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PARTNERING WITH STUDENTS TO EXPERIMENT WITH EQUITABLE ASSESSMENT METHODS

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Participating in the Pedagogical Partnership Program (P3) at Tufts University and collaborating with P3 student partners empowered me to experiment with ungrading and alternative assessment methods focused on student self-reflection and self-assessment as a way to increase equity and inclusion in the courses I teach. By better understanding the student perspective and experience from my P3 partners, I became committed to transforming my pedagogy to better meet the needs of students and to disrupt inequitable academic power structures. P3 has been a central part of my own (ongoing) journey of self-reflection to reclaim joy and meaning in teaching and to re-envision my own identity as an educator.

I want students not only to have a more equitable experience in the courses I teach but also to value and develop an equity mindset that stays with them far beyond their time in the classroom. Developing an equity mindset involves recognizing that there are multiple ways of knowing and multiple ways of doing. Each individual has a responsibility for self-awareness and awareness of others, and will work to meet the different needs of members of their community so that everyone has the opportunity to be full, valued, and successful participants in that community. A student-centered, inclusive classroom learning community will become an example of the kind of inclusive community of practice that students can create in other contexts in the future. By developing the habit of self-reflection and self-assessment within the classroom community, students gain self-awareness and confidence in valuing their own ideas and in valuing dialogue across differences.

My own awareness of the power of self-reflection happened in an unexpected way. In May 2020, a friend sent me an article about sexual harassment allegations in the university department where I was a Ph.D. candidate in the 1990s—a Ph.D. that I ultimately did not finish. I read a statement in the article that “13 of the 15 graduate students who have withdrawn from the . . . program since 1990 have been female” (Bikales 2020), and I was stunned to realize that I was one of those students. I was a statistic.¹

After starting to reflect on the way that gender bias had affected my own student experience, I thought in different ways about the vulnerability of the students I now teach and the challenges students face. I wanted to do everything I could to ensure that students would never become statistics—casualties of a higher education system founded on white male privilege—and that their education would empower them to use their voices to advocate for themselves and to advocate for others. Although I had experienced gender-based discrimination, I needed to better understand the intersectional identities of many of the students in my courses.

¹ Two other experiences that had a profound effect on me as I continued to reflect on my experiences in graduate school were watching the documentary [Picture A Scientist](#) and attending the seminar “Course Corrections for Addressing Sexual Harassment in Academia,” presented by Dr. Kathryn Clancy and sponsored by the Department of Biomedical Engineering at Tufts University, April 12, 2021.

As a white, middle-class woman who attended primarily white institutions in the 1980s and 1990s, my experiences as a student were different from the experiences of many of the students I now teach. Although I had always felt a deep commitment to student success, my definition of student success when I started teaching at Tufts in 2001 was biased and inequitable, based on what I then thought was preparing students for success in the “real world,” a phrase I have since come to detest. Students are already living in the real world every single day, and the reality of the world is filled with inequitable, inhumane practices that cause harm to so many people. I started to recognize that I had been teaching students to succeed by assimilating into existing inequitable systems of academic and professional life instead of empowering them to disrupt and transform those systems. How could I better understand the diverse experiences of the students I taught? I did what introverted academics often do and started reading voraciously—everything I could find about inclusive and equitable pedagogy.

I had begun to take small steps towards becoming a more equitable educator before the COVID-19 pandemic occurred, but those steps seem microscopically small in hindsight (student information surveys at the beginning of the semester, flipped classrooms, fewer graded assignments), and I felt isolated and vulnerable in taking them, lacking meaningful feedback from students or from colleagues.

Being a non-Ph.D. in a full-time, non-tenure-track faculty position, I have often felt isolated and vulnerable and that my position was precarious. Despite teaching at Tufts for more than 20 years, I consistently felt like I was in a position of low power within my department and within the university, and I hesitated to take risks in my teaching or do anything that might lead to questions about my teaching. I do not have advisees and never got much direct feedback from students about their experience, except in the form of course evaluations at the end of the semester, which occur only after the course is over and can be problematic in many of the same ways that student grades are problematic (Kreitzer & Sweet-Cushman, 2021). A negative end-of-semester evaluation often felt like an attack that I had to defend against, rather than a student sharing their experience so that I could make improvements. I often focused more on one negative evaluation than on twenty positive ones. I felt defensive rather than feeling concern that I had failed to connect with a student. And I suspect that the students that I was actually failing to connect with were often not the ones filling out the end-of-semester evaluations.

Despite my anxiety about a few negative student evaluations, I had consistently received positive course evaluations overall, and my department relied heavily on course evaluations in assessing my teaching. Why change anything? What was I risking by changing my pedagogy? So many of my decisions and actions had subconsciously been motivated by fear: fear of negative course evaluations, fear of further isolation, fear of harming students, fear of doing “the wrong thing.” The better question should have been, What was I risking by *not* changing my pedagogy?

The move to online teaching during the pandemic had an initial feeling of “we are all in this together,” but the increased awareness and attention focused on racial injustice after the murder of George Floyd made clear that everyone is not at all in the same situation. I heard other faculty talk about how difficult it was for them to transition to online teaching, which, in essence, was asking them to learn something new in a short amount of time and in a challenging, unfamiliar

situation. But isn't that exactly what we ask students to do, even in pre-pandemic times? This felt like a pivotal moment when the need for change became undeniable.

At about this same time, I read Stephen Brookfield's statement that:

. . . you should be putting yourself on the line for disapproval. You should be risking institutional condemnation by doing and saying the things that people of color will suffer even more harshly for doing and saying. Your job is to lose friends, colleagues, money, employment, perks, and prestige by calling out white supremacy in yourself and other whites, and then not to have anyone notice or thank you for it. (2019, p. 17)

This perspective pushed me past any lingering fears about personal consequences of changing my pedagogy, although I still worried about making changes that could unintentionally have a negative impact on students.

Teaching fully online in fall 2020 during the pandemic, I started to make changes in the way I thought about grading, especially grading of student participation. Engagement and participation in online classes were so different from in-person classes, and I started to notice that the chat function in Zoom was a space where more students used their voice and expressed their perspectives. I started every class with a check-in to see how students were doing, and I started saying things that I would have hesitated to say in the pre-pandemic past. I started our check-in on September 24, 2020, by acknowledging the grand jury decision the previous day in the killing of Breonna Taylor, the death the previous week of Ruth Bader Ginsburg and uncertainty about what will happen in filling the open seat on the Supreme Court, the ongoing toll of COVID-19 on human life and the economy, and the upcoming presidential election and concern about what will happen in the aftermath of the election. At the end of the class, a student privately messaged me in the chat to say "Class was awesome today—especially the check-in at the beginning! Thank you for saying all of that out loud."

After experiencing other interactions like these in the chat and the multiple means of engagement and connection in online courses, I redefined my ideas about grading students' participation, especially ways of participating that I might not be able to easily see or recognize. I committed to a plan for the next semester (Spring 2021) to have students grade their own participation by writing weekly self-reflections on their learning and participation. My goal of students grading themselves on their participation was to be more equitable and to encourage the habits of self-reflection and self-assessment. I wondered how students would respond, and I worried about causing additional stress and uncertainty by introducing something that could feel unfamiliar and uncomfortable for students.

In November 2020 when I saw the announcement that the Center for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching at Tufts (CELT) was accepting applications for the Pedagogical Partnership Program (P3), I felt like I was discovering the missing piece of all of the changes I had been thinking about and was planning to make—a way to better understand the student perspective and response to grading their own participation. I eagerly applied to be a faculty partner in P3 for Spring 2021 (when courses were still fully online). My initial goal was to work

with my P3 partner to increase equity and inclusion in the course, especially surrounding grading and assessment, but the partnership developed into so much more.

At the beginning of weekly meetings with my P3 partner, she would often talk about challenges she was experiencing in other classes. The honesty and openness of these conversations gave me so much insight into students' experiences that I was not hearing from students enrolled in my courses. Even more important, my P3 partner became a friend and a valued colleague. The more we got to know each other, the more meaningful the partnership became.

Each week, my P3 partner and I talked about what had happened in that week's classes and what was planned for the next week's classes. We especially focused on students' experience of self-assessment, which they were doing in the weekly self-reflections of their participation. These meetings with my P3 partner were an essential bridge between my own self-reflection and the students' self-reflection. My partner's feedback and encouragement gave me the confidence to make changes during the semester and experiment with different activities and topics of discussion during class sessions, and we were both eager to see how things unfolded when I tried some of the activities we had discussed.

In addition to observing class sessions, my partner developed an anonymous mid-semester feedback survey focused on students' experience of equity and inclusion in the course. The survey gave us valuable insight that I was able to act on to benefit current students as well as future students. Once we started collecting student-focused mid-semester feedback, I realized even more clearly the limitations of end-of-semester course evaluations. I continue to use the mid-semester feedback survey my P3 partner developed as well as other anonymous surveys at different points during the semester as one way for student input to shape the course.

Sharing the experience of making significant changes to my pedagogy in collaboration with my P3 partner was not just about getting actionable feedback. I gained a sense of community and connection that gave new meaning and purpose to my teaching, which I had been so used to doing in isolation. I also found a sense of community with the other faculty involved in the P3 program and the facilitators at CELT. The program created opportunities for connection between faculty in different departments teaching different kinds of courses, which deepened the learning and insights.

One unexpected aspect of my P3 partnership occurred when my partner enrolled as a student, two semesters later, in the same course she had observed (the result of switching to a different major for which the course was required). The P3 program always tries to pair students with faculty who are in different departments or different schools to avoid the possibility of any uncomfortable student-faculty power dynamics that could occur as a result of the P3 partnership. Although this situation was unexpected and one we would have tried to avoid, it ultimately proved to be overwhelmingly positive and further deepened my understanding of students. When I observed my previous P3 partner in the position of a student enrolled in the course, I still knew all of the things I had learned about her from our P3 partnership. I thought about how I might have perceived her in different ways or the assumptions I might have made if I hadn't had the opportunity to work with her in the P3 program. If she missed a class or asked for an extension on an assignment or was quiet during a class session, I knew that her decisions did not mean that

she did not value the course or did not value me. Her decisions were the best decisions for her at the time, as a whole person with many different needs and priorities beyond this one course. I think of this experience often and continue to look for ways to make students feel welcomed and valued in the classroom as their whole selves, fully deserving of flexibility, empathy, and understanding.

I participated in P3 for a second time with a different student partner in Fall 2021, which was the first semester back on campus for in-person classes after the pandemic and the first semester that I made the change from students self-assessing only their participation to students self-assessing for the entire semester and assigning their own final grade. Students were again basing their self-assessment on weekly self-reflections, but with the higher stakes, increased responsibility, and unfamiliarity of assigning their own final grade for the semester.

During that semester in the same course, I was also working with an equity learning assistant (ELA)—a teaching assistant focused on students' learning experience and equity in the classroom rather than focused on assisting students with learning the course content. Some of the best conversations occurred between me, my P3 partner, and the ELA sitting in the empty classroom right after students had left and comparing our observations of both the class session that had just taken place and the overall student experience on campus that semester. The ongoing pandemic and the accidental death of an undergraduate student that semester had profound effects on many of the students in the course, and the support and input of my P3 partner and ELA were essential for me to navigate the challenges of an incredibly difficult semester and to center the students' voices and experiences.

One compelling example occurred when my P3 partner noticed a comment about privilege in one response to a mid-semester feedback survey question. Although it was only one comment, she recognized the importance of more explicitly acknowledging privilege in the classroom. She then developed and led a class discussion focused on privilege in communication (business communication is the subject of the course). Students found this discussion engaging and meaningful, which I could see both from the way they responded to the discussion in class and from the way several of them reflected on it in their next weekly reflection.

I didn't truly recognize or value my own power in the classroom until I explored how to share it with students in P3. P3 was situated in the middle of renewed self-reflection about my past experiences as a graduate student and current experiences as a faculty member. My understanding of my own experience was changing along with my understanding of students' experience. Learning through self-reflection and through dialogue with others can feel vulnerable and uncomfortable, but engaging in that discomfort is a necessary part of learning and transformation. If I am not willing to do that myself, how can I ask students to do it? P3 has been such an important experience of engaging in vulnerability and transformation in community with students and with other faculty.

When I talk to other faculty about my experience with student self-reflection and self-assessment, they often ask me, "Could you provide a quick how-to document so that I can use student self-assessment in my course?" I respond in a humorous, yet entirely serious, way, "Step 1. Spend several years engaged in intense self-reflection and completely redesign your course."

And then my answer always arrives at what is most important: talk to students, value their diverse experiences, and partner with them to create equitable spaces for learning and growth—theirs and yours.

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