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Adilene Lorenzo
Haverford College

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MY PERSONAL TROUBLED TRANSITIONS INTO STUDENT-TEACHER PARTNERSHIPS

Adilene Lorenzo, Haverford College, Class of 2020

When I first learned about the Students as Learners and Teachers (SaLT) program at Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges, the whole idea seemed odd to me. I didn't really understand how a student could develop a partnership with a professor through reciprocal feedback and constructive critique. In my experience, teachers were incapable of receiving any kind of critique from students because they held a wealth of knowledge over students. It felt unnatural to think of myself as someone who could potentially "teach" or provide feedback on pedagogy and instruction. When I was growing up, teachers had always appeared as authority figures, and I had been taught by my family that teachers deserved the utmost respect, regardless of their teaching ability. Even though my education courses had taught me to be critical of my past experiences within education, I had not applied that learning outside of theorizing in papers and I hadn't dared to judge my professors or question their practices. In Karen Gravett's (2020) terms, my "pathway" had been well defined: it was one in which I followed where teachers told me to go. The idea of deviating from that path was troubling, but as I moved into student-teacher partnership, I started to see that there are more ways of learning and teaching than I had previously realized.

When I first got involved in SaLT, I was uneasy about how I could convey the respect and admiration I held for those who dedicated their lives to teaching while still providing helpful and honest feedback. From the first email where I introduced myself as a student partner to the last where I included a list of practices my faculty partner and I had explored together over the course of the semester, I went through careful revising and editing to make sure that I included candid but respectful input that acknowledged my point of view and past experiences. Through this process, I learned to talk about pedagogy in a completely different, productive manner. It was easy to notice an activity or practice that didn't seem to be working but the challenging part came in identifying why it didn't work and what could be done differently. This iterative process was differently troubling—troubling in a positive way. It allowed me to retain the respect for teachers I had always valued and that partnership also emphasized, but it also allowed me to see myself, my knowledge, and my relationship to faculty and teaching differently. This re-seeing made my path not so well defined because I started to see not only my faculty partners' pedagogy but also my own role in teaching and learning in new ways.

Through the experience of a partnership with faculty, attending weekly meetings of other students working in partnership with faculty, and gathering advice from my peers, I learned different strategies and ways to gather feedback and/or approach difficult conversations. As I gained more experience within the complex nature of a student-teacher partnership, I began to feel more comfortable about meetings with professors and constructions of lists and documents that contained suggested modifications to curriculum and lesson plans. This transition took place slowly and it was one I made in partnership not only with the faculty members I worked with but also the other students who were also working in partnership with faculty and re-imagining their own paths. We were all engaged in our own troubling transitions, each one unique.

During my senior year (Fall 2019/Spring 2020), my partnership with a professor at the Bryn Mawr Graduate School of Social Work and Social Research had already been held through phone calls and Zoom meetings. Due to our restrictive schedules and the confidential nature of her courses, our partnership was mostly remote even before the COVID-19 lockdown mandates were instituted. This meant that I faced the challenges of virtual meetings starting in September 2019. If I thought face-to-face meetings had awkward pauses, they were no match for the irregular flow of virtual meetings. It was difficult to pick up on small pauses and facial expressions to choose how to respond to what my faculty partner had said. Sometimes spotty reception, external interruptions, or changes in scheduling made it difficult to keep a steady conversation. These challenges prompted me to circle back around again to how I could navigate my transition from learner/follower to pedagogical partner. I knew the partnership work was valuable to my faculty partner, since she has asked me to continue to work with her after the initial semester for which we had been paired, but the transition to fully online communication, before that became the norm for everyone, troubled me in both familiar and new ways.

The greatest challenge came from not being able to conduct actual in-class observations, which are, in most student-faculty partnerships through SaLT, a standard component of the work. For the first few weeks, I had little to no idea what students were like and how they interacted with the material and each other. I learned about the issues that my faculty partner perceived in her classroom from her, which left unanswered many questions about the reasons behind these issues. When I was finally able to conduct an in-person observation and hold a feedback discussion with the students in her class, I learned so much more about the class in an hour than I had learned over several weeks of spotty Zoom calls. It taught me how important the in-person nature of these relationships is. That experience raised questions for me about how we can create the relationships necessary for deeply understanding and best supporting teaching and learning. In my time as a student partner, I had gone from being a student on a clear path feeling unsure about what partnership even was to interacting directly with students in my faculty partner's course to understand their learning experiences. Looking ahead to my own upcoming role as a 2nd grade teacher, I'm troubled in a whole new way as I wonder what teaching and learning will look like for me and my students.

With an equal amount of hard work, flexibility and dedication from both my faculty partner and me, we were able to develop strategies and patterns to get the most out of our partnership. Looking back, I can see that this is in part because we both were willing to deviate from the paths we had thought we had to follow. Gravett (2020) urges us to strive to understand “the inevitable challenges and difficulties inherent within learning,” which she links with “the ongoing nature of change and becoming.” She urges us to understand these *as* learning—to question any notion of a prescribed path with clear stages as a useful way to understand learning. The various turns in my own troubled transition have prepared me for my next transition, into teaching in my own classroom, which I'm sure will be troubling in some similar and some new ways. My own personal troubled transition will continue to take new turns, but I know now that I can not only move through them but that they are actually an integral part of my becoming.

Reference

Gravett, K. (2020, April 9). Troubling transitions: Re-thinking dominant narratives surrounding students' educational transitions. <https://srheblog.com/2020/04/09/troubling-transitions-re-thinking-dominant-narratives-surrounding-students-educational-transitions/>