Partners as Scaffolds: Teaching in the Zone of Proximal Development

Shannon Audley
Smith College

Recommended Citation

Audley, Shannon "Partners as Scaffolds: Teaching in the Zone of Proximal Development," *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education*: Iss. 24 (2018), https://repository.brynmawr.edu/tlthe/vol1/iss24/4

PARTNERS AS SCAFFOLDS: TEACHING IN THE ZONE OF PROXIMAL DEVELOPMENT

Shannon Audley, Smith College, USA

The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) describes the sweet spot where all teachers want their learners to reside. Specifically, Vygotsky (1978) defines ZPD as "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development, as determined through problem-solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (p. 86). It is, simply, where the instruction is the most beneficial for each student—just beyond his or her current level of independent capability.

As a teacher-educator, I have used this term countless times to help my students think about the ways in which they can identify what children can do on their own, and what they can do with scaffolding (help from knowledgeable others), thus helping the children achieve more than what they could do independently. In theory, once the task is mastered, the scaffolding can be removed and the child should be able to complete the task on their own, independently.

However, I never thought about how this term applied to instructors until I had a pedagogical partner in my Child and Adolescent Development course in Fall, 2017. This essay focuses on how a pedagogical partnership between a student and faculty member can create a safety net for risk-taking; the student-partner can act as a scaffold for faculty to make small course changes the faculty feel vulnerable about, but know will be beneficial in the long run. For me, my pedagogical partner was my scaffold to make small but needed changes such as, for instance, the addition of permanent discussion and activity groups to one of my most popular courses. Through our work together, I became more certain about the changes that I needed to make, and I took more calculated pedagogical risks throughout the course of the semester. I also learned what my course looked like from the student perspective, which will aid me in my ability to make pedagogical changes to my courses, independently.

Every semester I teach Child and Adolescent development with around 40-50 students from a range of majors, ages, and desires. I mostly teach this class in lecture format, and it has been successful for thirteen runs, with mostly positive student feedback. However, this is not how I want to teach this course. I want to teach the course in a way that does not rely on my lectures, but where students work in groups, doing activities, and discussing the finer points of the content and its application to research, policy, and educational practice.

Yet, given where my course is and my position as a pre-tenure Assistant Professor, I was incapable of creating the course that I wanted. In Vygotskian terms, it was beyond my independent problem-solving ability. I should note that it wasn't because I didn't have the pedagogical know-how; I do. But, making a change when a course is working is emotionally risky for the instructor and the students who have registered for the course.

For me, inviting change meant that I could no longer rely on my previous knowledge about students' reactions to critical lectures and take home messages that I had carefully crafted to be meaningful, yet safe. The classroom space would be less controlled, leaving students to respond in unexpected ways for which I was underprepared. Students who had registered for the course based on peer recommendations would not get the same carefully crafted experience, perhaps upsetting their delicate balance of courses selected based on workload and course type. This overall discontent could affect my confidence in the classroom and, most important to pre-tenure faculty, my course evaluation scores. Students would evaluate the course not on what occurred, but on what they thought should have occurred. At least, that was what I thought. I was worried that changing things up, even a little bit, could upset the delicate balance of my course, and make myself vulnerable—to bad reviews, to student discontent—and lead to failure to get tenure.

I had spoken of these course changes many times with other Smith College faculty and with my own teaching faculty mentor. And time and time again I was assured that these were good changes to make. And yet, semester after semester, I found myself polishing old lectures and wishing that I had made room for a few group activities or discussions. Other faculty, even those more knowledgeable in pedagogy, had failed to scaffold my course redesign. Why? I believe it was *not* because I needed a scaffold in pedagogy; I had effective strategies and resources to support me in that endeavor. Rather, I needed a scaffold for student responses, which other faculty and the Center for Teaching and Learning could not provide me. For this I needed a "more capable peer"—I needed a student pedagogical partner.

Enter Vox[1]. She was a senior engineering major, and at Smith, that meant she had spent a majority of her classes learning in and through group work. She was the perfect "more skillful peer" for me to work with. We met and discussed my planned changes for the course. Although my long-term goal was to get rid of lectures entirely, I was not capable (or did not perceive myself as capable) of doing that yet. What I wanted to try out was the creation of groups. This may seem like a simple task, but there were many considerations for this particular class. I have first years through seniors, and because the course content is diverse and highlights non-WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, Democratic) perspectives, I like to believe that it is curricularly open to students from a diversity of backgrounds and social locations (e.g., gender, ethnicity, class, ability, nationality, etc). Yet, the course content can be emotional at times, covering topics like peer rejection, exclusion, privilege, ethnic identity, and race and gender in the classroom, among many other topics, and I was worried about how students would respond to the content in a group format. How would I be able to coordinate the diverse experiences and perspectives of my students in a large class that was primarily content driven?

Inspired by Beverly Daniel Tatum's book, *Can We Talk about Race?,* I envisioned creating groups based on my students' intersecting identities (e.g., ethnicity, gender identity, class, first generation status) so that students would be in groups that were self-reflective and safe. I wanted to make sure that no student would feel like they had to act

---

[1] Student names have been changed for privacy.

as a representative for their group identity. But I also worried about the repercussions of creating groups based, in part, on ethnic, gender, class, etc. dimensions. I worried because Smith College, like most historically White colleges, sometimes struggles with representations of diversity. I also felt overwhelmed by small considerations as well: Where would groups sit? What direction would they face (me, each other?)? Would I assign group members "tasks"? How would I monitor their group talk? Would they take notes in groups?

In my experience with a pedagogical partnership, it was less the risk of vulnerability created within the partnership and more the risk outside of the partnership that I worried about. Having a pedagogical partner, one with dual expertise (as a student and someone who had experience learning in groups) lessened my perception of the risk that I was taking, and allowed me to succeed in the creation and maintenance of groups. In fact, I would argue because of her presence in class, and her guidance and encouragement each week (the Vygotskian textbook definition of a scaffold), I also was able to implement more changes and take more pedagogical risks and move my course changes farther than I had initially anticipated. For example, I added daily timed reviews to each class, and began incorporating cognitive-science based study skills as part of group practice.

I didn't "need" my partner to try out these ideas or implement things; I didn't "need" my partner to tell me that coming to class five minutes earlier would help facilitate the start of class, and yet, I did. I knew that if something didn't go the way that I wanted in class, we would talk about it. I knew that she would notice things that I would never have thought about that would both reassure me and shake me to my core. For example, I was initially worried about having some of the groups permanently located at the back of the classroom, but given the classroom size, there were not a lot of immediate options. However, during the first few weeks of classes, Vox noticed that one of the groups seated in the very back, Group 7, was not "fully engaged" in one of the discussions. She reported that they ended the discussion about one minute earlier than the other groups. I told her that I was not worried; sometimes, the time required for group discussion oscillates depending on the topic. However, my partner did not agree. She said that she recognized their pattern of interactions from her student experience in groups. Initially, I put her concerns on hold; at that point, I was skeptical that the student experience could override years of teaching experience. However, because of our partnership, I paid particularly close attention to that group. There was a slight, subtle difference in the way Group 7 interacted, one that I cannot describe myself but which Vox had captured perfectly. And at mid-term, the group's test score average was lower than the average of all other groups. Vox had been right. And when she suggested a simple intervention that had been successful in her own experience, namely changing the group's physical location, I listened, even though re-arranging the classroom space was challenging.

In the end, my experience with student-faculty pedagogical partnerships wasn't life changing; it was life affirming. Vox, and the pedagogical partnership, were, for me, a scaffold, a way of doing something that I had long wanted to do but could not do on my own, perhaps because of my fears as a pre-tenure faculty. And I believe that it worked because my partner, armed with sometimes only a week of pedagogical training, still (and

always) had the students' perspective. I could turn blue in the face telling her why something *should* work, but she had the power to tell me that it *wasn't* working. And because she acted as my scaffold, I had to listen.

I suppose that one could attempt to argue that a co-teacher could act in a similar manner; but I would vehemently disagree. That same semester I taught another course in which graduate students learning how to teach took turns, in pairs, "teaching" the class. As part of their evaluation, we immediately sent the two teachers after their lesson out of the room and the rest of the class, positioned as learners, discussed what went well and what could be improved. We asked the "teachers" to do the same. I found, after several iterations of the feedback activity, that there was a large distinction between what the "teachers" identified as areas of improvement and what the learners identified as improvable. The "teachers" focused on aspects of the lesson that didn't go as they had planned; it was mostly procedural and sometimes the lesson tanked in response to the perception of negative learner emotions. Yet, the learners (including me) identified other aspects of the lessons that the teachers didn't even mention, like enjoyment, or the difficulty level of the question or the activity; as learners we did not notice when a transition was not smooth, and our confusion about an activity was reliably misread as negative emotion. Yet, inevitably, when each learner became a teacher, they forgot their previous evaluations as learners and again focused on procedural mistakes, or perception of negative student emotions. Students and teachers have different roles and different perceptions, and sometimes that gap can be hard to breach.

Student pedagogical partners can provide unique scaffolding to help us faculty members teach in ways that are attuned to our students and reflect our best pedagogical selves. Yes, there is inherent risk in having a pedagogical partner scaffold our teaching, but we can reduce that risk when we deliberately target areas of pedagogy that reflect our particular partner's expert knowledge. In my case, it was not about pedagogy, it was about being a student and her experience as a learner. Our partnership worked because I acknowledged her expertise, and trusted that she was providing me with the appropriate assistance that I needed to move forward within my zone of proximal development. There is greater risk, I believe, in not making any pedagogical changes, than in doing pedagogical work "in collaboration with more capable peers."

Although I chose not to have a pedagogical partner next semester, I walk away with this experience with more respect for the student's role in the teaching-learning process. Students are experts in their own experiences. I admit I often overlook that. Sometimes I am so focused on my own course goals I can forget that students are even involved in the process—a flaw that I constantly identified in my teachers-learners class. My partnership reminded me that students can be pedagogical allies; if I want to know if something is working, sometimes I just need to ask. In order to be scaffolded, however, I need to make sure that I am asking a question that the students are able to answer.

References

Tatum, B. D. (2007). *Can we talk about race?: And other conversations in an era of school resegregation*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.