests that confidence is a balance between inner calm or comfort and outward capacity to engage and proceed, even – indeed, especially – when uncertain of outcomes. It suggests that at the heart of teaching and learning are openness to risk and discomfort, capacity to revise and change one's understanding, and the important balance between ownership and responsiveness. Faculty and student comments highlight how their partnerships through Bryn Mawr's Teaching and Learning Institute build confidence through fostering more informed and enriched vision, which leads to increased risk taking.

Respect and reciprocity are central to teacher-student relationships that strive to engage in productive disruptions and enact a pedagogy of mutual engagement. Equally important is striving for a balance between intentionality and receptivity – between being deliberate and being responsive. In her reflections on her experience as a student consultant in the TLI, Guest Student Editor Anna Chiles analyzes how she built meaningful and purposeful relationships in her partnerships with a wide range of faculty members and through her engagement in reflective TLI forums. The lessons she learned reverberate throughout the contributions to this issue of *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education*.

From the Student Perspective: The Story of Guest Student Editor, Anna Chiles

Anna Chiles graduated from Bryn Mawr College in May 2011. She completed a major in Sociology, a minor in Educational Studies, and a minor in French. She was a Student Consultant for three semesters, supporting in particular the development of Bryn Mawr College's new 360° program.

I came upon the Teaching and Learning Initiative (TLI) by accident in the spring of my sophomore year at Bryn Mawr College when I participated in a conference about education. As I was talking in a small group about the positive impact that more communication between students and professors could potentially have on Bryn Mawr's campus and, more broadly, in the world of teaching, an older student leaned over and said, "I couldn't help but overhear your conversation. Have you ever heard of TLI?" As I listened to her talk about how she actually got paid to communicate openly and productively on an equal footing with professors, and how she helped them reflect on and evolve their pedagogical styles and practices, I realized how much I wanted to be a part of the process. After the conference, I contacted Alison Cook-Sather, coordinator of this revolutionary program, to state my interest and make a plea to be involved. A semester later, I was matched up with my first faculty partner.

Now, three semesters and six faculty partners later, it's hard to imagine what my Bryn Mawr experience would have been without TLI. In many ways, my work as a student consultant is the most educative thing I have ever done. Not only have I become a more engaged learner, but I have also developed deeper understandings about the art of communication, the power of observation, and the thoughtful intentionality required in teaching. Perhaps most importantly, though, I have gained the invaluable insight that success in teaching and learning has everything to do with building meaningful and purposeful relationships. I have been able to see first hand the ways in which key moments of learning happen through both intellectual and emotional ties that learners have to teachers, to ideas, and to each other. These understandings did not occur over night.

I will never forget my first student consultant meeting, which took place a few weeks into the spring of my junior year. I walked in and took a seat, nodding hello to the familiar faces I had first encountered just a week earlier at our training. Within minutes, I was sure that the program had made a mistake in hiring me – I felt so unqualified in comparison to the insightful women sitting around the table. I was so impressed by the way they could give an account of something going on in a faculty partner's classroom simultaneously from the perspective of the professor and the perspective of the students. Every observation they brought to the group elicited a series of profound reactions and suggestions from the other student consultants. I was in a room full of people who had cultivated a teacher-learner hybrid perspective that I did not yet and possibly would not ever have.

But week after week I visited my faculty partner's classroom, I met with him to reflect, and I met with the other student consultants. As I watched him teach, I learned new pedagogical strategies – like how to integrate readings into class discussions and how to build classroom community. I also developed the ability to see when those and other important strategies were missing from the classroom. But it was not until my faculty partner and I had formed a relationship where we could trust and respect each other through this vulnerable-making process that we were able to begin closing the gap between the classroom he had created and the classroom that he ultimately wanted to create. What is more, I was able to start closing the gap between the novice student consultant who walked into that meeting the very first day and the other student consultants in the program. Each week that passed I was able to bring new affirmations as well as new ideas for change. The more I was able to bring, the more my faculty partner grew to trust my observations and recommendations. As we each grew more comfortable in our respective roles throughout the semester, I started to understand something: the more reciprocal a relationship truly is, the greater the potential each party has of gaining new insights from the other.

This year, I have had the fortune to work with the pilot of Bryn Mawr's 360° program, a program founded on a model of interdisciplinary learning in which several courses are taught around one common theme. In figuring out this novel role of being student consultant to a program comprised of five courses and five professors rather than to one course and one professor, I learned that the importance of relationships extends far beyond one-on-one partnerships. The shared academic energy around the common theme of "access in education" produced a tight-knit, affirming program community that is able to take risks together. Over the course of a year, the students and professors participating in the 360° program created a dense community of teachers and learners. Through approaching one idea – the concept of access in education –

through art, science, history and literature, they connected deeply with each other and with the learning in a multifaceted way that produced opportunities for recontextualizing their knowledge and reorienting themselves within history. As a student consultant, I was able to meet regularly with the students in the program to gauge how they were relating to each other, to the professors, and to the courses. I relayed the students' perspectives to their professors, who were able to make the connections between the five courses more explicit. My most important role, however, was in using feedback from both students and professors to organize several dinner reflections. It was in those reflections that the community truly solidified and students felt comfortable to take risks and build on each other's ideas.

Though each of my partnerships has been very different, each has helped me to build invaluable skills of practiced observation, sincere listening, and thoughtful, responsive, and respectful communication. As my time as a student consultant and a college student draws to a close, I am coming to the ultimate understanding that a TLI faculty-student partnership is an extended, never-ending dialogue about pedagogy and communication, about content and about community, and, most importantly, as Margaret Powers explains in her piece "[Reflections on Seven Core Principles of Facilitating Faculty-Student Partnerships within an Educational Initiative](#)," about "meeting people where they are." Communicating with a faculty partner takes patience with the process and the intuition to observe and understand where a professor and his or her students are at any given moment in relation to each other and to the course content.

Post-graduation, I will use the patience and intuition, as well as the relationship-building and communication skills, that I have acquired as a student consultant to transition into my role as an "academic coach," or a "pull-in" classroom resource in a high school. I count on my ability to build relationships to help me reach students and other teachers. Within a few years I will hopefully be transitioning into the role of classroom teacher. I know that the understanding I gained from being a student consultant – that being a teacher and a student is about learning how to connect oneself to people and ideas, about learning how to be in the world – will continue to be the bedrock of my educational philosophy.

[i] See Alison Cook-Sather, "Students as Learners and Teachers: Taking Responsibility, Transforming Education, and Redefining Accountability" (*Curriculum Inquiry* 40, 4 [September 2010], 555-575) for an extensive discussion of this point.