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Mercette Ohlwiler
Haverford College

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WHERE I COME FROM: GROWTH AND INCLUSION THROUGH SUCCESSIVE PEDAGOGICAL PARTNERSHIPS

Mercette Ohlwiler, Haverford College Class of 2019

At the conclusion of each pedagogical partnership through the Students as Learners and Teachers (SaLT) program at Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges, students are encouraged to write their faculty partner a letter sharing what they have gotten out of the partnership and what it has meant to them. We have devoted our semester together to affirming the practices and growth of the professor, and then the student concludes the partnership by sharing words about their own growth. Yet each partnership is considered its own experience so that one student may write a series of letters to successive faculty partners sharing what they learned during their time together but not referencing experiences across partnerships. In reflecting on my tremendous growth both as a learner and person through the multiple pedagogical partnerships I have experienced, I wanted to break down that barrier. I have had two faculty partners, Professor Jay Lunden (twice) and Professor Sara Grossman, and I want to write to each of them about my evolution through working in partnership with the other. Why? Because my path through the SaLT program is unusual: I worked first with Jay in an unofficial kind of pedagogical partnership outside of the SaLT program, then with Sara in a formal SaLT partnership, and I am now reentering a second pedagogical partnership with Jay as a student consultant through the SaLT program. Each partnership contributed to how I approach the other, so I reflect on the circumstances behind each one as a means of discovering my overall growth through pedagogical partnership.

For Sara

I only heard about the Teaching and Learning Institute at Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges and its SaLT program at the end of my first, unofficial pedagogical partnership. I had unexpectedly entered into the role of a student consultant for my professor, Jay Lunden, after offering to help him with his course in whatever way I could. I was passionate about the subject, so I reached out because I knew him and trusted he would either accept and value my input or politely tell me he had everything under control. Luckily for me, he accepted my offer, and I initially helped him as an informed student might: “This topic is interesting and worth spending more time on”; “That was already covered in the introductory course.” I also did extra readings on my own and offered them as examples for his lectures. Within the first few classes, however, our partnership changed: Jay wanted to make the course more interactive, and we started emailing with ideas about how to teach class for the following week. Those emails turned into frequent meetings and Skype calls, which were the essence of our close collaboration on his course.

I reached out to Jay because I was interested in the subject of his course, and I ended up learning more about the topic than I ever thought possible. My final project for the course developed into grant proposals for fellowships and applications for graduate school. The evolution of our partnership into matters of teaching and learning also left me wanting to learn more about pedagogy and have a similar experience again. Because of him I hope to be a professor some

day, and I see my pedagogical partnerships as an opportunity to study teaching in a way current professors never could. I am able to think as both professor and student and, as I move from one role toward the other, hope to maintain this perspective and continue working in partnership with faculty and students.

Academic stimulation and a new interest in pedagogy were not the most important aspects of my time working with Jay, however. Instead, it was my personal development. Before I met Jay earlier in the semester, I was a student of poor habits. I would skip classes (“What’s the point in going if I know it already?”) and rarely spoke in class due to a confusing mix of frustration and social anxiety with my professors and peers. As other student consultants have reflected (Perez-Putnam, 2016), I might well have left Haverford College if not for my partnership with Jay. Our collaboration felt like the first real and meaningful thing that I did as a student because it deeply engaged me as nothing else had and it directly impacted others in the class. If students ever felt confused, frustrated, or disinterested, we would debrief after class to figure out why, and our pedagogical problem solving excited me and gave me confidence in the value of my insight. On the other hand, when one class “failed” in our eyes by leaving a student unprepared for a presentation, I felt the weight of responsibility just as much as Jay did. In short, my partnership with Jay made me care about my own and others’ lives and learning—something I carried into my partnership with Sara.

For Jay

My time with Jay was transformative and paved the way for my formal entry into the SaLT program. There I was partnered with Sara Grossman, another young and nurturing professor, as a student consultant with the same desire as before: to help however I could. The SaLT program provided structures and guidelines I had not had in my partnership with Jay. I sat in on Sara’s classes, taking notes on many aspects of her teaching and classroom environment. I met weekly with other student consultants and Alison Cook-Sather, the director of the SaLT program, to talk about how best to support faculty exploration and development. I had never before considered the impact of how a professor framed a question or phrased a response, but I became attuned to what Sara said and why, and I learned through the weekly meetings with other student consultants how to name and discuss those dimensions of teaching.

As I followed along with Sara’s lectures and slides, I saw how the pace and flow of her speaking was matched with text, visuals, and color. I watched her students get swept up in the space of her classroom and learn within the environment she carefully constructed. I found myself confronted with my own aspiration to be a professor: What would I say and do? How would I facilitate discussion or respond to a student? I had worked closely with Jay on a few aspects of teaching, but working in this way with Sara showed me that pedagogy encompasses something much larger than the content of a lecture or design of an activity. I am fascinated by the structure and dynamics of the student-teacher relationship as well as its extension to the department and college. Being a student consultant with Sara let me step outside the role of a student to observe these structures and consider how I might move through them over the course of my life.

My work with Sara also allowed me to look back at my time as a student and use my experiences to create an even better learning environment within her course. Sharing with faculty partners one's experiences in other classes is a common tool a student consultant brings to their partnership, but at one point in the semester Sara and I went beyond discussing practices in classrooms past. I have before experienced a period of illness that effectively removed me from many aspects of college life. By sharing my perspective about the challenges students in such situations face, I was able to help Sara navigate her first semester at Bryn Mawr, and in turn I became aware of the variety of challenges facing professors. Working closely with Sara as she joined the bi-college community made me feel as though I was re-joining it in a way, too.

Conclusion

When tasked with describing my role as a student consultant and what I have gained through pedagogical partnership, it is often easiest to point to the future I have constructed from Jay and Sara's influence. After Haverford, I hope to attend graduate school and then become a professor some day. From the SaLT program and my work with Sara, I started to appreciate the depth and complexity of teaching, and both of my pedagogical partners have served as role models as I begin to contemplate the kind of professor I hope to be. This future was only possible because my partnerships with Jay and Sara catalyzed my personal growth and, ultimately, inclusion in the campus community.

Now, as a student and person, I want to make this community better. After my partnership with Jay, I stopped skipping class and became engaged in my learning. After my time with Sara, I am aware of how professors impact their students as well as the reverse impact that teaching has on professors. With both partners, I have felt the worry of the teacher mirroring my former frustrations as a student, and I can no longer feel resentful when a professor tries and fails in class. I will always remember rare moments of failure with my faculty partners, and realize that every student and every professor also experiences small failures in their learning and teaching. Now, when I am sitting in class as a student and the lecture falters or discussion grows cold, I want to help my professor "rescue the class," just as I did with Sara and Jay. Outside of the student-teacher dynamic of the classroom, I also see how the structure of the college influences professors and students alike. I can make small contributions toward helping students and professors in class and hope that, in sharing my experiences, I can help the larger community as well.

Reference

Perez-Putnam, M. (2016). Belonging and brave space as hope for personal and institutional inclusion. *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education*, 18.
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