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PARTNERING TO BUILD RESPONSIVE LEARNING COMMUNITIES THAT SUPPORT STUDENTS IN CRISIS

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Introduction

We began our work together in the Fall-2019 semester through the Students as Learners and Teachers (SaLT) program. SaLT supports student-centered pedagogy and multiple avenues for new faculty support and development at Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges. Kate, a recently graduated education independent major at Bryn Mawr, was paired through this program with Adam, an immunologist and new faculty member in the Biology Department at Bryn Mawr. We focused our partnership work in the Fall-2019 semester on an immunology laboratory Adam was leading, and we continued our work into the Spring-2020 semester in the context of Adam's seminar on drug discovery. In both semesters our partnership included weekly meetings in which we explored how Adam might create a welcoming and productively challenging classroom — a goal that had to be re-contextualized when we made the transition to remote teaching and learning.

In this essay we alternate perspectives to share the story of how our spring partnership work endeavored to build responsive learning communities for students in crisis. Specifically, we address the importance of reckoning with white supremacy as a broader context for pedagogical partnership; note key aspects of our partnership (cross-disciplinary collaboration and trust building) that created a foundation for our work; suggest that partnership enabled a nimble, student-centered transition during a time of crisis; reflect on how day-to-day interactions mask weaknesses in inclusivity; review foundational elements of our partnership illuminated in time of crisis; and comment on roles for partnership in sustaining trauma-informed learning spaces moving forward. We conclude with some final reflections on how our partnership work changed us as learners and teachers.

Reckoning with white supremacy as a broader context for pedagogical partnership

Kate: When Adam and I began our work together this spring, and even when we received in April the call for essays to be included in this special issue of *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education*, it was in the context of a vastly different world than the one we are currently living in. Looking back at this partnership, I recognize the role the dramatic shift from in-person to remote learning had in illuminating structural problems and inequities in higher education, as well as the possibilities that such a partnership holds for conceptualizing and putting into action concrete ways to address and actively work against the omnipresent white supremacy in higher education and moving us towards a commitment to anti-racist pedagogy. To convey how we strove to realize those possibilities, I reflect on the key aspects of our partnership and the pervasive inequities in higher education illuminated by the sudden shift to online

learning this spring, and I share key takeaways of doing this work as a student and future educator.

Adam: During this critical time when a reckoning with white supremacy in higher education and research must lead to real change I think there are elements of our partnership that will help me continue to grow as the teacher and mentor I want to be. To complement Kate's reflections, I focus on the key aspects of our partnership, illuminated during a rapid shift to remote teaching this spring, that are helping me move towards building sustainable, inclusive learning and research spaces that better reflect my values as an educator and human being.

Key aspects of our partnership: Cross-disciplinary collaboration and trust building

Adam: Kate's academic expertise is in education, and I'm a biologist. I think the fact that our partnership crossed disciplines is important. For me, the conceptual level of our weekly conversations was elevated because the course content itself was not our focus. In the fall, we had the opportunity to think together about how to create a welcoming and productively challenging classroom in a face-to-face context that we never imagined would cease to be the norm. Because we had done this work together and built a solid foundation of trust and an effective approach to collaboration, in the spring we were able to re-engage our existing partnership to facilitate a transition during times of crisis.

Kate: I joined the SaLT program right before the Fall-2019 semester began, not quite knowing what to expect from the experience. I least expected to be paired with an immunologist to consult on a 300-level biology course and, later, biology thesis work. As an education major, one who took Introduction to Psychology as her science credit freshman year and still to this day has nightmares about her ninth grade science class, I began this work with extremely low confidence in my ability to meaningfully contribute to anything relating to STEM. I never expected that I would be asked to stay on with Adam for the spring semester or to have received such positive feedback on my work. One of my main takeaways from this experience has been the importance of cross-disciplinary work, transcending disciplines and fields to collaborate on improving pedagogy, and moving out of comfort zones. Adam and I were able to work through this new space and grow together, which not only was an incredibly powerful experience for both of us, but also grew to represent the collaborative nature that should exist not only between professors and student consultants, but between professors and each one of their students.

Partnership enabled a nimble, student-centered transition during a time of crisis

Adam: When we suddenly had to transition to remote teaching and learning in March 2020, in collaboration with Kate I wrote a brief survey and queried each student to find out about their time zone and connectivity as well as preferred method(s) of contact: email only, phone, Zoom with optional video, and ability to join a class check in the first week of our remote transition. While these were logistical points, I note that we had a partnership in place and were therefore able to engage more deeply during a time of crisis; we could immediately jump into the work of

building responsive learning communities for students in crisis as an extension of our previous work during less (at least less obviously) stressful times.

Kate: Something that I greatly appreciated in my work with Adam has been his dedication to showing care towards students and willingness to evolve his pedagogy to best support his students' needs. This care was present before we shifted to remote learning and continued through the disruption caused by COVID-19, which he practiced through gathering student feedback, making swift and intentional changes based on feedback, and openly thanking students for their time, efforts, and contributions. While this initial survey did serve some logistical purposes, it also serves as an example of how to reach out to students and show care during a time of crisis. As he had been practicing this care long before remote learning, Adam's care-centered pedagogy exemplifies that showing care towards students should be prioritized always, not only during unprecedented circumstances.

Adam: I intentionally tried to prevent student Zoom fatigue and not ask too much of students during a difficult time, so right after the transition to online learning, I cut back on the amount of synchronous time we met, relying instead on our online learning platform to communicate with the class. The "backstage conversation" (Cook-Sather, Moss, Williamson, et al., under review) between Kate and the class revealed something important I'm glad we asked about: students wanted more synchronous time in that class, not less. While I emphasized that these sessions were optional and students could connect with me as their schedule/connectivity allowed, nearly all students attended each weekly synchronous class meeting through the end of the semester. I felt that students' request for more synchronous meetings during a time of crisis for many highlighted the importance of stability and community during turbulent periods.

Kate: Like Adam's students, at the time classes went virtual I was in the process of getting all of my work done in order to graduate, which is a fairly stressful task in the best of times. Going into the conversation with Adam's class in late March, I figured that the pressure students were under academically and personally would mean that the students would not want to meet as much as a cohort to add more time for them to work on their individual thesis projects. To my surprise, when I asked about how often and for how long students wanted to meet, there was resounding and enthusiastic consensus that the students appreciated the classroom community they had built along with Adam and me and that they wanted even more opportunities to meet. This allowed us to maintain a strong feeling of community, stability, and support, as evidenced by the fact that not only were the weekly check-ins well-attended each week, but also that students requested that we add a weekly writing workshop to the schedule as an additional time to reconnect, check in, and share progress.

Adam: Our community check-ins on Mondays were relatively well attended (~6-8 students) with students reaching out in advance if they were going to miss. A student led community emerged during the transition, exemplified by one student closing a remote class meeting with an enthusiastic "we've got this!" I think Kate's presence modeling leadership in our virtual classroom contributed to the growing sense of community in the course, stronger in virtual space than it had been when we were together. During this semester I was also working on a grant to support my research, and I shared an overview of my progress on that writing project during our synchronous meetings when students were updating the community about their own work.

Trying to move my own scholarship forward during a time of difficult transition made me empathize with difficulty finding focus, time, and energy to complete creative work. In noting this I am also cognizant that my own transition was much less stressful than it was for the students in the class because I did not have to move out of where I had been living, as students did.

Kate: A silver lining of shifting to virtual courses was that it changed my class schedule just enough for me to attend the weekly check-ins with students. In the fall, I was able to attend class at least once a week to observe Adam’s teaching, get to know the students, and participate in workshops. I was lucky to get this opportunity back in March — although, from my understanding, the class looked vastly different from how it had been before remote learning began. After the transition to remote teaching I was able to contribute to the classroom community by listening to students’ progress, roadblocks, and feedback, and how students felt — or did not feel — supported by their college, department, and professors. This provided insight not only into what Adam and I could be doing more to support these students. It also threw into relief what we could do as influences in our departments and other leadership positions to acknowledge and address inequities that this shift in learning exposed as well as interrogate our positionalities as white members of the community in these roles.

Adam: Mid-semester conversations between Kate as student consultant and students in the classes I facilitate have fundamentally changed the way I teach from a space of performance to a space of adaptation and growth. Kate gathered student feedback in the fall semester, and she and I engaged in several conversations about how to act on it (see Cook-Sather et al., under review), and the same thing happened, only in a different format, in the spring. When I revise how elements of a course are running through this process of gathering and responding to student feedback in partnership with a student partner, I feel I am making these decisions with student input collected in context by a trusted collaborator. I think having the opportunity to integrate actionable feedback relevant to a particular group of students in a course makes my teaching more nimble and responsive to student needs. This work requires that I not impose or assume a single trajectory of “success” that applies to every student but rather be responsive to and respectful of “the fine-grained, messy, changing becomings of students’ lived experiences” (Gravett, 2020).

Kate: The ability as a student consultant to serve as an intermediary between professor and student in obtaining constructively critical feedback and implementing change was important before the disruption in learning, but it became even more central during the period of virtual learning. With the circumstances constantly changing and uncertainty of what comes next dominating not only academics, but also everyday life, over the past few months, seeking out feedback in ways that are mindful of students’ time, ability, and increased stress and implement meaningful change became a main focus of mine and Adam’s and illustrated to both of us why it needs to be a main focus always.

Day-to-day interactions mask weaknesses in inclusivity?

Adam: In conversations I had with Kate about the class after we shifted to online, I began to wonder if the day-to-day, informal interactions with many students that I miss so deeply in the online context were masking structural weaknesses that exist all the time in the courses I teach. As I explore this more deeply I think that, yes, that is the case. Upon reflection, I'm wondering if I'm really teaching in a way that supports each student or, despite intentional efforts to avoid this, I'm actually teaching for some students and not others. The transition to online instruction illuminated this possibility for me, and because of our trusting relationship, I was able to address this with Kate.

Kate: Something that has become central to our partnership is being open to having difficult conversations about inequitable systems and structures in higher education, like the conversation Adam alludes to above. We do not restrict our one-on-one conversations to the context of the single classroom; we remain open to making connections between the classroom, the departments the course is affiliated with, the general field of study, the institution, higher education as a whole, and the national climate. No classroom is a vacuum; problematic systems and structures permeate the walls and affect students and their families, and it is important as student consultants and professors that we do not overlook these underlying areas for growth and systemic change and dedicate time and energy to discussing them collaboratively.

Foundational elements of our partnership illuminated in time of crisis

Kate: I attribute three elements of our partnership to our ability to make it not only survive, but thrive through the ups and downs of the Spring-2020 semester. The first was intentionality. From the beginning of our partnership, both Adam and I were deliberate about how we used our time in conversation with one another, how and when we sought feedback from students and for the class, how we went over and planned action from said feedback, how we set goals for ourselves, and even what language we used when giving each other feedback. This element of intentionality was illuminated once we transitioned to remote learning as we made an effort to maintain our partnership and the classroom community through a time of uncertainty. Being purposive and thoughtful regarding how we checked in, communicated support, and shared resources with students made these interactions more meaningful, just as our conversations, plans, and ways of obtaining feedback were made more meaningful through a focus on intentionality.

The second element foundational to our relationship was communication. We asked each other questions, shared ideas and actions to take moving forward, and kept each other updated on developments with the class, department, and college. One example that I, as a student consultant, practiced was pushing Adam to see what was effective in his teaching, not just what might need some room to grow, which he tended to focus on especially at the beginning of his time at Bryn Mawr. The ability for the two of us to communicate openly and with trust and understanding made this practice not only possible, but central to our partnership.

The final element has been appreciation for one another. Throughout our work together, Adam and I have shown mutual appreciation for what we each bring to the partnership, thanking each

other for contributions to our conversations, time spent on meetings and reflections, and actions taken based on feedback.

Adam: Some key elements of our partnership that made it successful were illuminated for me during a time of crisis this spring. First, partnerships are adaptable and transcend fields. I think the cross-disciplinary nature of our collaboration was central to its success, as we immediately fell into conversations about student-centered learning rather than course content.

Second, our communication style, based on really listening to each other and providing actionable feedback in the context of the courses we were working on together, required an investment of time and energy. This work benefited not only us as partners but also the students in my courses.

Finally, in collaboration with students in the class, our partnership enabled us to strengthen the community in a class during a challenging time. The reality is that many of our students (and ourselves) are living through trauma in ways the instructor may or may not have the right to access. The critical importance of building trauma-informed learning spaces is laid bare at present, and I think student-faculty partnerships are an important strategy to hold faculty accountable to build and nourish the learning communities we so often promise.

Roles for partnership in sustaining trauma-informed learning spaces moving forward

Adam: Necessary and overdue conversations about white supremacy and what to do to create a sustained anti-racist academy are currently permeating departments and research spaces. As many instructors consider adding readings and discussions about race to their courses for the Fall-2020 semester, I think it is crucial that we ask ourselves as teachers, “Can I really facilitate this reading/discussion in a way that does not further traumatize students?” I am worried that for many this will lead to clumsy facilitation of discussion of scholarship outside a faculty instructor’s area of expertise and, ultimately, re-traumatizing students. I speak on this here because I am hopeful that partnerships like mine and Kate’s, built on trust and open, honest communication, might mitigate this immediate danger. To me, Kate often felt “closer” to the class than I did, modeling leadership by providing ways for students to truly take ownership of their own learning. Partnerships are uniquely positioned to help faculty build and sustain trauma-informed learning spaces, respond to mistakes in content and facilitation quickly in a student-centered way, and avoid making blunders in the first place.

Kate: Moving forward, there is much to be done in institutions of higher education to centralize anti-racist work, decolonize syllabi, and disrupt systems that prioritize white students in these classroom spaces. Within this process, a delicate balance must be struck between centering student feedback — not only seeking critical feedback from students and prioritizing student voices, but also engaging with and responding to feedback swiftly and thoughtfully — and remembering that, at this critical time and always, it is not the responsibility of students of color to educate white professors and consultants on what to do differently or better. Asking for feedback is one thing; doing the work the feedback requires of you as an academic and a human being is another. Do the work, and with your partnerships and other support systems, know that

you're not alone. We are going to keep making mistakes through this work — that is inevitable. What faculty can do is be willing to grow and learn from it, and be transparent with your students when you do make mistakes.

Concluding reflections

Adam: The partnership with Kate helped me conceptualize my teaching in a completely new way. Instead of feeling the need to perform, I increasingly view my efforts as iterative cycles of implementation, adaptation based on student feedback, and further improvement (Cook-Sather et al., under review). For me this mindset is critical as I continue to do the work required to become the educator, mentor, and colleague I want to be.

Kate: The work that I have done with Adam has had a major impact on my thinking about my own experiences as a student, my coursework as an education major, my pedagogical goals as a future educator, and my positionality as a white woman in higher education. I plan on continuing this process of critical reflection, learning, and growth as I continue gathering the tools I will need to be an anti-racist educator and adaptable, thoughtful, and empowering member of the academic community, keeping in mind that this work is anything but a moment — it is, in itself, a movement (Miranda, 2015) that we get to be very small, but meaningful, parts of.

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