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LETTING US ALL BE LEARNERS

Emma Gulley, Bryn Mawr College '14

When I applied to be a student consultant through Bryn Mawr's Teaching and Learning Institute (TLI), I thought I would do something — consult — for someone else. I thought I would bring my perspective as a Bryn Mawr student and my training as an education minor to a new professor to help her learn to teach in this new context. Essentially, I thought the exchange would be predominantly between me and my faculty partner, and I thought I would be the one giving.

I could not have been more mistaken.

Participating in TLI made me think of myself as a student, learner, and future teacher in completely different ways — in my observations of my faculty partner's class and my meetings with her, in the weekly meetings with other student consultants, in my own classes, in my job interviews and applications — and over time I gradually but enthusiastically reconsidered the partnership for my own benefit. I realized there was nothing wrong with my making the relationship as much about my own learning and experience as it was about my faculty partner's. In fact, letting my own learning — and reflection on that learning — be a part of our work allowed us to analyze the process of learning together in a way that is rare for faculty and students, and I believe that was as helpful to her as it was to me.

New Learning as a Student and as a Consultant: The Importance of Openness

I worked as a student consultant for Lindsay Reckson's "American Moderns," a 200-level English class that was not without its challenges: it had 30 students with a wide array of class years and experience levels, and it was situated in an awkwardly shaped basement classroom during a low-energy part of the day. When I initially took up the consultant role, I (unwittingly) brought to it my own assumptions of what a class should be like, based on my own experiences and preferences.

My main assumption was that discussion needed to be central to a seminar, and so the key question I concerned myself with during the first half of my semester-long partnership with Lindsay was, "How can successful discussion happen in a large seminar?" I visited Lindsay's classroom every week and took detailed observation notes with three columns: I noted the time in the first column and recorded descriptive observations in the middle column. In the right-hand column I brainstormed ways to invite more student voices into conversation, I highlighted what I thought were appropriate moments for small-group and partner discussion, and I reflected on discussion questions that seemed to be particularly generative. Lindsay seemed to find these reflections helpful, and so I did not see any reason to shift my focus.

It was only over fall break, six weeks into the semester, when I read students' responses to Lindsay's mid-semester feedback questions, that I truly saw how biased my focus had been. At various points on the feedback forms, students indicated that they had expected the class to be more of a lecture, that they learned best by staying quiet in class and reflecting on their learning by writing outside of class. I had always known that there were different kinds of learners and

that different students had different learning styles. But there was always some part of me that believed my way of learning — through discussions — was superior.

As I stepped back and analyzed this belief, I realized I had assumed that people who didn't speak frequently in class were perhaps the slightest bit lazy or the slightest bit dull. Maybe part of me thought that students who didn't speak up in class hadn't done the reading or didn't have interesting things to say about it. I once took a tiny seminar where one of the students never spoke. On occasion I would think things like, "What is she doing in the class?" or "What can she be getting out of it?" or even, "Why is she here?" Now, however, I can't believe I ever thought that way. The student responses gave me and Lindsay a chance to think in more complex ways about what was happening in her classroom and how she might want to shape student participation. As she explains in her essay in this issue, my reflection and rethinking contributed to hers.

Participating in TLI made me a more conscientious and open-minded student. After analyzing that midsemester feedback from Lindsay's class and realizing the assumptions I had been making, I no longer thought my quieter classmates were lazy or less motivated and no longer did I worry they weren't getting enough out of their college education. Instead, I began to realize that their classroom experiences and desires were just as valid as mine, and it was that "aha" moment that forced me to stop thinking about my role as "identifying opportunities for discussion" and see it instead as an opportunity for "seeing moments of learning." It was at that moment that my partnership and experience truly became productive, exciting, and rewarding for me as a learner and, I believe, even more beneficial for Lindsay.

New Learning as a Future Teacher: The Importance of Purposefulness

Participating in TLI also affected how I saw myself as a future teacher. I joined TLI during the first semester of my senior year, which was a time when there was a great deal of confusion, anxiety, excitement, and hope swirling around in my head. I thought a lot about a lot of things: What grade level was my favorite? Where did I see myself living? Did I want to get state certification or try to teach in a private school? I knew I wanted to teach and I knew I was interested in education research but I didn't really know what kind of teacher, or researcher, I wanted to be. I loved early childhood but I also loved writing: Could I imagine myself teaching preschool and not seeing students' writing? I loved the day-to-day interactions I had with the toddlers at the preschool and I also loved the theoretical discussions about student experience I had in the weekly meetings with my fellow student consultants. It was when I was able to bridge those two experiences that I learned the most, got the most out of the partnerships, and was the most effective assistant teacher and student consultant.

During one of the faculty seminars in which new faculty participate and that student consultants visit periodically, someone brought up the idea of group work. In her role as facilitator of the discussion, Alison Cook-Sather reminded us that group work is generally only effective when the outcome of the conversation is something that can only be accomplished through group work, and that "group work for the sake of group work" should be avoided. That instance of knowing exactly why we're asking students to do something resonated, not only with my faculty partner as she tweaked future lesson plans; but also, with me as I reevaluated the sense of

“purposefulness” I brought into the preschool classroom. Before this faculty seminar discussion, I had tried to gently encourage every toddler to try to play at every station. One student had been particularly hesitant to play at the Play-Doh station. Every few classes I would ask her again if she wanted to play at the station and every time she would say “no” and scoot off to the library or rice table or play kitchen. It was the faculty seminar discussion that showed me that I wasn’t entirely sure what I wanted her to get out of the Play-Doh table. Was it for her fine motor skills? Was it so she could play and interact and share with other toddlers at the station? Or, most likely, was it so that I could check off, on some arbitrary list, that all of the toddlers played with Play-Doh?

Lindsay once told me that one of her take-aways from the faculty discussions was the power of purposeful and specific language in discussing student work, in giving directions, and in being a member of the class. I always knew language was an important and complicated tool in the classroom, but that exchange was a powerful reminder for me. When I thought back to my most generative essay prompts, I realized they were not the ones that asked me to “compare and contrast” two essays or ideas; rather, they were the ones that asked me to put two essays or ideas “in conversation with each other.” At the preschool, it became a challenge to myself to be purposeful in my language use and to try to use more specific vocabulary around the toddlers. For example, for several weeks I eliminated “nice” from my vocabulary and, in eliminating it, found that I had been overusing it and falling back on it to indicate many different sensibilities. It had been that a student was nice in the way he cleaned up, nice in the way she shared a toy, nice in the way he treated a baby doll, or nice in the way she passed apples at snack time. It was when I replaced those words with “kind” or “thoughtful” or “Friendly” that I realized I was communicating a more specific truth, message, or observation, that I cared more about them remembering and emulating again and again.

Conclusion: Learning in Many Directions

As I reflect on the experience of being a student consultant in TLI I feel overwhelming gratitude. I am grateful to the program, and partnership, for making me a more open-minded and broadly-thinking student, for making me a more purposeful and intentional Assistant Teacher, and for introducing me to Lindsay. Lindsay became, perhaps unknowingly, a mentor teacher for me. I admired the eloquent, specific language, open-minded patience, and gracious encouragement she brought to the students in her seminar. I have never met another individual who speaks with such intentional but accessible purpose, and when I changed my language use with the toddlers, I did so as much by channeling Lindsay, herself, as I did by thinking broadly about the concept itself.

I was only able to participate in TLI for one semester. But that one semester was a generative and unforgettable one. It was when I realized that this partnership was not only an opportunity for me to consult for someone else, but also an opportunity for me to learn and re-frame myself as a learner and future teacher, that I realized TLI is much more of a holistic learning experience and seminar, rather than a part-time job. TLI made me a better person. It made me more aware of my biases as a student (towards discussion-based classes) and it made me rethink them, in turn making me more open-minded and conscientious towards different styles of learning and participating. This experience also made me a more purposeful and process-thinking presence in

the preschool classroom, which, I hope, created a better, more responsive, and more nurturing class environment for the toddlers I worked with and learned from.

The intense thinking, learning, reflecting, and reacting I did as a participant last semester in the TLI reframed how I thought about teaching and learning in radical and long-lasting ways. I am confident that there are things about the TLI alumna's early childhood classroom that are different than the classroom of another teacher, and I look forward to finding out how in the years after Bryn Mawr. I look forward to doing what I can to create bridges between higher education and early childhood education, and to seeing what principles of TLI — student voice, process-based pedagogical decisions, clarity and reason — remain the same, regardless of the age of our learners.