# Co-creating Dynamic Pedagogical Reflection: Building a Transformational Partnership through STEPP

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**CO-CREATING DYNAMIC PEDAGOGICAL REFLECTION: BUILDING A TRANSFORMATIONAL PARTNERSHIP THROUGH STEPP**

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## Introduction

The Student Teacher Engaged Pedagogical Partnership (STEPP) program is an initiative at Vassar College to bring students and faculty together in reflection on teaching practices. In this program, a student is paired with a professor and attends their class weekly as an observer. The partners meet regularly to discuss classroom dynamics and brainstorm methods of inclusive teaching. During both the spring and fall semesters of 2021 we, Maya Pelletier (student partner) and José Perillán (faculty partner), participated in the STEPP program as student-faculty partners, first for *Science, Technology, and Society (STS) 200: Conceptualizing STS* and then for *Physics 200: Modern Physics*. Through participating in STEPP, we developed a relationship of mutual mentorship that benefited us both in incalculable ways. The following conversation and analysis reflect the co-creative nature of interactions we experienced throughout our partnership.

## 1) Part 1: What did each of us bring to our STEPP relationship?

*Maya: How did you think about teaching before participating in STEPP? Did you expect your perspective to change because of the program?*

*José*: Listening to the idea of STEPP during my first orientation felt like a 'light bulb' moment. I've always struggled with how we evaluate our teaching in higher education. For a whole host of reasons, it feels problematic for a faculty's teaching to be evaluated with so much emphasis placed on Course Evaluation Questionnaires (CEQs) in which students assign a 1-5 "grade" on different evaluative criteria. It seems to me that in order to effectively evaluate and improve teaching, we need more than this type of snapshot, end-of-semester feedback from students. By the time you get this feedback the semester is over and any adjustments you might envision have to wait until the next time you teach the course. Even when you use mid-semester surveys to gather student feedback midstream, you are relying on students who are in the midst of a course to be reflective and clear about their perspectives of the structure, content, and culture of that course. That's a lot to ask. All in all, I think the cycles of pedagogical reflection, experimentation, and iteration are far too long and the data used to iterate are way too noisy.

STEPP offers a structured scaffolding that includes immediate and ongoing feedback from a student who is not registered for your course. Throughout my first three semesters of STEPP, I've come to understand how powerful this combination can be. The simple and immediate consequence of carving out time each week to actively reflect on pedagogy has brought a whole different perspective to my teaching. More importantly, it has forced me to do more than

passively reflect on classroom culture. It's an invitation to engage in ongoing dynamic pedagogical reflection.

*José: What had you heard about STEPP, and how did you think you might react to being part of the STEPP program?*

*Maya*: I actually heard about STEPP from my really good friend who helps direct the program. When we first met, we often chatted about classroom experiences we'd had when we lived overseas (her in India, me in Ecuador). During one of our conversations, she told me about this program called STEPP where students and professors were partnered to focus on inclusive and adaptive pedagogy. Of course, I was hooked!

Before starting the program, I expected to learn a lot about how a classroom space is influenced by a professor's approach to teaching, and I hoped to form a relationship of trust and respect with my STEPP partner. I also had my fingers crossed that I would be able to sit in on the class and absorb some of the academic material, which I found fascinating. It's funny, though, looking back at my pre-STEPP life because I really couldn't have imagined the depth of learning you and I would experience together as STEPP partners or the friendship we would develop. I vividly remember my first time attending a STEPP class: I was so focused on following every tiny detail of interaction that by the end of the hour I was completely exhausted. There was only one other time I could remember feeling that tired—when I lived in Quito, Ecuador, for a year of cultural immersion. Suddenly my brain comprehended STEPP and the classroom experience in an entirely new way. I realized that each classroom has its own microculture created by the professor and the students, and entering into new classroom settings must come with some degree of micro-culture shock. The level of uncertainty and discomfort that each person faces would vary based on life experiences and the person's role in the classroom, but this framing completely changed my understanding of what it means to be a student or a teacher. Needless to say, what I thought STEPP would be versus my actual experience feels like the difference between seeing my shadow and seeing my reflection in the mirror.

*José: Have you been interested in teaching and pedagogy for a long time?*

*Maya*: I think before I was interested in teaching, I was fascinated with learning. From a very young age I loved to question, explore ideas, and discover how things worked. I was lucky that along the way I had lots of people who encouraged my curiosity and who were willing to mentor me. As I got older and saw more of the world, I started to connect the propensity for learning with access to good teaching—not that someone with poor teachers *couldn't* learn, but rather that it was much easier to learn with the support of a community that worked to understand your needs. I started to reflect on my own abilities as a product of having fantastic teachers and began to comprehend just how critical teaching is for enjoyable learning and general success. This evolution of my perspective convinced me of the importance of pedagogy (although I didn't discover that word until college!), and solidified my interest in teaching.

*Maya: What first drew you to STEPP? What was it like to have a new partner coming into the semester?*

*José*: I've been teaching in the Vassar Engaged Pluralism Initiative—Summer Immersion Program the past two summers. As part of the 2020 Summer Immersion Program, I was paired with a student partner and introduced to STEPP. I'm someone who generally likes to actively reflect on my teaching, so I was intrigued by the opportunity to do this in conversation with a student. We continued our partnership throughout the fall semester, giving me a sense of what a full semester STEPP experience is like. Although I found it valuable to carve out time each week for active reflection on classroom dynamics, I must confess that in my first semester the interactions with my partner did not feel fully collaborative. We would discuss classroom dynamics and I would listen to his feedback, but I preferred to process his observations on my own. This felt like a safer dynamic for me. I maintained a strict professor-student interaction with my partner, which allowed me to protect myself from any vulnerable feelings that might arise due to these exchanges.

In deciding to continue with STEPP for the Spring-2021 semester, I felt compelled to open myself up, share my vulnerability, and make the weekly reflections more of a partnered exercise. Being paired with you, Maya, was a wonderful stroke of luck. It was your first STEPP experience, and you brought a sense of openness, enthusiasm, and curiosity to the relationship. I felt like I could purge my protective instincts from the previous semester and start fresh. From our early interactions, I could tell that our STEPP relationship would be extremely fruitful. Our conversations flowed easily, but were raw and provocative.

*Maya and José:* In this first part of our conversation we reflected on what we each brought to the table when we began our partnership during the Spring-2021 semester. What seems clear is that our working relationship flourished in part because we were both ready to jump all in. Maya's curious nature and her passion for learning in community were critical to the catalytic nature of the process, as was José's openness to engaging in a shared process of pedagogical reflection. In the next section, we continue our conversation focusing on the particulars of our shared process of reflection.

## 2) What was the process like between partners?

*Maya: What is it like to have a student in your classroom who you know is there to watch you teach and give feedback? What was it like for you to have that type of relationship with a student?*

*José*: To be honest, at first it was anxiety producing. To think that a student was watching my every move and giving me feedback every week on my teaching style and classroom management was hard for my ego to take. When I first started with STEPP, I buffered myself from this bruising anxiety by processing on my own. This allowed me to retain some semblance of a professorial power relationship with my partner. The weekly reflections were still useful but not as effective as when I relinquished control, embraced my vulnerability, and trusted the

relationship with my partner. That's when STEPP shifted from a useful exercise into a transformational experience. I consider my relationship with you, as a STEPP partner, unique. It's far different from my relationships with advisees, research assistants, or mentees. There's a collegial aspect to our interactions. It's more of a mutual mentoring that has sprung out of our conversations. I value your expertise and perspective as something necessary for my continued pedagogical development. It's also something I can't access myself.

*José: Was it awkward to give a professor feedback on their teaching? If so, how did you overcome that feeling?*

*Maya*: I think giving someone feedback on something as personal as their teaching style and way of existing in a classroom is surprisingly—what's the word—raw? Intimate? Vulnerable? I don't think I would call it *awkward*, exactly. Maybe unnatural? Or unexpected. I like that: vulnerable and unexpected. You spend an hour and fifteen minutes intently focused on someone's behavior, their speech, their way of interacting with others, their way of connecting ideas. You see what they notice, what they don't notice. You have gut feelings that you would normally just let float by. You scrutinize how students perceive the space, how they react, what the space becomes through student-professor interactions. After all this, you talk about it with the person you've been observing. In a way it feels a bit like reading someone's diary out loud to them, except that what you're reading is something *you* actually wrote about *them*. That last point is key because it adds an extra personal layer to everything. You may be talking about them, but you also have to share your thoughts with them—talk to them; that requires vulnerability on both sides. This type of sharing is unexpected, first because it's uncommon in our culture (especially coming from students to professors), and second because in having this vulnerability you discover things you didn't realize you thought.

Being able to foster this type of sharing is tough, especially at the beginning of a partnership. To do it you have to build a relationship with the person you're talking to. There must be trust, respect, and humility on both sides as well as a belief in best intent. The bottom line is that this level of vulnerability can be uncomfortable. Once I accepted that, the feeling of discomfort was no longer the focus of our interactions. We both knew our goal was to make the classroom experience inclusive and meaningful, so focusing on that during challenging conversations was really valuable.

*Maya: How did you approach hearing feedback about something as personal as your teaching practices?*

*José*: I decided to go into academia because I loved teaching, not necessarily for the opportunity to do research and scholarship. That has always been my MO, and unfortunately it caused me a bit of consternation on my way to tenure.

In some ways my interests and emphasis on teaching made me search out opportunities like STEPP to further develop my craft. On the flip side, opening myself up to regular and sustained feedback was hard because it brought on feelings of insecurity and, yes, even imposter syndrome. The weekly process we established throughout the semester was critical to facing down that insecurity and getting over myself. Your notes about class dynamics were precise and

insightful. You made sure not only to point out problems, but to balance those observations with positive reinforcement. It was also very helpful to hear about your own experiences in other classes. Things that worked, and others that didn't. During our conversations, I always felt like you were an ally. You remained curious, open, and supportive of my process of dynamic reflection.

Most importantly, what eased my anxiety was the trust that we established through our humor and banter. Our conversations were not limited to metabolizing the observations and feedback from the previous class. We dedicated significant time to discussing questions that came up about Science, Technology, and Society as a field or the latest Ezra Klein podcast. Quasi-tangents were critical to developing our rapport.

*José: I noticed that by the end of the first semester you were feeling significantly more comfortable in our exchanges. How did you get there? What changed?*

*Maya*: A lot of things probably changed, but mostly I realized I could tell you anything and you would still see me as the valuable and imperfect human that I am. There was no fear that you would judge me or misunderstand my humor or laugh at some stupid comment I made. We achieved an amazing level of trust that meant I felt comfortable doing anything from talking with you about really tough topics related to inclusive pedagogy to emailing you at 11 pm on a Saturday about the end of *My Octopus Teacher*. We shared so much over the semester—from thoughts and ideas to academic resources and comics to the creation of a classroom—that I felt understood, respected, and valued as an equal.

*Maya: Was it difficult to incorporate my feedback into the classroom? What worked and what didn't work?*

*José*: Because your observations of class were so forthright and clear, it made incorporating feedback easy. I never felt blindsided by one of your comments or observations. Knowing that you were observing my class made me more aware of my own missteps or awkward exchanges. I usually acknowledged your points and agreed with your observations upfront, which left plenty of time for us to brainstorm ways to adjust and adapt my class management strategies. What made the incorporation of these tweaks feel easy was how open we were with the class from day one about your role and the philosophy of STEPP. You introduced yourself at the beginning of the semester, and students understood exactly what you were doing in class. Then, throughout the semester I recall several occasions when I explicitly referred to our one-on-one STEPP conversations about classroom dynamics as a reason for making an adjustment or tweak. I was more confident in making adjustments thanks to the deliberate and reflective nature of our process.

**Analysis**

Figure 1: A schematic representing the process of pedagogical partnership we developed during STEPP. The process began with a relationship founded on trust, respect, and vulnerability, which led to a collegial and communicative partnership. Learning and growth evolved from the co-creative aspect of this relationship and was continued through real-time, adaptive, dynamic

reflection on teaching and learning. All of these elements were oriented towards a final vision, or purpose: an inclusive and effective classroom environment.
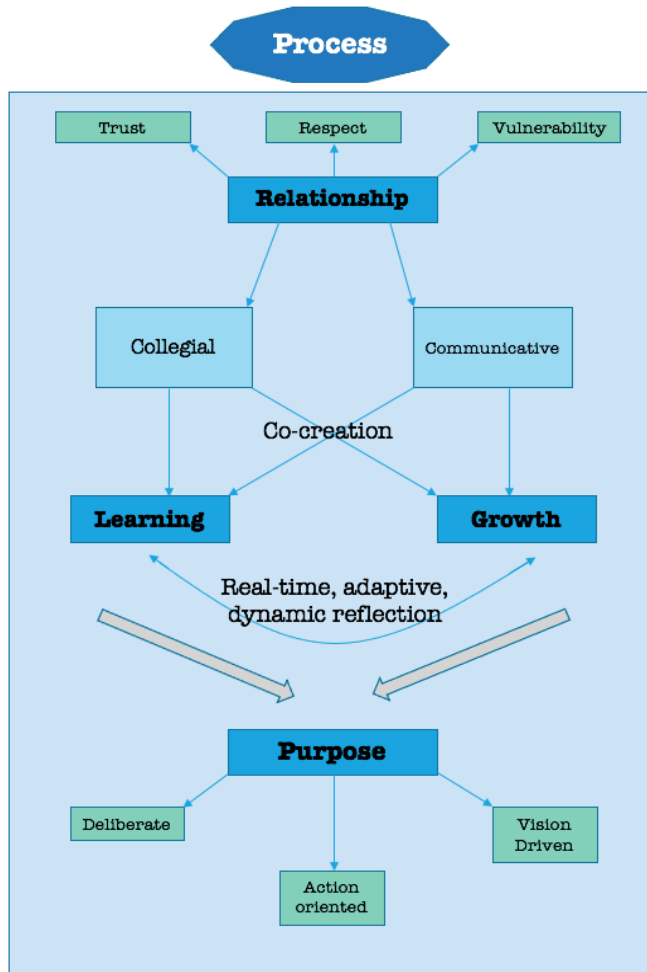


A process is a series of steps moving from one unfinished part to the next always keeping in mind some end objective. That STEPP supports a process of pedagogical reflection implies that it is ever changing and that it aims to improve the yet unfinished art of teaching. Through our work together we (José and Maya) have developed an understanding of the process of pedagogical partnership that can be seen in Figure 1. This process, our journey through STEPP, is centered on co-creation and real-time, adaptive dynamic reflection that works toward the goal of creating an inclusive and effective classroom environment.

The process of pedagogical partnership necessarily begins with the student-faculty relationship. This relationship is the basis of all learning and growth generated from a program like STEPP. Given that pedagogical partnership requires face-to-face feedback and discussion on something as personal as teaching practices, the relationship between the partners must be built on mutual trust, respect, and vulnerability. Partners are privy to confidential and sensitive information. There is an expectation that what is said stays between the partners, and this requires trust. Similarly, when sharing information and ideas, it is important that each partner treats the other as an individual with emotions, deserving of respect. With this trust and respect established, partners can begin to embrace vulnerability, perhaps the most difficult aspect of the student-faculty relationship. In most contexts, especially in academia, vulnerability is not welcomed as a virtue, especially not when dealing with the power differential between student and professor. It is only through both partners opening up to constructive critique, however, that the full potential of a pedagogical partnership can be realized.

Once the relationship is established it takes on a collegial and communicative nature that we define as "co-creative." The two partners are working as such to build a classroom environment that is healthy for both the students and the professor. Through insights, discourse, and reflection

each partner has the opportunity for learning, growth, and mutual mentorship. Throughout the partnership, learning and growth are continued by cycles of real-time, adaptive, dynamic reflection on teaching practices, learning styles, and observation strategies. All of these interactions build toward the purpose of the partnership, which is both individual (personal growth) and communal (creating a sense of belonging in the classroom and providing the best possible opportunity for student learning). Ideas for inclusive teaching practices are devised and strategies are developed for classroom experimentation to carry out those ideas. This vision for the classroom evolves from the learning and growth of the pedagogical relationship.

These elements—relationship, learning, growth, and purpose—make up the process we experienced as STEPP partners and enabled us to participate in a transformational process of pedagogical reflection.

### 3) What did we take away from this STEPP program?

*Maya: How do you think your classroom has changed from your participation in STEPP?*

*José*: Much of our pedagogical tweaks and interventions were around various approaches to introducing and discussing concepts and ideas. In other words, the underlying tension between relaying necessary information while also making room for students to engage in formative discussions. As we discussed on a number of occasions throughout the semester, I believe that striking a balance between information and formation is at the heart of teaching as an art form. That part of the craft will never be perfected, but through iterative development and caring attention it can certainly be honed. You have helped me make this tension explicit and been an invaluable partner in my pedagogical development.

*José: In what sense has your view of what goes into teaching changed because of STEPP?*

Maya: STEPP really showed me how many different things a good teacher has to focus on, from classroom dynamics, to content, to student interests. Since I wasn't focused on learning academic material I could instead put my mind to noticing the culture of the classroom and understanding various perspectives on teaching and learning. STEPP also made me feel the intense commitment and care that goes into good teaching. The fact that you were willing to go above and beyond— that you would allow the vulnerability of face-to-face, weekly feedback—showed me on a deeper, more personal level what it means to be a great teacher.

*Maya: How have your thoughts about student experience changed through participating in STEPP?*

*José*: Before participating in STEPP, my reflections on pedagogy were akin to living in Edwin A. Abbott's "Flatland." It's as if I resided in two dimensions, with no real access to a third dimension. That is why I refer to STEPP as a Gestalt experience. All of a sudden I am swimming in this new dimension. It's extraordinary and invigorating. I had brief flashes of insights into the student experience before, but to have a student partner engaging weekly, takes it to a completely new level.

*José: How did your STEPP experience change the way you engage in other classes?*

*Maya*: STEPP has made me more aware of both my own position and experience in a learning setting as well as that of others. Before STEPP, when I entered a classroom, my primary focus was to learn as much academic material as possible, regardless of the pedagogy being used. There were times when I had to shut down the parts of my brain that were reacting with anger or fear or shame to certain pedagogies because my purpose was not to have emotion; I had to absorb knowledge. In limiting my human response to the classroom, I was becoming an automaton in my learning, I was being unfair to myself as a person, and I was missing important cues for inclusion in the classroom. When you train to become a machine, it is difficult to respond to others or yourself as human—something that destroys community and makes it difficult to realize unfair situations when they arise. STEPP helped me reconnect with being a student who is also *human*; I am better able to recognize my needs, notice the experiences of others, and find ways to approach professors about making the classroom a welcoming space for everyone.

*Maya: Do you find that my feedback influences your life in interactions beyond the classroom?*

*José*: I think it's natural for a transformative experience to push beyond the confines of its immediate context. STEPP is no different. I feel that my work with you in STEPP has been crucial to increasing my understanding of how I impact those around me. Without a student-facing sounding board, pedagogical reflection and development can be rather self-involved and abstract. That process feels fundamentally different now, and knowing that, I feel as though I want to apply it to other facets of my life.

**Conclusion**

Before our STEPP partnership, it seems the two of us were limited in our capacity to fully experience the culture of classrooms of which we were a part. Whether we were automatons or "Flatlanders," there was something significant missing from our pedagogical experiences. We found that we could be "effective" students/teachers by going through the motions, doing the work, showing up to class, and engaging in performative learning and teaching. These were certainly safe and informative pedagogical experiences, but they were also somewhat sterile. Our knowledge grew as a result of these experiences, but our humanity and community not so much. Our STEPP relationship has carved out a dynamically reflective space that allows us to collaboratively transcend performative pedagogy and become more attuned to our sense of communal humanity.

This process of ongoing pedagogical reflection is a wonderful gift. As a teacher, I (José) have become sensitized to the student experience in a uniquely transformative and irreversible way. There's no denying that, given the chance, students can be trusted collaborators and colleagues. I have much to learn and I look forward to further STEPP iterations in which we can continue this invaluable dialog.

As a student, I (Maya) have witnessed the dedication, focus, and effort that goes into great teaching. I have learned how classroom culture is shaped by a professor, and how this culture is experienced differently by various students. Having the chance to participate in a pedagogical partnership has also shown me one of many ways that a student can help create healthy, inclusive, and educational classroom spaces.

Together, we continue to find value in our STEPP experiences. As academia exists in a state of constant flux, so too must the classroom if it is to respond to changing student needs and experiences. Participation in STEPP reminds us both that learning and teaching will never be static practices if their goal is to build inclusive community.