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STRATEGIES FOR TRANSFORMING A CLASSROOM INTO A BRAVE AND TRUSTING LEARNING COMMUNITY: A DIALOGIC APPROACH

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In academia, it is not often that we find someone who can hold a mirror up to us, making non-judgmental observations about how we work and reflecting with us on our goals and performance. The Students as Learners and Teachers program through the Teaching and Learning Institute (TLI) at Haverford and Bryn Mawr Colleges provides exactly this kind of opportunity for professors. In the program, an undergraduate student consultant attends course meetings and takes detailed notes about what is happening in the classroom, including course content, student questions and comments, dynamics of the room, and any other relevant happenings. As TLI partners, the instructor and consultant review the proceedings of each class together, noting anything from how each class fit into a broader pedagogical arc to an interesting comment a certain student made. Ideally, the partnership works not as a one-way critique, but as a way to reflect and grow together, offering each other feedback and solving the puzzles of the class as a team.

This was the tone of the partnership between the authors of this essay: Laura Been, Assistant Professor of Psychology, and Clara Abbott, Student Consultant and English major/Education minor. We partnered on Professor Been's seminar course on the Neurobiology of Sexual Behavior during Fall-2015 semester. The course was comprised of 11 students; the majority were juniors or seniors majoring in either Psychology or Biology, and more than half of them were minoring in Neuroscience. The goal of the course was to explore the relationship between the brain and sex behavior as a two-way street: both how the brain influences sexual behaviors and also how sexual behaviors can influence the brain. The course didn't use a textbook; instead, students read, presented, and discussed journal articles that probe these brain-behavior relationships using cutting-edge neuroscience techniques. Students read papers about the neurobiology of sex behavior in a wide variety of models, ranging from fruit flies to humans and everything in between.

For our partnership, we particularly focused on building a classroom space that highlighted and utilized the many learning styles in the room, primarily through discussion. Professor Been expressed at the start of the course that she wanted the students to not just learn the content, but to learn to think like scientists, critically and constructively. Indeed, our own process of identifying the dynamics of the class, the learning styles in the room, and the most powerful fuel for discussion took an experimental shape. Professor Been introduced activities from concept maps on the board to quick lightning round presentations in class, along the way noting student responses, points of confusion, and pivotal moments in the classroom.

As we experimented with different modes of discussion, we took note of common threads, attempting to understand how each micro-lesson we learned could contribute to a larger understanding of what makes discussion work. The following points illustrate common threads

that we found throughout our experimentation and main “takeaways” for transforming a classroom into a brave and trusting learning community. Because these threads came from conversations between Professor Been and Clara, our points take the format of an observation written by Clara, followed by a reflective response (*in italics*) by Professor Been. The points not only serve intrinsically as tips for promoting a healthy and affirming classroom environment, but also as a model for the process of coming to these conclusions on one’s own through discussion and observation.

- **Encouraging everyone to meet with you at some point in the semester** established a lot of closeness, familiarity, and sense of belonging in the class.
 - *I required students to get their presentation papers pre-approved by me and also have an in-person conference with me regarding their final paper. This guaranteed that students came to my office hours at least a few times and gave me a chance to solicit more informal feedback and check-ins about how the course was going for them.*
- **Reaching out to students personally.** When you reached out to the quieter students in the class, we saw a significant change in how they participated. Personal attention and concern can mean so much in a larger class.
 - *This is something that was new to me—I’ve always taught in much larger settings, so reaching out to an individual student was not a realistic expectation (and it’s unlikely that I’d notice a particular student becoming disengaged when teaching a 200-person lecture). Because it was new, this was something I didn’t feel 100% comfortable with, but I was glad that I reached out to the quieter students in the beginning of the semester to let them know that I thought their thought papers were really great and that I think the class could benefit from hearing their ideas. This seemed to work really well and helped to mold the dynamic of the class before it was too settled to change it.*
- **Delivering information in terms of stories.** I have noticed that when you show a video, talk about someone’s life, or explain how a concept came to be in the lab, the discussion is unlocked as there are more entry points for students to begin exploring the concept. When you paint the full picture, the concept stays in students’ heads and they feel more comfortable engaging with it.
 - *One of my less formal, but still important, learning goals for the semesters was getting students to think about science as a human endeavor—not some sterile, perfect thing. This is important not only for critical thinking (how can you criticize something that is a sterile, perfect thing?), but also in terms of understanding how things like culture, media, and zeitgeist can have a huge influence on how science proceeds. I also think that it makes it more interesting and memorable to personalize some of these stories and I try to find ways to share my own research experiences (particularly failures!) when appropriate.*
- **Allowing people to work on the board** is very physically engaging and lets people stand up and exert themselves a little bit more.

- *We did a lot of great board exercises this semester, which was really new to me. The class responded really well to them and it definitely increased the energy in the room and caused them to engage with the material in a deeper way. The students also seemed to appreciate that I took pictures of their finished boardwork (e.g., concept maps, Venn diagrams, etc.) and posted them on our Moodle site so that they could revisit them.*
- **Generating “lists” with the class**, because people feel like there is less pressure to just shout out ideas.
 - *This is a good example of something that I was doing without much intention behind it—I’m a list maker so sometimes when working through things in class, I instinctively start making lists on the board. However, Clara pointed out that this was a great low-stakes, casual exercise that made people more likely to contribute ideas.*
- **Asking about the limits of a model or ideology.** It seemed like whenever you asked the group about what a scientist could have done differently in their experiment, people were ready to jump in with criticism. Talking about something a scientist did wrong also allows people to transition into the realm of wondering, not being sure.
 - *This relates directly to one of my learning goals for the course: having students become more comfortable/skilled engaging with and critically thinking about primary scientific literature. Getting students to think about why the researchers made the choices that they did, including whether it was a deliberate choice based on scientific rationale vs. a choice made out of convenience, was a new and important skill for most students. Also, see below re: delivering information in terms of stories and personal anecdotes.*
- **People don’t want to answer a question that you will answer later.** It seemed like when there was a question “filling in the blank” of what you were about to say, people felt scared to be wrong and did not want to answer it. It worked so well when you asked questions that did not necessarily merit a right or wrong answer, so that people could feel more comfortable jumping in.
 - *Something really insightful that Clara pointed out to me was the distinction between asking students what they notice vs. what they know. Even if I wasn’t using those exact terms, there was definitely a difference in response when I framed questions in a low-stakes, what do you think way vs. a high-stakes, what is the right answer way. This is something that I was mindful of once she pointed it out, but still occasionally slipped into or unintentionally framed a question in a high-stakes, right/wrong way. I want to continue to work on this in future semesters.*
- **In-class writing.** I have noticed consistently that when you have people write down questions they have, generate some sort of presentation, or even just write out their thoughts that the class mood changes. The act of writing seemed to recenter and refocus the room on a less focused day and get people in a creative-thinking mode.

- *This is a good tool for getting students to re-focus, particularly on low energy days in the semester.*
- **Silent activities** like the silent board activity where people made diagrams without talking to each other. Very calming and focusing effect on the group.
 - *The silent board activity was one that I hadn't done before, but worked really well and also made students think carefully about how they were interacting with each other, how they were interacting with the material, and how they might be interacting with the material differently from their peers. This seemed to work well towards the end of the semester when they were already pretty comfortable with each other and the class dynamic was well-established.*
- **Giving people a moment to collect their thoughts.** It was so helpful when you either let the students write, talk in pairs, or just think for a second before answering a question. It helped less talkative people get ready to speak and it allowed for richer discussion.
 - *I have always incorporated "think-pair-share" activities into my courses and usually suggest that students jot down their thoughts during the "think" time. This seemed to be particularly helpful for this small discussion course, especially during the beginning of the semester when we were still establishing our classroom dynamic. I was surprised by how much having something in writing provided a "safety net" for students, particularly quieter students, during discussion—even if they didn't actually read from their paper while they spoke, having it there noticeably boosted their confidence.*
- **Changing orientation of room,** which could look different in a large group setting, but was awesome for refocusing the group and waking people up. It might not be a circle, but you could have people focused on another part of the room or change where they sit.
 - *Clara pointed out that when I had students form a circle, the conversation seemed to build upon previous comments and required a lot less overt direction from me. In the future, I will definitely request a smaller classroom with a more seminar-friendly layout (not a 35-person, fixed seating classroom) to facilitate this.*

These points demonstrate important models for student-professor interaction in both their form and their content. Just as the two of us arrived at points collaboratively and reflectively in our partnership by discussing an unknown idea or problem and finding a solution together, this way of learning proved just as successful in Professor Been's class. Specific techniques like silent writing activities and meeting with students outside class emphasize the importance of one's individual learning process, rather than focusing only on specific curricular learning goals (which seemed to come naturally into place anyway). In both Professor Been's class and our TLI partnership, the more we focused on the intrinsic growth happening in our work, the more we actually saw the desired outcomes, such as richer discussion and student initiative in the classroom.

The issue we emphasized the most was cultivating rich and natural classroom discussions. The room had a lecture-style arrangement and contained students from their sophomore to senior

years, a difficult set up for the goal of encouraging brave discussion. Though it felt difficult to do this because we had clear goals in mind, it was when we focused on the process of discussion that we met much greater success. For example, by focusing on how the questions were asked rather than simply encouraging more people to talk (a more simplistic, and often the most immediate way to look at the issue), we were able to cultivate better discussions. Professor Been emailed two students struggling to speak up in class, letting them know their viewpoints were appreciated in the classroom and that she was available to meet. The emails and the student interactions focused more on the intrinsic building of trust rather than the goal of just hearing more voices in the room. The rich and interesting discussions came with the increase in trust, but we could not have found the same outcomes if we had not focused on learning and trust building as processes rather than goals.

Our partnership seemed to demonstrate this trend as well; when we focused on achieving the goals of strong discussion and lecture, we found we had less to work on in our partnership. During the weeks that we introduced a new topic or question we had not discussed before, or perhaps challenge a previous assumption we had made, we grew much more as a partnership and found more success in the areas we had considered already. In both the classroom and in our partnership, when we honored the process rather than the goal, our outcomes fell into place more easily.