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A DIALOGICAL LEARNING EXPERIENCE THROUGH VASSAR COLLEGE'S STEPP PROGRAM

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Introduction

The STEPP (Student Teacher Engaged Pedagogical Partnership) program is modeled after a similar program at Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges called the Students as Learners and Teachers (SaLT) program. The SaLT program began in 2007, and centers around the notion that students and staff can and should interact with faculty members as colleagues in order to link everyone in the college community to educational opportunities (Lesnick & Cook-Sather, 2010). Specifically, SaLT and other programs through Bryn Mawr's Teaching and Learning Initiative "challenged the belief that expertise is hierarchical and that some people's work solely supports others' educational opportunity" (Lesnick & Cook-Sather, 2010, p. 3), thereby rejecting the dominant cultural model in higher education. The SaLT program invites the participation of faculty members who are open both to reaffirming and to rethinking their pedagogical practices in order to achieve the common goal of creating a more inclusive classroom.

SaLT laid the groundwork for the STEPP program at Vassar College. Vassar is a small, liberal arts college in the Hudson Valley of New York. Vassar believes strongly in interdisciplinary learning, and students at Vassar often take courses outside of their discipline or across disciplines. The curriculum is designed with an emphasis on intellectual inquiry, critical thinking and opportunity to explore various fields of study. The Engaged Pluralism Initiative (EPI) group introduced STEPP to Vassar in their efforts to build communities of inclusion while celebrating collaboration across differences. STEPP, like SaLT, supports student-faculty partners in affirming and revising pedagogical practices.

In this essay, we, a faculty member in education (Leonisa) and a student (Nywel) describe the course on which we collaborated, our own positions at Vassar, and a dialogue between the two of us that explores various aspects of our experience with STEPP.

The course and student-faculty partners

Education 263, "The Adolescent in American Society," has been offered in the Department of Education for at least 25 years. It is a core requirement for students pursuing secondary teacher certification but open to both education and non-education students alike. The course is offered every fall semester and generally enrolls 20-25 students. It explores the concept of adolescence from a variety of perspectives: historical, developmental, psychological, sociological, and cultural, as well as through educational context and practice. Dr. Leonisa Ardizzone has been teaching EDUC 263 for four years. In the fall of 2021, Dr. Ardizzone joined the STEPP program for EDUC 263 and met her student partner, Nywel Cheaye.

Leonisa has been an educator for 30 years, starting her teaching career as a middle and high school science teacher working primarily in under-resourced schools and communities. She received her doctoral degree in International Educational Development with a specialization in Peace Education in 2001, and since that time has continued to work in PK-12 schools—as a teacher, curriculum developer and coach, as well as universities, museums, and non-profit organizations. She came to Vassar in 2018 as an adjunct professor and is now a full-time visiting professor in the department of education.

Nywel is a senior at Vassar majoring in Science, Technology & Society (STS), a multidisciplinary program that analyzes science and technology through socio, historical, and cultural contexts. Nywel’s academic concentration is in medical sociology and bioethics because of her passion for patient advocacy.

Why did we get involved in STEPP and what did we hope to learn and explore?

Nywel: I got involved in STEPP because speaking to professors has not always been easy for me, and in many ways, it still is not easy. I was raised in a culture that does not believe in questioning or critiquing adults, and I have developed conditioning that makes it difficult to defend myself against authority. Personally, it was difficult to develop relationships with professors in my first year at Vassar because they seemed incredibly intimidating. In addition to this, through conversations that I have had with my peers, I have learned that there are many things that students wish they could change about their courses. For example: the desire for a professor to have more or less organization, a class to be more inclusive, or a professor to be more critical of readings. There has always been feedback that students have wanted to share but have not felt comfortable to say directly. I think it becomes a missed opportunity because the professor too does not hear a student perspective. As a result, that professor might teach that course in the exact same way, which carries over into their next classroom experience with new students. For me, being a part of STEPP was an act of being the person that I wish I had the confidence to be in my earlier years of college. I wish that I was able to go to a teacher and say, “What that student said was racist and you should have commented on it,” or, “This reading did not bring anything new to the class; it was very superficial and I think there's a better option.” Or even, “I don't think this course is intersectional enough. It does not represent multiple identities and the ways in which people are multifaceted.” STEPP is my way of observing the classroom and being an advocate for students who are not able to have that voice for themselves. I came into this with a blank slate, not knowing what to expect, but my experiences have been great.

Leonisa: I decided to join STEPP because I loved the idea of having a dialogue partner. I’ve been teaching for almost thirty years and the last time I had someone “observing” me was ages ago—when I was getting my teaching certificate—so I liked the idea of having someone in the room with me, helping me “see” what I missed and engaging in discussion about teaching and learning. The course I selected for the partnership was one that I’d taught for a few years and had been making incremental changes to each year, but felt like it needed some deeper consideration. I liked the idea that a student perspective could help me do that. I hoped that my STEPP partner would be able to provide feedback and observations on what works, what needs to be adapted or

chopped, how she thought students were responding to readings and activities, etc... and that's exactly what happened!

How did we set-up our learning relationship? How have we been working together?

Nywel: I do not feel like we actually planned to have a concrete relationship model. We did not have any established goals. I think we just made them up as we went along or at least I did, maybe you didn't. I came into this partnership previously having another experience with STEPP and in my prior experience, the other professor outlined how she wanted our meetings to run. My feedback and observations did not involve many ways the course should be changed. It was also a virtual class so discussions looked a lot different. We spent more time talking through lesson plans, because her goals were more specific in terms of desiring comprehension for students who were not STEM majors. For our relationship, I realized that you had not participated in STEPP before and so you were looking to me to see how we were going to define this partnership. I think that is also why I utilized questions in my notes. I wanted to move beyond merely telling you if I thought what was happening in the class was good or bad. Our relationship was very feedback heavy, and I've come to realize that my reflections were more important just because of the nature of the discussions. I also think that as I realized how seriously you considered my feedback, I made sure that I was selective in choosing which notes to share. There are comments that got left out of the final draft of my notes. There are comments that I did not feel were relevant to share with you. I felt like if you feel good about what's happening, then there's no reason for me to add any additional comments to it, especially because it's your class and I want you to stay authentic to what feels right for you. As I realized how strongly you held on to my words, I wanted to be specific about what I wrote. The way that we have worked together has been immensely—and unexpectedly—collaborative. You really took into account what I said and tried it out in the classroom. I didn't feel like I was a third-party observer but that we were in pedagogy together, which I absolutely appreciate.

Leonisa: We didn't set a “formal” process other than a weekly check-in meeting, thus during our first meeting we got to know one another and then headed right into a regular weekly dialogue. I did share that I had taught this course a number of times with minor revisions each year and felt I was ready to make bigger changes so I wanted your honest feedback on how learning was going, what worked and didn't, and what you observed about classroom interactions. I found your feedback incredibly helpful. I loved the way you set up the document you shared with me each week, outlining what happened at different points in the class period and including your “noticings” and then asking me questions for my own reflection. I really appreciated your perspective and loved when you would notice things that I didn't. I felt that our weekly meetings always ran smoothly, and when I was “thinking out loud” we had some great conversations about where some of these ideas could head. After talking about things with you, I felt able to try new things and then discuss how we thought it went and what adjustments were needed.

What have we learned about ourselves, pedagogy, and the process of this type of collaboration?

Nywel: I have learned that pedagogy involves trial and error, especially in observing someone who has taught for decades. I can imagine that the environment of the classroom shifts with new generations, and the students who were being taught in the '90s are not the same students who are being taught in the 2020s. I would imagine that pedagogical styles have had to be continuously revamped. In simpler terms, as school moves from semester to semester, new students come in. People from different backgrounds, countries, etc.—all of this creates what the specific classroom environment is going to be, and so it's necessary to be fluid and adapt with the new people who come in. I've also learned that while it is great to have a specific teaching style, it is always great to switch it up. I think that with routine comes predictability, which breeds loss of interest because you know what's going to happen every single week. You're going to do the exact same thing you did last week. You're going to answer the exact same questions and talk to the exact same people. You're not really growing, so I think that through this process I've learned that sometimes you have to throw in some new tricks to create a different kind of response. On the contrary, I've also learned that when something isn't broken, you shouldn't try to fix it. I did attempt to give you advice and add an idea about how to switch up our class discussion and then heard later that everybody liked it better the original way. Sometimes things are meant to be fixed and sometimes you can keep things exactly the way they are and they work perfectly fine. I think there's a balance between knowing when to switch things up and knowing when to stick to the structure.

Leonisa: I too think pedagogy has a trial-and-error aspect. I know that I want to use a critical and dialogical pedagogy in all my classes, but I also know that many variables determine how that will go, such as the readings, the students, the energy of the students, what point we are in the semester, the actual temperature in the room, etc... So I learned that sometimes things don't work — even if they worked the year before — and that's okay. I learned that being genuine about the subject matter, giving room for people to share their ideas and thought processes, and leaving space for compassion are very important to me (and perhaps in general). I learned that it's okay to try things and just see what happens! This is especially true when I know/knew that the next day I would be able to discuss it with Nywel to see if my perceptions of “the thing” were consistent with hers or if I was maybe being too hard on myself.

Have our learnings through STEPP reached beyond the course we are working on? (Have we taken our learning to other situations?)

Nywel: I'm going to answer this in the reverse way. Have I taken things from other courses and brought them into STEPP? The answer is yes: a lot of the suggestions that I have given you have been things that I liked that other professors have done. As far as reaching beyond the course, it comes up in conversations with my friends. A lot of them have told me about negative experiences they have had, and I wish that I could just sign up their professors for STEPP. But they have to sign up voluntarily, you can't force anyone to be a part of this partnership. They have to want to experience feedback and growth through observation and reflection. Many professors can benefit from it; there have been so many stories, predominantly from students of

color and femme-identifying students, that are either underrepresented or dealing with some sort of discrimination in the course. It also doesn't have to be in regards to extremely pressing concerns, sometimes it can be as simple as taking the time to learn how to pronounce a student's name properly. I wish that so many of my peers of color felt safe in their classrooms and felt like they were able to speak freely in their learning environments; however, that is not always the case. Many stories I've heard involved people being afraid to ask questions for fear of coming off as unintelligent or simply feeling unwelcome in an environment because of the dynamics of a classroom. I think that many professors can do more. Students that represent dominant identities can also do more to make these spaces more welcoming and understand that there is more difficulty that accompanies being a student of color in a predominantly white institution. Inclusivity is such a pivotal part of learning and people's ability to process information; if it doesn't apply to you and your situation, or if you feel like there isn't a way to make it applicable, then it loses its value. Similarly, if you're in spaces where professors constantly perpetuate harm in ways that are unknown to them but apparent to you, there's a gap in how much you can truly get from the course. These are all things that are not easy to convey to someone when they have the ability to determine how well you do in their class. The CEQs (Vassar's course evaluation forms, which are shared at the end of the semester) do not serve their purpose efficiently. It is extremely limiting in how courses can be evaluated, which means that certain concerns never get addressed. STEPP is "fighting the good fight" and taking that responsibility away from students who have direct contact with the professor and putting it in the hands of someone who is not going to be penalized for speaking up. I wish that it was something that everyone participated in.

Leonisa: I found that when I tried something different or had an observation of my teaching via my conversations with Nywel, that "learning" of mine carried into my other classes (and my work outside of Vassar). I generally think a lot about how a class went or have ideas on what I want to do, or wish I had done, and I found that the STEPP process helped me rein that in (like, hey, don't overthink it!) and also allowed me to step back and look at all my teaching and say, "What are you doing that is especially helpful and impactful for students?" and "What things are you missing? What needs to be changed?" I loved this aspect of STEPP. I am a lifelong learner and the STEPP process was a very clear reminder of why that matters. I can always be a better teacher and students can help me with that. As professors, we have to wait until the end of the semester to offer an evaluation, and when I review my CEQs, I learn something, but only if students add comments. Since the CEQs come in well after the class is over, I cannot make any real time adjustments. But with STEPP, I knew well before the end of the semester how I was doing, how students felt, and I already began to explore ways that I will change the course before next fall. I think one of the best things to come out of our partnership were those jottings you shared with me, because now a small group of students has volunteered to work with me on examining and updating the course. As a constructivist, I have always been willing to develop or change readings and activities based on what students are interested in, so this STEPP process has added another dimension to how I can do so.

Why is a program like STEPP (or programs like it) important for educators?

Leonisa: Many people become professors without much training in how to teach. For lots of professors, their content area knowledge is what's most important to them. But, in order to be

effective and compassionate educators we also have to understand pedagogy and our students. STEPP allows both novice and experienced educators to improve their teaching skills, their preparation for classes, and, I think, ensures that youth voice is part of our planning and teaching process.

Nywel: STEPP is important for educators because it partially removes the hierarchical nature of the student-teacher dyad. It humanizes students. Educators gain the opportunity to understand that a student is not merely a blank slate that is ready to receive the information that they choose to teach, but rather fully-fledged beings who have opinions about the concepts they learn and the manner in which they learn.

Concluding Thoughts

We both really enjoyed the STEPP experience and learned a lot from it. Hopefully, the program will grow at Vassar and other universities will implement a similar offering. The biggest takeaway from this experience is that educators are learners and learners are educators. In institutions, we make distinctions between the two, which is necessary sometimes, but it's also important to realize that the relationship is symbiotic. We are all knowledge holders and we are all knowledge receivers. Although students do not have degrees and titles, this does not mean that they cannot also provide information that is useful to their educators. We hope that as this program grows within Vassar and beyond that people take hold of the intertwined nature of this relationship.

Reference

Lesnick, A., & Cook-Sather, A. (2010). Building Civic Capacity on Campus Through a Radically Inclusive Teaching and Learning Initiative. *Innovative Higher Education* 35, 1, 3-17. DOI:10.1007/s10755-009-9122-3