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## Mechanisms of Change: How Pedagogical Partnerships Can Build Confidence Among Vulnerable Members of the Academy

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## **MECHANISMS OF CHANGE: HOW PEDAGOGICAL PARTNERSHIPS CAN BUILD CONFIDENCE AMONG VULNERABLE MEMBERS OF THE ACADEMY**

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### **From “Partnership Curious” to “Partnership Sold”**

As one of the “partnership curious” participants at the workshop “Teaching and Learning Together: The Opportunities and Challenges of Pedagogy Partnerships at Grinnell College,” I attended with an open mind about restructuring my classroom. I not only left the workshop with a better understanding of pedagogical partnerships, but with a renewed assurance that teaching matters and *is* a valuable, centralized focus of academic careers. I also learned why I remain diffident as an educator, even after spending nearly 16 years in the classroom: I did not benefit from a pedagogical partnership as an undergraduate. With this in mind, I am committed to fostering pedagogical partnerships to provide first-generation students an opportunity to explore teaching in my classes.

Much of the workshop discussion focused on identity and teaching discomforts. As a first-generation college student (yes, I still consider myself one at 45!) and a non-tenure-track (non-TT) collegiate assistant professor faculty member at a Research-1 institution, I realized my interest in pedagogical partnerships is rooted in my own teaching discomfort. Both of these identities have shaped my “place” within the academy. As a first-generation college student, I felt marginalized as a student, occupying the back corner of every classroom hoping to not be called upon. As a non-TT faculty member, I take Joni Mitchell’s advice and try not to “give [my]self away.” Both statuses—first gen and non-TT faculty member—cultivate a sense of isolation and a fear of exposure. The consequent imposter syndrome often amplifies the precarity of place for people occupying these positions, leaving people to contemplate when their time may be up. Listening to former and current student pedagogical partners discuss their experiences, it was evident that participating in partnerships elevated their confidence, instilled institutional knowledge, and fostered a willingness to dismantle the power relations between students and professors. For all intents and purposes, they were quasi-academics.

Many student-partners participated throughout the workshop, articulating lessons learned, sharing practices adopted, and offering recommendations for how they—and others—might move forward. It became increasingly clear that the “sense of belonging” they discussed as a partnership goal was a reflection and outcome of their experiences. They *belonged* at this workshop. They knew the conference organizers believed they belonged, and we as faculty and staff participants would learn it over the course of two days. They did not fear authority. As I watched and listened as participants related to and began to know each other, the students were embedded. They did not defer to the voices of authority in the room; rather, theirs were equivalent, valued, and wise voices. I wondered to myself if they still perceived authority, or if their partnership experiences truly “shifted the power dynamics” (as was repeatedly stated) enough for them to feel equal? As my first-gen, non-TT faculty-self gazed in awe, I knew two things for sure:

1. I recognized that if I had had the opportunity as an undergraduate to serve as a pedagogical partner, I would likely have experienced the liberatory feelings the student-partners embodied, and
2. I wanted to develop partnerships for first-generation students at my own institution so that they could experience a sense of belonging and move more freely within academic spaces.

Why am I concerned with the second point? If I could potentially alleviate even a modicum of feelings of isolation or the straddling of two worlds (Lubrano, 2005) for vulnerable students, then I would meet my own personal mentoring goal.

Workshop participants also debated whether pedagogical partnerships (or similar pedagogical approaches) are radical or intuitive. For me, the workshop itself was radical. Again, being in a space where teaching—something that is intuitive to me—was centralized deviates greatly from the ethos of my institution. What made the workshop radical? We were not talking about students as data points, particularly as financial contributors to our operating budget; rather, students were discussed—and were discussing themselves as—as vital components of the teaching and learning enterprise, as agents of the learning process. Pedagogical partnerships extend student roles from simply consumers of knowledge in their respective disciplines, to collaborators within and outside the classroom. In this way, the learning process is disrupted, resulting in bidirectional knowledge production. Our general acceptance is that knowledge in college classrooms flows in one direction—from professors to students; pedagogical partnerships necessitate the upward transmission of knowledge from the student-partner to the professor—radical, indeed. Consequently, student-partners serve as advocates for both professors and their peers.

What does this mean for the professor? Admittedly, after reading the assigned materials sent to participants prior to the workshop, I was a bit nervous about the prospect of giving up power in the classroom. Does this mean that an undergraduate will be assessing me, scrutinizing every move I make, every word I utter? As one student-partner at the workshop reassured participants, pedagogical partnerships are not evaluative. They are about making good professors great. I can get behind this! But as a non-TT professor, I am riddled with fear and anxiety that I will be considered a fraud, even at the workshop where “sense of belonging” was front and center. While I earned the credential that certifies my membership within the academy, my position on the hierarchy makes me illegitimate. Even though I have garnered departmental, college, and university-level teaching awards, these rewards are doled out in an institution where teaching does not count for much. I struggle with this in the classroom, too. Will my students think less of me, question me more if they find out that I am not on the tenure-track? I exist in a liminal space. Regardless of value, I persist in my pursuit to improve my teaching.

## **Collaborative Teaching and Learning**

I consider teaching a series of relationships. The classroom is an ecosystem of diverse lived experiences. As a family sociologist, I meander around the room and take inventory of students’ social locations and treat each class as a family. Each student exists on the family tree, but may

have roots in various directions. In order to create a familial atmosphere, I structure my courses as a series of conversations. Students read evidence-based books, such as Cathy O’Neil’s *The Shame Machine*, and then we, together, question and apply the data to ourselves, our own family systems, society, etc. I attempt to centralize all student voices and give them the latitude to ask questions, challenge me, and interrogate the texts. Further, students engage with each other through collaborative assessments—a process that continues, rather than simply judges, the learning process. Collaborative assessments require “mutual recognition and acceptance of each other’s statements”—which means that students take part in the teaching process (Frykedal & Chiriac, 2018, p. 189). Professors who employ collaborative assessments should learn to “see themselves as change agents who help students better themselves by developing independence through interdependence” (Davidson & Major, 2014, pp. 20-21). In my classroom, students are first interdependent on me to gain an understanding of complex concepts and social patterns; and, subsequently, interdependent on each other to critically apply concepts to a scenario, popular culture, or other media. Through this process, knowledge becomes a social product, where the professor and students work together to create and interpret meaning (Davidson & Major, 2014). Indeed, Smith and MacGregor (1992) note that collaborative assessments “center on students’ exploration or application of the course material, not simply the teacher’s presentation or explication of it” (p. 11). I strongly believe that students learn from my interpretation of sociological knowledge, but it is not until they explore these concepts with each other that true understanding emerges.

Although I recognize that my assessment style is radical, I had not considered that this pedagogical approach aligns well with pedagogical partnerships. Facilitating a pedagogical partnership will amplify the collaborative structure of my courses and foster agency among my undergraduate students. How, specifically, would I benefit from pedagogical partnerships? Given the size of my classes (40+ students in each class), I do not have many opportunities to meet with students to consistently acquire feedback; thus, my confidence in my teaching effectiveness wavers, as I assess each class in turn. While I have students visit my office to chat about class, these are informal conversations. Further, students who tend to visit my office are the students who enjoy the class—which skews the perception of the class positively. Developing a pedagogical partnership would allow me to engage in dialogue with a student-partner about my teaching in real time. Partnerships, then, provide an avenue to change my teaching in positive ways and to increase my confidence—which is clearly needed.

### **Pedagogical Partnerships as Mechanisms of Change**

As an undergraduate, I thought my professors were deities. To provide a frame of reference, I began college in 1997—a time before many professors incorporated PowerPoint slides or other forms of technology. They relied on either a list of points jotted down on a piece of paper or simply the technology they invested in most: their brains. I marveled at their ability to recall so much information and was even more impressed when they could answer student questions that made little sense to me. You might wonder, then, how did I ever go from the reticent student in the corner of classrooms to a PhD teaching three courses (using PowerPoints, of course) at a large, public, research-intensive university? Five words: “Kid, you’ve got the goods.” One of my professors asked to talk with me outside of class. I thought I was in trouble. I made sure I looked

nice for the meeting—my blue-collar roots at work. She just wanted to tell me that I was smart and that I should pursue graduate education. She changed my life with those five words. I want to be a change agent for students. After attending the workshop at Grinnell, I believe pedagogical partnerships are the mechanism to enact this change, which is why I piloted one in my Spring 2024 Gender, Family and Crime in Appalachia special topics course. During the same semester, I applied for the Diggs Teaching Scholar Award at Virginia Tech (VT). This project-based award highlights innovative teaching practices that disrupt conventional ways of teaching. As part of the award, recipients are required to disseminate their pedagogical practices in a public forum with the explicit goal of encouraging others to adopt similar ways of teaching. I am happy to report that the Diggs Society thought pedagogical partnerships are worthy of investment at VT! (See the news item [here](#).)

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