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PROFESSOR LOVE, FEEDBACK LOVE

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INTRODUCTION

I have taught young adults since 2020 when I created a course on art and self discovery for SHARE, an online NGO in Brazil. In this program, I teach through drawing and focus on building up my students' self-perception and self-esteem. The Pedagogical Partnership Program (P3) at Tufts University allowed me to build upon these skills and gave me the opportunity to get closer to a professor's experience. As a student partner, I had weekly meetings with my faculty partner to learn facilitation skills and how to address problems in class with P3 staff. With the skills and knowledge I gained in P3, I feel even more motivated to move forward as an educator.

A LITTLE CONTEXT

While designing my course for SHARE every semester, I try to treat my class plan with the care I often don't see in Western schooling. I want my students to develop autonomy, positive self-awareness, and contextual, balanced criticism—overall, tools to thrive in a broader sense than just career-wise. In Western culture, school was not created to foster students' growth; rather, it was created to ensure students' obedience. University settings are reminiscent of this power dynamic between teachers and students, and Tufts is not an exception. I try to bring this awareness to my work as a P3 partner.

Working at P3 has been helpful for me and friends in my classes to have more agency. For instance, in a program to welcome new Tufts students, I stepped up and talked about the importance of taking care of oneself while in stressful times in school. I felt shy raising my hand to add this comment, but being in P3 made me more knowledgeable about advocating for students' mental health.

While meeting my faculty partner, I saw how much she was willing to do for her students. If someone had asked her about changing something in class, she seriously considered it. This inspired me and gave me confidence to make suggestions for improvements to my own professors. I often engaged them by offering comments such as, "You can try using slides" and "I like the way you talk about this topic!" Because of my experience as a student partner, I was more attentive to what was going on pedagogically in a class and tried to make suggestions for improvement. I learned the importance of supporting students and offering them encouragement. That happened when my friend's professor was asking too much of her, and I sent her a message of support so she could carry on during the week of finals. These actions made a difference, and as a result, I see P3's potential to grow as a student-centered approach to education at Tufts.

P3's resources are starting to grow slowly because going against a systematic issue is always complex. P3 has helped me understand ways of dismantling the strong barrier between professors and students and supporting them in collaborating as they work towards a better education—for students and by students. I'm enthusiastic with every little achievement it may bring to me, my friends, my students, and the professors who still take responsibility for it.

MY PARTNERSHIP

My faculty partner was co-teaching the class to which I was assigned with another faculty member not in P3. At times, this dynamic made it difficult to make changes or improve strategies because so much depended on the other professor. I felt frustrated that I couldn't improve as much for my faculty partner's students as I would have liked. However, I now realize that being an effective P3 partner is not always about solving large structural problems in a course. Given our short time together, I found it more effective to focus on beginning conversations about feedback and creating a nurturing space for listening and care. For instance, I noticed apprehension on the part of some students feeling comfortable speaking in class. I suggested to my faculty partner that she change the physical environment of the class—organizing the tables so students could see each other better and have a conversation with each other, rather than just answering the professors and only waiting for professors to lead the discussions. This was a small change and it worked very well, in contrast to some other ideas about the class plan and course structure, which needed more time and thought to change. We instead opened up mutual conversations about these bigger topics, even if they were just ideas for the future.

We spent a significant amount of time focusing on ways to communicate with students. I'm not an expert in non-violent communication strategies, but I have participated in workshops on this topic and drew from those experiences and suggested ways my partner could talk to her students. Also, I think I helped my professor be more at peace with not having 100% of the class following along. Students have their own struggles and need to focus on other things or classes sometimes. I said to her, "Being honest, at the end of the day, you can't have all your students interested. I imagine that's hard to think of. I feel your class will be successful even though some students didn't do the readings." She agreed. Although saying that felt obvious, sometimes it's really helpful to be reminded of things we know but may be hard to think of. Next time as a partner I hope to set goals with my partner and keep better track of our improvements.

While thinking how she could communicate better with her students, I realized I, too, needed to practice that skill. In our Zoom meetings, I realized my faculty partner prefers direct and straightforward communication. I was initially intimidated by this style of communication. This is not as natural for me. But I realized that these communication styles did not mean that she did not care for me or her students. In fact, I am amazed by the amount of care she showed for her students. But I wanted to give her feedback in a way that resonated with her. So I asked her if she wanted to have our thoughts and ideas written down and shared. She agreed and thought that it was better for her. So I wrote down all of our ideas and suggestions and sent it to a P3 co-ordinator to review to make sure they were aligned with best practices. This was very successful, and my professor even shared the document with the other professor co-teaching the class.

I ended the semester in P3 with mixed feelings. I wish we had looked over the course readings, thought of discussion questions, and even reviewed the syllabus for her next course to help my partner have more time during the summer break when she would prepare the syllabus. But because of a lack of time and paying attention to other issues, we were unable to do these things. We had many ideas, but I appreciated our focus on being more open and looking for support when needed. I was able to bring these lessons to my own courses in Brazil. I felt more at ease with the class. Not all of my students would follow along, but I

started focusing on the ones who followed, getting feedback, and improving my dynamics—just like my faculty partner did. This helped the other students as well. These few mindset changes were actually no small thing for me and my professor.

FEEDBACK FEST

One of the most critical components of my partnership was our midterm feedback session. This was maybe the best moment for me as a student partner as I was able to gain feedback to help make changes for the course. This was my process:

1. I asked my faculty partner about the feedback she was looking for from her students. This way, I got some hints on what to look for.
2. We scheduled a time during class in which she would leave the class, leaving the students and me free to chat.
3. I facilitated a feedback session based on the training I got from the P3 meetings (more about how this dynamic worked below).
4. Finally, I wrote a document with the students' feedback for my professor and met with her to go over it.

We were able to get honest feedback by:

1. Introducing the activity in detail for students, telling them the professor would get feedback anonymously, making them feel more comfortable to share.
2. Dividing them into groups to chat freely. I asked them: "What's working, what can be improved, and any suggestion/comment about the class?"
3. Getting back to the full group and asking some groups to share their thoughts. I asked if other groups agreed with the comments to build consensus and find out what should be highlighted for the professor.

In the end, the students felt relieved to share struggles and connect as a group. I asked them: "How are you feeling? Relieved?" They responded with comments such as, "Yeah, much of our stress comes from things we could improve" and "Yeah, it's great to hear we have been having similar concerns about this class and the final project deadline." By looking at each other as they shared their feedback, they had a brief moment of community-building.

While sharing feedback was a community-building moment in the course, I believe it could have been better if it had been earlier in the semester. Because the feedback session was more towards the end of the semester, the professor didn't have time to change much for the class, and the students were already frustrated about having almost a full semester of dynamics that could have been improved. Through students' direct feedback, I had a greater understanding of the class dynamics and possible improvements. Furthermore, it felt almost too late for students to connect as a group, something I consider important for a class to which students feel excited to go back the following week.

I'm highlighting this feedback moment because it was so groundbreaking for me as a teacher as well. In my own classes as an instructor, I started listening to my students more and looking for hints of feedback. From my experience leading the midterm feedback session, I know how different it is to have a dialog with my students rather than asking them to fill an online form. I was able to get richer information that was more useful for my own teaching. So I tried to have more conversations with students to get feedback. For example, for one class activity, I wanted them to share their drawing exercises in the main group chat for

everyone to see. I thought they would be too shy to do it. I thought I should be considerate of their privacy. But when I finally had the courage to try this new dynamic for my class, it was a success! When I asked for feedback, they shared that they had a beautiful bonding experience that week, viewing each other's drawings and seeing where everyone was at. While I was the one afraid for them, they were actually craving to bond as a group through showing and seeing their drawings. If I had only considered my own perceptions, I might not have done this and the group might not have bonded as much. With some courage and feedback, and skills I developed in P3, we had a great semester.

It may be hard to put ourselves in these vulnerable positions for our students. Yet, it's by opening myself to self-criticism and others' perception of my teaching that I became a better teacher. I've been practicing that with my faculty partner and her class, and mimicking that for my own classes.

SUPPORTING PROFESSORS

Throughout this experience, I was made aware of a much bigger issue. I had never considered the burnout faculty members may experience. Students' mental health is a topic I hear a lot about, though sometimes still less effectively than it should be addressed. But I have never heard anyone discuss professors' burn out or lack of motivation. I was not taught to humanize my professors; they just felt like workers in a factory. But they are more than that. Their feelings and opinions must be seen and addressed. Nonetheless, the barrier between students and professors makes it hard to find opportunities to see that. P3 helped me to better understand faculty life and the difficulties instructors face. By participating in P3, I began viewing my professors with more empathy; many of them were working very hard to improve their teaching and supporting their students as best they could.

While P3 aims to create a space for professors to relate more closely to their students, in the one-on-one meetings with my faculty partner, I tried my best to listen to her insecurities about her syllabus and how much she wanted to be generous to her students. I always knew how important it was for faculty to acknowledge their students. Acknowledging how our students feel is a goal. I came to realize the same is true for my professors. How can we ask our professors to take care of their students if professors don't know what being taken care of feels like? Telling professors about caring about students' mental health feels like a sad irony while professors are burned out by their high work demands and by the ways the university administration treats them.

Similar to students overworking, professors too may feel stressed. Who can they go to in this case? Based on what I hear from my friends and on my own student experience, I have come to believe that students enjoy classes in which the professor can somehow build a sense of community. Universities try their best to build community among students, but what is being done for faculty? Talking to two other professors, whom I became closer to at Tufts, I heard the only meetings professors usually have are for administrative purposes. I asked, there is "no pedagogical, fun, educationally thought-provoking, chill, teaching-strategies-workshops, wholesome spaces are promoted?" They answered: "I'm sorry to say no, Muri..." Professors don't have space to share their experiences, knowledge, struggles, and successes with their colleagues. It's not a surprise that some professors may feel alone and unmotivated. This is not a small detail. While the institution doesn't plan enough broad support and community

for its faculty, P3 provides that through student partnerships. I hoped to provide support and community for my partner.

CONCLUSION

It's by getting closer to their students that professors can improve their classes. The classes are for the students after all. P3 proved to be a great resource to encourage professors to value the time to reflect on how they have been teaching and check in with their students about it. However, the vulnerable aspect of this is tough at first. This is mostly because professors don't often have space for sharing their insecurities, which is related to the power dynamic between students and faculty. Through P3, we have practiced dismantling that discomfort in order to get feedback and think of concrete changes to support the students in classes. Moreover, our meetings changed the way I view and act upon my own classes. Programs like this are crucial to keep an academic setting in progress. I hope to see P3 grow throughout the next few years through engagement from students, professors, and Tufts' administration.