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## **A STRENGTH-BASED APPROACH FOR CO-CONSTRUCTING STRONG PEDAGOGICAL PARTNERSHIPS AND INCLUSIVE AND EQUITABLE CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENTS**

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### **Kerri: The Beginning of Our Co-Created Journey as Faculty-Student Partners**

When our pedagogical partnership journey began in the fall semester of 2020 through Tufts University's Pedagogical Partnership Program (P3), it seemed like the only thing we could be certain of was that we were living in an unprecedented time of uncertainty. And above all else, we knew that we were in this together. Despite my having taught *Developmental Psychopathology and Adaptation* for over a decade, this semester felt particularly salient as it would be a new experience teaching this course in a virtual-synchronous modality during a pandemic. Nevertheless, I was excited to share the key content and structure of this advanced undergraduate/graduate course of 30 students with my pedagogical partner, Michelle, and was also very interested in learning from her and gaining a deeper perspective on the student experience. It was important for us to navigate this new course modality together to ensure a learner-centered experience for our students, which has always been central to my pedagogy. Given the course's organic focus on mental health, I knew moving forward it was paramount and apropos for us to prioritize this as foundational to pedagogy; to flexibly meet students where they were at during this uncertain time and to place well-being at the center of our journey together.

With a felt sense of urgency to establish rapport, and a desire to strengthen our relationship as learning partners, it felt clear to me that flexibility and creativity were going to be critical to meeting these needs. The question was not *whether* we could connect, but rather *how* we could authentically be present for one another. Our journey began with an initial, virtual P3 cohort meeting that was designed for all 2020 partnerships to individually meet in breakout rooms and begin to discuss goals for the semester. And having this opportunity to initially meet one another, learn from each other, and discuss what we wanted to accomplish together in partnership enabled us to cultivate shared goals. Given the necessity of a virtual-only modality during the pandemic, Zoom became the foundational platform upon which we could begin to build our relationship and embark on our pedagogical journey.

### **Kerri & Michelle: Navigating Our Virtual Space through Intentional Design**

With some trepidation, and a greater sense of excitement, we held our first virtual meeting since our preliminary dialogue on Zoom to solidify our pedagogical and partnership shared goals: fostering student engagement, supporting student empowerment, amplifying the voices of marginalized students, centering students' strengths, and creating a more equitable classroom environment. In this space, we talked, we listened, and together we discussed how we would set these intentions and goals for our pedagogical partnership for the fall semester. We also quickly learned that this modality could serve as a productive and meaningful space for achieving our

faculty-student partnership goals of establishing rapport, building trust, and ultimately becoming care partners. This virtual space did not seem to limit our ability to get to know one another and cultivate our unique relationship. With a shared interest in working to deconstruct the power dynamic that inherently exists in a faculty-student relationship, we discussed ways in which we could work together as a team to co-construct learning goals to create a more inclusive and equitable classroom community that fosters a sense of belonging.

To sustain and build upon these foundational efforts, we established a weekly standing meeting to discuss/debrief each class and to ultimately hold ourselves accountable to these goals. In a similar vein, these weekly meetings provided us with space to “check in” on our well-being and to continue to grow our faculty-student relationship. We intentionally designed these meetings to promote dialogue and open exchange of ideas and to serve as brainstorming sessions to support the goals of our pedagogical partnership in a safe space that we co-constructed. Specifically, we began each meeting with cultivated space to “check-in” with each other and share how we were feeling at the moment. This was especially important given the unique challenges of the pandemic, and it offered the opportunity for us to share what we were each navigating in our roles as faculty and student, respectively. Our agenda for each meeting also included an opportunity for debriefing the most recent class and a brainstorming session to prepare for the upcoming class. Not only did this provide organization, familiarity, and structure for our meetings, but it also served as a meaningful opportunity to establish a support system and continue our work with shared pedagogical and partnership goals.

But an important question remained unanswered: *Could our goals to create a more inclusive and equitable classroom community that fosters a sense of belonging pedagogically work in a course that also needed to be changed from an “in-person” to a “virtual-synchronous” modality of instruction during the pandemic?* Given the recent success we had experienced with building our own relationship in a virtual space, we acknowledged that this was indeed possible, particularly in a “Developmental Psychopathology” course with content centered around the awareness and promotion of mental health, and we were up for the challenge. However, we knew we would need to continue to be flexible and creative in co-creating our inclusive learning community in the classroom (albeit virtual) to reach our pedagogical goals – and to perhaps exceed expectations along the way!

### **Kerri: Co-Constructing Our Inclusive Learning Community**

The integration of social emotional learning has always been key to my pedagogical practice, and this was prioritized and supported in our pedagogical goals of engagement and empowerment in a virtual classroom, with the primary intention to foster an inclusive, learner-centered community that is strength-based, trauma-informed, and culturally sensitive. We knew that we wanted to meet students where they were during such an uncertain and unprecedented time, and to design an inclusive learning community (especially for marginalized students) where they could see themselves and be themselves in a supportive classroom culture. But how were we going to do that in a virtual-synchronous space? In our collaborative P3 standing meetings, we shared ways in which we could enhance engagement, amplify the voices of

marginalized students, and create a supportive classroom climate that addressed and valued student well-being and belongingness.

Specifically, to support these efforts, I began the semester by offering my confidential/optional “Student Information Form” with the intention of using this information to help tailor the course to best meet the individual and collective needs of our learning community and to provide Michelle with the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of our class cohort. This form has always been an integral part of my teaching and serves as an important tool to get to know students more deeply and provide them with a safe space to share information about themselves as learners. Examples of questions included, but were not limited to, demographic information (including preferred pronouns), preferences for instruction/learning styles, and questions that addressed their strengths as learners. In addition, I provided a timely section with questions to reflect students’ comfort and preference with learning in a virtual-synchronous modality (e.g., main session discussion, breakout room/small group discussion, sharing screen/presentations) and provided an open-ended space to share anything else they chose to share about themselves as learners that they would confidentially like the instructor to know and implement in the best manner possible. This information was then aggregated (anonymously) by me and used in partnership with Michelle to enhance pedagogy through tailored instruction, including, but not limited to, brainstorming activities and assessment to support inclusive and equitable practices and to support a sense of belonging in the virtual classroom environment.

For example, given my understanding that students cannot learn if they do not feel valued or safe, and to ensure that all students’ voices are seen and heard, in my teaching I intentionally hold space during the first class to develop a Community Learning Agreement (CLA) in our learning community. In our one-on-one meeting, Michelle and I specifically discussed different virtual platforms and we ultimately chose Google Jamboard for students to co-create this document given its anonymous and auto-saved functionality, making it accessible to all throughout the semester. To enhance access and offer flexible choice in the co-construction of the CLA, we also simultaneously encouraged the use of verbal responses in our virtual-synchronous Main Session and written contributions via chat function on Zoom (in essence, whatever platform felt most comfortable for the student). To continue to hold both ourselves and our learning community accountable, we re-visited the CLA throughout the semester to make certain we were acting in accordance with our commitment to the shared values of our inclusive learning community. The contributions shared and unpacked in our CLA became a model for how we mindfully moved forward sharing course content most effectively/preferred in our virtual-synchronous space, with a shared commitment to creating a supportive classroom culture.

In subsequent alignment with student voices/perspectives that emerged from the CLA, the course continued to be pedagogically structured to integrate contemplative practices, empathy-building skills, opportunities for choice/flexibility, and reflection-based activities to support well-being, agency and promote a community engagement and belonging. Although these strength-based activities have been central to my teaching practices for years (e.g., mindfulness meditations, journaling, small group discussion), up to this point I had primarily conducted them with students in an in-person modality. There was a pressing need to align these practices within a virtual-synchronous modality. While I knew that we needed to consider a variety of platforms that offered multiple modes of instruction/support multiple learning styles to create an inclusive

climate, support equitable practice, and to amplify all voices, having the input of my pedagogical partner, Michelle, was key to the efficacy of this process and a hallmark of our partnership.

Specifically, in our one-on-one meetings, we intentionally and consistently discussed how to adjust or develop curriculum-based activities to support the individual and collective needs of our students. What emerged was two-fold: (1) together we were able to brainstorm creative and meaningful virtual approaches (e.g., the use of mindful moments/guided meditation, breakout rooms for small discussion and Zoom whiteboard post-breakout rooms to unpack what groups had discussed, main discussion with encouragement of use of the chat function for students who did not feel comfortable off-mute, Canvas Discussion Board, anonymous Google Jamboards, shared Google Docs, Poll Everywhere, Padlet, etc.), and (2) we were able to focus on each other's strengths to support our shared goals. For example, while I was particularly familiar with the course content and was dedicated to integrating social emotional learning in my pedagogy, Michelle played a critical role of providing the student perspective; together we shared the same commitment to sustain a learner-centered environment. As a virtual classroom observer, Michelle was able to further gain perspective and knowledge on the student experience. Specifically, she attended each virtual class and floated within student breakout rooms to not only provide a leadership presence (intentionally kept camera off and stayed on mute in an observer role), but to also learn from the students and share their needs accordingly in our one-on-one sessions together.

But another question remained unanswered still: *How did we know if these intentional efforts to develop an inclusive and equitable learning community were working? Were we successfully meeting the needs of our students and capturing all voices through our strength-based approach?* Just as it was important for us to check in with each other to foster our relationship, we also recognized the importance of checking in with our students to ensure that we were addressing their needs and/or had ample time to devote to tailoring the course accordingly. In essence, we were cognizant of how meaningful our student-faculty relationship was, respectively, and the many strengths we each contributed to the partnership. And it served to clarify and reaffirm how important it was to work in a similar kind of partnership with enrolled students. That is, to continue to provide opportunities to be in ongoing dialogue with students about their learning experience and the pedagogical choices that support those.

For example, to complement my P3 experience, I provided a host of additional opportunities to establish supportive relationships with my students, especially given the limitations of being in a virtual-only modality (e.g., check-ins during class to get a “climate check” of how students were feeling using multiple formats to share most comfortably [off-mute, chat, one-on-one meetings and/or reflecting in the present moment]; an invitation for individual “get to know you” one-on-one meetings with each student in the course; frequent re-visiting of the CLA to ensure student voices were being heard and their needs were being addressed; co-created, anonymous Midterm Check-In to gain perspective on what was working well, improvements that could be made, and anything else the students wished to share; myriad of opportunities for small group breakout room discussions). Through this process we learned the value of fostering relationships and that flexibility, empowerment, and empathy were key to nurturing these efforts!

### **Kerri & Michelle: Co-Construction and Assessment of Pedagogy**

Our P3 weekly meetings not only served to sustain and strengthen our faculty-student relationship as pedagogical partners, but over time it blossomed into something even greater: we became a team. Each of us brought our strengths to the proverbial virtual table in our shared pursuit of creating an inclusive and equitable classroom culture for our learning community. Specifically, Michelle's ability to connect with the students and provide both her unique perspective, as well as an overall student voice was instrumental to our process. Similarly, Kerri's desire to listen and intentionally provide a safe space for dialogue helped to strengthen our relationship and meet our shared pedagogical goals.

As mentioned above, it was important for us to not only check in with each other, but also to check in with our students. Therefore, we developed an anonymous Midterm Check-In Survey. We intentionally kept this survey brief to both honor the students' time and to focus on our specific goals of discovering what was working well, identifying any areas for improvement, and offering open-ended space to share comments directly in a confidential and anonymous manner. We aggregated the data we received, shared our findings with the learning community, and made changes where applicable. That is, transparency with these findings was important to us to share with the students as it modeled our strength-based approach to being learner-centered, our commitment to social emotional learning and "checking in," and focused on inclusion and equitable practice in our desire to hear from all students—highlighting our primary goal to always strive to do better. From this process, we learned that students seemed to be navigating the course well and appreciated having the opportunity to thoughtfully share their voice/perspective in an anonymous manner.

Although there were just a few comments for improvement, we took this as an opportunity to work in partnership to see if we could adjust our curriculum to further meet the needs of our students. In our standing weekly one-on-one meetings, we discussed how this might be achieved and recognized that the most important need that we could immediately address was being as flexible as possible (especially given the unprecedented nature of the times and how it was uniquely impacting students). Together we were able to discuss ways in which we could make the curriculum more flexible, while still preserving the thoughtful rigor that aligned with syllabus learning objectives. Working as pedagogical partners to candidly share student perspectives and advocate for and support the flexible options that Kerri shared was instrumental to our process and commitment to shared goals. In doing so, not only did we address the needs of our students and enhance our inclusive learning community, we also promoted a sense of belonging within our own pedagogical partnership.

### **Kerri & Michelle: At Our Journey's End We Found a New Beginning**

At the end of the semester, we carved out considerable time to debrief pedagogical practices, reflect upon our experiences, and continue to brainstorm authentic ways to co-construct strong pedagogical partnerships and inclusive and equitable classroom environments. This was especially important as we considered the course for the following year, framed in potential in-person or hybrid modalities. Overall, we were pleased to learn from student feedback that the

course was extremely well received and our goals were largely met despite the uncertainty of teaching virtually during a pandemic. We learned many important and valuable lessons, both in our respective pedagogical roles and co-constructed with each other, and especially from our students. Particularly of note, we learned how meaningful the student-faculty relationship can be when we intentionally check in, listen, and advocate for one another via a strength-based lens—and flexibility and empathy are key to this process! When we understand the needs, intentions, and strengths of each other, we can work together to develop and achieve shared relationship and pedagogical goals.

Perhaps the most important lesson I (Kerri) learned from my students during my P3 experience is that they can indeed learn and thrive in a virtual modality (and during a pandemic), and this is enhanced when intentional design supports a more inclusive and equitable classroom that fosters a sense of belonging—lessons that I will continue to nurture in all modalities moving forward. I am especially grateful for my partnership with Michelle and the powerful and inspiring student perspective I have learned from her. The insight I have gained from working closely with her will continue to impact my pedagogy and strengthen my teaching. From my perspective, learning never stops and neither does my desire to always strive to do better to meet the needs of my students and to enhance my pedagogy.

Lastly, perhaps one of the most salient things we discovered along our journey was that our partnership did not end because the semester was over and our P3 program concluded. In the semesters that followed our participation in P3, we continued to check in with each other. We learned that we still had each other, and this was a relationship that would continue to grow and flourish in the supportive community that we had co-created for each other. And as we pursue our lifelong journey of learning, the spirit of this P3 partnership experience will continue to guide us in fostering strength-based approaches and meaningful student relationships along the way.