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A PARTNERSHIP APPROACH TO MANAGING THE CHALLENGE OF APATHETIC AND DISRUPTIVE STUDENTS

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Introduction

Whatever the course, when crafting a syllabus faculty members fill its pages with expectations, and hopes, that students will come to class prepared and ready to engage in the material at hand. Yet, just like faculty have to learn how to balance research, teaching and service, students are trying to balance multiple courses—some that are requirements, others that are electives—often alongside jobs, extracurricular activities, and/or other types of commitments. This means that in their effort to balance their schedules, particular class(es) may fall to the bottom of students' priorities, particularly if the course is one that they have little to no interest in.

In this essay, we reflect on our faculty-student pedagogical partnership experience as it relates to addressing apathy and disruption in the classroom that can emerge as a result of how students prioritize or experience classes. We begin by describing the student-faculty partnership program that provided the context for our pedagogical partnership. Next, we shift focus to how we addressed apathetic and disruptive students that we encountered in the classroom. Finally, we end with a reflection on how our experience influenced our understanding of our role in learning and teaching in the classroom.

SaLT Program Overview and Description of Our Partnership

The Students as Learners and Teachers (SaLT) program is part of the Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges' Teaching and Learning Institute (TLI), which was created in 2006 through funds from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation (Lesnick & Cook-Sather 2010).ⁱ The TLI was created to bring together social actors from across the College campuses and build a community that recognizes learning as an active process in which faculty, staff, and students all engage.

SaLT pairs faculty members and undergraduate students as partners in teaching and learning for one class in one semester in the faculty member's first year at one of the Colleges. For faculty, the SaLT program is part of an elective pedagogical seminar that comes with a one-course reduction in their first year. Undergraduate students have the option of participating in the partnership for course credit or receiving a stipend. Both the faculty pedagogy seminar and the set of responsibilities the student consultant takes on (explained below) take place on a weekly basis. The faculty seminar is thematically organized and participants are required to write one-page reflections each week and create a pedagogical portfolio at the end of the semester. Each meeting centers on discussion of that week's theme and any dilemmas, conflicts, or questions that derive from the student partnership, class, and/or experience as a new faculty member. The weekly meetings of student consultants are similarly a space where student consultants discuss observations, dilemmas, and celebrations they have from their partnership that week. Broken up

into different sections so that each group only has five to eight participants, the student consultants are able to share with each other in small groups, giving feedback, advice, and techniques to take into their role and pass on to their faculty partners.

In addition to these weekly group meetings, the student observes and takes extensive notes during one class session each week in the course for which they are paired. These are structured notes and are divided into two columns. The left-hand column is for student observations of the class, and the right-hand column is for commentary on the observations, both encouragement regarding what went well as well as constructive criticism on how to improve or differently address people, responses, activities and/or events (see figure 1). Pairs also partake in weekly one-on-one meetings to discuss classroom dynamics, the notes, student consultant feedback, and questions from the faculty member.

During the 2016 spring semester, Kirsten, a Bryn Mawr senior majoring in Anthropology, with a minor in Education, and Victoria, then a second-year Assistant Professor at Bryn Mawr, were paired for the pedagogical partnership.¹ Prior to our first meeting, Victoria reached out to Kirsten when she learned of our paired assignment, because Kirsten had previously taken a course Victoria taught during the prior spring semester. We both had a positive experience and were excited to get to work with one another in this capacity. During our first meeting, we set the ground rules for the partnership—one of relative equals, where Victoria stated her desire to learn from Kirsten and that she was eager to get critical feedback on her teaching—and how to establish trust with one another given the inherent power dynamics between a faculty member and an undergraduate student. One way we did this was by actively acknowledging in our conversation how we were both in the partnership to learn from each other, and how we each had valuable knowledge to share.

Building on the relationship created as student and professor the previous year, we were more easily able to settle into our roles as partners having worked together. However, before we discussed our partnership, Kirsten felt anxious about her new role as a consultant and partner, rather than as a student taking the class for a grade. To break out of the role of a student was hard for Kirsten to imagine since many students are taught to not question authority figures, in this context, their professors. She very quickly realized the reasons she had anxieties were unfounded, and Victoria played an important role in this realization. As the partnership grew and we got closer, Victoria's openness and honesty with Kirsten allowed Kirsten to do the same.

In our first meeting, we also laid out the logistics of our partnership. This included weekly meetings that, due to scheduling complexities, occurred during the 30 minutes directly prior to the class in which Kirsten would observe. It also included going over the weekly notes Kirsten took during class on the Feedback Sheet (see Figure 1 below), which allowed Kirsten and Victoria to recall specific events and examples from the week before and discuss them. The format of the notes created a space for Kirsten to write initial observations of Victoria's class session, as well as a space where Kirsten could more deeply reflect on and analyze the observation to then discuss with Victoria. We also communicated through the Feedback Sheet, where Victoria would raise questions about the encounters, obstacles, and interactions that

¹ Victoria started at Bryn Mawr College during the Spring 2015 semester. Since she participated in the TLI seminar during the Spring 2016, her two semester teaching experience at BMC prior to the seminar is an anomaly.

occurred during class. Through ongoing face-to-face and email conversations, we were able to address difficult dynamics in the classroom, particularly those around managing apathetic students. (See Reyes & Adams, 2017, for a discussion of addressing racial tensions in a different classroom).

Figure 1: Example of Feedback Sheet

Wednesday, January 27, 2016		
Questions for Victoria:		
Questions for Kirsten:		
Time	Observation(s)	Feedback
2:57pm	You verbally summarized and wrote the discussion points on the board	I really appreciated how you both verbally summarized and wrote the main points on the board for the class. By doing both, you help different types of learners distill and understand the information
3:20pm	The discussion leaders run out of time presenting	Next time I might try having the discussion leaders present at the beginning of class so you don't have to worry about running out of time or having them rush through their presentation.

Context

The context for our discussion of managing apathetic students is a research design course for juniors in the major. This course is a half-credit course that meets once every two weeks. It is offered every semester so any junior in the Growth and Structure of Cities department can take it, even if they follow a popular route of going abroad for a semester for their junior year abroad (JYA). Since all seniors in the department are required to write an original research thesis over the course of the fall semester, this course is meant to prepare students to think about their research beforehand—going from a topic to a research question, what data and methods to use, and the contribution of their proposed work. It is also meant to serve as a launching point for students' Institutional Review Board application and, for those who are able, to begin collecting data in the summer prior to the senior seminar—the fall semester course in which they write their thesis.

Victoria has taught a version of this course two other times.² Each of the previous times she taught the course, she was impressed by the caliber of student engagement in the course and in

² The social science methods and research design courses were one course during spring 2015 and for the 2015-2016 academic year, Victoria split them into two. Victoria began teaching at Bryn Mawr in spring 2015. Victoria took

their final project. One to two students from each class used the final research proposal as part of their successful application to the Hanna Holborn Gray Research Fellowship, a competitive Bryn Mawr fellowship that funds student research in the summer.

Managing Apathetic and Disruptive Students

During the semester of our partnership, Victoria encountered something unexpected at a school like Bryn Mawr—unengaged students who did not complete homework assignments. Victoria was at a loss, and being able to address her concerns with Kirsten was, for Victoria, a critical part of the pedagogical partnership and developing trust throughout their work together.

To support Victoria in addressing this challenge, Kirsten brainstormed additional ways to get students involved, including emailing each person their grades midway through the semester to get them to understand how their lack of participation affects their grades, individual follow-up emails with students regarding missing assignments, and finally, reassuring Victoria that at some point she should let students have to face the consequences of their inactions. Kirsten also served as a sounding board for Victoria's outlook on class and how she felt taken advantage of by students because they continued not to turn in assignments despite her being responsive to extension requests. Working through this classroom dilemma emphasized to Kirsten how easily both professors and students can exhaust themselves both emotionally and physically. She saw how much Victoria was investing in her students and the course, and the toll it took on her when some of the students took her dedication for granted. After speaking with the other student consultants and the director of SaLT, Kirsten came back to Victoria with their words of encouragement and advice as well as her own. Per Kirsten's encouragement, Victoria became resolved that she should not be more invested in a student's learning than that student his/herself.

One student in particular did not turn in assignments and did not seem to do assigned readings prior to class because during discussions, this student did not display any associated knowledge regarding the topic at hand. The day a particularly important assignment was due, Victoria received an email from that person's Dean, requesting an extension for the assignment because this student became sick. Although the assignment was due prior to class and students had a month to work on it, Victoria agreed to a short extension. A week after this assignment was due, Victoria followed Kirsten's advice (since three students had not turned in this assignment), and reached out to each individual student, detailing their grades and which assignments were missing. In her individual emails regarding feedback on their assignments, Victoria also made it a point to remind each student about her office hours and invite them to email her to set up an appointment if they could not make that time. Victoria still had not received this particular student's assignment another week later, so reached out to them once again. Victoria did not receive a response to either email.

Two days after this latest email, the Deans emailed the professors of students for whom they are in charge, asking faculty to respond to the Deans if the student had not turned in any assignments

part in the TLI during the next academic year, when it was offered both fall and spring semester—she opted for the spring semester. That Victoria started in the middle of an academic year was an unusual practice at Bryn Mawr. The 2015-2016 academic year was also the first year the TLI was offered both semesters.

or had a low grade. Victoria sent an additional email to the student, cc'ing their Dean. The student replied shortly thereafter that they submitted it to the Moodle classroom website. After our next session, two weeks later, this student approached Victoria after class regarding their low grade on their aforementioned assignment: both the substantive feedback and the expectations. Although Kirsten and Victoria were set to meet, Victoria spent a few minutes talking with the student. On her computer Victoria pulled up the sheet she had passed out earlier in the semester regarding expectations, and reminded the student that they had spoken multiple times during class meetings—and Victoria wrote on the board—regarding her expectations for the assignment and the difference between similar assignments in other class they may have been assigned.

Victoria inquired whether the proposals from last semester helped the student see the difference, and the student replied that they only read one of the two proposals they were supposed to read, though they could not say what that proposal was about. Victoria brought both proposals up on screen. She quickly went through the differences between the assignment the student turned in and the proposals from the previous semester, and asked multiple times whether they understood what Victoria was saying regarding the differences, and they said yes. She encouraged the student at least three times to please email her so they could set up an appointment to go paragraph by paragraph through their literature review, since Victoria was already late for a meeting. Later that day, Victoria sent an email to the student and their Dean as a summation of what they had discussed. Victoria also included comments on the latest assignment, for which the student did not follow directions. Shortly thereafter, she received an email from the student that detailed reasons for not earlier turning in the aforementioned assignment.

In her reply, Victoria wrote that “when things occur, it’s expected that you keep people notified of any delays. Class assignments are your responsibility and if you have questions, concerns, or problems, it is your responsibility to be in contact with me. Hearing or being notified of problems or delays after assignments are due and only after I reach out to you — rather than you being proactive and reaching out to me — is problematic. When I am notified or have students come talk to me about concerns, I can be — and have been — very flexible with regard to class assignments. Additionally, the assignments are spelled out in advance in our class syllabus...” and that if the student knew in advance that they would not be able to work on the assignment for a week or two, Victoria explained that they had multiple options: email for an extension, completing the assignment before they would be unable to work on it, or completing it in the days that followed returning on campus and class.

These interactions were frustrating for Victoria. Being able to discuss with Kirsten the challenges that arise with apathetic students offered another avenue in which Victoria could reach out to a student with a different perspective and ask questions regarding the ways in which she can address students’ needs while not feeling that she was being taken advantage of by the students she was trying to help. Here, Kirsten emphasized that at some point, students have to be responsible for their own learning and that there are limits to what faculty can do. She provided an undergraduate perspective that Victoria trusted in regards to knowing how to navigate the boundary between offering students flexibility and adhering to Victoria’s goals of the class and standards for the students. Alison, Director of SaLT, helped remind both Victoria and Kirsten that we are all human and have certain limits to what we can invest into our jobs in order to stay healthy and happy ourselves. Victoria had done everything she could to help her students, and

after working through the situation together, Kirsten helped Victoria understand that she had tried her best to help the students and that the rest had to come from them. In any healthy relationship, whether between colleagues or students, the relationship has to go both ways. Victoria had done her part, and now it was up to the student to reach out.

In this class, Kirsten and Victoria also had to troubleshoot how to handle a particular disruptive incident involving another student. This class is designed as a workshop where students discuss the progress they've made and get feedback from their peers and Victoria. During one particular session, Victoria asked each student to share how reading the two proposals from the previous semester that were assigned for homework helped inform their own proposal. Victoria also asked them to discuss what their next steps were with regard to their project, and any questions they had for the class. After each student shared, the rest of the students in the class "workshopped" their ideas by giving suggestions and feedback. Then, after peers were able to give feedback, Victoria would give suggestions and ask questions of the student who shared. For one student, her suggestions and questions elicited behavior that was disruptive of the class, which for privacy reasons, Victoria will not detail.

The student's behavior made Victoria feel very uncomfortable and she thought it was disrespectful. She also thought that it likely made the student's peers feel uncomfortable because Victoria noticed other students glancing her way during said student's behavior. This is a student with whom Victoria tried to be as accommodating as possible, setting up weekly meetings with them. Kirsten's and Victoria's meeting immediately followed that class session. Kirsten was able to serve as a much-needed sounding board because Victoria was feeling overwhelmed and unsure of how to handle the situation. It reached a point where Victoria felt like she could no longer interact with the student and wanted to avoid them, which was something that went against the very pedagogical goals that Victoria had for herself. By first acknowledging her frustrations, reiterating that the behavior she described of the student was inappropriate and out-of-line, Kirsten was able to diffuse the situation because she affirmed Victoria's feelings.

Conclusion

This situation with apathetic and disruptive students, so unexpected, threatened to destabilize Victoria. Kirsten, as someone who had been at Bryn Mawr College for much longer than Victoria, was able to draw on her vast experience to thoughtfully reframe the situation in a way that addressed the problem, while moving forward with the class and students. She did so by encouraging Victoria to write an email to the students, framed as concern for them, and cc'ing their dean. Involving a dean with student incidents is a common practice at selective liberal arts colleges. By serving as a trusted advisor who was at the same stage (undergraduate student) as students in the class, Kirsten played a crucial role in helping Victoria navigate how to address student apathy and disruption, recognize the limits of flexibility, and identify how and when to bring in others in addressing student behaviors.

Faculty-student partnerships are beneficial for both parties. For Kirsten, developing real-world skills, such as reflexivity and active listening, will continue to serve her long after she graduates from Bryn Mawr. These partnerships also help dispel common myths that a professor's role in

the classroom is to simply impart their wisdom to students, and that students passively accept their professors' insights and have no knowledge of their own to share.

Faculty can also benefit from seeing flexibility and students as active agents in their own learning as important pedagogical strategies. A *shared* learning environment requires flexibility with regard to planning a given day's class, and Victoria learned that being inflexible will not allow her to address uncomfortable moments in the classroom nor the needs of individual students. Similarly, recognizing students as agents allowed Victoria to shift the students' focus to what the students themselves want out of class and how to get there. It also creates a shared space for sustained engagement with students and the ability to encourage them to take ownership of their learning and how to navigate circumstances that arise in the classroom.

What faculty-student partnerships highlight is how the classroom is a learning environment for *all*. That is, learning can and should be a goal not only for students taking a faculty member's course, but also for the faculty member and the student consultant themselves.

Having another person on campus to seek out advice, reach out to in times of apathy and disruption and regarding routine interactions, and rely on allowed Victoria and Kirsten to truly see themselves as part of a campus community and be more confident in what they can contribute to any community in which they become a part (for similar reflections see Reyes & Adams, 2017).

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ⁱ See also: <https://www.brynmawr.edu/tli>, last accessed May 24, 2016