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HOW A MULTI-YEAR, MULTIFACETED, AND ITERATIVE PARTNERSHIP CAN CHANGE TEACHING, LEARNING & RESEARCH

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When we sat down to discuss how we were hoping to reflect on our partnership for this special issue, we had in mind the main tenets of Northeastern's SAIL framework: that learning happens everywhere, that everyone is a learner, and that everyone is an educator. We've chosen to tell our story as a conversation that follows the chronology of our still-evolving relationship (inspired by the conversation between Myles Horton and Paulo Freire, chronicled in *We Make the Road by Walking*, in which these two important social justice champions explore their common commitments and passions through dialogue). This journey has allowed us each to grow in our multiple roles of educator, learner, and human.

Note from Becca: At the outset, this may read as though this is simply one of those special relationships that happens regardless of a faculty member's orientation toward their students, where they find a student with whom they share a kindred spirit and like passions. While that is certainly part of what is reflected in this dialogue, I hope we also portray how this relationship blossomed from my approach to my work as an educator in which I view all of my students as co-learners. I have continuously striven to do this both out of the classroom through pedagogical approaches such as service-learning and community-based research and activism, and in the classroom by taking a learner-centered approach that provides foundational frameworks and readings, but seldom dictates for students the subjects or topics for lectures, discussions, papers, or presentations without student input. I also firmly believe that making space for continual reflection is key to creating an environment where students are able to make connections between theory and practice, whether learning is taking place in or out of the

classroom. Not only is this central to my teaching philosophy, but it is reflected and embedded in the ethos of Northeastern and what it means to trust students with ‘real’ work from the moment they step foot on campus- so, while not every student relationship I have manifests itself in ways reflected in my relationship with Ava, the foundational values and core ethos are central to the ecosystem of partnership as fostered at this institution and reflected in my work.

Food Justice and Social Change Course

Ava: Arriving at Northeastern in September 2016, I was an undeclared student looking for a direction for my bubbling passion. On a whim, I signed up for a one-credit, exploratory course, Food Justice & Social Change, taught by Professor Becca Berkey. I had no idea at the time that I would meet a mentor whose constant support, challenge, and friendship would completely change the person I am today.

There were two components of this course that altered my life trajectory. The first was a wide range of guest speakers involved in every aspect of the food system from school lunch at Boston Public Schools to food waste at festivals. I would leave class every day inspired with another potential career path in fields I couldn’t have imagined in high school. The second was its focus on service-learning and civic engagement. Not only was I exposed to theories of justice and the food system in the U.S., I was also engaging in Boston’s food system and learning about the racial and economic tensions in the community where I now lived.

Becca: Ava was a student of mine the first time I taught my Food Justice & Social Change course in Fall 2015. I had been teaching at the college level at several institutions for nearly ten years around topics like leadership, ethics and social responsibility, and quantitative literacy, but was also recently coming off of finishing my PhD in 2014. This was my first time teaching in my area of study. In addition to this dynamic, I was teaching the course as a 1-credit

inquiry seminar in our university's Explore Program for Undeclared Students. These undeclared students were in their first year, first semester, enrolled in a program that was aimed at helping them select a major, and this seminar was a completely optional component of that program. Theoretically, this meant that I was getting students with a wide range of interests who were authentically interested in the course topic or something they read in the description.

This ended up being the case with most of the students, who came eager to learn and engage, if not a bit timid during their first college semester in how to do so. From the get-go, Ava took advantage of the setup of the course to make authentic class contributions, and also went above and beyond to walk through the opening that was there for all of the students should they choose to pursue it – to get more involved in and knowledgeable about the topic and its impact on our communities. She was always willing to share but also to listen to her peers and was able to discuss intense topics by situating them in her own experiences and learning.

Agroecological Research

Ava: Eager to find a place in this new academic arena and motivated by injustices I had now witnessed first-hand, I timidly reached out to Becca, inquiring if she had any research projects that she could use an undergraduate student on. I soon thereafter found myself working on an annotated bibliography detailing the social benefits of agroecology, a topic of which I could not have known less about. Becca, brushing over any hesitation I exhibited, briefed me on agroecology, what she was expecting for the project and how the research would be situated in terms of her other work, and pushed me to work independently.

As is a recurring theme of our partnership, I was a very type-A learner who was used to a fair amount of supervision, always working hard, but usually having someone to point

that energy in the correct direction. This project pushed me to be self-motivated without a lot of oversight, something I definitely needed to improve upon. I worked on this research project with Becca through the rest of my first semester and into my second, allowing me opportunities to present my research to Dr. Claudia Ford, a then-professor at the Rhode Island School of Design, and to co-facilitate a food justice workshop for Northeastern's annual Service and Leadership event on Martin Luther King Day. In all of these experiences with Becca, I was treated as an equal whose ideas and contributions were welcomed and even encouraged.

Becca: Sometime during that semester, Ava approached me about setting up a time to talk outside of class. When we met, she asked me about the possibility of working on research with me. It's important to note here that not only had I just completed my doctorate the year before, but my main role at the University is administrative in nature. I serve as the Director for Community-Engaged Teaching and Research, meaning that my own teaching and research are not part of my main job responsibilities because I am not in a faculty role. That said, I do have an active research agenda, and Ava and I were willing to 'take a risk' on each other – her with a newly minted PhD who wasn't in a traditional faculty role, and me with a first-year student to see what was possible. We began working together, meeting regularly to bring her up to speed with some collaborative research that was in its initial stages. I was partnering with Dr. Claudia Ford and Northeast Farm Access to examine the social dimensions of agroecology, and over the next semester Ava was up to the challenge of helping us lay the groundwork for what was to come by conducting an extensive literature review and coding her findings thematically. She also presented her work to Claudia and me regularly, so we were able to iterate with her as the process unfolded.

Service-Learning Teaching Assistant

Ava: Our partnership continued to evolve when Becca invited me to be her service-learning teaching assistant (S-L TA) for the course I had taken with her the year prior. I was thrilled to be able to facilitate the same thought-provoking and career-changing experience to a new round of undeclared students. My role as the S-LTA of the course was to be the point of communication for both of our community partners: Fresh Truck and Urban Farming Institute. In this position, Becca challenged me again to work independently on managing all of the students' service activities and reflection on their civic engagement, and to gauge the satisfaction of the community partners, both of which had a longstanding relationship with Northeastern.

Once more, I was nervous about the large responsibility I was handed – a leadership role for students just one year younger than I and maintaining relationships with the program's community partners. However, I learned to manage communication and logistics between all three different parties in the course (professor, students, community partners) and became comfortable in leading reflections on the difficult topics that the students would be engaging with during their service opportunities. Becca also granted me the opportunity to teach an entire session on the agroecological research we had conducted together and what I had gotten out of the course experience and my experience with Becca. Teaching this lesson allowed me to reflect on how my relationship with Becca had grown into a wonderful partnership, one of mutual respect and support.

Becca: It was only natural to ask Ava to serve as my Service-Learning Teaching Assistant for the very course she had taken that next Fall, in 2016. By this time, the rapport we had developed allowed for some honest conversations about the class and what could be done to strengthen it. Ava not only offered helpful constructive feedback, but also came to the table with

ideas and suggestions – such as creating more space for students to reflect on their experiences with service-learning and doing more to prepare them for what we were hoping they would take away from those experiences. Not only that, but through her training as an S-LTA she came ready to take a lead role in facilitating some of those dialogues – shifting her role in my eyes and that of our students from being an assistant to me to being a co-lead for our course. Doing this took preparation, planning, and openness from both of us – meeting weekly to debrief and plan, and not being so rigid in our ideas around the structure of the course that we lacked flexibility to make room for new ideas and approaches to emerge. From that perspective, I found a partner for what can sometimes be a lonely journey – teaching. We had an interesting mix of students that semester, some of whom knew exactly what they were signing up for and approached it with the same zeal I'd witnessed the year before, and some who seemed confused from the get-go. Ava helped me navigate that dynamic in ways I would not have been able to otherwise by connecting as a peer with the students and also with me – bridging the gap between their experiences and my expectations so we could create a fruitful classroom dynamic.

Returning to Food Justice

Ava: A few years passed before I would get the opportunity to work with Becca again, although our paths did cross several times through our mutual interests. Whether it be through other job opportunities, club meetings, or lectures that Becca taught, her influence was always present throughout this period of time, especially with her constant advice and support with internships, fellowship applications, and career questions. It was during one of our catch-up coffee sessions this past fall that I offered up the idea of being Becca's service-learning teaching assistant again for the 4-credit version of the Food Justice and Social Change course.

Everything settled back into place for this semester in order for us to again partner on teaching this course. I have been out of both the service-learning and food justice realms for a bit of time now and am a bit rusty on the language of integrating service and curricular learning in class, but coming back to collaborating with Becca again has been the most natural of progressions. Coming back into the role of the S-LTA, I feel so much more assured and confident than when I approached the position for the first time. By pushing me to autonomously complete tasks and problem solve without her oversight, Becca has prepared me to be a successful working adult. At my last co-op position at an environmental legal nonprofit, my supervisors were constantly surprised at my ability to take initiative on projects and to complete assignments thoroughly and with a special attention to detail.

Taking Food Justice and Social Justice on a whim was absolutely one of the best decisions I made during my undergraduate career. Becca introduced me to an issue that I could put my passion into, molded me into a responsible, hardworking researcher and employee, and taught me to think critically about the world around me. Any change I make in this world will have Becca's imprint on it.

Becca: In the ensuing semesters, Ava and I haven't worked together directly as she has been working full-time on two different co-op experiences as well as studying abroad. Throughout all of this, we found our paths crossing in both planned and unplanned ways due to our shared interests and passions. And, despite not working directly with one another during that time, what I had learned by working alongside Ava added to the rich lessons I've gained by working with students as partners throughout my career – specifically by giving me more confidence about what is/isn't resonating with students and my own ability to create enough space for the people around me to take risks as well as the flexibility to accommodate what

comes when those risks pay off. In the iterations of this course that have followed as well as my work with students in my administrative role, I have continued to build on that foundation in my partnerships with students, more continuously asking what is working and what isn't as well as what ideas they are most interested in pursuing. In short, it is partnerships like the one with Ava that have helped me live in better alignment with my most deeply held values as an educator.

I am teaching the 4-credit version of the course, called Food Justice & Community Development, this semester and the students I have had in the past full seminars have graduated. I didn't hesitate to say yes when Ava asked about serving as the S-LTA, even though she hasn't taken the 4-credit version of the course, given our varied history and the partnership we've forged through the multitude of ways we've worked together. I am looking forward to continuing to learn alongside her, and have already seen the fruits of our partnership in a pretty major redevelopment of the course based on the feedback that she has freely given and the experiences that she has now accumulated in her time as a college student about what works and what doesn't to optimize learning for all.

Post-Script

From Becca: Since we first drafted this piece, much has changed in the world around us. During the course of the Spring semester, COVID-19 turned everything upside-down, and we went fully online about 2/3rds of the way through the term. While our service-learning partnerships for the course (each of which relied on face-to-face service) were upended and our students dispersed geographically, Ava was a steady partner to myself and her peers in successfully navigating the disruption to salvage what we could both of the course content, as well as with our guest speakers and our community-based partners. At the time of revision we are in the Fall 2020 semester, and Ava and I are once again partnering for the one-credit version

of the course (offered fully online this semester) as she navigates her ‘full circle’ Northeastern experience in preparation for graduation. We will also be working together in her final semester next term for her capstone project, titled *Centering Community Voice in the Massachusetts Build Back Better Conversation*. 2020 has been a year of instability, but the embodiment of this approach to students as partners in our co-mentorship has been steady. I look forward to seeing what she goes on to achieve, and to continuing to nurture future partnerships based on what we’ve learned from one another.