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QUALITY OF ATTENTION: THOUGHTFULNESS, AFFIRMATION, AND ACTIVE LISTENING IN PARTNERSHIP

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In the Fall of 2019, I delved into pedagogical partnership theory and practice by engaging in an independent study and participating as a student consultant in the Students as Teachers and Learners (SaLT) program at Haverford and Bryn Mawr Colleges. I was paired with a new faculty member in the natural sciences at Haverford College, and every week I observed her class and met with her to discuss my observations and whatever else she wanted to talk about.

Additionally, I read scholarship on partnership and wrote weekly reflections that linked my experience in that pedagogical partnership with the scholarship that I read. With my engagement in both the independent study and the pedagogical partnership, I was consistently immersed in partnership work throughout the semester, which led to a lot of reflection about the experience. Through my reflection, three themes surfaced that clarified for me some of the premises and practices of partnership: a) being thoughtful about thoughtfulness, b) the role of affirmations in partnership, and c) active listening in partnership. All of these themes relate to the various qualities of attention present and necessary in partnership. These insights about attention not only illuminate aspects of work in a pedagogical partnership, but they also contribute to my capacity to engage with people, inside and outside of the partnership framework.

Being Thoughtful about Thoughtfulness

The structure of being a student consultant at Haverford and Bryn Mawr Colleges includes weekly student-consultant meetings where the program director, Alison Cook-Sather, prompts us to reflect upon and discuss our experiences as student consultants. In these meetings during the Fall-2019 semester when I participated, we sometimes talked about how partnership work involves a lot of being thoughtful about thoughtfulness. I consistently grabbed onto this idea in our meetings because it gave me an entry point into analyzing how complex attention can be. We discussed how being thoughtful about thoughtfulness is similar to, but also different from, the concept of “thinking about thinking” -- or metacognition. Ken Bain, in *What the Best College Teachers Do*, details the importance of teachers being able to think metacognitively about their own work. Teachers are experts in their fields, but in order to be able to teach students about this knowledge, they have to be aware of how to break down concepts that seem simple to them, but are likely complex for their students. Being aware of the need for metacognition is important in partnership work, not only for faculty but also for student partners. But, as we discussed in our student-consultant meetings, being thoughtful about thoughtfulness seems like more of an accurate way to frame the metacognitive work taking place in the partnership.

One of the main reasons that using the language of thoughtfulness rather than just thinking seems more apt when framing partnership work is that partnership work is very personal and emotionally charged. A lot of partnership work is an exercise in relationship-building between the student consultant and the faculty partner. Because of the one-on-one nature of the partnership in the SaLT program, it is imperative that both parties are especially thoughtful about how they are navigating the spaces that they create together. As a student consultant, I can't only be thinking about the ways that I am processing my observations in the classroom. Rather, I need to take this practice a step further. I have to be thoughtful about how the ways that what I am observing are going to impact the students in the classroom and my faculty partner. I have to be thoughtful about the ways that I articulate both my affirmations and my ideas for change. This again relates back to the emotional nature of partnership work, as I need to not only make sure that what I am saying is meaningful and accurate, but I also have to frame my suggestions and affirmations with the emotions and well-being of my faculty partner in mind.

In “‘It Depends’: Exploring the Context-Dependent Nature of Students As Partners’ Practices and Policies” Mick Healey and Ruth L. Healey (2018) don't specifically mention the idea of thoughtfulness, but they do write about the importance of understanding the impact of emotions on student-faculty partnerships. They argue that emotions influence the motivations, attitudes, and behaviors of the partners, and that we can't fully understand or explain these facets of partnerships without thinking about the emotions of the partners. I appreciate this idea of centering the role of emotions in partnership because it emphasizes how emotionally charged partnership work can be. While there are plenty of ways to give advice or general guidelines for partnerships, acknowledging how context dependent each partnership is illuminates the importance of recognizing the emotions and needs of those involved in pedagogical partnerships. In moving towards framing partnership work as a relationship-centered exercise, being aware of the emotional needs of the involved partners becomes a central part of the work.

Being thoughtful about thoughtfulness encompasses more of the metacognition that takes place in partnership work because it also incorporates the importance of reading and attending to emotions in the process. Student consultants need to communicate their ideas very thoughtfully to their faculty partners because their faculty partners are in a new and vulnerable position of being observed and having their practice analyzed by a student. To build a trusting relationship with their faculty partners, which is key in being able to have deep pedagogical discussions, it is necessary that student consultants are thoughtful about the ways that they are engaging with their work, rather than just thinking about the ways that they are conceiving of the work.

The Role of Affirmation in Partnership

In considering ways in which the various facets of attention in partnership can be taken from the abstract form of thoughtfulness to more concrete examples, I am going to analyze the role of affirmations in partnership. Affirmation is clearly emphasized in the student-consultant guidelines and in our early weekly student-consultant meetings to ensure that student consultants know to share their positive feedback with their faculty partners in addition to their constructively critical feedback. In their research, Cook-Sather et. al (2018) illuminate the ways that the use of positive psychology techniques by student consultants in pedagogical partnerships, such as affirmations and the encouragement of strengths-based growth, help partners strengthen both their relationship and their pedagogical commitments. Specifically with regards to affirmations, the researchers used a collaborative auto-ethnographic research method to highlight how specific partnerships have benefitted from the student consultant intentionally sharing affirmations with their faculty partner. In these case studies, the student consultant focus on affirming their partners first and foremost created a space of trust and confidence for both partners. The affirmations also provided structure for the faculty members to explore their own pedagogical beliefs and deeply explore why they are committed to certain practices. In turn, the faculty member learned from articulating these beliefs to their student consultant and even their students in some cases.

In a student-consultant meeting early in the semester during the Fall-2019 semester we addressed this same need to intentionally give affirmations to our faculty partners in person, rather than just talking about affirmations in meetings or reflecting about them to ourselves. Giving affirmations not only validates the faculty partner's strengths in their teaching and pedagogy, but, as the above research demonstrates, it also helps build a trusting relationship between the student consultant and the faculty member. However, I quickly came to realize that the affirmations that I was giving my faculty partner did not have much depth or substance to them, as they mostly consisted of value judgements about an activity or a moment in class. As the semester progressed, I came to see affirmations as giving specific positive feedback that is tied to reasoning about teaching and/or learning, rather than just giving empty and vague praise to fill up space. As I explain below, I found that the affirmation didn't have to be related directly to pedagogy, but it needed be related to how I would imagine myself succeeding as a student in the class or how I observed other students responding to the teaching.

With practice during the semester, I found myself improving at giving affirmations. In the beginning, I had to focus on developing a language around positive feedback. I had to develop a language beyond just saying "this activity was great" or "this is a good way to engage students." I learned how to take out words such as "good" and "great," which we had talked about in our student-consultant meetings as value judgements that we need to try to avoid in our observations of our faculty partners. I found it to be more difficult than I had anticipated to replace value

judgments in my notes with deeper explanations for my comments. Why did I think the activity was great? What about the activity was good for engaging students? In learning to ask myself these questions and develop a language beyond value judgments for affirmations, I think my conversations with my faculty partner became much deeper and more engaged. Instead of saying, “The group activity went really well today,” I was able to say, “The students seemed really engaged in the group activity today. I think part of the reason that the students were so animated and asking so many questions to their peers was because they had the opportunity to share their answers on the white board when they were done with their work. The students seem to be excited by the chance to get out of their seats and write on the board together in groups.”

In reflecting back on this growth in my understanding of affirmations, I appreciate how much more elaborated my conversations were with my faculty partner once I started to move beyond value judgments. There is so much more content to be discovered when you move past saying that an activity was “great.” I was able to share with my faculty partner the particular activities that engaged students and why. In this one affirmation of the group work that they did in class, I was able to point out how group work and peer-learning in class seem to really engage and excite the students. I was only able to settle on this point once I developed a language of affirmation beyond value judgments by prompting myself with questions about why I thought something that I was observing was effective or why I thought it could be more effective.

Not only did I have to push myself to develop a new language around affirmation, I also had to expand my attention while I was observing the class and gathering my thoughts to share with my faculty partner. As I learned to ask myself questions while I was observing, I suddenly had to pay attention to more parts of the classroom at once. It wasn’t enough to have a positive feeling lingering after an activity and conclude that the activity went well. I had to focus on more parts of the classroom—such as student engagement with their peers, mobility in the classroom, volume and level of general engagement, activity form, etc. While it might seem obvious to focus on all of these parts of the classroom experience, they are all happening simultaneously and have to be observed in depth. Through pushing myself to give deep affirmations, I learned not only to be specific with my language, but also to focus on multiple aspects of the classroom at once. I believe that my engagement with my faculty partner became much more meaningful as I developed these skills that allowed me to give her specific affirmations that related to multiple parts of the classroom experience.

Active Listening in Partnership

My growth in giving affirmations, and therefore in creating an engaging space for discussion with my faculty partner, happened over the course of the semester. Part of what makes the SaLT program so effective is that it is structured as a semester-long collaboration. Because of this

framework, the partnership also importantly allows for sustained listening over time. And not only does partnership consist of sustained listening over time, but it also needs to include active listening to make sure that the members of the partnership are taking into account what the other partner is saying. The work in a pedagogical partnership, when boiled down to its simplest parts, is basically a semester-long conversation between a student consultant and a faculty partner. Of course, in reality, it is more complicated than that, as the partnership incorporates student input as well as input at the department and other levels. However, these additional layers only emphasize how important a role listening takes in partnerships, as the student consultant and the faculty partner need to listen and respond to the ideas not only of each other, but also of the students in the class and other faculty/ administrators.

The literature about partnership addresses how sustained conversation and listening over time is a key element that makes partnership work meaningful. In “Five Things I Learned from Working with the Student-Consultant for Teaching and Learning Program,” faculty partner Morgan Luther and student consultant Benjamin Morris reflected on what they learned working together in a pedagogical partnership at Reed College. One of the key takeaways for Luther from the semester was that “feedback is helpful.” While this seems like a rather simple takeaway, it highlights the importance of sustained and active listening over the course of a partnership. Both Luther and Morris attribute the meaningful substance of the content they discussed to the consistency in giving and receiving feedback. While end-of-semester feedback serves as a way to listen to student input, the feedback is confined to one moment in time. Instead, partnership provides the structure for consistent feedback throughout the semester. Luther and Morris demonstrate how in this context, listening takes many forms. The student consultant observes, and therefore listens and engages with, a class period each week. Additionally, as Morris noted in his reflection, the student consultant meets with the faculty partner weekly with knowledge about how the faculty partner has taught in the past and is currently thinking about teaching in the future. This sustained listening over time provides both the student consultant and the faculty partner with the ability to collaborate over time, and therefore, deeply listen to each other to make the feedback that they discuss truly helpful and meaningful.

In my experience as a student consultant during the Fall-2019 semester, I found that a lot of my role consisted of listening. I listened to my faculty partner debrief me at the start of each of our weekly meetings about how she thought class went that day, what she was excited about from the week’s pedagogy seminar in which she was participating simultaneously, and what she had planned for the rest of the classes that week. Only after first hearing all of her thoughts and ideas would I respond to her based on what I had observed in class that day and what I heard her say in her debriefing. This is where the idea of active listening comes into play because in order to respond immediately to all that my faculty partner said, I had to be actively listening, taking notes, and coming up with immediate responses. As with developing a language for affirmations, the process of active listening was a skill that I built throughout the semester. It was actually relatively difficult to hear my faculty partner tell me all of her ideas for the week and expect me

to respond immediately after she finished speaking. Throughout my time working with my faculty partner, I developed active listening skills so I could be engaged with what she was telling me while also coming up with responses and ideas of my own. In this way, pedagogical partnerships are very dynamic and engaging, because we are in this role of constantly absorbing the other person's thoughts while having to come up with our own thoughts about them. This is very different from the traditional student-professor relationship because the listening is often less active. The student might be passively taking notes on what the professor is lecturing about. Or, the student might be seeking advice from a professor about a paper topic in office hours and passively listening to the thoughts of the professor. In the case of a pedagogical partnership, the student consultant is playing a much more active role than they are used to, and that is part of what makes this work so radical and dynamic.

Another important part of listening in partnership work, which I mentioned above briefly, is that the active listening is sustained over time. There are so few opportunities in which students and professors, or really people in general, have a structured framework for engaging with each other's thoughts and ideas over a long period of time. Part of why I think this work is so generative is that both the student consultant and the faculty partner are engrossed in this work for an entire semester. Both parties integrate partnership work into their weekly schedules and, as a result, these conversations and opportunities for active listening consistently occur over the semester. The consistency in this work structures the opportunity for relationship building and sustained interest for both the student consultant and the faculty partner. Week to week, the ideas build off of one another until the student consultant and faculty partner reach deep levels of thinking about important pedagogical questions such as inclusion and access in the classroom, student understanding, and many other topics. This environment where productive and important conversations take place, I believe, is built in part because of the opportunity for sustained active listening throughout the semester. Active listening in partnership is situated within the concept of "attention" as listening is a key part of attention. It illuminates many ways that both student consultants and faculty partners have to attend to the ideas of the other member of the partnership while also ensuring that they continue to discuss topics that are meaningful to them.

Concluding Thoughts

All three of these examples highlighting the importance of the quality of attention in pedagogical partnership work illuminate what makes this work so meaningful and radical. In learning to value thoughtfulness in engagement as a student consultant, the student-consultant can build trusting relationships with their faculty partner by taking into account the emotional needs of the members of the partnership, as well as the best ways to represent all of what the student consultant is observing and discussing. In being thoughtful, the student consultant must attend to many different parties and parts of the classroom at once, and this makes room for meaningful

engagement with a variety of issues. In learning to develop a language for meaningful affirmation, the student consultant is working to develop an environment of trust in which the faculty partner feels valued and has the feedback to engage in substantive conversation about teaching and learning. And, in understanding the vital role of active listening in pedagogical partnerships, the members of the partnership are able to actively engage with crucial topics such as access and inclusion because they are intentionally continuing conversations over time and co-creating a space of engagement. These three types of attention are all built into the framework of a partnership, but it takes time and intentionality for thoughtfulness, genuine affirmation, and active listening to develop into meaningful conversation throughout the semester. As I grew into the role of a student consultant over the course of a semester, I learned that these attention skills will help me enter any relationship or conversational context with the understanding that I need to be constantly doing my part to make trusting, thoughtful, and engaged spaces for learning.