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Inclusivity in the Classroom: Shared Experiences of a Student-Faculty Partnership

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INCLUSIVITY IN THE CLASSROOM: SHARED EXPERIENCES OF A STUDENT-FACULTY PARTNERSHIP

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The Community Learning and Inclusivity Partnership (CLIP) program at Emmanuel College brings together faculty members and students in partnerships to promote inclusive practice in the classroom. Modeled after the 'Students as Learners and Teachers (SaLT) program' developed by Dr. Alison Cook-Sather at Bryn Mawr College, CLIP was developed within the Biology Department at Emmanuel College and is supported by the Office of Academic Affairs, The Center for Diversity, Equity and Inclusion and an HHMI grant that funds the college's 'Belonging in Biology' program (Seshan, 2022). In Spring 2023, we piloted CLIP in the Business department with operational support from the Biology Department and funding from the Office of Academic Affairs.

The CLIP program partners faculty and student consultants with the shared goal of fostering inclusion in the classroom environment. Typically, CLIP student partners are pursuing majors that intentionally differ from the subject area of the class they consult on. This allows them to focus on the interactions and experiences in the classroom versus course content. Research supports the uses of pedagogical partnerships for curriculum design. Bovill and Bulley's (2011) ladder of participation suggests that 'active student participation', whereby students have significant influence and decision-making power in the co-creation of the classroom environment, can foster student engagement, enhance the learning experience and improve the quality of classroom teaching (Cook-Sather et al., 2014; Healey et al., 2014). Further, Bovill, Cook-Sather and Felten (2011, p. 134) suggest that "active learning implies not only a shift from passivity to agency but also from merely doing to developing a meta-cognitive awareness about what is being done" therefore improving the learning outcomes for students. In particular, this partnership model can serve to amplify the voices of traditionally marginalized students and create necessary and "culturally sustaining" change in pedagogy (Cook-Sather & Agu, 2013, p. 283).

The following essay summarizes our CLIP experience and provides student (Cynthia) and faculty (Kelly) reflections on the experience.

'How it Worked'

We met as partners for the first time in January 2023. At that time, we had both received some information and guidance from Emmanuel's CLIP Student Coordinator. During that meeting we each sought to identify our goals for the semester. The CLIP partnership focused on an undergraduate course in Organizational Behavior within the Business Department at Emmanuel College in Boston. Some of the shared goals developed during this meeting included developing a better understanding of the diverse perspectives on work in organizational settings brought to

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the course by individual students, assessing the impact of different teaching methods and class activities on diverse learners, identifying challenges and potential best practices associated with groupwork (a heavy focus in this course) among diverse learners and enhancing class participation and student engagement. Operationally, the CLIP partnership involved weekly class observations followed by an in-person meeting the following day to jointly reflect on the class session. Students in the course were also introduced to the CLIP program and invited to share feedback with Cynthia throughout the semester. During our weekly meetings, we would discuss what went well during each class session and challenges or concerns that we experienced. Twice during the semester Cynthia conducted a confidential survey with students to elicit feedback on the classroom experience as well as specific class activities.

Sample Intervention

After the first few class meetings, we identified possible deterrents to an inclusive learning environment, set goals for the semester, and implemented new practices to eliminate the deterrents in order to meet our goals. Considering the course is heavily group-focused, the main deterrents we identified were that some groups were more silent than others during group work, groups sitting in the back of the classroom were not easily accessible to Kelly and the same students were answering questions in class. Based on these obstacles, we established that improving student participation and classroom mobility would be one of our goals for the semester. To eliminate these deterrents and meet these goals, we implemented a rotating seating arrangement that placed groups in a new area of the classroom for each meeting. Groups who were more reserved and typically residing in the back of the classroom ultimately became more talkative and easily accessible to Kelly, which allowed for better facilitation of discussion during group work. Based on the initial class meetings, it was noted that students who sat closer to the front of the classroom were more likely to participate, therefore by incorporating a rotating seating arrangement, we were able to hear new voices and see more participation from different students as the semester progressed. By improving participation, a greater diversity of perspectives were being shared, ultimately enriching the learning experience. Through this intervention, we were able to meet our goals, allowing us to move closer to creating an inclusive learning environment. This is one example of an intervention we were able to implement during the semester.

Student Reflections (Cynthia)

As a first-generation student and a woman of color, I felt a bit of imposter syndrome when I began my freshman year. To compensate for this feeling, I quickly took on leadership roles and positions on campus in order to feel as though I deserved to be a part of the community, which was a strong driving factor in my decision to become a student partner. I wasn't quite sure how I would fulfill my new role, but I knew that it would give me the opportunity to hopefully create a welcoming and comfortable environment with my faculty partner that would rid any uneasiness or lack of belonging felt by my peers, something I knew all too well.

I grew anxious thinking about if I would be successful in executing my role. Having to make the transition from student to colleague was nerve-racking and I wasn't sure how I was going to make it work. It's one thing to provide constructive criticism to a professor in an end of the year survey, but it's another to meet with them weekly and critique an area of their expertise. However, understanding that it was also my faculty partner's first time in this type of partnership made it much easier and we were able to navigate this new experience together.

As a student who majors in Biology, I also worried that I wouldn't be able to properly aid the students taking Organizational Behavior, a business course. With hindsight, I believe this made my contribution as a student partner unique because I was able to focus in on the classroom dynamic and teaching practices, rather than on the content itself.

With the guidelines provided to me by the Student Coordinator, I began taking notes and examining the classroom dynamic. Through my observations coupled with feedback collected from students, Dr. Basile and I worked together in our weekly meetings to ensure the classroom was an inclusive learning environment. After implementing the changes we discussed during our meetings, students visibly became more confident within themselves and more open with each other. Students who were typically silent during class began to ask and answer questions, as well as being more talkative in their groups. In a post-intervention survey, students expressed that they liked moving around the classroom and participating in interactive activities with different peers. I could see the classroom dynamic shifting with each meeting, which made me feel as though I was fulfilling my role and truly serving as an aid to my peers. In addition to a sense of fulfillment, I was able to deepen my roots on campus by establishing a relationship with a professor I otherwise may have never crossed paths with. I've come to realize that creating meaningful relationships on campus is the antidote for imposter syndrome. The position of student partner has brought me one step closer to establishing my roots at Emmanuel. I was able to work towards making my peers feel as though they belonged in class and also prove to myself that I am deserving of being a part of the community on campus. In more ways than I initially anticipated, I grew both as a student and as a person. The CLIP Program provides student partners with an amazing leadership position, aims to ensure students feel advocated for within the classroom, and allows faculty to receive real-time transparent feedback from their students.

Faculty Reflections (Kelly)

As soon as I heard about the CLIP program on campus, I felt that it would be a valuable opportunity for me to learn about ways to promote a more inclusive classroom experience for students in my Organizational Behavior class. In particular, I felt that it was an important opportunity for this course, as one of the learning goals of the course is "to learn strategies for recognizing and maximizing the opportunities presented by diversity in organizations." I thought that if I don't do this well in my own classroom, how can I teach students strategies for inclusion in their future occupations? I also considered that, in my own experience, the most valuable feedback I have had has been from students, via evaluations and even casual conversations, therefore it seemed like a great opportunity to receive this feedback each week during the semester which would allow me to make real-time changes to the course.

Similar to Cynthia, I also felt a sense of 'imposter syndrome.' Despite having been in academia for more than 15 years, any form of observation makes me anxious. In the first few classes, I found myself very aware of what I was saying and how I was interacting with students. Quite honestly, I was concerned that I would do or say something that might let down Cynthia as my partner in fostering an inclusive environment. However, I quickly grew more at ease with the observations and feedback. Cynthia provided this feedback in a positive and constructive manner, and we worked together to identify areas for improvement. In addition, our faculty-student partnership led to a shared sense of responsibility to ensure that the classroom was inclusive. As a faculty member, I found support in the fact that I had someone else who was invested in finding solutions to challenges that arose. I truly believe that the collaborative nature of this program led to more generative discussion and innovative ideas.

Quickly, a few themes emerged that provided opportunities for us to collaboratively design techniques that would benefit student experiences. The classroom itself was a challenge. Attempting to run interactive, often small group-based activities in a long narrow classroom was challenging and we found that student groups in the rear of the classroom were less likely to contribute and were getting much less attention from me. In addition, we identified a few challenges with group dynamics and specific activities that had the potential to elicit microaggressions. Through subtle changes in class structure as well as intentional outreach from Cynthia, we were able to provide better support for students around these activities. Last, as noted by Dr. Anu Seshan, Director of the CLIP program at Emmanuel, on her own experiences with CLIP (2022), I also found that I held myself to a higher degree of accountability to design and implement changes each week of the semester due to my weekly dialogue with Cynthia.

A final aspect of the program that I found invaluable was the ability to access more comprehensive student feedback in real-time. Via Cynthia, I heard student voices that I would have not otherwise heard. In prior courses I thought I was asking for feedback and receiving it however, I realize now that I was missing perspectives from students who were unwilling or experienced discomfort in providing it. Further, I heard these voices in real-time, meaning that I could adjust my approach during the semester. Moving forward, I need to incorporate methods of asking for feedback more often and in a variety of ways. I also plan to ensure that students have a means of providing feedback and sharing concerns anonymously during the semester through a greater use of polling software and shared response formats.

Conclusion / Future Opportunities

The CLIP program was an extremely beneficial experience for all those involved. A key takeaway from the experience is the importance of including opportunities for student leadership in course design and course delivery. While CLIP is one clear example of how to employ student leadership in this way, other examples might include smaller scale initiatives such as student involvement in the co-design of course assessments, student selection of course content and/or student leadership of classroom activities. Further, ensuring that students have a voice during the semester so that they can provide real-time feedback to faculty allows improved opportunities to make change in an impactful way.

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