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A YEAR OF RECOGNIZING MY AGENCY THROUGH PARTNERSHIP

Maria Bohan, Bryn Mawr College, Class of 2021

For many, the months following March 2020 were some of the least agentic they had ever experienced. In a time when I and most people had little control over the world or even our experiences in our corner of it, the [Summer Pedagogical Partnership Program](#) (SPPP) at Bryn Mawr/Haverford College's Teaching and Learning Institute (TLI) was a lifeline for me. It gave me a purpose in what otherwise would have been a directionless summer, and it showed me the agency I could still have even in the most unprecedented of times. When I started the program in May 2020, I couldn't have guessed how much of an impact it would have on my life inside and outside the classroom.

The SPPP was the first of its kind in the TLI and the world. Born from the intersection of the COVID-19 pandemic and the Black Lives Matter Movement uprisings, the SPPP's focus was supporting faculty in developing [trauma-informed, anti-racist, hybrid and remote approaches to teaching and learning](#) (a focus for which it was selected as a finalist for the POD Innovation Award). Student partners created pedagogical resources on these topics, worked with cohorts of 2–6 Bryn Mawr and Haverford faculty, and facilitated 14, one-time, small-group conversations offered through the Liberal Arts Collaborative for Digital Innovation ([LACOL](#)).

My first one-on-one partnership fell through, but I nevertheless attended the weekly meetings of student partners who were working with faculty in June and July of 2020. At these meetings, I didn't feel like I was missing out because I wasn't in a one-on-one partnership. Because I wasn't in a partnership, I had the opportunity to really dedicate myself to reading many pedagogical resources and creating summaries of those resources. Although all of the student partners contributed to creating the resources, I spent more time on this work than the other partners who had to devote most of their time to their faculty partners. As an education minor and aspiring school librarian, I loved getting the opportunity to research best practices in teaching. Although I have enjoyed my readings for education classes in the past, I felt extra motivated to read and summarize pages of pedagogical research because I was being compensated for my effort. The compensation was a clear indicator that my perspective was valuable and necessary.

At whole-group weekly meetings, I made myself the voice of the resources, referring to them when other student partners asked the group for advice on their partnership. In my work on the resources, I found a place to make myself an authority—not a form of authority that is unbending and unearned, but an authority gained from dedication and study. Although I could easily have stayed quiet during our meetings, as I did not have my own partnership to discuss, I recognized the value of my contributions and shared them. In the partnership I had with other student partners, I came to have confidence in my knowledge and my ability to share it in productive ways.

Another space where I asserted the value of my contributions was in the LACOL Brown Bag conversations. These were lunchtime pedagogy gatherings where faculty and staff from the collaborative's member colleges brought their questions and perspectives after reading our resource on antiracist, trauma-informed, hybrid and remote teaching and learning. Two student

partners facilitated each discussion. When I told my family and friends about these conversations, I constantly expressed disbelief that I was helping lead them. Being at home I experience not exactly a reversion, but a closeness to my younger self. In fact, I attended the LACOL meetings from my childhood bedroom. The disbelief I felt originated in thinking about my high school self leading a Zoom room full of teachers through difficult topics—that was certainly something I could never see my teenage self doing. After months of studying the topics we were discussing, and after my feeling like an important contributor in student partner meetings, I felt few nerves at the three meetings I co-facilitated, but I actually was able to enjoy this unique opportunity to support cross-college dialogue.

Later in the summer, I was able to work with three faculty partners and another student partner from August to September 2020. At the outset, I didn't know what to expect from the partnership, as what we would work on depended largely on the professors' emerging needs. Still, after successfully facilitating the LACOL sessions and working on the pedagogical resources so intensely, I felt confident that I would have something to contribute to our conversations. That I could feel this confidence despite not knowing exactly how the partnership would unfold was another indication that I was developing agentic engagement through this partnership work.

During one Zoom meeting of our cohort, my younger sister was in the next room. When the meeting was over, she said that I was very well spoken in the meeting. Older sisters know that it is very rare to get a compliment from your younger sister, so I was struck by her comment. She elaborated that I seemed to really know what I was talking about in giving recommendations to my faculty partners. Reflecting on this day, I see that my confidence shone through in my interactions with my faculty partners in a small but meaningful way. For instance, while we were waiting for one of our faculty partners to arrive, I surprised myself by carefreely showing them around my cousin's house (where I was taking the meeting), including her kids' coloring projects and her adorable cat Wonky. Academia and white supremacy culture often prefer us to be "all business," but because I felt comfortable in the business aspects of the partnership, in this instance, I displayed the confidence to bring more of myself into the room.

Since I was working two other campus jobs in fall 2020, I did not take on a faculty partnership that semester. Still, the lessons I learned and perspectives I gained from the SPPP stayed with me. A little more than halfway through the semester in the wake of the police killing of Walter Wallace Jr. just miles away from Bryn Mawr, a student-led strike began at Haverford and was taken up at Bryn Mawr, with people at both institutions demanding antiracist change from the college administrations. Many students did not attend classes for two weeks, myself among them. While some professors canceled classes, others kept holding them. In one course that was still being held, my classmates and I organized a meeting with our professor to discuss how the striking students could participate in class equitably when the strike ended. Our discussion got a bit tense at the meeting, especially because our professor had been on the receiving end of the frustration of many striking students. Our professor was very amenable to all of our suggestions for modifying the course, but at the end of the meeting, they expressed their own frustration with the hostile attitude they perceived of some of my classmates. Although I had not spoken at all during the meeting (although I had contributed to the students' planning session), I jumped in quickly after our professor was finished speaking. Using my skills of facilitation gained during

the LACOL sessions and from working with faculty partners, and drawing on course content, I was able to validate the professor's feelings, recognize their willingness to work with us and their clear care for students' perspectives, and assert the value of our student perspectives.

The lessons of the SPPP also helped me when I was faced with a career challenge. That same fall semester, I was taking my final education courses in preparation for beginning (virtually) student teaching in the spring. A month into the semester, the reality of teaching finally hit me. I realized that I did not want to be a high school teacher. In fact, up until that point, whenever anyone asked me what I was majoring in, I answered with, "I am getting certified in secondary English education." I could never verbalize that I was studying to become a teacher because deep down that reality was just not something I could see for myself. Still, I knew I wanted to be in the education field. After some reflection, I found a path I was excited about: school librarianship. But then came the hard part—telling my advisors and cooperating teacher that I would not be student teaching in the spring.

Before and after breaking the news to my mentors, I had a few tearful moments. Although no one told me they were disappointed in me, I couldn't help but feel uncomfortable about going back on my commitment. This discomfort didn't originate from guilt or regret but from the fact that I had never felt this feeling before. In all of my years in school, I had tried my hardest to do everything that my teachers and family expected of me. This was the first time that I had listened to myself and what *I* wanted to do. This taking agency over my future would not have been possible had I not worked on breaking down the barriers of the teacher/student hierarchy in the SPPP. Instead of seeing professors as people I should defer to, I now saw them as individuals whose perspectives were valuable, but equally valuable as my own.

Motivated by my new career path and with a large gap in my schedule because I would not be student teaching, I decided to make the most of my final semester in college and create a combined independent study and internship called Libraries and Antiracism. After years spent studying antiracist pedagogy in the SPPP and my education courses, I felt excited about studying an antiracist library framework and starting to develop my own practice for librarianship. First, I had to write a proposal, which came easily because of my strong motivation to create the course. Through a connection from the TLI, I was able to find an internship site at a local college library, where a former TLI student consultant and current librarian would host me as an intern at the library. In her capacity as an education professor at Bryn Mawr, Alison Cook-Sather served as the advisor for the academic side of the course. Then, I had to design my own syllabus after communicating with my internship advisor about my interests and their needs. Although designing learning experiences is something I have done before as an education student, I found the syllabus design process a bit challenging because it meant designing a whole curriculum rather than activities. Still, I felt empowered by the opportunity to control my learning experience by writing my own goals for the course, as these goals inspired my readings and responsibilities at my internship site. I was able to help launch a social media page for librarians of color, moderate a Zoom panel on LGBTQ+ educators, and participate in meetings of the library's inclusion, diversity, equity, and accessibility committee. I paired these activities with readings on the experiences of librarians of color and best practices for antiracist librarianship.

As I took agentic engagement into my studies, in the Spring 2021 semester I also co-facilitated a group of student partners focused solely on accessibility in the classroom. My involvement in the group, called TLI Access Student Partners, began during a teach-in on radical access in education, which I attended during the student-led strike mentioned earlier. After hearing student stories at the teach-in of the impact of professors' resistance to and/or ignorance of accessibility issues in the classroom, the wheels in my head began turning about how every professor needed to hear student perspectives on this issue. Although student partners likely touch on accessibility with their faculty partners in one-on-one partnerships, I wondered about the possibility of creating a group of student partners focused only on accessibility to show how important it is that access be considered in the classroom.

I contacted Alison Cook-Sather about my idea and discovered that a few years earlier, a similar group had existed in the TLI. Fortunately, one of the key student partners from the earlier group, Nicole Litvitskiy, was still involved in the TLI and had actually co-facilitated the SPPP. She was excited about reviving this work, and she and I drafted a proposal for this new iteration. In March 2021, we received the go-ahead from the TLI and the Bryn Mawr College President's Office to start our work. It felt empowering to see this idea turned into a reality.

We got a group of six student partners together with various experiences of classroom accessibility and partnership work. Although Nicole and I had our own ideas for what we wanted the group to focus on, we opened the floor to the student partners' ideas. As we entered the busy season of another unusual semester, we continued to meet, but by the end of the semester, we did not have any deliverables for the project. When Nicole and I discussed this, she smartly reminded me that we didn't have to prove anything to anyone by "accomplishing" something. We knew that our hours of discussions and the ideas we generated, although we had not yet acted on them, were valuable.

Overall, my experience of working as a student partner for the first time, supporting my fellow students and professor, taking ownership over my future career and course of study, and finally co-facilitating a group of student partners shows the impact recognizing my agency had on me. Through my student partnership work, I realized that my perspectives were valuable. I became an agent of change in my life, in my education, and the education of my fellow students.