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Sarah Bressi Nath
Bryn Mawr College

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FINDING VOICES IN REFLECTION: HOW MY WORK THROUGH THE TLI CHANGED MY CLASSROOM DYNAMICS

Sara Bressi Nath, Assistant Professor of Social Work, Bryn Mawr College

During my third semester as an Assistant Professor at Bryn Mawr, I participated in the Teaching and Learning Initiative (TLI). In addition to attending a weekly seminar that included an interdisciplinary group of new, mid-career, and senior faculty, I was assigned a student consultant to observe my classroom. I entered my academic career with teaching experience; however, prior to the TLI, I had few opportunities to intensely examine my teaching, or reflect on my impact on students and their impact on me. My student consultant observed a course entitled Human Behavior and the Social Environment — a theory course surveying the major psychological and social theories used to inform social work practice. This particular class is fast paced and designed to impart a breadth of knowledge to social work students just entering the field. The students who take this course are typically green, curious, and scared. In those first days at the College, I could relate.

My student consultant, Darla, was a senior English major at the undergraduate College who was also seeking state certification to teach at the secondary level. She was bright and charming. Her youth afforded her an ability to blend in and her inexperience with graduate social work courses allowed her to feel fairly close to the perspective of my novice students. She attended every class session that semester, and recorded each session in the form of a transcript that included the dialogue of the class, as well as her reflections and analysis on what had transpired. We met each week to debrief using these transcripts as a guide. Darla offered an invaluable additional pair of eyes privy to the vicissitudes of the classroom.

Initially, being observed created a good deal of discomfort for me — but my perspective changed over time. In an entry to my TLI journal early in the semester I wrote,

I've been very pleased with my experiences with having a student observer. The truth is it is challenging to have someone watching...having an "outsider" in the room makes me feel very exposed and vulnerable. This is a huge risk. But over time, I'm starting to see that this is less about 'being good' or performing well and more about learning from my students and pushing their ability to engage with the material.

While I was initially afraid of being assessed, judged, or critiqued (an archaic fear that pops up frequently in academe), Darla helped me to reflect and gain a deeper understanding of the kind of classroom I was constructing, the places I felt stuck or constrained, and the places where I could find freedom.

Through reflecting on the course transcripts, and my conversations with Darla, several themes were evident in my early days of teaching. Here, I'll discuss the challenge I experienced in feeling out how much space to take up in the classroom. That semester, I was extremely anxious. Each week I prepared copious slides for lecture, devised small group activities, and carefully planned class discussions. I always felt a certain tension to keep class moving, and feared running out of things to say. As a consequence, I often felt overscheduled during class

time. When things got rich, I was already moving on, fearful of getting off course, and sitting in a less tolerable place of questioning, wondering, and exploration. I was filling the space with my own voice, but it was a voice that silenced, in many ways, both students' voices and my own more exploratory side.

Darla's notes captured and reflected back to me the kind of classroom I had created: one in which I was "covering" lots of material but leaving little space for the students to articulate their understanding or questions and little space for me to be in actual dialogue with them, learning as much as teaching. Here's an example. Just about midway through my Spring semester, I remember preparing a lecture and thinking, "How on earth can I sum up modern classifications of mental illness in a single session?" Driven by this worry, I raced along, inundating students with information. About forty minutes in, Darla recorded in the transcript that a student had raised her hand, but retracted it very quickly when it was clear I was moving on. This happened again during the same session near the end of class.

During discussions with Darla, we wondered aloud together, had I seen the student's raised hand and ignored her, or, had I missed these gestures from the class altogether? Darla felt I hadn't noticed these raised hands, and she was right. In both cases, the transcripts noted that I was looking down, scanning my notes, and stuck in my agenda. My mind was wrapped up in moving forward, as opposed to being present to who was sitting right in front of me. But Darla was able to notice the silenced students trying to speak up but being hesitant, reluctant, and perhaps, feeling their voices would be "getting things off topic" or not "believable."

In response, Darla in her observations noted when I was more patient in discussions, or used humor to mix up the sessions. She particularly noted when I seemed to enter the space with a more relaxed, self-assured, conversational tone. She wrote comments like: "It seems you actually won some of their attention through a little break in your serious tone" And "These moments of yourself entering —referring to students by name, speaking your thoughts, chuckling — these are moment when your students seem to slightly perk up."

Halfway through the course, Darla planned and facilitated a mid-semester feedback session with the students to gain their perspectives on how the class was going. As Darla had suspected, the students themselves articulated in their feedback the experience Darla had noted. One student wrote, "I do feel comfortable participating [in class], but I try to reduce it so discussions do not get off topic." Another indicated her silence in a slightly different way. She wrote, "I should push myself more and learn to believe in my thoughts and to articulate them verbally [in class]."

Another pattern that emerged was that the more insistent and confident voices in the room often took precedence over others. A student wrote, "I would encourage others to learn to be comfortable participating in class discussions. Discussions are often dominated by a select few."

This student was begging for their peers to fill more of the space. It was important for me to see directly how powerfully I could impact the students' experience of each other in the classroom. Some felt overburdened, and others felt thoughtful but were unclear as to how to jump in and join the conversation. Thus, in controlling the space, and in using a more anxious and stifled

style, I left my students in a position of struggling to find ways of expressing themselves in the class.

In thinking about how I could respond to this silencing, Darla encouraged me to lecture less, and during discussions, to specifically use an appropriate amount of wait time before “feeding” students the answer. Through her observation notes, I could directly see the benefits of offering silence as a prompt for participation. Relatedly, she noted when I really paused and paid attention to a student’s comment and the ways in which I transitioned to include the group. She also suggested and actively supported my use of small-group activities and large group discussions inspired by art, poetry and music. Over time, new voices emerged in Darla’s observations notes, and she commented on a shift in the atmosphere of engagement and relationship in the room. In so doing, Darla helped me to alter my classroom preparations to allow for more exploratory discussion, grow comfortable with waiting in silence for things to emerge, and look closely for those flashes of engagement before they disappeared. I really began to understand that I didn’t need to fill the space with lecture, but rather, I needed to create space for engagement to occur. I slowly moved from a place of feeding my students to a place of taking in, and enjoying the feast. At the end of the semester, I wrote the following entry into my TLI portfolio:

I’ve struggled with the issue of control this semester. I’ve been tempted to draw too much attention to my own agenda, and have struggled with the urge to ‘feed’ my students the ideas and perspectives I think are important. Now, I’m freeing up the class for discussion as they grapple with difficult concepts. I’ve made myself less of the center- and the students have been able to become active members in the discourse. It’s been a great joy to watch this happen. It was a risk to loosen up the reins on my course; but with risk comes transformation.

In sum, this early work with the TLI, and specifically with Darla, created a real opportunity for growth in allowing for my own voice to be recorded, processed, and fine tuned in the classroom. Darla’s observations and suggested refinements to the flow of the class helped me to feel more relaxed through bringing in the excited and curious voices of my students. Her support helped me to feel more confident in the classroom and allowed for more exploration and more diffuse boundaries between what needs to get accomplished and what can emerge.