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Jay Adams
Berea College

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THE F@\$\$-UP'S GUIDE TO RECLAIMING AND REIMAGINING MY STUDENT IDENTITY THROUGH PEDAGOGICAL PARTNERSHIPS

Jay Adams, Berea College, Class of 2022

In the fall semester of 2020 at Berea College, I happened to take a core class for the English major that was being co-taught by two English faculty members. After the class finished, I got an email from Leslie Ortquist-Ahrens, one of the professors and the director of the Center for Teaching and Learning, inviting me to take part in the Student-Faculty Partnerships Program (SFPP) wherein I would work closely with a faculty member, observing their classes and meeting with them once a week, and examine pedagogy and teaching together. I was immediately equal parts curious and anxious—this program seemed weird, unique, and wonderful, yet something about it I was unable to name made me shudder. Nevertheless, I accepted the invitation hungrily. At the time I did not consciously realize the depth and breadth of the undertaking I had volunteered for, or the fundamentally radical potential of the program. When Spring 2021 began and the program started, it felt a little like I had eagerly leapt into a pool, only to realize mid-flight that the water was far deeper than I had initially thought. I soon realized, a week or two into the program, that my anxieties were not rooted in the partnership itself. Rather, they were bound to my own identity as a student, and a conflict between my own valuation of that identity and the valuation of student identity and perspective proposed by the partnership. I was burdened by my past in a way that felt impossibly heavy, and it would be through SFPP that I would begin to let go of those burdens and reclaim—and reimagine—my student identity.

You see, this was not my first time attending Berea College. I began as a freshman in 2011, immediately after graduating high school. I had been homeschooled since starting the second grade (save for two semesters, one in middle school and one in my junior year of high school, where my mom and I got on each other's nerves and I was sent to private school). Arriving at Berea College, I was immediately overwhelmed by the sheer variety of human experiences that were now accessible to me after having spent so much time in the insular world of homeschooling. I picked up smoking cigarettes because the smoking gazebos were a focal point for social interaction. I began to experiment with intoxicants and hallucinogens and went out every weekend with my friends. Soon, the revelry began to spill out of the weekend and into my weekdays; when I applied myself to my academics, I was capable of great things, but the effort it took to do so was increasingly spent on the pursuit of pleasure. By the end of the Spring 2012 semester, I had been put on academic probation, and at the end of the Fall-2012 semester I was suspended.

Leaving Berea College was, in retrospect, a catalyst for my subsequent downward spiral. I applied to another, much larger university and began studying there in the Fall of 2013. Almost immediately, I fell into a similar pattern: I would spend the weekends intoxicated, which spilled into my weekdays, and eventually I would be suspended from there as well. However, my time in that city was far more intense than Berea. I was using harder drugs, drinking much more and at far higher frequencies, and even facing legal issues and physical violence. The last month I

lived in that city was spent in the basement of a house without water or electricity because the occupants had not paid the utility bills.

I left this experience strung out, traumatized, and, though I did not immediately realize it, convinced that academia and being a student were not for me. My identity as a student was now tied, seemingly inexorably, to the things that happened to me while I was a student, so returning to school risked those things reoccurring. I moved home in May of 2015 and would spend the next five years in the work world. For most of those five years I resolutely refused to consider the idea of returning to school. I rose through the ranks at an airline contractor, starting as a cabin service agent (a euphemistic title more accurately described as “passenger airplane janitor”) and ending up as the second shift dispatcher, working in one of the airport terminal’s control towers. I would likely still be there were it not for two big events: one, trouble from the city I had lived in was resurrected, shocking me out of my lotus-eater waking dream. This relit a fire inside of me, and that year I would start to reclaim parts of myself I thought long dead, beginning with my love of poetry. Second, I applied for readmission to Berea College and was rejected. My readmissions counselor suggested that I try doing a semester or two at a community college to boost my GPA and show a commitment to education before applying to Berea again. So, I applied to a local community college, expecting to take a few classes and strengthen my transcript. Instead, in classes like Human Ecology and Introduction to Programming, I felt alive for the first time in a long time. This experience at community college, and the letters of recommendation my instructors there and my managers at work wrote, helped me get readmitted to Berea College after a lengthy process.

So, we return to Spring 2021. It is the second semester of Berea College’s first official year of COVID-19 restrictions. I am sitting in my faculty partner’s class, happening virtually over Microsoft Teams. I am also sitting in the bedroom of my campus apartment, a cluttered but comfortable little room I have made my own over the past six or so months of living there. I am also sitting in almost six years of pent-up anxiety and self-doubt about my position as a student, reminded at every turn of my past at Berea and how I had previously failed here. These three states are superimposed on top of one another like stacked projections.

Our program worked somewhat strangely as compared to others. For one, it is paired with an actual for-credit course, where student partners learn about pedagogy while also discussing how their partnerships are progressing. What was learned in the class helped to polish the partnerships; what the partnerships planted bloomed in the class. Another strange, yet related, part of our program was that we did not immediately hand over our notes during meetings with our faculty partners; instead, we spent the first few weeks working with our instructors in class to revise and improve our note-taking processes. We handed our observation notes to our faculty partners once ready.

This made the early parts of the program somewhat nerve wracking. Those first few weeks of observation, I felt myself portioned out between these various states, between my apartment, the virtual classroom, my haunted history at Berea, as if different parts of my mind and body were illuminated by different projectors. Everything changed, however, the first week I observed after handing my faculty partner my observations. I saw my faculty partner implement a minor suggestion I had made, and the projectors fizzled and burnt out. I was suddenly fully present in

observing my class. Any anxiety I had, any doubt about my position as a student, was lifted briefly from my shoulders like the millisecond of weightlessness at the apex of a roller coaster's hill. I spent the rest of that week chasing that ephemeral feeling, finding ways to recreate it in the readings, reflections on my observation notes, and the reflective writing prompts I did for the SFPP. Soon, the feeling became more constant, steadier, something to be held instead of pursued, and it suddenly clicked for me. I remember going to my romantic partner's apartment, next door to mine in campus housing, and telling them, "I think I want to be a professor." They just looked at me quizzically and said, "Yeah, I've known that about you since we started dating."

My experience as a student partner had a much deeper impact on my identity as a student in a way that I am still trying to unpack, however. Whereas before joining the program, I had thought of myself as trying to be a good student despite my history, I was beginning (and am continuing) to see myself as a good student because of my history. Rather than my tumultuous history being something hindering me as a student, it is the soil in which my unique perspectives and approaches have grown, and these perspectives and approaches benefitted me greatly while going through the equally unique SFPP. The chaos of my past has made me adaptable, agile, and critical of authority that only exists tautologically. I led organized efforts to change policies at work; I use that same desire for equity to advocate for better treatment of students in the classroom.

The impetus for this essay came when, during a discussion with a friend about the SFPP, they said they would have loved to do it when they were in their undergraduate studies, but did not feel as if they had been a good enough student. I, excitedly, told them that they did not have to be a good student as determined by anything as strict and formal as GPA, an exchange that inspired not only this essay but also its tongue-in-cheek title. In conversing with prior student partners, I have found this reconsideration of the self in various ways to be a frequent sentiment, that through this pedagogical partnership students are able to gain a new perspective on themselves, a new idea of wholeness. I see this as a meta encapsulation of the SFPP ideal of reciprocity, one of the three core values of the SFPP (Cook-Sather et al., 2014), in the sense that focusing so heavily on teaching and pedagogy with my faculty partner led to a fundamental reconsideration of my student identity. I moved from being unconvinced of my ability to succeed in academia to actively attempting to improve classes I was in. I was newly engaged with my courses, my instructors, and my fellow students. I was also inspired to begin pursuing extracurricular activities: I ran for Senator-At-Large in the Berea College Student Government Association and won and applied (and was accepted) to write for the school newspaper.

I ended the semester with a newfound fascination with the identity of "student," its disempowerment and marginalization under the "sage on a stage" and banking models (Freire, 2000) of higher education, and the radically empowering potential of programs like the SFPP. When Leslie Ortquist-Ahrens and Lauren Hall, my instructors during the SFPP, asked me to return the following year as the Mellon Student Fellow, I jumped at the chance. As a Mellon Student Fellow, I helped to construct the course portion of the SFPP, and co-taught both sections of it. It is a very liminal and meta position; it is some hybrid of student partner and faculty instructor. My experience as a student partner had spilled into every other sphere of my life; I found myself wanting to find ways to help build, in some small way, collaborative learning and

working environments in every class I took and at my work-study job as a reporter. I am genuinely excited to learn and to help others learn; I readily start and join reading groups, revision workshops, and other ways to further engage with the course and with my fellow students. I get invested in the progress of my fellow students and try to help better the collaborative learning environments I find myself in whenever possible.

Working as the Mellon Student Fellow, helping to plan the course and co-teach both sections, I have seen firsthand the way in which SFPP empowers students through a reconsideration of what “student” even means. As a student fellow, I occupy a strange and liminal space. I am not quite a peer of my students, but also not exactly outside of or above that role. Early on in the semester, a student asked me if they could use the restroom, a moment in the class that left me with a wide range of feelings. I felt validated in my position as instructor in that moment, and yet simultaneously very strange, as if I were wearing a Halloween costume that was far more convincing than I had initially planned. Later in the semester, a student was talking to me about problems they were having in the course and said that after class they were going to speak to the teachers, meaning my faculty co-instructors, and again that liminality was thrown into the spotlight.

My time as a student fellow and as a co-instructor has allowed me to confirm a few beliefs I have come to about being a student, and about creating the kind of classroom environment that allows for collaborative learning to flourish. One of the things I find most important is joy. By this, I don’t mean that every day, a teacher has to be happy, peppy, or overly excited; what I mean is that there needs to be some amount of pleasure derived from the process of teaching. I have had (and am currently having) teachers for whom teaching was clearly an obligation or a chore, and that permeates into every aspect of the class. Students can feel that, and it contributes to a lack of student engagement. Joy, in the radical, transformative ways that bell hooks and Emma Goldman use the word, is powerful and conducive when applied to the classroom setting. Goldman (1970) has railed against the idea that any cause that stood for “a beautiful ideal, for anarchism, for release and freedom from conventions and prejudice, should demand the denial of life and joy” (Goldman, 1970, p. 32). Similarly, bell hooks (1994) writes extensively about the revolutionary power of joy in the classroom, but few lines of hers strike me as powerfully as these: “Pleasure in the classroom is feared. If there is laughter, a reciprocal exchange may be taking place” (p. 145).

I also think that the classroom needs to operate as a sort of tidepool. A tidepool is fed by the ocean, which allows for life to develop and flourish within it. When a wave comes it exchanges some of itself for some of the ocean, and the cycle begins anew. A classroom should be fed by the subject as a means for allowing collaborative learning to flourish, should provide a contained environment in which that learning happens, and then should allow for that cycle of learning going out and coming back in. In both cases, it is school that flourishes, one of fish and the other of people. One thing that I try my best to keep in mind is that I want to learn as much from the students I’m helping to instruct as they do from me, to be that type of student for my teachers outside of the program, and to try to structure things with that reciprocity in mind.

Finally, I think that students need to feel important in the classroom. I heard a number of students suggest in our SFPP discussions that what they offer to their faculty partners are things

that they don't get in other classes, but badly want to experience. Students want to feel like they matter and feeling like they matter in one class may be the catalyst to them making themselves matter in other classes. I want my students to know that they are not only welcome here in my classroom but cherished and necessary, a crucial part to the collaborative learning environment we are building. Rather than seeing themselves as vessels into which knowledge is poured (Freire, 2000), I want them to see themselves as a crucial part of the classroom, one that, without which, the classroom could not even exist.

This positioning of student-faculty partnerships as a way for the identity of "student" to be radically empowered is one echoed in almost every example of student writing on the subject. Ana Colón García, in her essay "Building A Sense of Belonging Through Pedagogical Partnership," writes "I felt confident in myself and what I bring to the classroom, and found myself constantly thinking about how I was affecting the classroom dynamic" (p. 4). Manroocha Singh, in "Moving From 'Us vs. Them' to 'Us' through Working in Pedagogical Partnership," writes: "This partnership has already allowed me to feel comfort when talking to faculty," and that "the more exchanges I have with professors, the more I reinforce this idea and feel more confident in my identity as a student" (p. 5). This theme is recurrent and powerful: pedagogical partnerships between students and faculty lead to a radical and empowering reimagining of what it means to be a student. Many student partners also came to pedagogical partnerships with their own forms of academic baggage, and many of them (like me) found ways to lessen that burden and let ourselves flourish through teaching and learning together.

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