Choosing Pedagogical Partnerships Over Pedagogical Solitude: Embracing the Inherently Social Nature of Teaching and Learning

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CHOOSING PEDAGOGICAL PARTNERSHIPS OVER PEDAGOGICAL SOLITUDE: EMBRACING THE INHERENTLY SOCIAL NATURE OF TEACHING AND LEARNING

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In the spring of 2020, I was one of four Vassar faculty members piloting a new faculty-student pedagogical partnership program called Student Teacher Engaged Pedagogical Partnership (STEPP). We modeled this effort after the SaLT program at Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges (Bala, 2021; Cook-Sather et al., 2019). The program allowed each of us to partner with a student, whose role was to sit in on our classes, observe, and engage with us in critical reflection about teaching and learning. The pilot provided faculty and student partners with opportunities to engage in dialogue about teaching and learning that we would not otherwise have, given the "pedagogical solitude" that college faculty commonly experience (Shulman, 1993). Our student partners helped us reflect on what we were doing and why, what our goals were for our classes, and whether or not our efforts in class were effective. Our hopes for the pilot were simple: that these partnerships would help us refine our teaching and strengthen our engagement with students by helping us identify what was going well in classroom settings and dynamics, and what could use some work.

As is often the case, life can upend our best laid plans, and that spring it was a global pandemic that forced us to recalibrate significantly. As the COVID-19 pandemic brought the U.S. educational system to a grinding halt, those of us involved in the STEPP pilot had to figure out how to proceed with our partnerships, while simultaneously scrambling to pivot from a "high touch" residential educational model to an entirely on-line model. As we did so, the pandemic highlighted a truth about teaching and learning that often goes unacknowledged: that at their best and most effective, teaching and learning are inherently social phenomena rooted in processes of collaboration and interdependence.

Learning with and from Students: Collaborative Research, Course Design, and Teaching

As an extrovert who thrives on collaboration with others, I had an intuitive sense of this truth before I came across scholarship on teaching and learning that validated my sense that I learn better, teach better, and feel more engaged with research when I am doing those things in dialogue, reflection, and collaboration with others. Since becoming a tenured member of the faculty at Vassar, it has felt easier to take the kinds of risks with teaching that I have wanted to take given that course evaluations no longer loom overhead with the same kind of weight as they did at the pre-tenure stage of my career.

Over the last few years, I have been able to shift my pedagogical approach to one that is far more collaborative—and therefore more student-centered—than when I joined the Vassar faculty as an assistant professor fresh out of graduate school. This shift began, in large part, when I invited first generation and/or low-income Vassar students to conduct participatory action research (Rueda et al., 2017). Working alongside students to understand the experiences of first generation low-income students at Vassar yielded a much-needed student perspective on the matter, not only by giving students the ability to share and control their own narratives, but also

by centering their voices in the analysis and recommendations that we were able to provide to the college on an array of issues. As Gibson et al. (2017) note, engaging students as participants and collaborators in research can provide "rich insights into the world and lives of our students" (p. 117), and I quickly learned that the same is true for engaging students as pedagogical partners. In my research and teaching, partnering with students has yielded insights that would have been more difficult to come to on my own.

My first effort at pedagogical collaboration with students came when I asked the students on my research team if they would be interested in creating a new course based on our research. Drawing from the reading we had done to prepare for our research, their interests, and their areas of expertise, we created a 200-level course ("Accessing the Ivory Tower") that has become part of my regular rotation of courses. When I teach the course, members of the research team co-facilitate the topics they are most interested in. Once I experienced the value of collaborating with students on course design and course-facilitation, I have not gone back to doing any of those things on my own. Recently, I have also worked alongside students to revise and update existing courses. I have invited students who have just taken my course to work with me the following semester to discuss course goals, class activities, readings, and assignments. I am thus able to update the course drawing directly from student input. Subsequent iterations of the course have a clear student imprint on them, which the next group of students seem to appreciate, as indicated on course evaluations.

The opportunity to pilot the STEPP program during the spring 2020 semester felt like a natural extension of my desire to avoid the pedagogical solitude of previous years. The STEPP pedagogical partnership provided an opportunity to continue aligning my pedagogical practices with my values as an educator. By working with students to shape what I do in the classroom, how I approach teaching, and course design, I am able to engage with students in ways that foster connections to the course content, with each other, and with me. In these ways, I try to foster a sense of belonging in educational settings and to upend notions of teaching and learning as individual processes that require all of us to "tough it" out on our own.

Partners in Course Design and Facilitation: Piloting STEPP

If there was ever a time when it would be helpful to work with a student partner to think through how I was going to proceed with a class, it was the spring 2020 semester. I welcomed the opportunity to enter into a pedagogical partnership during what I anticipated could be a "complex time" given that I wanted to try something new with the immigration class that I was scheduled to teach (Labridy-Stofle, 2020). I had no idea that the STEPP partnership would also end up serving as a crucial life-line to students during an unexpected time of transition, stress, and vulnerability for everyone.

I had the good fortune of being able to work with a student partner (Kayla Gonzalez '21) whom I had known for several years and who had been a member of the research team when we designed the "Accessing the Ivory Tower" course. Thanks to our previous experience, we had developed the *confianza*—the confidence and trust—that is necessary for pedagogical collaborations to work effectively. Without the mutual reciprocity, familiarity, and trust that this term connotes,

the vulnerability, honesty, and risk that are necessary to invite someone into a classroom, have them observe, and feel ready to learn from constructive feedback in order to improve one's pedagogy is more difficult to achieve. Similarly, without that *confianza*, it is more challenging for student partners to feel comfortable subverting the power dynamics inherent in student-faculty interactions. As student partners have attested to (Bala, 2021; Gallo & Berkey, 2021; Lorenzo, 2020; Weiler & Williamson, 2020)—and my own student partner had articulated during previous pedagogical collaborations—there is a fair amount of hesitation, anxiety, and discomfort that comes with the work of countering "traditional hierarchical structures and modes of interacting" (Cook-Sather et al., 2019, p. 96). Providing direct feedback to professors is not an easy undertaking for many students, regardless of the circumstances. Given how risky these pedagogical collaborations can feel on both sides, I was thankful for the ability to work with a student partner whom I trusted deeply and who had already inspired and supported me to take chances and broaden my teaching.

Feeling uncertain about how students would respond to my plans for our course, Kayla and I met before the semester began to discuss my ideas for restructuring the immigration course: I would chose the topics and readings we would cover in the first half of the semester (e.g. readings that would provide students with background knowledge of the history, theory, and demographics of immigration trends since the mid-1800s), and students would work in pairs to choose the topics and readings for the latter half of the course. Additionally, student pairs would co-facilitate the class sessions dedicated to their chosen topics. With this format, the last seven weeks of the course would reflect student interests. Kayla was instrumental in helping me think through various features of the plan. In these early discussions we reviewed the syllabus for the course, the course goals, the structure of the class, assignments, deadlines, and logistics. Her feedback was invaluable in helping me iron out some of the wrinkles and feel more confident about what I was trying to do with such a different course structure and approach than what I am accustomed to.

Kayla's presence on the first day of class was instrumental. Together we set the tone for the class, established classroom norms, and talked about the structure for the second half of the semester. I remember feeling relieved after our first class meeting. The students had seemed receptive to the idea of how to structure the second half of the class. In retrospect, Kayla's presence in the class and knowledge of what I was proposing seemed to make the plan go over more smoothly. It was not anything that she said explicitly, but perhaps the plan seemed less overwhelming because the students knew she had given me input on the course.

In the first half of the semester, Kayla attended class once a week, after which we met to discuss what my goals were for the class the following week and how class had unfolded on the days that she observed and took notes. The notes that she took were focused on the issues that we discussed in our meeting prior to that class session. For example, she initially focused her observations on classroom community-building efforts: who felt comfortable speaking regularly in class and which activities seemed to encourage more participation from students.

During our weekly meetings, it was incredibly helpful and reassuring to hear Kayla's constructive feedback and perspective about how class dynamics were unfolding. Aside from the occasional opportunity to co-teach a class with a colleague, I have not had the opportunity to

have someone observe my teaching and engage in explicit discussions of what I am trying to do, why I am trying to do it, whether or not it is working, and what I might change to better meet the goals I set out for a course or in a given lesson. The opportunity to engage in intentional dialogue about teaching and learning was incredibly refreshing. Kayla and I discussed why things were going a certain way, and how to replicate the good components of the course, while thinking about how to address the things that needed work. I try to engage in that kind of self-reflection when I am teaching on my own, but the STEPP partnership kept me accountable for engaging in that reflection more consistently throughout the semester.

Partners in Crisis: The COVID-19 Pandemic and the Switch to Remote Learning

In late February, just before Vassar's two-week spring break, Kayla and I discussed how to solicit mid-semester feedback from students to gauge what they felt was (and was not) helpful for their learning experiences in the class. We agreed that students would respond to Kayla, who would then read and compile an overall summary to discuss with me. We drafted a feedback form using Google Forms asking students to reflect on how an array of class features shaped their learning (e.g. different types of class activities, classroom dynamics, their level of comfort participating in class discussion, their experience in office hours, and what concerns or questions they might have about the plan for them to co-facilitate class discussion in the second half of the class). I was hopeful that student feedback would provide a sense of what to keep in mind for the latter half of the class, particularly in regard to what students felt about co-facilitating class discussions and taking intellectual ownership of the topics they had chosen for us to cover.

As was the case for other faculty-student partnerships during the spring 2020 semester, our plans for soliciting mid-semester feedback from students in the course fell by the wayside as the COVID-19 pandemic scattered everyone to all corners of the globe. Rather than focus on how class had gone in the first half of the semester, all subsequent emails, polls, and Zoom meetings with Kayla and students in the class were focused on figuring out how to proceed together and build a responsive learning community given the radically different and unanticipated circumstances we now found ourselves in (Weiler & Williamson, 2020). Thankfully, the bulk of the syllabus for the last seven weeks of the course had been filled out by the time spring break rolled around. As a class, we had set aside a bit of class time once a week in the first seven weeks of the semester to agree collectively on the topics that students wanted to cover in the second half of the course. Students had also paired up to find readings to add to the syllabus. However, once the college announced that we would not be returning to campus to finish up the spring term, the key question in my mind was whether it would be asking too much of students to proceed with the original plan to have them co-facilitate their chosen topics and readings.

Kayla and I met over Zoom during spring break to brainstorm what elements of the original plan seemed feasible and which ones might pose an undue burden on students, whose new learning situations were far more unequal in terms of space, resources, and time than they were when they were all living on campus. Thanks to her encouragement and the ability to use our conversations as a sounding board for the approach I was intuitively imagining, we were able to set a supportive tone in the class at a time when so many things were in flux. I shifted things around a bit for the second half of the syllabus and worked with Kayla to rethink the assignments, so that

when we had our first class meeting on Zoom after spring break, I had already made changes to the syllabus and communicated clearly to my students that we would be gauging how to proceed with the course at every step of the way in order to ensure that I made adjustments as-needed. With that joint-messaging from Kayla and me during our first Zoom class session, the students were better able to imagine sticking to the original plan of co-facilitating the topics and readings they had chosen.

Given how much everyone was juggling as we figured out together how to do teaching and learning through Zoom, those of us involved in the STEPP pilot agreed that it made sense for each student-faculty pair to figure out what worked for them. Kayla and I were able to keep our collaboration going through several weeks of on-line learning. We did what we could to borrow from the model of classroom observation that we had been using during in-person classes, with Kayla joining class sessions over Zoom to observe discussions in breakout rooms, and whole-class discussions when we were all on the same screen. We quickly learned that it was difficult for us to observe classroom interactions and participate in discussions in the way that we did when we were learning in person. The 20-30 minutes at the beginning and end of each class session when we were all together made it easier to observe and engage with students, but not the smaller group discussions that happened in separate break-out rooms. At that early stage in learning how to use Zoom features, the only way I knew how to move Kayla around from one breakout room to another was to sit in the main session by myself and wait for her to leave a break-out room and then rejoin me in the main session so I could put her in another breakout room. It felt cumbersome and I felt useless waiting in the main session. There was a level of disconnect from my students and the discussions that made me feel uncomfortable in those early days of learning how to use Zoom. After those first few weeks, our STEPP on-line partnership became more difficult to maintain for additional reasons. Kayla was not immune to the array of disruptions that were occurring in students' lives, so we reprioritized how she should spend her time. As a senior, it made far more sense for her to focus her energies on successfully completing the courses she needed in order to graduate.

Partners in Successful Pedagogy

Participating in the STEPP partnership helped me set the tone for the kind of pedagogical collaboration that I had envisioned for the students who were enrolled in my immigration class that spring. On its own, the STEPP partnership helped blur the traditional notions of faculty-as-expert and student-as-novice, which made it easier to extend that model of learning to what I was asking students to do in the course. Having students choose the topics and readings for the last seven weeks of the course and co-facilitate those sessions made learning and teaching less hierarchical because they had control over the direction and content of the course, and because they were learning from each other, not just from me. The STEPP partnership and the structure of the course also encouraged students to think of themselves as experts of their learning experiences and needs.

I was not certain whether students would experience the increased interactions required to pull off the second half of the course as helpful or stressful given the less-than-ideal context we were in that spring. Much to my relief, it was the former and not the latter. The second half of the

course required far more meetings with students to prepare for how students would go about co-facilitating their class sessions. I met at least once with every student pair to prepare for the class sessions they were in charge of, which allowed me to check in with students regularly, gauge what students needed in a given week, and make the necessary modifications to class. At every moment I was prepared to take over the class again and I made that clear to students, but because of our constant communication and the modifications that we made to the course, not a single student pair relinquished their turn to facilitate class discussion. Students remained intellectually engaged and were creative in their approaches to class sessions. For example, in some weeks, the student pairs decided to start the class at 11:00 am EST, rather than 10:30 am, so that their peers on the West Coast had more time to rest. On those days, student pairs assigned a short video clip or an activity for students (e.g., a free-write) to do off line. Since we always circulated the lesson plan a day in advance, everyone had the opportunity to view the material or engage in the activity the night before if they wanted to use those 30 minutes differently. In some cases, students asked if they could modify their topics and find new readings (e.g., the student pairs focused on immigrants and labor, and immigrants and health, chose new readings that addressed how the pandemic was impacting immigrant labor and immigrant health), which allowed us to use class meetings to discuss what we were seeing going on around us in the context of the pandemic.

In the end, the class worked beautifully despite the pandemic, the uncertainty, and the stress. I did not have the kind of drop-off in attendance, participation, or intellectual engagement that I had expected. Students' desire to continue with synchronous class sessions and willingness to maintain as much of our original plan as possible reflects what other student-faculty partners discovered about the spring 2020 semester—"the importance of stability and community during turbulent periods" (Weiler & Williamson, 2020). Having Kayla to talk through all of that helped me feel more confident about the approach that I was trying to take with the course during the pandemic. Kayla was a lifeline to students in a moment when that kind of connection was incredibly important. She provided valuable feedback that helped me gauge just how much flexibility, leniency, and compassion were needed to help support students through the shift to remote learning and to the array of feelings that emerged as the pandemic unfolded, alongside an economic downturn, and waves of civil unrest across the country.

Though my STEPP collaboration with Kayla ended before we completed the semester, I credit the success I had teaching during the spring 2020 to our pedagogical partnership. Kayla provided feedback from a student's perspective at critical points in the semester—in moments when that feedback had the most important and profound impact on the trajectory of the course. The partnership I had with Kayla also influenced the interactions that I had with the students in my class. I am convinced that the very structure of the course in the second half of the semester—which required more collaboration among students and with me—in part accounts for the success we had together as a class, but so did the fact that the students saw how much I valued my pedagogical partnership with Kayla.

The STEPP pilot was a fantastic relationship-building initiative between faculty and student partners, but I feel strongly that working with a student partner in this way also communicates something to the students in our classes. By having a student pedagogical partner, we communicate very clearly and concretely to students enrolled in our classes that their input

matters to us and that we are open to having conversations about what we are doing in the classroom and how it is working. Ideally, over time, it will not just be our STEPP partners who feel comfortable engaging us in conversations about how our classes are going, and we as faculty will feel braver about inviting more of our students into pedagogical collaborations. Continuing to build *confianza* with more of our students may allow us to create "brave spaces" in the classroom and in our pedagogical partnerships, where faculty and students are committed to taking care of each other as they take risks, make themselves vulnerable, and learn from one another (Arao & Clemens, 2013; Cook-Sather, 2016; Weiler & Williamson, 2020). Together, these threads will help all of us acknowledge and embrace the inherently social nature of teaching and learning.

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