

# Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education

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Issue 26 Winter 2019

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## Carrying Partnership Skills Beyond Formal Partnerships: When Conflicts Grow into Connections

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### Recommended Citation

Mejia, Yeidaly "Carrying Partnership Skills Beyond Formal Partnerships: When Conflicts Grow into Connections," *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education*: Iss. 26 (2019), <https://repository.brynmawr.edu/tlthe/vol1/iss26/6>

## **CARRYING PARTNERSHIP SKILLS BEYOND FORMAL PARTNERSHIPS: WHEN CONFLICTS GROW INTO CONNECTIONS**

*Yeidaly Mejia, Bryn Mawr College, Class of 2019*

I have worked in pedagogical partnership with several different faculty members through the Students as Learners and Teachers (SaLT) program at Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges. Each partnership was different, but in each one I developed new skills for working across differences—of power, of identity, of pedagogical commitment. These skills included learning how to listen to faculty for what they wanted to accomplish in their classes and in their teaching and tailoring my feedback to those pedagogical goals. They also included learning how to clarify and find language to name what matters to me and to other students, as a person and as a learner, and to advocate for those things. Both of these skills require empathy for others and the courage to act on my own convictions. One of the most important things I have learned is that these do not need to be in conflict with one another.

In thinking of the ways I have grown and expanded my views through being a student consultant, I want to offer an example of a partnership that developed outside of the structure of the SaLT program and that showed me how far patience and empathy could take me. It also showed me that acting on my convictions could have positive outcomes for me and for other students as well as for the faculty member with whom I worked. In this essay I tell the story of how this partnership unfolded and how it became part of my development as a student as well as a pedagogical partner.

### **Conflict in Class**

In the fall of my junior year I had enrolled in a course that focused on socially and politically charged content. I walked into the course expecting to talk about contemporary political movements and how they have been inspired by older movements, hoping to specifically look at the relationship between Black Lives Matter and the Black Panther Party. To my surprise, that is not what happened. The class was instead focused on the theory of movements and how movements arise. In my time as a student consultant, I had been exposed to the ways that there can be a disconnect between what the students are hoping for in a course and what the faculty have in mind for their courses. This was extremely helpful in thinking of the ways to negotiate my wants and needs from the course.

This conflict of expectation also seemed to have a parallel in conflicts around whose contributions were valued in the class. As one of several women of color in the class, I brought particular lived experiences and intellectual interests that I wanted to explore. It felt like there was only room in the course for the “classic social movements.” As I spoke to other women of color in the course, we had felt like we were not being listened to in class. I remembered feeling this way before and that being one of my driving forces to join SaLT and start working with other student consultants and Alison Cook-Sather, director of the program. SaLT for me was a way to engage in dialogue and partnership with faculty members who were focused on many

aspects of building a course, one of them being how they could meet their students where they are at while teaching the course material that they felt they needed to get through to make the course worthwhile and successful. I had brought my concerns with the professor above to my student consultant meetings and got very helpful advice from other student consultants on what to do.

### **Taking on the Conflict**

Women of color who felt that our voices and ideas were deemed unimportant in this classroom met outside of the class to address what was happening. We demanded that our deans and the administration do something, and they contacted the professor with our concerns, since we had tried to bring up the concerns beforehand to what felt like no avail. The professor came to our next class meeting requesting feedback and asking us to rename and recall what had been traumatic events. My friends were shocked, and I ended up speaking for most of the class. Through being a student consultant, I had learned to feel comfortable engaging in dialogue with a faculty member and had learned how to use language that is less confrontational and more coming from a place of care and concern.

At the end of the conversation, I told the professor that I would be happy to talk to him outside of class and think of ways to rectify the harm we had experienced and how to be more harm reductive in the future. After I talked to the professor and let him know that I was willing to meet, I asked to meet with Alison. I was nervous about this meeting as this professor still had a hand in grading me for the course and there was no way the course could continue in the way that it had been going. Alison helped me come up with an action plan that included language to avoid using and questions to ask so I could truly come to the conversation with empathy. It can be easy to put our professors on a pedestal and expect them to know everything, but they are still just people like the rest of us. They have the capacity to truly mess up and also to learn from their mistakes.

When I met with the professor, I explained to the professor the moments where the women of color in the class had experienced harm. I wanted to make sure I had explicit examples to justify the concerns. In the times I had worked as a student partner, I always made sure to have concrete examples. My faculty partners appreciated these because they allowed us also to discuss how to avoid a similar situation in the future or how to replicate it if it was beneficial for the course. I expected the professor to be extremely defensive and push back on my claims. To my surprise...he was not defensive and he did not push back. When we met, he apologized and acknowledged the effects his actions had had. The work was not done, but this made me feel hopeful. He could acknowledge his role and was willing to do the work to unlearn some racial bias he had.

We made an action plan for how to carry on with class. We had both agreed that the discussions could be adapted to meet the needs/wants of the students and the learning objectives of the course through giving more space for students to discuss what they wanted to discuss. Along with adapting some of the discussions, he agreed to meet with Alison to discuss the rest of the

course and his syllabi for the next semester. Additionally, we had casual check-ins after class to see how class went and how the adjustments were working.

If it had not been for the SaLT program and being a student consultant, I do not believe I would have been comfortable even having the conversation in the classroom I describe above. I had always felt like professors were always right, and I never knew how to advocate for myself and other students in the course. As a student partner, I had learned how important my voice could be in a classroom. Additionally, I had gained the skills and language to speak with professors and address something that was not working well, while still empathizing with them. The weekly SaLT consultant meetings proved to be an intentional space where consultants could share what they were coming up against and with and receive and provide support to other consultants.

### **From Conflict to Connection**

In thinking about the ways the classroom dynamic might have shifted as a result of the dialogue I had with this professor, I believe there was more space made for the women of color to speak their ideas into the room without constantly being challenged. For our final projects, we were able to connect the “classic social movements” to contemporary social movements and were actually encouraged to do so.

At the end of the semester, the professor sent me an email thanking me for the work I had done and wanted to discuss the research project I had brought up once. We met the next semester, I told him about my thesis ideas, and he loved them. He sent me a load of resources and encouraged me to apply to write a senior thesis with him. I did, and he is now my thesis advisor. We have had conversations discussing where our relationship began and how much it has changed. I look forward to meeting with him weekly, and we have developed a really productive relationship.

Because of this experience, I have grown to think of everyone as in progress. Everyone has the capacity to learn and grow, and what matters is whether or not they want to put in the effort towards that growth. No one should be disposable or cancelled. I learned through my work with this professor that when I draw on my skills of listening, productively challenging, thoughtfully supporting, and sharing my own insights, that it is possible to bridge divides that I assumed were unbridgeable.