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TRANSFORMATIVE SELF-CENTERING THROUGH PARTNERSHIP

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Preface

I am still searching for a way to authentically convey my thoughts and feelings from the student-faculty pedagogical partnership I was a part of in Fall 2018. Even in writing this reflection, I am grappling with how to express myself: I struggle to commit to any of the language my brain conjures, second-guess every sentence, wait staring at the page for words that capture my mind to appear—then rewrite them as soon as they do. But I cannot wait for my fingers to work on their own; I must start from the beginning, framing my opinions and ideas first with recollections from the partnership, enabling my story to arise emergently as greater than the sum of its parts. I need to soothe my mind into trusting itself if I am to be vulnerable enough to speak candidly. I must just begin.

Back to the Beginning: Embracing Not Knowing

I am a Student Consultant with the Students as Learners and Teachers (SaLT) program, part of the Teaching and Learning Institute (TLI) of Haverford and Bryn Mawr Colleges (“the Bi-Co,” short for “Bi-College Consortium”). This program pairs current undergraduate students with new and returning professors in semester-long, unique pedagogical partnerships that enable both the student and the professor to work in close collaboration to deeply consider the dynamics of classroom education, curriculum design, and effective communication. Coming into SaLT at the start of my senior year, I brought with me an array of preconceptions about what constituted being a “good” educator. My prejudices were drawn from a mix of personal experiences, both as a student and as a teacher myself; from anecdotes by others; and from readings, whether in academic journals or on the Internet, which flourishingly suggest “best practices” for so-called “effective” education. I felt equipped with the analytical tools necessary to deal with any pedagogical “problems” that might arise.

But after sitting in on my faculty partner’s course for a week, it was clear that there were no glaring “problems” to be addressed. I expressed to Alison, the Director of TLI and facilitator of the SaLT program, that I was concerned about my ability to be helpful to a faculty partner who was as confident and well prepared as he. I also expressed worry that I would not be perceptive enough to describe important elements of my faculty partner’s pedagogical style. In the absence of anything “wrong,” I didn’t know what I was looking for. Her response to me was simple, liberating: “Sometimes not knowing is the best.”

So I went, unknowingly, into my faculty partner’s course two mornings a week, watching quietly from the back of the classroom and documenting minute-by-minute observations of anything I noticed: things he said and the language he used in saying them; how he moved around the classroom; which students raised their hands and how he responded to their contributions; the pacing of the material; and so on. Barely any of it felt significant to me. Nonetheless, I sent him

my observational notes, with each observation accompanied by a short reflection, most of which were affirmations and validations (as recommended by Alison—besides, there was so much good stuff to point out!).

When he and I sat down to meet, I was surprised to find that he had found my notes helpful. He had even gone through and pulled out key points that he wanted to talk more about, such as how students were responding to his prompts for questions and other forms of participation. This particular discussion, assessing student participation in class and how to signal and support various types of engagement, became one of the central themes to our discussions throughout the semester. Our meetings continued apace, with each of us bringing observations and thoughts to the table, workshopping them, and then embodying the results of them in the classroom. We had quickly established a rapport, and despite my initial worries and concerns, we communicated and collaborated productively throughout the semester with the observational notes from class frequently serving as a springboard for discussion.

Unconscious Revelations and Conscious Listening

My biggest regret from the partnership was my lack of timeliness in sending along notes, reflections, and the like to my faculty partner. In a meeting with Alison and the other Student Consultants during the first week of the semester, I expressed apprehension about the large time commitment sometimes required by this work and my ability to balance it alongside schoolwork, other jobs, and extracurriculars. I resolved to intentionally combat habits of procrastination and delay: to be timely. From the outset, I was scrambling: a few days before classes started, Alison emailed me to let me know that she had heard from my faculty partner that I had not yet reached out to introduce myself and set up a time to meet, and she encouraged me to do so as soon as possible. As many of my stories go, I started out behind, and it snowballed.

By the midpoint of the semester, I had weeks of observational notes that had piled up and I was constantly working through a backlog. Amid profuse apologies, I brought up this delinquency to my faculty partner. He had two replies: (1) please send the observation notes as soon as possible; “I need my feedback, Jake,” he said with a wry grin; and (2) it’s consistent with what I had told him about students in this community. This second response caught me off guard: what had I said about Bi-Co students that would explain my lack of time management skills? His answer: “You told me: ‘Bi-Co students love to overpromise.’” I remembered it then—an off-handed comment, half in jest, early on in our partnership. But what to me had been a joke grounded in truth had been for him a window into a community he had entered only weeks earlier—one, according to him, that had helped him to start picking up on some of the patterns and rhythms of life in this community.

Taking Hold and Letting Go: Connecting by Moving within and between Spaces

As a senior, I am already beginning my transition out of the college community and into a new environment, wherever that may be. When asked about my plans for after graduation, I reply that I am sad to leave—but happy to go; while I have enjoyed my time in college and I am sad to

leave, I am excited at the opportunity to explore and take on new adventures in the “real world.” But that’s not the whole truth. Over my time in college (which expands in my memory to occupy a much longer span than four years), I have built communities and friend groups. I have learned as much as I can, not only in my classes but also about classes, about the school, about the people here. I have made myself comfortable.

Leaving this place of comfort is going to require a simultaneous, seemingly contradictory breaking-down and building-up of barriers. I will be breaking down barriers that have insulated me within the college environment, thereby opening myself up to new people, experiences, places, ideas. At the same time, I will build new barriers, both to keep myself secure—secure in myself, in what I know, in what I believe in and what I want in a world full of people who have mostly never heard of me—and to create new structures of comfort wherever I land. That in-between space—not quite here, not quite there—between now and when I am fully settled into the next chapter of my life, requires me to be strong yet vulnerable, to inhabit a liminal space that exists both totally externally to and directly in relation to the tangible, neatly definable spaces of “college” and (for now) “what-comes-next.” I am scared of leaving behind the foundations and structures, patterns and habits and expectations that I have come to know so well, so thoroughly and innately that I was able to communicate fundamental aspects of them to my faculty partner as he made his own transition into this community last fall. I am scared of leaving. I am scared to go.

But I’m not leaving, not completely—or, I should say, the weight of my four years in this community isn’t *leaving me*, not completely. As I leave, I bring with me not only my own experiences here, but also those that I have taken on, vicariously and emotionally, from my interactions with other people. The true heart of community lies in those interactions, in the communication of lived experience from one person to another through shared space. Working as a Student Consultant has been for me an opportunity to develop my skills in this type of communication. By “communication,” I mean more than just expressing myself or understanding others through speaking and writing. I am talking about an all-encompassing engagement, transcending information-transfer and activating a fundamental mental musculature of opening up, of leaning into discomfort and the unknown to discover and create common ground through mutual understanding. This style of communication is one that is essential to building close relationships, tight-knit communities, and meaningful interactions. It is one of the tenets of our historically Quaker institutions. It is central to the student-faculty partnerships of SaLT.

For me, the process of coming into a new community, establishing new connections, learning to speak a common language, find shared experience, and really validate myself as well as others (even when I am doubting or afraid) has been choreographed and rehearsed through the SaLT program. This work has gifted me a framework by which to explore human connection, both outward-facing and inward-turning. Throughout the semester, Alison asked each Student Consultant and each faculty partner to reflect independently on what we were doing well and what strengths and capacities we were bringing to this work: self-affirmations. Living in a society that socializes us to criticize and demean ourselves, subtly couched self-deprecations were rampant among these supposed positive self-reflections. At one point, Alison asked us, as Consultants, to come up with a list of affirmations of what we saw our faculty partners doing well, since they had had trouble generating affirmations of themselves.

Generatively Centering My Self

It is remarkably, surprisingly difficult to say positive things about oneself. I have a lot of trouble coming up with affirming characterizations of my thoughts, actions, and habits. It's not so much that I feel that I am bragging if I self-affirm, although that is a factor; I just have so rarely been asked to genuinely consider myself in terms of what I am doing well, instead of what needs improvement, that it was an unfamiliar mental muscle wanting for some exercise. My work with SaLT has offered up the mental gymnasium through which to develop tools and a framework of self-valuing and self-affirmation. It is a radical self-centering—not self-centeredness, mind you—that is inherent to SaLT and similar work and that enables its participants, like me, to self-value and self-validate. When we speak, when we act, we communicate with others and with the world. When we think, we are communicating with ourselves. As I have strengthened lines of communication with myself, I have found myself better able to communicate with others. As I quiet the waves of self-criticism, I enable myself to step confidently into a state of vulnerability, to begin that process of leaning into discomfort from which communication arises to transform people and relationships.

In our last meeting of the partnership, my faculty partner expressed a similar fear, or maybe an apprehension, to my fear of leaving this community. For him, it had been of coming into *this* community this year—yet another academic landscape, after years of undergrad and grad school and post-docs galore, in which he knew nobody and had no history. He reflected to me, in that final meeting, just how valuable he had found the SaLT partnership experience, how much of a difference the opportunity to connect with others within the framework of this self-centering type of work had made in his ability to build for himself a space of comfort in this community. Leaving the room that day, I was aware of just how much the partnership had enabled me to further establish that space for myself, too, even though I had been a member of this community for many years already. I could feel those abstract barriers shifting around inside my head—forming a new space already—one that was not centered around “college” or “home” or “what-comes-next” but around *me*.

I am still learning. I will always be learning. Every time I reflect on my experiences with SaLT, it becomes a little bit easier, a little bit more natural to sink into that place of vulnerability in which I am able to communicate openly with myself that enables me to convey some facsimile of my mind outwards. It still takes time to reach that point and there are still barriers within my mind to be reshuffled and reframed and danced around. But I am learning. In my application to work as a Student Consultant last fall, I wrote: “I have found input from students to be invaluable in catalyzing my capacity for self-reflection. I hope to be able to act as that catalyst for teachers here.” I had no idea at the time the profound implications of what I was saying. The experience of working with SaLT this semester helped to catalyze self-reflection through a different register of learning, of learning how to trust and respect and value myself. I was only able to help create a space for self-reflection and self-realization for my faculty partner through enacting that same transition within myself; in complementary form, I was only able to enact that personal transition through the support of my faculty partner. This relationship, this partnership, between student and faculty is a unique opportunity to begin to develop these transformations of selfhood, but it is still only a catalyst for those mental muscles that must continue to be exercised. If I am to

survive, let alone thrive, in that “what-comes-next,” I am going to need to keep learning to hold myself at the center.