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CREATING CLASSROOMS AS RADICAL SPACES OF POSSIBILITY

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In bell hooks' seminal text, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, she writes:

The classroom is the most radical space of possibility in the academy. For years, it has been a place where education has been undermined by teachers and students alike who seek to use it as a platform for opportunistic concerns rather than as a place to learn....Urging all of us to open our minds and hearts so that we can know beyond the boundaries of what is acceptable, so that we can think and rethink, so that we can create new visions, I celebrate teaching that enables transgressions—a movement against and beyond boundaries. (hooks, 1994, p. 12)

It is often easy to forget about the radical possibilities of the classroom. In our current moment, when faculty are being asked to do more, students are undertaking record amounts of financial debt to attend colleges and universities, and institutional resources are constrained, it is easy to feel overwhelmed and powerless. We cannot dismiss these very real feelings and challenges. hooks' words serve as a reminder that, despite these barriers, the classroom can be a site to break down boundaries and create the types of spaces we envision for a better world. We just need to do the work.

Student and faculty partnerships have the potential to disrupt many of these systemic barriers and transform institutions of higher education (de Bie, Marquis, Cook-Sather, & Luqueño, 2021). Creating spaces for students, and particularly students who possess social identities that have historically been excluded from contributing to the educational missions of institutions of higher education, is a radical move if you consider the context where instructors are viewed as the possessor of knowledge and students as vessels to receive that information. Partnerships can center these students and disrupt power dynamics between them and their instructors. Partnerships can also promote a culture of collaboration that works against the individualistic reward system of higher education. It is through these collaborations and the sharing of new ideas that the classroom can be conceived of as a transformative space that centers learning, well-being, compassion, and radical societal change. With these potential impacts in mind, we at Tufts University created our own Pedagogical Partnership Program.

Tufts University's Pedagogical Partnership Program (P3) developed in the summer of 2020 and was founded by two undergraduate students, Jillian Impastato and Langley Topper, in conjunction with the Center for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching (CELT). The program was designed with several goals in mind, including to provide:

- (1) students of minoritized and marginalized identities a space to contribute to the teaching and learning mission at Tufts
- (2) faculty members with a better understanding of student experiences and how those impact teaching and learning

- (3) faculty members with additional forms of feedback to improve teaching beyond end-of-semester evaluations, and
- (4) students and faculty members with an opportunity to collaborate on pedagogy.

The essays in this volume reflect these goals and describe the radical classroom spaces that have been created through these partnerships. They highlight how partners have tried to actualize these goals, but also have made mistakes along the way.

The first three essays are written by student and faculty partners who describe the ways they were able to use their partnerships to further develop more equitable and inclusive classroom spaces, in spite of teaching in a remote modality in the Fall-2020 semester. The authors each describe their initial uncertainties about the partnership, and how, through open communication and feedback, they created meaningful and lasting relationships.

The first of these three essays, [“Flexibility and Vulnerability: The Pedagogical Partnership Two-Step,”](#) is co-authored by Jillian Impastato, Class of 2021, and her faculty partner, Erin Seaton. In this essay, the authors use the metaphor of a dance to navigate their feelings of uncertainty coming into the partnership and course. They share how they had to become comfortable with this uncertainty by remaining flexible with each other and the students in the class and through leaning into their own vulnerabilities. These experiences not only provided them with greater confidence, but also allowed them to work through any challenges and to create a better educational experience for their students.

Kerri Modrey-Mandell’s and Michelle Nguyen’s co-authored essay, [“A Strength-Based Approach for Co-Constructing Strong Pedagogical Partnerships and Inclusive and Equitable Classroom Environments,”](#) describes the way they worked together to create a learning environment that was strengths-based, trauma-informed, inclusive, equitable and tended to students social emotional needs in a time of immense uncertainty. This faculty-student pair discuss the ways they fostered a collaborative spirit with one another before developing specific strategies that they implemented together to create their desired learning environment.

While many faculty may struggle with navigating uncertainty and tending to students’ needs, class size and course modality make this more challenging. Eve Abraha (Class of 2021) and Lauren Crowe (Lecturer in Biology), in their essay, [“Exploring the Student Perspective in an Asynchronous Virtual Introductory Biology Course,”](#) share how their partnership created a space to gain valuable student feedback in a large asynchronous course. While Lauren is currently an instructor, she was as a student most familiar with large, lecture-focused STEM classes, and as a senior Biology major, Eve shared many feelings of marginalization throughout her time in the major. Informed by research-based strategies and their own experiences, Eve and Lauren were able to create multiple avenues to gain student feedback to support student learning, particularly students from marginalized groups, in spite of the impersonal structure of the course.

In the second group of essays, we have accounts from individuals of how they navigated particular challenges in their partnership. Amy Hirschfeld’s essay, [“Partnering with Students to Experiment with Equitable Assessment Methods,”](#) is a deeply personal reflection on her journey to becoming a committed anti-racist educator. She describes how working with students as

partners provided her with new perspectives and increased confidence to pursue greater risk in her teaching, particularly in her course assessments.

Muri Marinho Mascarenhas' essay, "[Professor Love, Feedback Love](#)," is a student reflection that explores a partnership in an art class. More specifically, it emphasizes how participating in P3 allowed them to learn valuable skills and lessons that have helped and motivated them to become a better educator in their home country of Brazil.

The final essay, "[Working to Build True Partnership in the Leadership of the P3 Program](#)," by me, focuses on partnership in the leadership of the program. I share a reflection about my successes and struggles as a staff person striving to model partnership in collaborating on the program with student leaders. While trying to manage the logistics and professional obligations of the program, I discuss key learnings and strategies to amplify the voices of students and to ensure the program is truly a collaboration in all facets.

Each of these essays reflects our attempt to create the radical classroom spaces that hooks writes about. These essays in no way suggest that Tufts' P3 program has fully actualized this possibility. We are learning and will continue to learn from the work of so many other individuals engaged in partnership work. These essays are our attempt to share our learnings and commitments with you. We hope you find these reflections valuable and feel inspired by the work of our students and faculty.

References

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