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The Formation and Power of Trust: How It Was Created and Enacted Through Collaboration

Mary Brunson
Bryn Mawr College

THE FORMATION AND POWER OF TRUST: HOW IT WAS CREATED AND ENACTED THROUGH COLLABORATION

Mary Brunson, Bryn Mawr College Class of 2018

Initial Hesitation

When I first I met my partner, I could tell he was hesitant about entering into a pedagogical partnership with me through the Students as Learners and Teachers (SaLT) program. Because he is an established professor in his field and has more experience than most participants, I could see how radical the SaLT program seemed to him. My partner had never fathomed that one day his pedagogy and curriculum would be co-created with a student. He had created his style with thirty plus years of teaching and, even though he valued student opinions in the classroom, he did not see them as necessary in helping create a curriculum. When we first met, in late August, he asked me many questions about what this program meant to me and what this partnership would "look" like. It was clear that he was attempting to be open but it was also clear that deep down his guard was up. He was taken aback by the idea that every partnership "looked" different and that it was on us (together) to create it.

My partner was not the only one with hesitations about SaLT. As a transfer student from a large state school participating in the program for the first time, I found SaLT to be foreign. Students helping teachers reflect on and form their curriculum, theories, and approaches to education— well, that was just alien to me. However, I was intrigued and quickly found love in co-creation. My experience in a state school, where student-teacher collaboration would have never been feasible, allowed me to bring a different perspective to the table. I was curious if my partner would listen to my ideas or whether my ideas would be appropriate for an intimate learning environment like Bryn Mawr, having had such little experience in such a setting. At my previous university, if you offered a teacher a thought about their pedagogy, it would not have been acknowledged. The form of acknowledgment that the SaLT program affords is unique and can only be achieved if both partners are dedicated to it.

In this short essay, I will attempt to explain the reasons why the SaLT program was transformative for both my faculty partner and me. I will focus on trust—trust between us and restoring the trust my partner had in his teaching and his character. I will also address the discomfort in the unknown and the concept of "unfinishedness" and how these were enacted through the pedagogy we collaborated on. It is important to note that the work we did together contained many other components, but these three points are the ones that I have chosen to highlight.

Laying a Foundation for Building Trust

One of the first questions that I asked my partner was why he had decided to participate in the program. I think a program like SaLT can be daunting (especially when you are new to it), and I wanted to form goals from the beginning. I recognized that these goals could and would change throughout the term, but I thought it was important to gain a starting point. By asking this question I was able to learn more about my professor's perspective on his teaching and subject

matter. I was also able to start off on a personal note. However, one thing that I learned quickly about my partner was that he was not one for "chit chat" or "small talk," so by asking him this question, it led to direct goals that he had already come up with. Understanding how your partner communicates, I truly believe, is vital for any SaLT partnership. That my partner is straightforward and rather blunt was necessary for me to know, so I could frame ideas and present activities in the same style later to him. This was the first and one of the most essentials parts of gaining my partner's trust. Without knowing how to best communicate with him, trust would not have been feasible.

The reason my partner wanted to be part of SaLT program was clear. For the first time in his thirty plus year career, he was unsure about whether he was fit to teach his subject matter. He worried that his class was not inclusive enough and that he lacked an understanding of what his students were experiencing that was necessary to create a successful learning environment. My partner also wanted to know if there was a way that he could create a curriculum that would make him more "in touch" with his students. It was then and there that I realized that my partner had lost trust in himself. For a professor who, I could tell, was rather bold and strong in his knowledge of material, he had been blindsided by an experience the previous semester to do with tensions in his class around race and had lost clarity on how to move forward. This was the root of everything. It was by learning this that I was able to further individualize everything I suggested: each discussion, idea, and approach. It was also by learning this that I was able to continue working to gain his trust, while also helping him regain his self-trust. Understanding the history and personal reasons someone has for joining a partnership can be incredibly beneficial to all components of a partnership but especially for building trust.

It is important to note, here, that trust is a two-way road. It was vital for my partner to trust me, but it was equally important for me to trust him. The trust that I came to have in him was built with patience, vulnerability, and understanding that learning is continuous. It was also my partner's willingness to "try all." Even with hesitation, each idea, activity, and theory would eventually be tried or accepted. It was this that made me feel trust with him. I was inspired by the way his hesitation would quickly turn into curiosity and then transform into ambition. His ability to do this drove me to work harder in collaboration while also growing my trust. As valuable as it was for my partner to trust me, it was equally valuable for me to trust him.

Affirmation of "Uncomfortable Pedagogy" as a Key Component of Trust

Another strong trust-building component of our partnership was continuous affirmation and naming the positive results of "uncomfortable" pedagogy. My partner was, at the beginning, incredibly hesitant about trying out something new in his classroom. It was often the case that he was clear about his lesson plans and goals and did not want to change or adapt. Part of me was grateful to have such a direct and clearly oriented partner, but throughout the term I made sure to incorporate components and theories of education that he was uncomfortable with. At first, this was incredibly difficult. I could feel his resistance as he patiently would listen to my ideas. More radical, for him, even than having a student help him his form pedagogy was being told to try activities like "carousel" or "silent board discussions" or student-directed discussions.

I knew my professor was not one to say "yes" to everything, so knowing this, I would present a pedagogical strategy—for example, an activity—and I would work with him to adapt it to his comfort level. This adaption came from us both coming to the table open minded and finding an activity that he would be comfortable to present but also pushed the levels of learning. For example, partner work was an approach to learning that my partner never knew was effective. Together, we found a way for students to do partner activities and for him to see the true benefits—benefits that would be shown through the feedback he would later receive.

These small steps had a big impact. By the time we got to mid semester feedback, there was overwhelming positive commentary from the students about the variety of activities. For example, students said they loved the assignments and that they found the class to be incredibly engaging because of those. I remember talking to a student and them saying that they had never been in a class that was so demanding yet intriguing at the same time. My faculty partner had taken a "risk" and the payoff was exceptionally beneficial for all.

The Beginnings of Transformation

Through taking the kinds of risks I described in the previous section and seeing the positive results, my partner was slowly regaining his self-trust, and the trust between us was becoming transformative. With time, the dynamics of the partnership changed into him presenting an idea for a new activity to me and wanting us to further develop it. He would often ask questions like, "How could I make this work?" or "Can we change this a bit to help those who need it in class?"

This change captures my partner's development in his self-trust. With trust in collaboration and my partner regaining his trust for himself, we were able take "risks" that would never have been possible earlier in the semester. Together, we were able to not just create a learning environment that was engaging to all but we were also able to push the learning deeper and find new approaches in educating. It was also in this learning environment that we created a space for students to express their personal relationships with material, achieving my professor's goal of finding ways to be more "in touch" with his students.

This trust in collaboration was not just helping him regain his self-trust but it was also helping mine. As I saw that I was being effective in helping him regain his own self-trust, my self-trust grew and got stronger, too. Along with self trust, I found myself trusting him more. I was inspired by his drive to create a learning environment that challenged his prior beliefs. As we continued to push, challenge, and take "risks" in learning, I was able to truly see the improvement and transformation we were creating. Our work was dimensional and impactful in more ways than I had ever imagined.

The Role of "Un-knowing-ness" in Trust

It may seem like what I explain above captures an ideal partnership characterized by growing certainty. However, one of the strongest components of our collaboration was our "unknowing-ness." We often ran into this discomfort in the unknown (on both ends of the partnership). I often would not know how an idea would settle with him or what was the right thing to suggest, and he was more than often unsure of my suggestions. Having both of us in this position was somehow

imperative to our trust development and process. If one of us had been an "expert" in what we were trying to create together, the balance of our relationship would have been swayed, causing us not to be connected in this "unknowingness."

With time we learned that there is not always a "right answer" and, more importantly, we learned to be comfortable in not knowing the answers—comfortable with the unknown. In our partnership, discomfort in the unknown turned into comfort of the unknown. Becoming comfortable in the unknown, for him, made him learn to be "okay" with making mistakes and being "okay" with the fact that not every day would be a perfect day. For me, it was one of the most transforming components of the SaLT program. It was with this ability and understanding that I was able to move forward (without worrying about what was "correct" or "right") in forming ideas and approaches to learning/pedagogy.

Conclusion

As explained above, every partnership will look different and every focus will be approached in a way that is unique to the collaboration dynamic. However, personally, it was through Paulo Freire's theory of unfinishedness that I was able understand the true growth and power of our partnership. Paulo Freire (2000) says, "The real roots of the political nature of education are to be found in the educability of the human person. This educability, in turn, is grounded in the radical unfinishedness of the human condition and in our consciousness of this unfinished state" (p. 100). With this quote, I was able to further understand that our work as teachers and partners is never "done." There is no "finished" in the terms of education or learning. The work of SaLT is never finished.

SaLT can be transformative if you can find the way it translates into the dynamic of the partnership and pedagogy. It was with trust development, affirmation, adaptability, unknowingness and unfinishedness that our collaboration was largely successful. So much so that my partner has asked me to continue to work with him for a second semester.

Reference

Freire, P. (2000). *Pedagogy of Freedom: Ethics, Democracy, and Civic Courage*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers