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Eugene Lee
Amherst College

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UNDERSTANDING THE VERSATILITY OF TEACHING AND LEARNING

Eugene Lee, Amherst College, Class of 2023

Before entering the pedagogical partnership program at Amherst College, I had the privilege of teaching at a Boston Public School through the Americorps program City Year. In joining the partnership program, I believed that I was more than well prepared to tackle a pedagogical partnership, yet it turned out to be a learning experience that was outside of the K-12 realm of teaching that I was used to.

I first joined the partnership with the goal of fostering professional development for myself, as well as gaining insight into the pedagogical methods employed in higher education. Through observing students and engaging in dialogue with my professor, I initially saw my role as an assistant rather than a partner or consultant. Yet, the partnership afforded me an opportunity to engage with a faculty member as an expert in my own right and demystify the seemingly distant relationships that students hold with professors at the college-level. It allowed me to see the ways in which professors valued student feedback and opinions, and further change the rhetoric of a limited one-size fits all pedagogical approach to teaching classes.

Entering this program during remote learning was a challenging, yet exciting engagement. As a non-STEM student, I found being placed in partnership with a professor in mathematics was a daunting first contact. I feared that my background in the humanities would prove inadequate in a mathematical pedagogical partnership. I believed that for me to best support my professor I would need a strong foundation in mathematical concepts. Furthermore, placed in an advanced class beyond fundamental mathematics initially made me feel behind in my understanding. How was I supposed to best offer constructive feedback if I had no footing on concepts leading up to the class? Furthermore, my remote engagement in this partnership created some initial anxieties about how helpful I could be to my partner faculty. Yet, it's here that I found that pedagogical theory can separate itself from the subject matter being taught; in other words, pedagogical engagement is flexible, and teaching becomes a versatile medium, which makes this partnership so interdisciplinary. My background in the humanities offered an interesting lens to foster small group work as well as altering structures of engagement with students to provide deeper understanding and clarity of topics. As such, although the class was set up to be a lecture, this humanities insight allowed for the creation of expanded student participation and discussions.

In consultation with my faculty partner, I found myself not only being able to engage in discourse about classroom inclusivity and self-efficacy, I also found agency. Throughout our partnership, my faculty partner and I rarely, if at all, talked about specific mathematical topics that were being taught in class. This brought forth two certainties: one, pedagogical approaches aren't always bound by specific subject areas to ensure student efficacy; two, my status as a college student lends, in itself, expertise in fostering ideas of classroom inclusivity. Having this foundation allowed me to develop confidence as both a consultant and a pedagogical partner. I was able to observe and note what I thought could be improved in lessons, and furthermore, research and offer pedagogical ideas that I saw being implemented in classes. This not only strengthened my confidence, but also allowed me to feel respected as a student partner. This experience of agentic engagement is indicative of how pedagogical partnerships reinforce "the three basic psychological needs... autonomy, competence and

relatedness” (Kaur & Mohammad, 2019, p.1). From the start, my faculty partner assured me that my presence in the class as well as the insights that I was bringing in were more than valuable; it felt as if I was coming in with expertise in pedagogical theories. Of course, this is indicative of the dialectical nature of partnership work, which foregrounds “respect, reciprocity, and shared responsibility in analyses and support of teaching and learning” (Cook-Sather, Bovill, & Felten, 2014).

A prime example of such confidence in my partnership was reflected in our work to develop student self-efficacy in the classroom. One of the leading concerns that my faculty partner expressed was students’ over-dependency on professors, and the seemingly insubstantial questions that students asked. In a math class that built on abstract ideas and concepts, arithmetic questions were perceived often as indications of a narrow understanding of a given mathematical topic, rather than a broader interpretation of theoretical ideas. As such, a primary goal of our partnership revolved around building student independence and increased demonstrated understanding.

Over the course of the semester, through observations and consultations with my partner faculty two important observations emerged. First, there was a perceived gap in what my partner faculty discerned as student independent thinking and what students were in fact doing. It became clear that what my partner faculty understood as student independent thinking and engagement, was different from how students critically thought about the content of the class. In one of our earlier weekly meetings, my partner faculty noted how low student participation worried her. Were students understanding the topic? Was there a connection between student silence and inadequate comprehension of the course materials? Yet, in engaging with students through survey questions and dialogue, it became increasingly apparent that my faculty partner discerned student independent thinking through a one-dimensional lens. In other words, student thought/engagement processes cannot be seen through one perspective; there are other ways in which students engage with given course materials such as doodling, looking down, quiet processing, etc. It’s important to note here that this perceived gap was only exacerbated by the hybrid teaching model—some students sat in-person, some students engaged in remote learning. Thus, perceiving student thinking and engagement became more difficult. In talking to my partner faculty, I raised the point that I have my own way of processing information. Sometimes, I like to doodle or make little notes in class, other times, I sit in silence and process the course material by staring off into space. Of course, this point was affirmed when my partner faculty observed high student performances in their first examination.

Relatedly, the promotion of students’ independent thinking was contingent upon reframing questions. Drawing on my own previous teaching experience, I suggested a reframing technique to my partner faculty to increase student engagement. As my partner faculty noted, slightly lesser student contribution indicated a level of disengagement in her observation. In my year of teaching through City Year Boston, an important facet of pedagogical efficacy was reframing questions to garner deeper understanding from students. Thus, supplementary questions to initial student responses such as “*Can you give me an example of x ?*”, “*How did you read x concept?*”, or “*What do you/I mean when thinking about x ?*” promoted not only additional engagement, but also fostered students’ independent creative thinking patterns. In addition to these reframing questions, it was also important to employ a level of classroom inclusivity. In this sense, questions such as “*Are there any other ways to think x ?*”, or “*Can someone who hasn’t spoken yet help me understand x ?*” allowed for an inclusive environment for student participation as well as promoting a level of agency. Notably, the

level of student contributions was high throughout the semester. Furthermore, students began to devise creative ways of processing information in a given topic. Thus, reframing questions increased student participation as well as allowing for students to have a space to ask more substantial theoretical questions.

The nature of a pedagogical partnership allowed me to carry confidence in giving my partner faculty suggestions as well as building a respectful relationship, with my partner faculty, in understanding the linkage between versatile instructional tools and student thought processes. Shifting from my initial sense of myself as an assistant rather than a consultant into a sense of myself as a partner, I was able to confidently engage in discourse with my faculty to create an inclusive learning environment as well as help voice the opinions of students in class. Coming from my previous work in the Boston Public School system, I believed that my work would be to help my professor with logistical tasks as an assistant. As a City Year Americorps member, my job was to support my homeroom teacher in directing students to follow a set curriculum. Here, my work involved offering ideas and insights to her teaching, consulting with her about different approaches to garner stronger student engagement, understanding, self-efficacy, etc. As such, this experience afforded me not only agency, but also empowerment for my peers' engagement.

This agentic engagement wasn't limited to my observations in the classroom. Rather, it was extended through contexts outside of the partnership. Prior to the partnership, I was very cautious and often sceptical of the effectiveness of end-of-semester course feedbacks. Having experienced this partnership, I recognized the ways in which student-professor discourse was invaluable in creating a successful learning environment. It afforded me a new perspective in which professors can learn from students, and moreover, are willing to take students opinions into account in their teaching. For instance, I was able to provide feedback on some of the ways my professors set up their courses. I realized that as a learner who deepened understanding through constant discourse, I valued small group discussions. As such, I was able to gear course feedbacks to my learning processes. Furthermore, the partnership allowed me to contextualize versatile course set-ups and classroom teaching and notice what aspects of a lesson were effective to my own learning, and which were not as effective. This work allowed me to re-envision ways in which students can promote and contribute to their own learning efficacies in classroom environments.

Having experienced the pedagogical partnership program at Amherst, I feel more inclined to engage in conversations with my professors about my learning needs. The partnership allowed me to recognize what pedagogical tools I need to best learn in class, and how to approach my professors with confidence.

References

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