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LEARNING IN PARTNERSHIP: A REFLECTIVE JOURNEY

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As an educational developer, I am drawn to strategies that engage students as active participants in informing the teaching process that go beyond traditional student feedback mechanisms. I view students as active participants in teaching and learning and advocate for creating spaces that allow students to step into that role. That doesn't happen so easily in my context, the Teaching and Learning Center at West Chester University, because much of our programming is faculty facing. While we certainly think about the students in all we do and get valuable insights about student experience from faculty, that is not the same as engaging directly with students in dialogue on teaching.

When I came across the practice of pedagogical partnerships at the 2022 conference of the Professional and Organizational Development (POD) network in Seattle, it felt like I had stumbled upon a potential solution to my perennial question about how to engage students meaningfully in the teaching process. I was intrigued. The invitation to participate in the "Teaching and Learning Together" workshop at Grinnell College arrived in my Inbox a few months after that conference, and it could not have been better timed. I was eager to learn more about pedagogical partnerships.

Listening and Learning at Grinnell

As I reflect on my experience at the workshop, I think about the seamless alignment of the topic, content, and process. The workshop was a perfect model of a participatory approach where every person's voice, identities, knowledge, and experiences were valued and affirmed, even when we disagreed. We were a diverse group that included faculty, administrators, and students with varying expertise and experience with pedagogical partnerships. The experience was designed to give us opportunities to learn with and from each other and support one another as we reflected on our individual goals. It was an incredible opportunity to learn about pedagogical partnerships in partnership with others.

A poignant moment for me was a lunch conversation with a student partner who shared her college experience. She narrated her struggle during her first semester, almost losing her merit-based scholarship. To finance her education, she took up a part-time job that gradually became fulltime. Her academic performance suffered as she accepted extra shifts to meet her financial needs. She thought she was doing the right thing, working and earning as much as possible to pay for college, but her schoolwork paid the price. Hearing her blame herself for not knowing better moved me to tears. What were her choices? She was doing all she could to stay in college and struggling because of it, through no fault of her own.

This student's story resonated with my own college experience of balancing work, academics, and sleep. These types of experiences shed light on systemic barriers that often impede academic

success for students from marginalized communities. It is nearly impossible to identify these barriers outside of meaningful engagement with students. When discussing barriers, we don't typically talk about the taken-for-granted and sometimes conflicting assumptions in the higher education context that trip students up. Students who have had minimal exposure to the culture of higher education prior to arriving on campus will likely have more difficulty navigating these taken-for-granted assumptions or hidden curricula.

The stories and experiences shared at the workshop helped me to see the potential for pedagogical partnerships to bring these issues into focus and prompt critical dialogues aimed at systemic change. While listening and engaging in discussions at the workshop, I started to think about how and what we could learn from the experiences of students who are struggling academically at our institutions. The more time I thought about this and discussed it with others, the more I could see how pedagogical partnerships could help us shift the narrative from trying to 'fix' the student to exposing and addressing the invisible barriers in our institutions.

Bringing Partnership Principles to West Chester's Teaching and Learning Center

Returning to my campus after the workshop, I shared with colleagues what I had learned and proposed that we start a pedagogical partnership program at our institution. I was heartened by the positive responses of my colleagues, who were willing to partner with me to try this out. We were able to pilot a partnership program at our university within a year of my attending the workshop. We hosted an orientation that included the participation of a student partner from Bryn Mawr and Haverford College's Students as Learners and Teachers (SaLT) program who, after the orientation, continued to meet with student partners virtually to offer support and guidance. This was another form of learning in partnership.

In reflecting on this partnership work, I gained other insights as well, such as that the kinds of questions participants in the pilot partnership program ask is a form of feedback that can inform how we support faculty and student participants. We typically think of responses as feedback, but understanding questions as another form of feedback enacts two of the basic principles of pedagogical partnership: respect and reciprocity (Cook-Sather et al., 2014).

Another important learning from our pilot involves the way student partners, initially slow to respond to our call for participation, have embraced the role. We have noticed that when we explain to students that their struggles are a strength within the context of our program, it changes the way they engage with it. They are more willing to name and bring attention to practices that might otherwise go unnoticed. For example, one student partner shared their difficulties navigating the learning management system as a transfer student, which helped their faculty partner (and all of us) to consider the assumptions we make about non-first-year students. It may sound obvious, but it's an excellent example of the taken-for-granted assumptions that get in the way of student success. This program offers a unique opportunity to listen to students with the intention of learning from them so we can reflect on our pedagogical practices. Through their stories, we gain insights into the things we don't and cannot see because of our perspective.

From Feedback to Reciprocity

While we still have much to learn, our program is off to a good start, mainly due to the resources and support that I received from the workshop. I continue to draw on the lessons learned, connections made, and the inspiration I received from the workshop as I work with my team to develop our program. I am particularly excited about the shift from only gathering student feedback, already an established practice and one I can easily support in my role, to supporting more reciprocal relationships in which questions and the explorations of responses to them guide our work. As an educational developer without classroom teaching responsibilities, I value the opportunity to engage directly with students. I feel more connected to both the students and faculty as a result of this program, possibly because it allows me to hear about teaching and learning experiences from both perspectives. One of the faculty partners in the pilot recently said the program renewed his joy in teaching. I, too, feel that joy and am honored to be part of a joy-generating experience.

Reference

Cook-Sather, A., Bovill, C., & Felten, P. (2014). *Engaging Students as Partners in Learning & Teaching: A Guide for Faculty*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.