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Creating Brave Spaces within and through Student-Faculty Pedagogical Partnerships

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The call to create “safe space” in classrooms and other forums for teaching and learning has always troubled me, since real learning requires some risk and discomfort. In my own pedagogical practice, I have wrestled with how to balance genuine challenge with sufficient support and affirmation, because it is that combination, I have found, that encourages the greatest growth and openness to further risk. Therefore, when a student introduced me to the concept of “brave space” from the social justice education literature (Arao & Clemens, 2013), I was excited about the combination of active risk and built-in affirmation that the concept captures.

Safe space implies that danger, risk, or harm will not come to one in that space—that the space as constructed precludes the possibility of those phenomena. In explaining why they find the notion of safe space problematic, Arao and Clemens (2013) argue that “to remove risk” from challenging encounters around controversial issues is “simply impossible” (p. 136). They suggest that to claim we can create “safe space” for such work is not only misleading but actually counterproductive, because it promises to protect and exempt people from the very difficult-ness that real learning and growth require. Furthermore, because the language of safety may “encourage entrenchment in privilege” of those, in particular, who think they do not need to make themselves vulnerable, the language of safety can “contribute to the entrenchment of dominance and subordination” (Arao & Clemens, 2013, p. 140).

Brave space, on the other hand, implies that there is indeed likely be danger or harm—threats that require bravery on the part of those who enter. But those who enter the space have the courage to face that danger and to take risks because they know they will be taken care of—that painful or difficult experiences will be acknowledged and supported, not avoided or eliminated. The shift for which Arao and Clemens argue—away from the concept of safety and toward an emphasis on the importance of bravery—focuses our attention on the active engagement and agency required of participants in spaces intended to support learning. In other words, using “brave” rather “safe” not only sets a tone for engagement but also proposes a mode of engagement. For these reasons, this alternative to safe space resonated not only with my thinking about classroom practice but also in relation to the spaces created through student-faculty pedagogical partnerships.

Exploring how the concept of brave space can inform our thinking about both classroom environments and student-faculty partnerships, this issue of *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education* features the reflections of three undergraduate students and two incoming faculty members who participated in the Students as Learners and Teachers (SaLT) program at Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges. The essays highlight how these participants experienced and created brave spaces—spaces in which they felt courageous enough to risk, explore, experiment, assert, learn, and change, knowing that they would be supported in those necessarily destabilizing and unpredictable processes. These essays describe how student-faculty pedagogical partnerships themselves constitute brave spaces and/or how such partnerships support the creation of brave spaces in classrooms. All five authors address the importance of

creating brave spaces that challenge the implicit and explicit ways in which inclusion and exclusion, affirmation and disenfranchisement, and belonging and alienation play out for people with different identities.

It is perhaps not coincidental that the faculty members who wrote essays for this issue worked with student consultants from underrepresented backgrounds. While pedagogical partnerships have the potential to create “counter-spaces” wherein “deficit notions of people of color can be challenged and where a positive collegiate racial climate can be established and maintained” (Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000, p. 70; see Cook-Sather & Agu, 2013), they do not automatically do so. That creation requires genuine engagement—attention, affirmation, and willingness to change—both from the SaLT program itself, which gives students, in the words of one student consultant of color, “a seat at the proverbial table and the courage to speak up for what I believed and wanted to see” (quoted in Cook-Sather & Agu, 2013, p. 277), and from their interactions with their respective faculty partners. When participants achieve such engagement, students whose voices are often not heard speak in ways that enact a form of bravery and support the creation of brave spaces for and by their faculty partners.

The collection opens with “**Belonging and Brave Space As Hope For Personal and Institutional Inclusion**” by Miriam Perez-Putnam, Haverford College Class of 2016. This essay highlights the role of brave spaces for individuals and for the institutions of which they are a part. Linking the concepts of belonging and brave space, Perez-Putnam, a student of color, describes her own experience of developing a sense of belonging through the Students as Learners and Teachers (SaLT) program. She also links the sense of meaning and contribution she experienced through working in pedagogical partnership with incoming faculty to the potential she sees for the SaLT program to foster the development of “a future Haverford in which engaging and thoughtful pedagogy is the norm and students leave with a genuine attachment to their education, peers, and mentors.”

In “**Striving Toward a Space for Equity and Inclusion in Physics Classrooms**” Kerstin Perez, Assistant Professor of Physics at Haverford College, discusses two ways in which her partnership with an undergraduate student consultant, Meron, provided brave space: the first was the time the partnership created to focus on how underrepresented students do not feel they belong in natural science classrooms and how to create more supportive environments for them. The second and related way the partnership created a brave space was “that the relationship supported the ‘bravery’ needed to question the traditional boundaries of what is discussed in an undergraduate physics class.” Perez describes herself as “a mixed-race White and Hispanic woman from a low-income urban area” who has made her way in the often unwelcoming world of physics. She found that her partnership with her student consultant, Meron, “herself an underrepresented student,” Perez explains, “who had been dissuaded from a STEM field by her experience in undergraduate classes, validated my own experiences with classroom environments that, while not explicitly unwelcoming, left us feeling isolated.” Perez explains that, with Meron, “I could share the vulnerability of being a student who didn’t feel that her background and approach to study were shared by her peers, as well as announce the things we wish professors had spoken to us about.”

In “**Leaping and Landing in Brave Spaces**,” Clara Abbott, Haverford College Class of 2017, analyzes what constitutes and contributes to the creation of brave spaces in a natural science classroom and what supports leaps into and soft landings in such classrooms. Abbot analyzes both what happens within students’ minds as they sit in classrooms considering whether to participate or not and what kind of invitations and affirmations faculty members can offer to encourage leaps into brave spaces of learning for oneself and the support of others’ learning. As suggested above, while creating such brave spaces for all students is important, it is especially important for those who do not feel they belong in college classes in general and in science classes in particular.

In “**Practicing Virtue in Teaching and Learning**,” Carola Binder, Assistant Professor of Economics at Haverford College, reminds us that the cardinal virtue of *fortitude*, synonymous with courage or bravery, is not only central to Catholic teaching but also has a longer history stretching back to the Greek and Roman philosophers, all of which inform her thinking about brave space in the context of her embarkation on teaching in a new context. She focuses on how such a virtue must be actively practiced and how her partnership with a student consultant through the SaLT program supported her in engaging in such practice. As she concludes her essay: “The student consultant program helped create a brave space in which I could practice fortitude. As a result, I feel more equipped to actively practice fortitude and the other virtues in teaching for the rest of my career.”

Finally, in “**Learning to Be Brave within and beyond Partnership**,” Anita Ntem, Bryn Mawr College Class of 2018, writes about how she developed bravery in and through her pedagogical partnership with an Assistant Professor of Theater. Both she herself and her faculty partner were committed to working with the predominantly white college students enrolled in the professor’s course and the predominantly African-American middle school students with whom the college students collaborated in preparing a production of *King Lear*. Ntem writes about how she both developed her own bravery and supported bravery in relation to her work with her faculty partner, in relation to the students enrolled in the course and the students at a middle school, and in relation to other areas of her life. The personal and professional relationships Ntem developed in her role as student consultant positioned her to make a significant difference in the experiences of those participating in the course and also made a significant difference in the way Ntem views herself and her role in relationships beyond this program.

In keeping with the tenets of “brave space,” all the essays in this issue throw into relief the multiple ways in which learning always requires a certain vulnerability and willingness to let go of previous ways of understanding and engagement with the world. Learning, as Boostrom (1998) has put it, “necessarily involves not merely risk, but the pain of giving up a former condition in favor of a new way of seeing things” (p. 339, quoted in Arao & Clemens, 2013, p. 141). We think of this challenge of learning primarily in relation to students, but it applies equally to faculty, particularly faculty who are new to an institution and who are committed to creating classrooms that are at once demanding and affirming of a diversity of students.

The essays also offer antidotes to another challenge that is “an all-too-common affliction among academics” (Bahn, 2014): “imposter syndrome”—“the feeling that, regardless of your accomplishments, you’re still about to be unmasked as a fraud” (Bahn, 2014). Although

originally focused on high-achieving women (Clance & Imes, 1978), the concept of imposter syndrome resonates for women and men alike and for students as well as faculty. Embracing one's vulnerabilities and recognizing one's capacities, not only accepting risks as critical to learning but actually seeking and taking them, constitute bravery and the creation of brave spaces that help to counteract imposter syndrome through revealing that everyone has vulnerabilities and everyone has capacities. If these are topics of discussion, as they can be in the SaLT program, the pedagogical partnerships supported by the program become counter-spaces not only for students of color but for all who wrestle with the feeling that they do not belong.

In addition to embracing the innate risks of learning and the particular vulnerability of faculty members and students who suffer from imposter syndrome, these essays illustrate how the concept of brave space is consistent with the particular premises and approaches of pedagogical partnership. Among the forms of bravery that working in pedagogical partnership requires are: opening oneself to vulnerability; letting go of traditional notions of expertise; being willing to negotiate power; and accepting that one can never "master" the art of teaching in any final way but must nevertheless keep trying. These are demanding learning experiences that require courage.

Activist and author Parker Palmer (2009) has written about "the courage to teach," in the book of that title and in other contexts, and yet typically the language of courage and discussion of the capacity to endure, even in the face of fear or pain, are not especially common in academic development (although see Taylor, 2010). However, open acknowledgement of the difficulty of creating and participating in environments that genuinely facilitate learning—of the risks and rewards of this work—makes such work more likely to succeed. And by succeed, as these essays also illustrate, I mean to continue to grow and change, to take more risks and to grow further...not to achieve some sort of finishedness. As Freire (1998) reminds us, it is our unfinishedness that makes us educable.

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