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REDEFINING PROFESSIONALISM AND REJECTING PERFECTIONISM THROUGH THE PROCESS OF PEDAGOGICAL PARTNERSHIP: TAKEAWAYS FROM MY YEARS AS A STUDENT CONSULTANT

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On mile 3 of 25 co-leading my first backcountry hiking trip of the summer, I took as deep a breath as was possible while carrying an 80-liter pack. I was taking the “caboose” that day, meaning I was at the end of the group, watching my co-lead and nine first-time teenage hikers take their first backpacking trip in North Cascades National Park. On day 2, I could already tell the trip was going to be far from a “perfect” journey: participants were ill-informed by the company I was working for regarding the realities of what a backcountry trip would look like, we were down one water filter, bugs were everywhere, and participants were not enjoying each other’s company yet.

Throughout the week, I instructed the teenagers in backpacking, camping, and hiking essentials. These included Leave-No-Trace principles, how to set up tents and filter water, and history of the lands and parks we were on. Despite the company job training’s emphasis on wilderness first aid and trail etiquette, much of my work as an outdoor educator, rather than focusing on practical and tactical skills, was relationship building, connection, support, affirmation, and facilitation of self-reflection and celebration. Being an outdoor professional meant leading 15-year-olds in mindfulness and breathing exercises in hard or teary moments on the trail. It meant taking as many breaks as were needed on long hike days, practicing outdoor mindfulness, encouraging participants who felt less naturally disposed to hiking to take turns leading the group, and making time for joy and silliness when there were challenging moments.

Of course, my experience hiking and backpacking, and working in environmental education in various summer camps throughout my life, was incredibly useful, but that week, the training that proved most useful for keeping myself grounded in the field was from my job as a student consultant through SaLT (Students as Learners and Teachers), part of the TLI (Teaching and Learning Institute) at Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges. In my 24/8 work with youth in the wilderness this summer, I solidified my takeaways from my work as a student consultant: the importance of leaning into messiness rather than perfection; the power of redefining what it means to be a professional; the value of clarity, transparency, and flexibility; and the absolute significance of human-to-human connection and relationality.

Leaning into the “Mess” of the Learning Process: An Overhaul of Perfection and a Redefinition of Professionalism

My first experience as a SaLT student consultant was as a co-facilitator of a Pedagogy Circle for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (see Suresh & Rolfes, 2023 for a description of pedagogy circles). An hour before I co-facilitated my first pedagogy circle in January of 2022, I decided to draft a script for myself to follow. After the first 10 minutes of co-facilitating the circle, though, it became clear to me that this scripted idea of what it means to be a professional was not applicable in this job; while having a plan was important, facilitation was dependent on what

each circle participant brought to the (Zoom) table, and I had to model more flexibility and vulnerability than a pre-written script to prompt engagement from the range of faculty and staff that attended that first circle.

Once I finished my “opening script,” I was forced to accept that my fear of saying something not perfectly phrased would become a reality. Over the course of the semester, rather than forcing myself to conform to one mold of who I thought the perfect facilitator would be, I let myself be. From that state of being present and open, rather than being rigidly “prepared,” I was able to respond to circle participants when it felt natural, to frame my own thinking and questions, and occasionally to say something that might need a bit of clarification. This need for clarification, rather than being a flaw in my ability to lead, fit more naturally into the intention of the pedagogy circles—to provide a space for people from various identities and roles across Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges to come together in open dialogue and exchange about equity, accessibility, and inclusion (Suresh & Rolfes, 2023).

In my time as a student consultant, I not only co-facilitated pedagogy circles but also served in two year-long, one-on-one partnerships with faculty members who were new to the colleges. In these relationships, I continued to unlearn and redefine what it meant to be a professional in these spaces. Littered across my notebook from my first year in a one-on-one partnership with a professor are my own self-doubts about formality and professionalism. As I got more and more comfortable in my role as a student consultant, a guide, a collaborator, I found myself “performing” professionalism less and less. I instead found a more authentic version of myself—one that was more confident in my own expertise and my ability to offer sound advice and think and talk through pedagogical approaches. This work proved significant not only for myself, but also carried over into discussion with my faculty partners about their own perceptions of what it means to be an academic professional.

At the beginning of our collaboration with my first faculty partner, nearly all his classes I observed were lecture heavy: information was passed one way from the professor, at the front of the classroom with a PowerPoint, to students, in neat rows. Jotted in my notebook from this first partnership is the question: *How could this passage of knowledge be re-structured? Could students be agents of their own learning when they don't already know the content? Is that possible?* Initially anxious to bring up questions that went against the default structure of this professor's pedagogy, I talked through my perceptions of the classroom first with fellow student consultants and the director of the SaLT program. I was reassured that these questions—and raising questions about other methods of teaching and learning—were not just important, but also necessary as a part of my professional role as student consultant. In this case, being a professional meant setting aside any conflict-avoidance tendencies and just asking questions, rooted in my own observations and reflections.

In a subsequent meeting with this same faculty partner, I learned that he had been feeling a lot of anxiety about his own performance as a lecturer and in particular an obligation to fill the entire 90-minute class period with information. He feared losing his students' trust in him as a professor, as the only person in the room with a PhD. In the spirit of vulnerability, I shared my own experiences as a learner and the type of classrooms in which I feel the most trust and agency—classrooms where I feel strong relationships with my fellow students and my professor.

I shared the more challenging experiences my peers and I had experienced in more “traditional” lecture-focused classroom spaces. I assured him that there is no *one* way to be an academic, but that, in my experience, the most rewarding experiences in a classroom, as a student, take place when the learning is shared between professors and students.

This was not a one-time conversation. Over the course of our year-long partnership, this professor and I discussed at length what it means to be a professional, and why there is often an expectation for perfection within the profession of academia. We talked through what success means to each of us, to him as a professor, and piloted different pedagogical approaches to engage and center students in his classroom. There were weeks that students were just lower energy, that he did not cover what he had planned to, and he had to pivot from week to week. I took the chance of framing this not as a failure, which he initially feared at the start of the academic year, but rather as another part of the process, and of what a new role as an educator turns into.

It was, I believe, this shared vulnerability and acceptance that, sometimes, you have to lean into the mess a bit in order to learn, to grow, to foster relationships, that set the stage for the rest of our partnership to flourish. Within our partnership, there was never an expectation that either of us would perform perfection. Instead, the expectation was that we would show up. It was through this showing up as authentically us that we created a trusting—and, without a doubt, professional—relationship. The rejection of perfection and the move towards an acceptance of all elements of the process of becoming more evolved versions of ourselves were necessary in order to be inclusive of a wide variety of learners who entered my faculty partner’s classroom, as well as for his own understanding of himself.

The Value of Transparency and Intention in Humanizing and Equalizing Authority

Throughout my two years in one-on-one partnerships, one of the most consistent questions I asked of my faculty partners was: Why are you doing what you are doing? Can you tell me more about the intention behind [this practice]? In asking this genuine question, I attempted to open a space for professors to outline and verbalize pieces of their own pedagogical philosophy. It was in the spaces of these conversations that I was often able to offer advice and clarifications, and it was here that professors were most concretely able to either pinpoint the intention behind their teaching methods or find ways to pivot methods to find more intentionality, if they realized their answer was less clear. One of the most consistent pieces of feedback I offered to my faculty partners was to outline their intentions to their students. This practice of pedagogical transparency served to disrupt normative hierarchies between students and teachers, inviting students into a slice of what it was like to be a professor.

Part of this transparency around assignments, class structure, and potential changes to syllabi is establishing clear boundaries around what is and is not included in a professor’s role: what they can and cannot do. The importance of these boundaries and expectations is not that they are in and of themselves beneficial or problematic but that clarifying them allows the professor to explain their intention. The transparency around pedagogical intent is essential to creating

humanizing and trusting relationships between professors and students, a goal clearly articulated by both of my faculty partners.

This practice of transparency around intention and action has proven important in many arenas of my life, beyond the classroom. Though it can serve as a valuable structure in any human relationship—personal or professional—I find it particularly important in spaces where one holds authority. In my time as a backcountry outdoor educator, I have found that being able to ask myself and my co-lead these questions of intention has allowed us to do some necessary restructuring of our plans, as well as admit the limits of what we could and couldn't do, as informed by the broader structure we were working in. It also allowed us to communicate transparently with all participants, allowing them to be invited into elements of the planning process, and it has informed our communications with our higher-ups.

Leaning into Relationship Building and Connection as a Part of the Joy of Partnership

Despite my own moves towards a redefinition of professionalism and away from perfection, well into my third semester working as a student consultant, I found myself questioning myself after a meeting with my faculty partner. I had little critique to offer to my faculty partner after my weekly observation, and we spent an entire scheduled meeting talking about our own experiences in music education spaces, about competition, about cultural differences. We spent an hour talking, laughing, connecting, and sharing stories. Later that afternoon, I entered my weekly student consultant meeting, still energized from my morning meeting but also feeling a bit sheepish, like I had less “productive” of a week of partnership. I expressed this, prompting a conversation about the core of pedagogical partnerships: human relationships. The storytelling, relationship building, laughing, and connecting are not antithetical to a professional relationship in this capacity; rather, those are what makes professional relationships what they are. I was reassured that the joy and connection was not a distraction from the work we were doing to develop my faculty partner's pedagogical skills and confidence.

To be a professional in education is to be in relationship with others. That is something I've learned, implicitly through a life lived as a student in classrooms, explicitly in some classrooms as a part of my coursework for my education studies major in college. Relationship building and human-to-human connection are what make all of the growth and development present in pedagogical partnership—and also a lot of joy—possible. I've found the same to be true in most work I do, but particularly work in education. To me, feeling joy is feeling energized and excited, and is more often than not shared between people.

In my second semester of my second year-long, one-on-one partnership, I'd learned to lean into the joy of connecting with my faculty partner. In one of our final meetings, we sat outside on campus, talking through my weekly observations and what we each wanted out of the collaboration looking towards the end of his first year on faculty and my upcoming graduation. We spent over an hour talking and connecting, both about class and campus happenings, and about so much else—life, postgrad journeys, rent, and our shared and differing experiences at Bryn Mawr College. When I finished that meeting, instead of questioning the joy I felt as I had a

year prior, I chose to sit in it, to accept this joy as a sign of a successful partnership and collaboration.

Conclusion: Implications for Wellbeing

The night before I joined my first student consultant meeting back in 2022, I was feeling far from my best. It was the start of my fourth semester in college, but my second semester experiencing college fully in person. I was dealing with the lingering stress of the pandemic muddled with many other struggles so central to being 19: feeling isolated, overwhelmed, and unsure if I made the right decision coming to Bryn Mawr. The next afternoon, I tentatively clicked the Zoom link I had been emailed by the director of the SaLT program and joined other student consultants in a meeting. I was immediately impressed with and a bit in awe of the ease with which the other students talked to one another, offering advice about building rapport with a faculty partner, writing and communicating observation notes, and pedagogy circle facilitation.

Though it took me some time to warm up to the work, to gain my own sense of confidence and expertise, without the community fostered in—and inspiration I drew from—that first semester among other student consultants, I likely would not have come back for more the next semester. As I went on over my next two years of college, the TLI weekly meetings, and my weekly meetings with my faculty partners, became highlights of each week. Through these meetings—dedicated to a careful balance of growth and self-reflection—I honed my ability to connect, to transparently outline and communicate things I noticed, I clarified my goals, and I saw so many others, faculty and students alike, unapologetically on their own journeys to new levels of being in connection in higher education, regardless of level of profession.

The ability to be human beings together in spaces, talking about change and making education a more equitable and accessible space, greatly impacted my wellbeing and sense that I was a part of something greater than myself (Cook-Sather & Wald, in press). Looking past singular definitions of being a professional and leaning into messiness has helped me beyond my performance in my role as a student consultant; it has provided me with valuable tools to be flexible in other jobs I've held and through the rest of my college career, helping me come to a further iteration of self-acceptance. Process-based thinking is applicable to my own view of self as I enter the world post-college and am able to afford myself the kindness of distance from perfectionist expectations. Working with professors to clarify their own expectations in the classroom and open up to students in a transparent way simultaneously encouraged me to do the same in my own avenues of life, deepening my relationships with others and myself—through honest, direct, and transparent communication. This work validated for me the importance of growth-oriented connection, of growing together and sharing the process of becoming better versions of ourselves, and it is something I know will serve me well as I move into different stages of my life.

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