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## **THE SIXTH SPACE: WATCHING STUDENTS BUILD CONNECTIONS AND THEMATIC UNDERSTANDING THROUGH RECONTEXTUALIZING CONTENT OUTSIDE OF THE CLASSROOM**

*Anna Chiles, Bryn Mawr College, 2011*

In the Spring of 2010, History Professor Elliott Shore called me into his office, where Education Professor Jody Cohen, Biology Professor Greg Davis, English Professor Anne Bruder, Philadelphia Mural Artist Shira Walinski, and fellow Bryn Mawr student Jen Rajchel were all deep in discussion and planning. I was standing awkwardly, feeling like an interloper in what seemed like a significant and *closed* meeting, when Elliott announced that they would like for me to join the six of them in launching the prototype of an interdisciplinary learning program — five courses, one common theme: chronicling the shifts in education and, more specifically, women in education, throughout history. They were looking for me to join them as the program’s student consultant as a part of Bryn Mawr and Haverford’s Teaching and Learning Initiative (TLI). I immediately accepted, honored by the request and energized to work with some of the most thoughtful people on campus.

As I pulled up a chair and began to take notes, however, questions began to form about how I, as one person, could possibly be fully present in five courses over the span of two semesters. I had worked only one semester previously as a student consultant and I knew how time consuming it could be to attend *one* class a week—to take detailed notes, meet, analyze, and plan with a professor, all the while bringing authentic student feedback to him or her in a way that generates a respectful and thoughtful, yet often vulnerable conversation about growth in pedagogy. The prospect of functioning in that same capacity for five professors at once seemed daunting. I felt obsessed by the notion of keeping each course separate and organized, of compartmentalizing my relationships with each professor so that I could do each partnership justice.

After each subsequent planning meeting, I learned more about each course and each professor and it became clear that I was going to need to reconstruct my understanding of what a student consultant should be with every new partnership. In this case, I was going to have to meet each of the five professors on his or her own turf and support them each in the unique ways they required. I would soon learn that each professor expected something a little different. Both Elliott and Jody were hopeful that I would take on the role of a coordinator, or handle general support of the program as a whole (now being called the 360’s pilot program, “Changing Education”), while Shira, Anne, and Greg were interested in working with me individually to develop pedagogy (through observations, notes, meetings and the collection of student feedback) to collectively connect their courses to the broader fabric of the 360. Though I was experienced in the traditional student consultant role —the role that Shira, Anne, and Greg all hoped I would assume — I was unsure of how to satisfy these new roles. I would soon learn, along with the students participating in the 360, that I would need to decompartmentalize and blur the lines between the five courses if I wanted to make true meaning of the connections between them.

With the fall came the launch of three of the five courses: Shira’s Growth and Structure of Cities 276: Mural Arts, Elliott’s History 325: Women’s Higher Education in the 19th and 20th centuries: The History of Bryn Mawr College, and Jody’s Education 260: Identity, Access and

Innovation in Education. In Shira's class, students began to build a Philadelphia mural from scratch, meanwhile studying the delicate conversation between community and artist — much like the difficult balance between students and their teacher — to co-construct a neighborhood mural. I found in Shira a new, artistic and wonderfully chaotic energy and a constant desire to grow and evolve in her new role as teacher. Those TLI partnerships, the work between new teachers and student consultants, can be the most invigorating and the most powerful. We met whenever and wherever the two of us could find a schedule overlap, often at a West Philly coffee shop, to review that week's class: what had gone well and what could have gone better. We planned how to strengthen the connection between the students in her Bryn Mawr class and the younger students that they worked with on a weekly basis at a local West Philadelphia high school. I thought that our most important work, however, was the work we did together to build Shira's pedagogical style from the ground up.

A seasoned veteran of teaching and the TLI program, Elliott needed my help not on a micro level — in the daily observations and feedback, but on a macro level: in helping connect his work to the broader fabric of the 360. So, I watched from a distance —visiting class sporadically — as his students dove deeply into primary accounts of Bryn Mawr's history, chronicling in-depth the founding figures and early students while situating them all within the historical fight to establish a place for women in higher education. His students brought to the 360 an empowered ownership that comes from uncovering your own roots, and theirs was a steady and consistent presence in 360 events for the rest of the year, which made it a more of a fluid process for me to engage them in connection making.

Also a veteran teacher and a former TLI partner several times, Jody too wanted me to focus on cross-course connections and the 360 student community. While Jody's students worked to adapt the conversation about education to a modern context through class readings and classroom discussions, and also through their participation as student teachers, observers, and mentors in a Philadelphia public school classroom, I sought out conversations with her students outside of the classroom to gather feedback about the parallels they were seeing among their 360 courses. With each meeting, I gathered detailed feedback to gauge the level of conceptual connection and thematic unity across the three courses and heard more students link the legacy of inequity — systematic blocked access — to the failure of historic and modern policy to equalize the opportunity structure in education. I was hearing a lot of the same words and concepts from students, about the careful balance between the institutions that create and project knowledge, and the communities that consume that knowledge, not only in the context of Jody's course, but also in connection with Elliott's and Shira's. But even though that uniting link between the three classes was obvious to me, not every student in every class was making the same connections.

In order to address some of the missed connections and gaps in content, I followed up on an idea proposed by a student in the Midcourse Feedback: organizing a 360 community dinner. That meeting, just meant to be an informal conversation with pizza, was the birth of a brand new and very powerful *sixth space*, an extracurricular roundtable where students exchanged content knowledge and helped one another elaborate on understandings. Fifteen minutes into the dinner, I threw out my original plan for facilitation and simply listened as students constructed bridges between art and history and put both, together, in a broader context of community, knowledge, and education. From then on, I worked with students and professors to create as many extra-

classroom spaces for connection building as were possible, so that by the time Anne's English 258: Finding Knowledge Between the Leaves: 19th Century Literature of Education and Greg's Biology 214: The Historical Role of Women in Genetics and Embryology began in the Spring, the 360 students were meeting outside of the classroom on a more regular basis.

Anne and her students used 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century texts to explore the evolution of education through analysis of historically situated progressive educational experiments that ultimately led to institutional change. In our meetings outside of class, Anne and I would spend an hour or more each week deep in conversation discussing topics at the cross-section of content and pedagogy: the Lancaster model of education in the context of the ever-evolving notion of what is "progressive" in education, or Anne's interaction with a particular student and what impact it may have had on the classroom community on a particular day. At that point in my college experience, I was spending much of my time thinking about what kind of teacher I wanted to be and this particular partnership allowed me the privilege of living vicariously through her teaching experience; we discussed lesson plans and ideas for in-class activities together and I had the opportunity to watch them play out in a real classroom setting. Our partnership was delightfully open, honest, and reciprocal; Anne was so focused on cultivating her pedagogy and building an inclusive classroom while I, as a soon-to-graduate future educator, was trying to do the exact same thing for myself.

That same semester, Greg walked his students through the nuanced history of women in science and their uphill battle for inclusion in a male-dominated intellectual sphere, focusing on the contributions of female scientists to major developments in the fields of genetics and embryology. As I did with Anne's course, I focused on Greg's class in a more traditional consultant role. I observed his class once a week or at least once bi-weekly, taking notes on his teaching style, lecture delivery, classroom community building, and seminar discussion facilitation, then I met with him to discuss my observations. Greg brought with him a sensitivity and social focus often omitted from the sciences and, as a result, our partnership was deeply rewarding and challenging. I recognized that many of the powerful student voices in his class were not those of science majors, but those of social science and humanities majors, who were bringing with them very specific and non-scientific lenses through which to interpret a history and socially-centered Biology class. It occurred to me that it was their diverse academic backgrounds that made for such fascinating dialogue in class. Like the interdisciplinary connections the 360 as a whole was striving to support, the connections students from different disciplines within the course were making contributed to the richness of the experience.

Many of the students in Greg's class provided fascinating insight into the ways that the different 360 courses overlapped and informed each other in interviews and the informal 360 dinners. In an interview with one 360 student, for example, one 360 student told me about a paper she was writing to explore the fundamental connections between Greg and Jody's classes. The paper explored identity specific schooling and the notion of creating a space for education where it may have been formerly lacking, as gender specific educational institutions (at the primary, secondary, and higher levels) do. Touching base with that student after graduation, I learned that the ideas that grew out of her work in the 360 regarding the intersectionality of gendered privilege and access in education and empowering learning spaces informed her post-Bryn Mawr work in a gender specific high school in Chicago.

I found myself quickly becoming invested in the course content and, moreover, driven to connect ideas, key players, and readings from one to the other. Students were building similar connections in my weekly interviews and during our informal roundtable dinners, consistently starting sentences with, “Oh, this reminds me of what we talked about in Jody’s class,” or “This makes me think of that reading we did in Elliott’s class.” Students were coming together at these informal dinners not only to share a meal, but also to fill in content gaps between and among the five courses, as most students only took three of the five. For weeks, I observed and took notes, met with students and listened as they shared before I realized that students were doing something really powerful: they were transposing core themes, tokens of knowledge, from one course to another, all the while deepening their understanding that access to education is at the core of the potential power of education to change the status quo.

Looking back on my role in the 360, I often feel that I had the valuable vantage point; I was able to function as a nomadic student of sorts — being immediately woven into the fabric of each classroom, visiting lectures, watching conversations unfold where students were able to co-create their own interpretations of events from history and modern day, and, perhaps most importantly, I received the raw, unmediated feedback from all involved, both students and teachers.

Students were no longer compartmentalizing the information that they were learning in each individual class; they were using one class to help interpret others. As one student explained in an interview: “Last year I felt like my classes were each in a little box — isolated from each other. It’s not like that with the 360. Everything feels so connected now.” That vantage point helped me to see something pretty remarkable in action: through the sixth, informal learning space, students were blurring the lines of academia; this constant connecting and recontextualizing pushed them past comprehension and engagement and into the realm of ownership. It was as though they were co-constructing a new lens — one rooted in access and equity — through which to interpret future classes and, eventually, their subsequent interactions with society.

And while I gained much insight as the first 360’s student consultant, I can see now that my retrospective and, thus, more reflective view of the process has lead me to draw even bigger conclusions about the power of interdisciplinary academic programs like the 360 and potential influence of recontextualization on a student’s capacity to understand, learn, and possess tokens of knowledge.

It was such a wonderful privilege to be the student consultant for the 360. I learned so much, not just about pedagogy, collaboration, and interdisciplinary teaching, but also about the content of each course and the broader conversation surrounding access and education. From my limited observation of those five classes, I learned so much more than I ever thought I would. I truly believe in the power of the 360 to reshape the way that Bryn Mawr and Haverford students learn — how they engage with professors, each other, and with knowledge. But, my perspective as the student consultant for this very special cohort of classes gave much more than insight into the universal theme of access and the role it plays in the ever-evolving world of education (in all of the connotations that word takes); it pushed me to develop the notion that as students come together to discuss cross-disciplinary content, they organically recontextualize, or transpose core ideas and themes from one course to the next. I watched as students approached the year with a

compartmentalized view of their own learning, a strict belief that with each area of study comes an inextricably linked history, a set of key players, theories, moments, and works. And as they left the program, I observed in more students than not a controlled intellectual chaos, where boundaries between ideas were much more fluid.

Since graduating from Bryn Mawr in 2011, I have embarked on my own path to teaching. No longer safely living vicariously through Anne or anybody else, I am currently in my second year working in high school special education, where I reinforce my belief in this notion of the power of recontextualization every single day. I recontextualize content and key themes for my students constantly, using metaphors and analogies, giving countless examples, and seeking connections to students' lives and personal experiences to help my students reinforce understandings. The most important step, I've learned, is pushing my students to create their own metaphors, their own context for a particular piece of information or course theme. When they are able to take this step, I know that they are one the way to not just comprehension, but ownership. That's what this then-new endeavor through the 360 program, and the sixth space, helped students in "Changing Education" do. They used our space to turn comprehension into ownership. Had Elliott and his colleagues not invited me into the role of student consultant for the course cluster, I might not have learned, and certainly not in this way, the importance of recontextualizing content outside of the classroom and how powerful that can be in deepening student understanding.