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STRIVING TO MAKE FRENCH AND FRANCOPHONE STUDIES MORE INCLUSIVE

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During the Spring 2019 semester, I worked with a student consultant, Carol Lee Diallo, through the Students as Learners and Teachers (SaLT) program at Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges. This collaboration was linked to my participation in a faculty pedagogy seminar supported by a grant from the Lumina Foundation. In both the partnership with Carol Lee and the pedagogy seminar, my goal was to explore inclusivity in the experiences of students in my courses in French and Francophone Studies at Haverford College. Because an external review committee had recently completed its review of our department, my colleagues and I were working through its findings and recommendations and discussing potential changes to our curriculum. I saw this as an opportunity to gather students' perceptions of the department and seek their input on course offerings, materials, and programming as they move through the curriculum at Haverford and Bryn Mawr.

As Carol Lee and I prepared to develop a survey for all students currently enrolled in French courses across the Bi-Co, she posed to me the following questions, which helped me rethink some of my teaching practices and also interactions with students outside the classroom:

What are the perspectives and experiences of this generation of students? What kind of culture is present in the Tri-Co [consortium: Bryn Mawr, Haverford, and Swarthmore Colleges], and how does that impact the classroom environment? Currently, there is a strong social justice culture, so students are constantly thinking critically about identity and how institutions are or are not accommodating the diverse positionalities of students. This is the kind of mindset many students have when they come into the classroom. How do students identify? And how can we include those identities in the classroom?

Keeping these kinds of questions in mind, Carol Lee and I devised a series of survey questions, had the survey reviewed and approved by the department, and then submitted it to students for their input. Our questions were largely open and balanced so as to allow equally open feedback, and we included questions on the classroom experience so we could better understand their experiences in regards to accessibility and inclusivity. Among the questions we included were:

- What has been your experience in the French classroom?
- What could the department do to make you more excited to engage with the French language and French-speaking culture?
- Do courses in French and Francophone Studies invite you to continue studies in the department? How so or how not?

With almost 100 students responding to the survey, individual faculty members could interpret students' responses and any patterns as they considered their own pedagogies and relationships with students, and the department as a whole could reflect upon the self-study and the students' perspectives as we made changes to the curriculum and to programming.

While I thought the student feedback forms would be informative, I still wondered if they might offer more generalized or superficial information, especially for the students with whom I was most interested in connecting. Instead, I found that students appreciated this initial written contact, and overall, their responses offered me a great deal of understanding into their learning practices and their identity as a student at Haverford. Particularly important were the insights they offered regarding the very intersection of identity and language study. Carol Lee and I had discussed how certain aspects of a student's inability to participate in class may stem from the identities they hold because they might not feel welcome or included in the space. Those students could feel the classroom space as competitive, or that their knowledge or skillset is not valued in the space. I wanted to ensure that transgender and non-binary students as well as international and heritage speakers were getting the most from my classes. Here, the observations of a student consultant were invaluable, as Carol Lee suggests that sometimes a simple gesture can make a major impact:

Even though French is a gendered language, there are ways to speak to people without gendering them. Using their name instead of a pronoun, for example, or even making students aware that gender-neutral pronouns and inclusive language is emerging in French, too. Knowing about more inclusive pronouns is important so students who don't identify with gendered pronouns can still fully participate and engage in class – and feel respected and recognized!

Because heritage speakers and international students should not feel pressure to perform or share experience based on their cultural backgrounds, Carol Lee suggested reaching out to these students in advance. She argued that: “The classroom should create opportunities for them to participate if they want to.” Because such an important component of first- and second-year language courses is communication and getting to know one another while also exploring global cultures, I make it a point to touch base with heritage speakers of French and international students in the first weeks of class to ask if they would feel comfortable sharing cultural experiences that might help students learn more about francophone countries and global cultures. I strive to leverage the knowledge and experiences of all students to benefit our class dynamic; my exchanges with Carol Lee have inspired me to be attentive, conscientious, and respectful while doing so.

At the end of the semester, Carol Lee and I agreed that our work learning about students had helped us to become more aware of building trust in the classroom, which is especially valuable in the language classroom. As she put it, “In a language classroom, students have no choice but to be vulnerable because there are so many ways to ‘make mistakes.’” These comments touch on a critical aspect of my language teaching: welcoming vulnerability and reducing stress in the classroom. In addition to the student survey and the subsequent departmental reflections, Carol Lee and I devised a few techniques to help establish trust. First, at the start of the semester, distribute a quick survey on a notecard about students' previous experiences with French, and then use mid-semester feedback to get a sense of the classroom environment after the semester is under way. These techniques open and sustain dialogue with students about their learning, inviting them into a form of partnership like the one Carol Lee and I had through our collaboration.

Student Partner's Perspective: *Carol Lee Diallo, Haverford College '19*

Through my work with the SaLT program, I have come to realize the immense value of creating intentional and meaningful collaborations between students and professors. Before participating in this program, I had a very traditional understanding of teacher-student interactions. I felt that student voices carried little weight in the classroom, and I believed that students were not invited to actively co-create the classroom environment. It was only through engaging in open dialogue with faculty about issues of diversity and inclusion that I realized how my perspective and insight as a student could be used as a tool to develop more inclusive pedagogy and practices.

My partnership with Professor Corbin focused specifically on how to make the French Department more inclusive for a diversity of students. The main goal of the partnership was to develop strategies and practices that would allow students with marginalized identities to feel more able to engage with the French language, and the French department. Through the survey we developed, I had the opportunity to think about the various aspects of student identity that inform the experience of learning French. In our partnership, we considered how factors such as cultural/linguistic identity, class year (first year, sophomore, etc.) and socioeconomic status made students feel invited or discouraged to continue to study French. The conversations I had with Professor Corbin and other faculty in the department challenged us all to reflect on how our roles and perspectives as students/educators can promote or hinder feelings of inclusion and engagement in the classroom.

The structure of the SaLT program allows professors and students to “translate” their experiences for one another—it gives each person an opportunity to explain their thinking and intention. This engaged process creates space for students and professors to expand their understandings of student-teacher interactions by challenging the assumptions they make in the classroom. Student-teacher partnerships foster open, reflective, and collaborative environments in which educators and students can highlight their own strengths and successes, while also work through the challenges and vulnerabilities of the teaching/learning process. I was truly moved by how positively my faculty partners responded to my feedback, and how willing they were to put our proposed strategies into practice. This program serves as living proof of the fact that when these kinds of partnerships exist—when there are open and intentional lines of communication between educators and students—we all learn (and teach) better.