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## **THE POWER OF TRUST IN EDUCATION: LESSONS FROM MY COURSES AND PEDAGOGICAL PARTNERSHIPS**

*Fatoumata Sylla, Bryn Mawr College Class of 2018*

In my first few years of college, I had a relatively skewed perception of professors and my positionality in relation to them. My educational background had taught me that within the realm of academia and learning, there exists a clear hierarchy: the professor sits at the top of this hierarchy and students below them. This mindset, though conventional, serves as a roadblock to what I regard as effective learning/ mutually beneficial classroom dynamics. Through my work as a consultant in the Students as Learners and Teachers (SaLT) program at Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges, I've had the opportunity to critically reflect on my past learning experiences and evaluate how they have impacted my conceptions of socially responsible teaching. Through a process of reflection on my own education and using my past experiences to inform and guide me through my SaLT partnerships, I've realized that there is one essential and key element that must be present in any meaningful teaching and learning interaction; this element is trust. Trust, between a student and a professor, allows for several channels of dialogue to be opened, therefore allowing for more enriched, holistic, and socially conscious educational engagement.

### **Revisiting My Own Courses**

In many courses in college I did not experience trust. This lack of trust showed up in many ways and on many levels. For example, in a natural science course I took, the professor was incredibly stringent and really believed in the hierarchy we see play out in higher education. In many ways, he did not believe and trust in us as a student body to have agency over our learning; this all fostered a sense of uneasiness and discomfort not only in the classroom but also when students would try and attend office hours. Upon reflecting on my time in that particular course, I've come to realize that at the time, there existed a huge schism between what the professor expected the students to be able to do and the actual ability and agency of the students. Hierarchy and archaic practices made it so that this gap could never be bridged.

My first experience of trust developing between faculty and students occurred my sophomore year in a course that addressed texts regarding rape and genocide in the Bible. The professor, early on in the course, let students know that she was not a scholar in the material but she designed the course because the topics we'd be covering were incredibly relevant to modern day discussions around rape and genocide. Although this seemed relatively unimportant to me at the time, I realize now that her vulnerability and willingness to inform us that she too was new to the class material was a form of her trusting us. She established a platform based on openness and trust and thus set the ball in motion to create a classroom environment where we would be engaging in inquiry and academia as collaborators. This was different from the hierarchies I had previously experienced in the classroom. Throughout the semester, she would encourage us to engage with the material collectively, and through this practice, we worked actively in building trust between ourselves as students as well as with the professor. At the end of the course, I had never felt more challenged and motivated. Because we had worked on establishing trust and

vulnerability early on in the semester, we were comfortable providing constructive criticism and pushing on ideas that we felt needed to be expanded.

In courses post this class, I found that professors weren't necessarily constructing their courses to be predicated on trust, but they weren't necessarily trying to evade this foundational concept, either. This is to say that developing trust often depended on my own willingness to foster this trust. For example, I recently took a seminar course in my major with a professor who was also my major advisor. At the start of the semester, I saw similar dynamics I had seen in previous courses where there was a barrier/ lack of trust between students and the professor. Because of my work in SaLT and my experience in the Bible course I had taken, I knew which sort of dynamics would facilitate my learning as well as the learning of my classmates, and so I decided to have a one-on-one meeting with this professor about the expectations in the course and the way the course was run in general. Of course this was easier for me because I had a lot of contact with this professor and was comfortable with them but the takeaway from this anecdote is that the professor chose to hear me out and chose to trust my suggestions and commentary as a student. Even though trust and vulnerability weren't initially present when the course started, I found that this professor was open and receptive to communicating with me in an open way that was founded on these principles.

### **How Pedagogical Partnerships Deepened My Understanding of the Importance of Trust**

In my experience, in order for student-faculty partnerships to be successful, they also have to be predicated on trust. I've kept the experiences I describe above in the back of my mind through every partnership I've held. The ways in which they did and did not build trust helped me think about the trust I experienced in my own partnerships and the ways I could help faculty foster trust between themselves and their students.

In my first two partnerships, I often felt as though I was trying to find a way to reach my faculty partners, but they seemed more comfortable keeping me at a kind of distance. They would often listen to the perspectives I offered and even try some of what I suggested, but in these partnerships, I found that I often could not predict how they would respond to me, and so I wasn't always sure how to reach them. Sometimes this was a struggle and other times it just felt disconnected. There were instances in these first two partnerships where I felt as if my faculty partners did not trust my advice, which was based on my own experiences as a student, and thus there emerged moments where I found myself one, questioning my ability as a student consultant and two, wondering if I had wrongly interpreted my past educational experiences.

My third partnership was different. In our initial meeting, we talked for upwards of an hour about the goals he had for the course, how he wanted to achieve them, and what roadblocks/ reservations he had about teaching the course. Although talking about goals and visions for the course is standard, this was the first time I had asked a partner about reservations/ roadblocks and had them answer the question fully and honestly. This opened up a space where I felt like we were truly engaging in a teaching/ learning partnership. His trust of me in sharing reservations and roadblocks made me trust him in return and make myself vulnerable, too, in sharing experiences and ideas.

Throughout the course of our time as collaborators, we would constantly support each other through issues that came up in his classroom. There was a point in the course where students had mentioned that in a situation where the people they were working with engaged in cultural practices and ideologies that differed from their own, and in those situations they would be less likely to have open dialogue with those people about how these differences impacted their relationship. My partner, after this class discussion, expressed his frustration about this discussion to me in our one-on-one meeting and for the better part of an hour, we spent time brainstorming ideas and lesson topics he could present to the class that would change their viewpoint or at least open the pathway for more discussion.

Another example is when my faculty partner asked me to speak to his class about our pedagogical partnership, the observations I had made of his pedagogy, and this idea of trust we had spent the better part of the semester thinking about. This request and my subsequent talk with the class would not have been possible if we had not been working on building trust and vulnerability throughout the semester. At the end of the semester, a student told both my faculty partner and me that in witnessing how we navigate our partnership (through trust, openness, and honesty) she felt more comfortable being vulnerable to the class as a whole. This moment and experience, along with my experience sophomore year, are both instances that have been instrumental in forming my philosophy on pedagogy and partnership.

## **Conclusion**

I've found that without trust in the classroom, there tends to be an air of fear; in the student/professor relationship, this fear manifests when students are too afraid to address classroom dynamics that may or may not be working for them lest they upset the professor. This fear ultimately stifles the student and thus limits the extent to which everyone in a class can be fully present and engaged. Trust is a necessary component in the classroom and in the pedagogical partnership process, and as my time in the SaLT program comes to a close, I'm left thinking how I can bring this experience and this idea of trust into endeavors I undertake beyond my college experience. I plan to pursue a career in health, where trust is foundational to any professional engagement. Through and beyond my career I anticipate my observations on the importance of trust in creating opportunities for better learning to inform all I do, as only relationships built through trust and vulnerability have the potential to grow.