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Sasha Mathrani
Bryn Mawr College

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BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS, NAVIGATING DISCOMFORT AND UNCERTAINTY, AND TRANSLATING MY VOICE IN NEW CONTEXTS

Sasha Mathrani, Haverford College Class of 2018

Through this essay, I will reflect on the transformative experiences I have had as a student partner in the Students as Learners and Teachers (SaLT) program at Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges. The SaLT program, a part of the Teaching and Learning Institute (TLI), creates an environment for students and faculty to engage in dynamic relationships that support their growth inside and outside the classroom. During my time as an undergraduate at Haverford College, I have engaged in three pedagogical partnerships across the two colleges. The individual relationships I built with my faculty partners, the discussions I engaged in through weekly student consultant meetings, and the overall experience of engaging in partnership contributed immensely to my personal growth. My dynamic journey over the past three partnerships led me to value myself, my perspective, and my contributions. Through reflecting on my TLI experience thus far, I realize that building relationships and navigating discomfort and uncertainty have been instrumental in my being able to value myself. The confidence I have gained through TLI seeps into a variety of other contexts that I will explore through this essay.

The Context of My Growth: Three Traditional Pedagogical Partnerships in Different Disciplines

My three partnerships all followed a traditional model of a SaLT pedagogical partnership to a large extent: I attended one session of my faculty partner's class weekly, took observational and reflective notes, met weekly with my partner to discuss my observations, and participated in a weekly meeting facilitated by the director of the TLI with other student consultants.

Although all three of my partnerships followed the standard model, the subject matter and the particular focus of the partnership work varied. My first faculty partner taught a 35-person natural science class where she focused on engaging all students through a flipped classroom. A lot of our conversations centered around the importance of inclusive teaching practices in a science classroom that traditionally excludes students with marginalized identities. My second faculty partner taught a 16-person natural science laboratory class once a week for three hours. Over the course of the semester this partnership gradually narrowed its focus to the importance of creating an accessible classroom for students with varying identities. After the traditional partnership in the spring semester, we used the summer to redesign the inherited courses he would be teaching the following year. We redesigned the courses with the intention of making them more accessible. My third partnership was in a 12-person social science seminar where the focus of our discussions was balancing the needs of all students in the classroom.

All these partnerships have individually and collectively contributed to my TLI experience with different aspects of the partnerships contributing in unique ways to my overall growth. I organize my reflections on them into the following related categories: building relationships, navigating discomfort and uncertainty, and translating my voice in new contexts.

Building relationships

Although my three partnerships have been drastically different from one another in various ways, one common thread is the strong relationships I formed with my faculty partners. When I participated in the student consultant orientation before embarking on my journey of partnerships, I listed one of my apprehensions regarding participating in partnerships as *using the wrong words or tone to communicate with my faculty partner*. As I reflect on this apprehension three partnerships later, I realize that the communication with my faculty partners was very strong. I transformed this apprehension into an inspiration to build a relationship with each faculty member through affirmations of their practice, understanding their goals for teaching, and learning about what was important to them.

I was privileged to have partners who respected me, asked for my opinion and perspective, and treated me as a true colleague. Because of this mutual trust in the relationships, I was less worried about using the ‘wrong’ tone or words with my faculty partners. Instead, I focused on being honest. Over time I transformed my apprehensions into honesty by focusing my energy on building a strong relationship with my partner. In my third partnership, for instance, my partner and I developed an especially strong relationship where we often spent time in our meetings talking about our families, our goals, and other aspects of our lives that did not seem directly related to the partnership. At times, it felt like these conversations were separate from our partnership. However, the familiarity we had with one another, and the strong relationship we formed through these conversations, made our pedagogical partnership even stronger. I knew I could be honest with my faculty partner when there were practices I thought she could change, or situations I thought she could handle differently. Through building a relationship with my faculty partner, I felt valued by my partner and that contributed to valuing myself.

In addition to being honest with my faculty partners, an important aspect of building a positive relationship was meeting my partners where they were at. To have productive conversations I had to gauge where my partner was in thinking about pedagogy and creating an inclusive classroom. I realized I had all these ideas and thoughts about how the class could be different, but if I did not understand what my partner was thinking, we would not be able to connect and make progress. During one of my partnerships, I reached a point in the semester when I felt like I was not making many new observations in the class and I did not have many more suggestions for my partner. I used this point in the semester to revisit my partner’s goals. As we looked at modifying the goals, I shared my personal interest in intentionally creating spaces in the classroom for students with equity-seeking identities and the possibilities for my partner to do that in their current and future classrooms. This conversation was extremely productive and I was pleasantly surprised at my partner’s interest in talking more about creating an inclusive classroom. After that moment of assessment, we had many conversations about how the classroom environment can actively work against stereotypes and assumptions that students are faced with. If I had not stepped back, revisited my partner’s goals, and expressed some of my own commitments, I might not have found that his thinking and commitments were also so inclined toward fostering greater equity in his classrooms.

In another one of my partnerships, I felt like there were plenty of suggestions I had for my faculty partner based on my observations and feedback from students and we never reached a

point in the semester where I felt like we could talk about larger issues and the importance of inclusive pedagogy. Instead, we were focused on the specifics of classroom interactions and small actions my partner could take to balance the interests of students. Although we did not talk explicitly about creating an inclusive classroom, the goal of our discussions was to create a more inclusive classroom, just through a different lens. I learned from my faculty partner she was overwhelmed with all my notes from the semester and was not sure how to take the ideas into her future classrooms. When she shared this, I realized she was having a hard time taking a step back and looking at the bigger picture of the class. Therefore, I created a simple website for her to organize all our ideas and thoughts from the semester so she could look back on that, instead of trying to sift through all the notes. This adjustment of my approach to meet her where she was made it more likely that she would be able to work toward creating the classroom we both imagined.

Through experiences like this in partnership I have been able to better understand where someone is at, and how I can find ways to communicate with them and build a productive relationship. Furthermore, through reflecting on the relationships with my faculty partners, I realize my ability to build relationships has developed over my three partnerships. I now value the perspectives and beliefs I contribute to a relationship. In all the relationships I built, I brought an aspect of myself to the partnership that I had not expected to. I shared a lot of my personal experiences with my partners, and I also shared fears and apprehensions I faced in my academic and professional life. This level of detail I shared with my partners allowed me to build genuine relationships. I also shared my interest and passions with my partners. Although each relationship was very different, each partner got to know an aspect of me that was not directly related to the partnership, and my partners would share articles, events, and even job postings with me.

Even though I had strong relationships with my partners, not all aspects of the partnership were easy and comfortable. In the next section I explore the discomfort and uncertainty I faced through the partnership experiences.

Navigating discomfort and uncertainty

Discomfort and uncertainty have by no means defined my partnership experiences. However, the uncomfortable interactions and moments of uncertainty have created space for me to grow. The situations created opportunities for me to change my perspective, look for creative solutions, and step outside my comfort zone. I have experienced discomfort and uncertainty in the classroom as well as in conversations with my faculty partners outside the classroom.

My physical presence in the classroom was a source of much of my discomfort during my first two pedagogical partnerships. When I began my first partnership, I was still understanding and navigating my own radical role in the classroom as neither student nor teacher. My faculty partner briefly introduced me on the first day of class, but I sat at the back of the classroom and took observational notes on my laptop. When the students were working in small groups, I was unsure of how I would make observations if I stayed at the back of the classroom. After discussions in the weekly student consultant meetings, I decided to walk around the classroom

and make observations of group dynamics and group work. Although this felt uncomfortable at first, I became used to walking around the classroom and felt confident I was providing my faculty partner with observations that were helpful to her pedagogical decisions. Some of the observations I made while walking around the classroom ended up creating the basis for some of the suggestions I gave my partner, and she made changes in the classroom that ended up encouraging students to be more engaged. When I realized I had a perspective my partner could never take in her own classroom, I felt the responsibility to be confident and make the most of the time I was spending in her class.

At the start of my second partnership, I worked with my partner to decide how I would make observations in the laboratory class where he would be walking around to different groups the whole time. At first, we thought I might work with a different group each week and observe how they were working through the experiment, but after talking more we decided the most productive observation would be if I followed my faculty partner around and traced his movement around the lab. We felt this might be productive because I could see the individual interactions he was having with students and how he was able to distribute his attention to all the students. At first, I was nervous about walking around the class and writing my observations in my notebook. I felt like it might be uncomfortable for myself and the students if I was following the professor around. The first couple weeks were a little uncomfortable, but I realized the more uncomfortable I was, the more uncomfortable I would make the students in the class. After I explicitly understood the impact my presence had in the class, I shifted my focus from my own discomfort to the learning of the students in the class. I began to talk informally with the students about their experiments and would join in on informal, not necessarily content-related conversations. Although I was still observing and shadowing my partner, I was not a silent participant in the classroom. This shift in my behavior made me feel more comfortable and allowed the students to get used to my presence.

In addition to the discomfort I felt in the classrooms, in my second partnership I faced discomfort in the form of disagreements my faculty partner and I had during our weekly meetings. At one point during the semester, our hour-long meetings became twenty-minute meetings because we were unable to get past our disagreements. Although this was uncomfortable and I was uncertain about our relationship at that point, we spent time listening to each other and ended up building a stronger relationship. One example illustrates how this happened.

During one of the weekly meetings, I talked to my faculty partner about my beliefs about the importance of professors being transparent with students with expectations and motivations behind assignments and pedagogical choices. My faculty partner did not agree with my views on the issue, which led me to clarify my own ideas and sit with the discomfort of disagreeing. He shared an idea he had for a class he was planning to teach next semester: that he wanted to start the class with a very difficult assignment to show the students they had a lot to learn. However, he said he did not want to tell the students the assignment was intentionally difficult. I thought this lack of transparency was not ideal in the classroom, and I believed professors should always be transparent with their students. I did not talk about why I believed this—partly because I wasn't sure, I just felt it—I just told him I believed so. After talking about this uncomfortable conversation in my weekly student consultant meeting, I figured out why I felt this idea was not ideal for the classroom. The next time I met my faculty partner I told him I had thought about our

previous conversation and the reason I did not agree with his idea was that making an intentionally difficult assignment would disproportionately hurt students from marginalized backgrounds. Students who are questioning their place in a natural science classroom will immediately be discouraged if they are not given any reason for such a difficult assignment. When I framed my belief this way, with a clear reason behind it, my faculty partner immediately changed his focus and began to think about his practice differently.

This experience led me to become more comfortable with my own beliefs and not shy away from discomfort, because I realized if I am clear about why I have a certain belief, I should share that and not worry about the discomfort. I worked through the discomfort and it not only benefited me by making me feel more confident, I was also able to see a shift in my partner's way of thinking as well.

All the skills I gained through the partnership experience have equipped me to build new relationships and sit with discomfort. I did not understand the extent of the growth I experienced until I found myself entering new situations with a newfound confidence and value for my own perspective.

Translating my voice to new contexts

Through my journey of building relationships and navigating discomfort and uncertainty, I developed a stronger belief in myself. In the context of my partnerships I have felt valued and confident. However, contexts outside my partnerships provided me the opportunity to witness how my positive engagement with the SaLT program can permeate all facets of my life.

My comfort in new situations and desire to share my perspectives has increased over the course of my three partnerships. I did not realize this change until recently when I had the chance to reflect and consider what I gained from being in partnership with different faculty. This past semester all senior Biology majors, myself included, had to give a ten-minute thesis proposal presentation that outlined the background and rationale of our senior research. In preparation for the proposal talk, we all practiced our presentations at our weekly lab meetings with the other members of our lab and our thesis advisor. The practice was a chance to give and receive feedback on the presentations. When my fellow lab mates shared their presentations, I did not hesitate to give them feedback on how they could organize the presentation for more clarity, use each slide with clear intentions, and guide the audience through their presentation with ease. During one of these lab meetings my thesis advisor explicitly shared how much she valued my suggestions by saying: *"You are really good at this sort of stuff. I always love hearing your suggestions."* My ability to identify explicit ways for my peers to clarify their presentations, and the ease with which I could articulate those suggestions, can be attributed to the skills I have developed through navigating my partnerships.

With my lab group and my thesis advisor, I received affirmation on my evolving skills and confidence I developed through partnerships. However, I have found myself taking these skills, and valuing my perspective, in spaces where others might not necessarily value and affirm my presence. I recently attended an inclusive science teaching workshop at an International Biology

conference. The workshop was designed for faculty and post-doctoral students, but given my interest in inclusive science teaching, I decided to attend the workshop. During the interactive workshop, I was at a table with post-doctoral students and faculty members who were thinking about how to make their classes more inclusive. Once we all introduced ourselves at the table, the four people at my table immediately dismissed my presence, talked across me, and did not really allow me the chance to speak. One aim of the workshop was to craft goals for next steps in making a more inclusive classroom. When everyone at my table was writing their goals, I decided to speak up. I talked to the two people sitting next to me, both post-doctoral fellows who were beginning their journey of teaching. I shared with them my role as a student consultant and emphasized the importance of the students' perspective in making pedagogical choices. No one asked me for my opinion, or suggested they would even consider it, but that did not stop me from valuing myself in that moment.

Conclusion

Participating in the SaLT program has been a transformational experience. Each small transformation has contributed to my personal growth and appreciation for myself. Reflecting on my varied partnerships has helped me identify some of the moments of growth and explicitly understand the impact of the SaLT program in all my ways of being. I can see how my ability to build relationships and navigate uncertainty has developed over the course of my partnerships, and I realize how learning how to navigate those unfamiliar situations has given me the confidence to speak up in situations outside my partnerships. I have learned how to focus my energy on other people, whether in understanding my partner's goals and needs, or focusing on the students' learning. However, as I have learned to focus on other people, I have also learned how to open myself up to being uncomfortable and vulnerable. These transformations have enriched each of my partnerships in different ways, and have also translated into all aspects of my life.