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## **SUPPORT SYSTEMS AND TRANSGRESSIVE HIERARCHIES: INSIGHTS WE GAINED THROUGH THE TRANSITION ONLINE WHILE PLANNING FOR PEDAGOGICAL PARTNERSHIP**

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### **Introduction**

In December 2019, we began working to implement a Student-Faculty Partnership program at Tufts University in Medford, MA. Seeking administrative guidance, we connected with Annie Soisson, the Director of Tufts' Center for Enhancement in Learning and Teaching. When COVID-19 forced us to leave campus on March 13, 2020, the three of us were writing a grant to secure seed funding for a pilot of our Pedagogical Partnership Program (P3). We all felt strongly about the benefits of student-faculty partnerships, regardless of whether they support online or in-person teaching. Since our program is still in the development stage, we are in the extraordinary position of reimagining the program to fit the rapidly changing online classroom that was implemented during a one-week spring break. Our program had the capacity to grow out of the needs of improving and optimizing this new higher education landscape that had vastly accelerated a transition to online and future hybrid learning models.

As our leadership group reconvened, we were each experiencing disruption, dislocation, and the new challenges of launching this program. There was an adjustment period at the beginning as we all struggled to rebalance and structure our now-isolated lives. Since the start of this project, Jillian had been working remotely, Facetimeing into meetings. With her full-time internship cancelled, she was very grateful for the potential purpose and goals of the P3 project. For Langley, separation from the physical campus compounded the loss of momentum and the motivation she'd felt when meeting with professors on campus.

We focused on strengthening our relationships with each other as we discussed whether and how to recommit to bringing the Pedagogical Partnership Program to reality. As our weekly Zoom meetings continued, we fell into a more comfortable and less formal rapport. We spent more time at the beginning of each meeting checking in, talking about headlines that had caught our attention, board games our families were loving, and things we were learning. Acknowledging the massive impacts of COVID-19 around us and in us was a baseline and microcosm for proceeding with and lending context to our renewed mission for Pedagogical Partnership. In this essay, we share the specific ways in which the two of us experienced this movement forward.

### **Jillian Impastato: The Role of Support Systems during Transitions**

The transition to online learning is not unlike other transitions that college students undergo. Transitions in college, both their processes and products, are an essential part of the "college experience." In "Troubling transitions: Re-thinking dominant narratives surrounding students' educational transitions," Karen Gravett (2020) speaks about the supposed linearity of the

transition to college that is enculturated into the student body through language and structured events like “welcome week” or the “freshman experience.” Gravett goes on to discuss how the COVID-19 pandemic further sheds light on the inadequacies of a linear model of college transition:

Key implications will be a need for institutions to offer support beyond the initial stage conventionally termed transition, as well as to seek to depart from approaches that construct students as experiencing a homogeneous ‘student experience’, or as experiencing a transition period that should necessarily be managed, smoothed and eased at all. Rather, considering how we can share an understanding of the inevitable challenges and difficulties inherent within learning, and the ongoing nature of change and becoming may be more useful, particularly in our troubling times where we might conclude we are now always experiencing a period of transition, or becoming. (Gravett, 2020)

Before this semester, my hardest and most fruitful transition in college was the first two weeks of college known as “pre-Orientation” and “Orientation Week.” At Tufts University, I participated in a community service-based pre-Orientation program called FOCUS. As I finished the five-day program, I truly felt bonded with my two upperclassmen leaders and the other seven first-years in my group. We spent long days participating in service and long nights sleeping on a church basement floor bonding over silly icebreakers. After pre-Orientation ended, my FOCUS group had weekly reunion dinners on Sunday nights. This built-in support structure was incredibly helpful, because I always knew that I would be starting the week by spending intentional time with people that I had been through something significant with. Additionally, this support system helped through a multitude of transitions throughout my college career, through roommate problems and making friends to choosing a major and mourning the loss of a family member. With three years of college under my belt, I am now able to reflect on this experience and compare it to other transitions.

I am now able to see that although I felt this bond with the other first-years in my group, because we had all been through something together and were heading into the same situation and environment, I was completely overlooking the fact that we were all bringing very different baggage to our unique college experiences. Shared experience can bring people together and lay the important groundwork for community, but it is important not to overshadow the discrepancies in our experiences. This same tension between bonding over shared experiences and concerns about pushing discrepancies under the rug was definitely present in my transition to working remotely on P3 this semester.

As Langley, Annie, and my work transitioned completely online, I immediately felt a sense of bonding over similar circumstances not just to this trio, but also to the larger population of college students having their semester interrupted. In our weekly meetings, Langley, Annie, and I discussed the peculiar dynamics of having our entire families home and working or how we have come to appreciate our natural surroundings on daily walks. This sense of “going through something together” was definitely akin to my experience with FOCUS, but there was also the equivalent problem with overlooking the diversity of experiences.

My team of three, all with similar quarantine experiences, were creating this plan for the future based upon our limited experiences! Yes, almost everyone's quality of life and plans for the future were impacted in a negative way by COVID-19, but the extent to which that was the case could be wildly different. As far as I was aware of, my team of three's immediate worries were limited to hoping that our Wi-Fi would be strong enough each day and that we wouldn't butt heads with family members. In both my experience as a first-year student and my experience currently as a P3 program developer, it is essential that I consider the diversity of student experiences. Now, the student body's relationships with technology and differences in resources should always be at the forefront of my mind. My experience with transitions during COVID-19 has not only made me further understand the intersecting and complex identities of my community members within the hierarchies of higher education, but also harkens back to Gravett's ideas about linearity. Besides the extent to which a student's material/physical reality can change week to week, students' emotional experiences of the pandemic can drastically vary.

The presence of reasonable hurdles during my transition to college life actually seemed to make my later successes in college even sweeter, so I hold a bit of hope for something similar for whatever my academic and personal transitions may be post-COVID-19. The biggest thing that made both my transition to college and my transition to new quarantine life easier is the existence of a support system and structures in place. Whether it be through FOCUS reunion dinners in the dining halls, or my P3 trio's Zoom calls where I get to continually work towards a common goal, I will try to recreate these support systems and structures for myself and others. While acknowledging the strengths of common experiences, I will also strengthen my self-awareness and will recognize my blind spots. In summary, my goals are twofold: to further realize the power of bonding over similarities of identity and of experience as well as an essential increased awareness and support of differences. How? Well, I don't have the complete answer, but centering student voices through partnership programs is one component of the solution.

### **Langley Topper: Zoom and Transgressive Hierarchies**

For me, the transition to online learning revealed the value of authentic check-ins gave me a more holistic view of professors' multifaceted and complex lives, and highlighted the importance of synchronistic class meetings to build solidarity and community. The transition to online learning shifted the power and empathy dynamic between students and professors.

Two of my courses chose to meet synchronously on Zoom, one with 20 students and the other with nine. Before COVID-19, my relationship with professors had been formal and polite. I've felt questions like "How are you doing?" were simply icebreakers, more rhetorical than genuine, to be answered with standard responses. However, during this time of rapid change, my professors introduced periodic check-ins at the beginning of classes, something that we had not done much during in-person classes, or at least not in a regular, structured way. Initially, I found check-ins to be a waste of valuable class time, but they quickly became an essential part of building class community. The student check-in responses were more thoughtful and truthful than the passive responses offered in person. Because the check-ins were mutual, I also understood my professor's situation more than before. In my future faculty partnerships I want to emphasize the importance of establishing a strong class community through unstructured small

talk. *Chit chat* builds rapport, which in turn builds trust, which in turn contributes to a strong learning environment. Student-faculty partnerships can set community building within the classroom as an explicit goal and identify strategies and indicators to measure achievement.

There is a vulnerability that comes with seeing inside a person's living room or hearing them talk with their child who interrupts a Zoom lecture with a question about long division. The professor is no longer standing in front of a classroom; we are all just the same size boxes on a screen. All of us, students and professors, were more aware of the common and individual challenges we were experiencing. Applying this insight to my thinking about pedagogical partnership, I see that, as a student partner, I am a second pair of eyes and ears and can alert professors to students whose behavior or engagement changes and bring additional awareness of the need to monitor student mental health and well-being.

Initially, although online discussions lacked the natural flow they have in the classroom, in certain ways the quality of discussions improved. Often during in-person discussions students direct comments at the professor, rather than at their classmates. Discussions bounce from student to professor to student and then back to the professor. On Zoom, students have a gallery view of their classmates, so it feels like they are speaking to their classmates instead of the professor. Zoom better allows professors to take a step back from the discussion and encourage students to speak to one another. Again thinking about how this insight can inform planning for pedagogical partnership, I want to find concrete ways to help my faculty partners facilitate peer-level discussions into my next partnership, whether that is online or in person.

Online learning challenged my confidence as a student. I was frustrated by my inability to replicate my on-campus levels of productivity and peer engagement. Under normal circumstances, I lean on the support structure of classmates to reflect on an in-class discussion, ask a clarifying question about a homework assignment, or brainstorm ideas for an essay. When I am seeing classmates face-to-face, those are easy exchanges; however, it was difficult to call a classmate and ask the same things. Synchronous classes, as opposed to asynchronous classes, offered me the opportunity to ask my professors and classmates questions since we were focused on the same thing at the same time. Synchronous online classes created solidarity among classmates and accountability to maintain a structured schedule by having frequent meetings and dedicated time. For me, that resulted in a better quality work experience and better work product. The transition to online learning reinforced that respectful and caring relationships are, and always will be, the basis of a holistic education. Online and distance learning will be strongest when it can provide structure and support for the essential social, participatory, and engaged learning style of students.

### **Concluding: Now What?**

During this time of social isolation, the need for supportive partnerships is all the more important. The relationship between ourselves and Annie Soisson was drastically altered but ultimately strengthened by this online transition. A partnership has developed through this project, but also a friendship. Neither of us has experienced this degree of connectedness with a faculty member before. Through our dynamic and evolving partnership, we have found a

renewed outlook on our larger educational philosophy. We fortified our understanding of students not as empty vessels for knowledge, but rather as an entangled network of similarities and differences. We were working as a team of three complete and unique individuals, not just two undergraduates and a faculty member. This was the key to the strength and the efficiency of our program.

Partnership is not something easily put into boxes; rather, it often has a sort of interconnected growth. Our partnership has expanded to include not only Annie, but also an advisory team at Tufts and many experts across the field. The development of the Tufts program has been aided tremendously by the support of Dr. Alison Cook-Sather and by connections with the student-faculty partnership programs at other colleges and universities. We have been surprised by the openness and enthusiasm with which others have offered their advice and encouragement. Early into the transition to online learning, we had the pleasure of joining a conference call with student partners at nine different universities. Centering partnerships as the focus of this program has brought us so much support in starting Tufts Pedagogical Partnership Program (P3) and in the transition to online learning.

From these meetings, quick check-ins, countless hours of reflecting, and this overall multifaceted growth that we have experienced, we have come up with some key strategies. In any partnership there is initial awkwardness as all parties begin to develop trust and an understanding of individual responsibilities. We have found that there are a number of artificial structures you can use at the beginning of a partnership to cultivate a trusting and organic partnership later on. We prioritized regular meetings even if we didn't have a long agenda of things to discuss and prioritized check-ins even at the beginning of busy meetings. Between us, our partnership does not have clearly delineated responsibilities. We each have specific strengths and skills, but do not have many clear work zones. It is very much a co-working relationship that is hinged on strong communication. Particularly at the beginning of our partnership we would call after every meeting to reflect first on the content of the meeting, but second on our interactions with one another. This is how we faced the challenges of shared workloads head-on and made it so we all felt like everyone was sufficiently pulling their weight. Clear communication and transparency as we navigated the challenges of a shared workload of a partnership are essential. Of course, we are still finishing up the development of P3 and are just now embarking on our own first student-faculty partnerships for this summer, so we are excited to put these strategies to the test and add more to our pedagogical toolbox.

By centering partnership between students and professors we hope to see the centering of student voices as a continuing trend in a "post-COVID-19" world that supports it in becoming a sustainably permanent component of higher education.

## **Reference**

Gravett, K. (2020, April 9). Troubling transitions: Re-thinking dominant narratives surrounding students' educational transitions. The Society for Research into Higher Education (blog). <https://srheblog.com/2020/04/09/troubling-transitions-re-thinking-dominant-narratives-surrounding-students-educational-transitions/>.