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FLEXIBILITY AND VULNERABILITY: THE PEDAGOGICAL PARTNERSHIP TWO-STEP

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In thinking about our partnership during the pilot phase of the Pedagogical Partnership Program (P3) at Tufts University, we see that the work we did together required mastering something of an academic dance, learning how to alternate between leading and responding, staying in step with each other over the course of the semester. Dance feels like an apt metaphor for the work of faculty-student partnering, especially in the way a strong partnership requires careful attention, practice, communication, listening, and an ability to respond to the unexpected twists, turns, or missteps that arise in the classroom, and adjusting accordingly. Dancing with a partner also requires a close connection that grows from a place of vulnerability and commitment to the art, and we have found this to be sustaining beyond our initial partnership. Dancing, like student-faculty partnering, is inherently relational and requires authentic attention and openness to review, revision, and repair. It is only through this practice of listening that growth transpires. As a possible model for others who are considering engaging in the dance of student-faculty collaboration, this essay highlights specific examples of how we built our partnership, fell into step, found our rhythm, and grew from this work.

Erin: A faculty perspective

One of my biggest challenges as a faculty member is that I rarely receive teaching feedback, particularly while I am teaching a course. End-of-semester student course evaluations are helpful in thinking about future iterations of a course, but often student feedback on course evaluations is limited to rating scales and largely lacks depth or specific details. Likewise, when I encounter challenges in my teaching, I have struggled to find a community of peers in which to process these. It's rare to have support for conversations, conflicts, and other teaching decisions, in the moment and from a student perspective. While soliciting mid-semester or end-of-class student feedback is possible, the power dynamic between students and faculty can create barriers that could make it difficult for students to share their authentic experiences. Asking faculty peers to observe teaching can provide useful information from a faculty standpoint, but this cannot adequately capture students' experiences of a course. The Pedagogical Partnership Program (P3) offers a remedy to this dilemma. Participating students pair with faculty, provide in-the-moment feedback throughout the course, and create a space in which to negotiate dilemmas of practice with faculty partners. Without the complexity or power dynamic that students might experience if they are enrolled in a course for credit—and in real time—practices, pedagogy, materials, and assignments can be adapted throughout the course to better meet students' needs.

In the summer of 2020, I faced the challenges of entering the classroom as a white, cis-gendered, heterosexual female acutely aware of my positionality during a time of heightened attention to racial injustice and, simultaneously, teaching a fully online course for the first time. I wondered what it meant to be a white anti-racist educator in that particular moment and how I would create a space that privileged the voices and experience of students who felt their identities were

marginalized in schools and higher education. Would we be able to tackle conversations across race and identity? And how might this happen in a virtual space? I had gained some experience in teaching online from the sudden transition to virtual learning in the spring semester of 2020, but I had made adjustments in the moment, without a larger picture, and mostly in response to students' shifting and emergent needs when schools and colleges closed.

As I prepared for my summer course for pre-service teachers on Human Development and Learning, a faculty member reached out to see if I would be willing to work on a new project in which I would be paired with a student partner for the short summer semester. I considered the possibilities: I was unsure about teaching at this moment and in this new modality. What would it be like to engage with a student around my own uncertainty? Would it require additional work at a time when I already felt overwhelmed? Would it feel supportive and helpful? How would we frame our work together as partners? Would the student participate in the class? Co-teach or co-facilitate? How could I learn from the student, and what could I provide in return?

The first step was embracing my own uncertainty and leaning into this opportunity. It felt like a perfect moment to engage in this new work of inviting in a pedagogical partner; openness to feedback, opportunity, partnering, and learning were essential and easy to muster in that moment. Jillian and I met over Zoom a week before my summer course began. From our initial conversation, we discussed how we wanted to frame our work together as partners both in class and in our one-on-one meetings, when and how often we would meet, and what the format for our weekly meetings would look like. We established a weekly routine for our conversations, and we chose a day at the end of the week so that what transpired was still fresh but also allowing for some time for each of us to reflect and process. We also identified areas in which I was hoping for support and questions I wanted to return to throughout the semester: Was I engaging *all* students? How did my own identity impact our class? Whose voices were heard, and who may have felt silenced in the virtual classroom space? How would I support students, especially across racial and cultural identities, and in the virtual space? What skills and strengths from my in-person teaching experiences would carry over, and where did I need to employ new strategies or teaching methods?

Several specific conversations from the semester stand out for me as deepening my practice as a teacher. One such conversation unfolded when Jillian and I discussed student voice and participation. In discussing ways to invite students to engage in class conversations, we puzzled through the challenges of asking all students to participate verbally in a class, particularly over Zoom, and if verbal participation should be privileged over other ways of demonstrating learning and engagement. It was only through this conversation that I recognized the impact of my communication with students not just inside but also *outside* of class. I explained my use of email to connect with quieter students, a practice that I now realize is deeply connected to my own inclusive pedagogy and offers a space in which students who don't feel comfortable expressing themselves in the larger group can still demonstrate their learning, with the added benefit of time to write, reflect, and practice participation in a one-on-one context. I had always reached out to students over email, but I had never thought about this as a pedagogical practice, and one which might offer an alternative modality for student engagement with course concepts. It took Jillian's insight and feedback for me to understand this, and it is a tool I lean on with greater attention, to strengthen relationships with students.

The work of our partnership extended beyond my summer teaching. In a department town-hall-style meeting with students and faculty, I experienced a teachable moment with Jillian that stands out as critical to the kind of meaningful transformation that partnerships can offer faculty. At the start of the meeting we opened with a simple exercise, which had often worked well for me in person, but failed over Zoom. Students and faculty in attendance were to introduce themselves and then call on the next person to participate. In person, we passed to the next person by tossing a ball to another participant without knowing their name. However, over Zoom, with participant's names identified in the corner of their window, the exercise turned into a marginalizing experience. White students and faculty called on peers with Anglo-looking names, leaving out those with names that might have appeared more difficult to pronounce to white faculty and students. I felt myself react physically; my stomach sank, my heart raced, I felt my face flush. But I did not stop the activity or address what had happened when it was over. Instead, I rushed to move the class along to the next activity without ever naming the way in which students may have felt marginalized.

It was Jillian who commented on this exercise and its potential impact on students. One of the most important lessons I learned from my partnership with Jillian was to be wary of defensiveness, and this was a helpful lesson in this moment. I stopped myself from saying that this was an exercise that had always worked well in the physical classroom space and, instead, leaned into listening to Jillian's feedback and ability to name this source of potential harm. What followed was a thoughtful conversation about the importance of names and pronouns. What I learned from this moment was that another person in the room noticed how potentially marginalizing this exercise proved to be and that I should have named this for the class. My silence, in this opening exercise, enabled the marginalization to go unspoken and unaddressed. Rather than feel defensive, I could have commented on what I was seeing, hearing, and feeling and asked the students in the meeting if they saw, heard, and experienced a similar feeling—and if they could help me then think about how to repair and move forward from this moment. Naming what I was noticing became a common theme throughout my work with Jillian. Not only was it validating to talk through this with a partner, but it gave me courage to trust those moments when I felt uneasy about an interaction, particularly one in which a student may have been marginalized. This is a practice that I would not have come into so definitively without my student partner and remains a critical component of how I view one aspect of anti-racist practice in my classroom.

Through this partnership and its aftermath, we got to witness both the immediate and the ongoing benefits of consistently bringing flexibility and vulnerability to every part of our partnership. We faced every obstacle and every celebration together, because we were consistently proving to ourselves and each other that we were showing up to make this virtual classroom a more equitable and engaging space.

Jillian: A student partner perspective

Going into my partnership with Erin, I was acutely aware of my layered positionalities. As a co-founder of P3 and a student partner, I had already done extensive research into similar programs

at other universities, and I was so excited to get our program off the ground, but I was trying to keep my mind open and my own expectations to a minimum as I began to meet with Erin. Additionally, as a cis-gendered, white woman, I was concerned about my ability to advocate for all of the students in Erin's classroom. Now, reflecting upon the experience of our partnership together, especially the beginning of the partnership when uncertainty was at the front of my mind, I realized that vulnerability and flexibility are central to the work of both the student and the faculty partners. These amorphous concepts were less strict guidelines, but rather goals to embody throughout my time as a partner. Erin and I started putting these into practice during our first meeting where we discussed the logistics of our weekly meetings and began to think aloud about our individual ways of receiving feedback. This turned out to be a productive way to open a clear line of communication and to begin building a working relationship (with a stranger over Zoom, which is not always an easy feat). Looking back, it not only took vulnerability to share so much about ourselves from the start, but it continued to take vulnerability to be open about what was changing throughout the semester.

Erin and I fell into a rhythm with our weekly check-in meetings and our individual note-taking. At first it felt like we were attempting to learn a style of dance that did not exist yet, but there was immense comfort in doing it alongside someone else. A central point to this process was a feedback loop that focused on validation. We would both come to the meeting with observations from the class sessions that we wanted to discuss. We were vulnerable about what we were honestly feeling and thinking, and we were flexible in thinking about next steps. We saw everything as a work-in-progress. A small, yet fruitful, example was our ongoing discussions about how to run the beginning of each class session.

During a weekly meeting from the beginning of the semester, I shared that sometimes the beginning part of the class session was the most lecture heavy, and we started to think together about possible alternatives. Erin shared that she believed it was important to get as many students as possible to participate (verbally or nonverbally) as soon as possible in her classes, but that it often felt hard to balance that with the overview and review of content before jumping in. One of our first attempts was using an interactive virtual whiteboard for students to enter their responses to a thematic question related to the readings for that class session. We were met with a few responses, but not as much energy as we had hoped for. Erin and I agreed that the whiteboard could be a tool to add to our arsenal, but by no means a perfect solution. The next class, Erin changed it up by asking students low-pressure questions directly. She asked some students about their personal lives and others about how their weekly assignments were going. The class seemed to be more energetic this way. Erin found that there were some things, like the structure of the class session, that really needed to be said at the beginning of the class, but that she could supplement those with other methods to spark engagement. Throughout the semester, I could observe that Erin was constantly tinkering with how she structured the beginning of class, and we would often return to this topic during our weekly meetings.

An incredibly productive disruption to our feedback loop was the midterm feedback session I led. Erin notified the students that for one class session, near the middle of the semester, she would be ending class ten minutes early and students would be asked to stay an additional ten minutes to give me twenty minutes to facilitate a midterm feedback session. This midterm feedback session was a way to give everyone (students, Erin, and me) the ability to take a step

back and look at the class thus far. I introduced three reflection questions to the class and explained that all of their comments would be brought to Erin anonymously before putting students in four-person breakout rooms for seven minutes. I had them take notes about their conversations in the breakout rooms, and when everyone returned, I called on people to share. Responses ranged from loving the frequent use of breakout rooms during class to mixed feelings on the unconventional nightly “moon journal” project. This time also gave students the opportunity to further bond as they built off of each other’s responses. The overwhelming sentiment I received was “Wow, we all really do enjoy this!” which led to nuanced statements of appreciation for the amount of care Erin was putting into the course and how she brought theory into action. Erin’s vulnerability to not be on Zoom during the midterm feedback session is probably many people’s worst nightmare (knowing that other people are talking about you without you there!), but it opened up so many doors for the last few weeks of our partnership. Erin and I felt validated since some of the things we had already been working on were being noticed by students. Students felt empowered to play an active role in co-creating this learning environment together. Finally, this midterm feedback session sparked more substantive discussions between Erin and me, where we dove into some of the students’ requests and discussed which could help student learning and which might actually hinder it.

Following the last class of the summer session, I received an email from a student saying that they appreciated having me in the class and that the P3 program motivated them to remember that they could always take steps to make things better where they are, not just in their own classroom, but on an institutional level, too. Besides the gratification that the pilot phase of P3 had substantially impacted at least one student, this email made me realize that although my formal partnership with Erin was over, our work would continue. For two years since that last class, Erin and I have been ongoing “thought partners,” bouncing ideas off of each other and asking for an outside perspective on pedagogical obstacles we face.

Three months after graduating from Tufts University, I moved to Norway on a Fulbright Fellowship as an English Teaching Assistant. I began my own teaching practice, which has been greatly influenced by my experience with P3. I feel much more confident in my ability to observe factors that are aiding or hindering student learning in the classroom, even in a completely different cultural context. Especially in Norway, a working culture that does not normalize unprompted feedback, I am more confident in requesting it because of the care and vulnerability that Erin demonstrated. Even when I am faced with the vastly different social and structural norms in Norwegian classrooms, my critical thinking skills, developed from my engagement in P3, supported me in deciphering my surroundings.

Whether I am thinking through the opportunities for and costs to student learning that stem from things like name-blind exams, using first names for professors, and physical classroom layouts of the Norwegian educational system, I approach my thinking with an ethic of deepened questioning that leaves no assumption untouched. This continuing partnership with Erin has given me an additional sounding board to reflect upon these observations and to craft lesson plans that are culturally congruent with my new context. I also feel connected to Tufts in a new way. Even though I am an alumni many miles away, I hear about the current obstacles and successes she is experiencing “on the ground.” I feel assured that our partnership dance continues.