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Introduction

I was introduced to the Teaching and Learning Institute (TLI) at Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges and its Students as Learners and Teachers (SaLT) program through a friend in the Education Department at Bryn Mawr College. She's someone who constantly engages in critical thought inside and outside of academia, and one who I look up to in terms of how to support and partake in constructive dialogue with both administrators and professors alike. When she told me about TLI and how it operates on Bryn Mawr's campus, I got excited by simply the premise of the program. I had only really seen students observing classrooms for an education class field work component. However, the primary purpose of those observations was to give students a chance to see class ideas enacted in real-world academic situations in K-12th grade classrooms. TLI presented a unique opportunity for us students to get an opportunity to go a step further with these observations—-to actually engage in conversation with professors from different fields. These conversations range from identifying what is occurring in their classrooms to learning much more about the processes they go through in order to create a classroom environment that is responsive to their students' needs. This essay describes how I moved from these questions about classroom processes and pedagogy, and a feeling of "us vs. them" that many students feel in relation to their professors, to a feeling of "us."

Starting My Partnership

I entered TLI as a math major/education minor who was paired with a professor in computer science and linguistics, so I began the partnership a bit apprehensive about whether or not I'd be able to understand the content. However, through the weekly meetings we'd have with the director of the TLI as well as other student consultants, we learned to look past the content of the course to the way the class was structured, the way the professor interacted with the students, and other pedagogical issues. I actually learned to reframe my initial worry as an advantage of a student consultant: since I wasn't in the class to learn the material, I was able to focus more on *how* the material was taught rather than *what* was being taught. However, this being my first partnership, I was a bit unsure of what exactly I was to be looking for. Was I solely looking at pedagogical techniques? Do I focus on student reactions to certain techniques, or should all my attention be on the professor?

During my first meeting with my faculty partner, I remember relying on the TLI orientation in order to structure the conversation. Particularly, I drew upon fellow student consultants who explained the importance of being transparent about expectations. There were many factors to this transparency: 1) being receptive to the wants and needs of my faculty partner, 2) being transparent about my experiences in the Education field, whether that meant in Education classes or in outside experiences that could relate to TLI and inform my role in the classroom, and 3)

being open to myself about entering a new experience and not pressure myself to find certain "faults" or techniques in the class like in other observation exercises.

It turned out that in this partnership my faculty partner was also new to the program, so when she opened up to me by explaining her role on campus and her introduction to this program, we didn't feel the need to fit our potential relationship into a box. We decided to take the experience a day at a time, and feel out what sort of student role would best fit the class. This initial flexibility naturally led to trust and understanding that I think benefited the role in that it didn't feel forced or rigid: it was organic and fluid depending on what was happening in the class, and what my faculty partner and I wanted to investigate further.

Settling into My Role as Student Partner

As I visited more and more classes, a role naturally emerged that felt right to both me and my faculty partner. The first couple of classes I felt like I embraced a more "fly on the wall" based approach. I think I defaulted to this role because I wanted to be careful and not intrude on an already existing class. I felt like a guest in the classroom, and I didn't want students to think I was there to "monitor" what they were doing, which is why I kept to myself in one spot. Through conversations with my faculty partner, we naturally developed a role for me that respected the students in the classroom and the work they did, but also allowed me to check in with groups and understand how the activity was being received by the class. I do think there was a benefit in starting off cautiously, though: I wanted to respect my faculty partner and the classroom environment, as well as the students in the class, and through meeting with student consultants and the director of TLI, I realized that this reflected the respect I carried for my faculty partner and how I didn't want to cross boundaries.

My faculty partner and I initially wanted to see what would be the most beneficial issues to focus on. Eventually, as more group work emerged in the class, we decided it was helpful for me to also float and see what sorts of ideas student groups were coming up with, and how they embraced the activities. This allowed me to also focus on class dynamics and catch onto initial reactions that students had during transitions (for example, when pair group switched to small group work, and then led into a class discussion.) Through these conversations, we decided what specific aspects I could focus on during my next visit to the classroom. This process of finding a balance between identifying issues we already knew we wanted to consider and letting issues emerge more organically gave me a lot more clarity and well as confidence in terms of being a student consultant.

Identifying the "Us vs. Them" Phenomenon

As I become more comfortable with my faculty partner, I became more willing to share my previous experiences with STEM professors at Bryn Mawr and Haverford (or even through my K-12 experience at a public school in New Jersey) that related to what I saw in her computer

science classroom. When we'd reflect on what was happening in her classroom, we found connections to other schooling experiences we **both** had. This, I think, was the most unexpected, yet rewarding, part of our partnership. I found myself opening up to her about experiences I had back in high school and college, such as strategies a teacher would try to get more engagement in activities, or ways of framing questions to help guide students in the right direction. What I didn't expect was that my faculty partner responded so positively to that honesty and told me about experiences she had in earlier teaching experiences, or even that she had when she was in college (both undergraduate and graduate.) We worked off our trust for one another to push each other to think about how our previous education experiences could influence what my faculty partner does in the classroom, and how she does it.

As we met more, she showed genuine interest in my perspective as a student not only in the Education Department, but just as a college student navigating the Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges (the Bi-Co). In very few conversations on campus have I ever felt comfortable in a professor's office, yet my faculty partner committed to validating my presence not only as a part of TLI, but as a student in general. Many times when talking to professors on campus, specifically those who are/were my teachers, I've always felt on edge about how much I can open up. Part of this might be because there was always the fact that this professor had control over my grade, which could impact my future, so therefore the conversation I have with them has to be "on point." It also just might come from this need I found within myself to constantly "impress" the educators around me in order to prove I was worthy of higher education. Conversations with my faculty partner, both the ones guided by TLI principles and ones that stemmed into just casual check ins, helped wear down these assumptions I carried with me into professor's offices. They allowed me to settle in and feel more comfortable about my role as a student consultant, and that I didn't need to prove my worth but rather me voicing my viewpoints was my doing my job.

In the weekly meetings with my faculty partner, we found ourselves going through the observations and notes from the last class, seeing how they fit in with her perspective of how the class went, and then just talking about other components that can influence students' engagement with the class. This is how we began talking about the "Us Vs. Them" idea between professors and students. This is an issue I want to highlight because I believe it gets reinforced through what I think is the disciplinary focus of many K-12 classrooms (in which teachers are seen as "**reinforcers**" of a very strict etiquette in terms of behavior and academic performance wise.)

We were talking about office hours and how students were utilizing this resource throughout the semester. My faculty partner was amazing at creating many opportunities for students to access office hours as students in the Bi-Co. She accommodated students on both campuses by lining up office hours after class so students from the other campus wouldn't have to take another shuttle bus to come see her. She also adjusted when her office hours were around when labs/big assignments were due so students could have her as a resource for these projects. This sense of accommodating definitely translated not only from our interactions inside her class, but in our weekly meetings. Many times during my first few weeks in class, my faculty partner would check in on me and see how I was doing. It made me feel really welcomed into the environment, and more comfortable branching out to other groups to see what they were talking about.

These conversations and interactions led us to talking about how to get more students to use resources offered in class to feel more welcomed. Specifically, we focused on office hours, which reminded me of my own experience as a first-year student being terrified of going to office hours. The dynamic my faculty partner had established during these meetings made me feel comfortable enough for me to share my own journey with getting used to the concept of office hours. I told her about how my friends had to convince me to go to office hours for help with an essay during my first year at college because I had always associated one-on-one meetings with professors with me being in trouble. I told her how I never talked to professors in such an informal or affirming way until college. Before then, I thought that you only saw your teacher when you had performed badly on an assignment, or when you weren't behaving properly. I remember talking to a lot of first-year students as an Orientation Counselor on campus who felt the same way, and having to confront that misconception early on so that students wouldn't miss out on such a useful resource.

In talking with my faculty partner about this, we both continued with this train of thought, wondering about how other experiences from a student's K-12 experience could influence how much they want to build a relationship with their professor. It led to thinking about ways we could combat this ""Us Vs. Them" idea that students may be carrying into her classroom. One approach we thought of was having informal check ins concerning project ideas through which students got a chance to meet with her outside of class in a setting that wasn't about discipline, but rather utilizing professor input to help validate students' ideas. This got us thinking about ways professors can reframe the concept of office hours to students to address these initial impressions we bring into the classrooms.

Moving from "Us vs. Them" to "Us"

These explorations my faculty partner and I went on during our meetings really allowed me to rethink how the creation of a college class can go. Throughout our meetings, we discovered more about the "other side" as I thought of it. Our conversations shed light on my own personal student experience, while my faculty partner took me through the thought processes she had when building a curriculum, or how she chose what teaching method to use when introducing a new concept. We also expressed our own viewpoints of how we thought the "other side" operated. I told her about, for example, how I admired how she floated in a non-intrusive way during group work, and she revealed to me it was something she hadn't initially thought about/was trying to control. Yet, the way she had done it in class was one of the most effective ways I've seen a professor navigate a space like that. She would also express to me her thoughts of how she believed students were reacting to certain assignments or activities, and we'd talk about how we saw evidence of her beliefs and how that reflected in their engagement.

Overall, I felt like our partnership provided me and my faculty partner the space to brainstorm ways in which we see this divide between teachers and students negatively impact the classroom space, as well as ways to combat "us vs. them." As a student, I've felt a major disconnect with a lot of my professors and teachers growing up, and it wasn't until I had these eye-opening conversations did I understand where those feelings came from. My faculty partner's

commitment to finding solutions to this us-vs-them problem while also providing a space for students like me to feel comfortable talking through their insecurities inspires me to continue exploring these ideas.

In terms of first steps, I'm hoping to start by engaging with those faculty relationships from college—those professors that I've felt a connection with that may be open to having honest conversations about this divide. This partnership has already allowed me to feel comfort when talking to faculty, and I believe now thatme being open and candid does not reflect me not wanting to maintain a level of rigor in my academic work. The more exchanges I have with professors, the more I reinforce this idea and feel more confident in my identity as a student. I hope then to bring that comfort into new academic spaces I may encounter, including professors I might have in the next semester.