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BUILDING A SENSE OF BELONGING THROUGH PEDAGOGICAL PARTNERSHIP

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This essay seeks to explore the idea of belonging in the classroom, and how I began to think about such belonging during my experience in the Students as Learners and Teachers (SaLT) program. This program, part of the Teaching and Learning Institute (TLI) at Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges, supports faculty members and undergraduate students in partnerships through which they explore, affirm, and revise classroom practice. Throughout my partnerships, I developed a collaborative relationship with my faculty partners that helped me rethink my rapport with my own professors and my role as a student in their classrooms. As a result, it helped me make sense of my relationship to my community as a whole.

Navigating Unfamiliar Educational Norms

During my first semester of my first year at Haverford, I constantly felt unsure of myself in the classroom. I believed that I was somehow less prepared than my peers to participate in class because I had not studied in an American high school and English was not my first language. This belief pushed me to undermine the value of my contributions, hindering my ability to participate confidently and sometimes even at all. I spent several hours every day making sure I completed every single reading for every class before I took time to do other things, because I was afraid that if I didn't, I would not feel as if I had a strong enough foundation to make comments in class the next day.

I also felt the need to be super prepared during class time. When I did feel that I had something to add to a discussion, I would first write it down in my notebook to make sure it made sense, in terms of content and language, before I raised my hand to say it aloud. I always focused on the assigned material. When peers in class confidently shared personal anecdotes that related to the readings, I was always surprised because bringing in my background into the classroom was not something I thought was appropriate in that context.

Even though I spent so much time preparing, I often worried about the fact that professors wouldn't know how much energy and effort I was putting into the course, because the primary way of showing it on a regular basis was one in which I felt I had a disadvantage, even if it was just a personal limit I was setting. I was unsure of how or whether to interact with professors outside of class, and I often resorted to emailing them instead of approaching them to talk.

I didn't know then that there was research on this phenomenon: that I was experiencing "*belonging uncertainty*"— "doubt as to whether one will be accepted or rejected by key figures in the social environment" (Cohen & Garcia, 2008, p. 365). I knew from my own experience but have since learned that research shows how students from underrepresented backgrounds can feel "a profound sense of both social and academic nonbelonging when they arrive on campus" (Barnett & Felten, 2016, p. 9-10). My identity, my beliefs, my worries, and my sense of uncertainty as I navigated the unfamiliar academic spaces of Haverford College all contributed to my sense of not belonging.

A particular classroom experience during the second semester of my first year made me realize that there were meaningful ways to contribute to the class dynamic that did not necessarily involve the public speaking component that made participating so stressful. One particular education course I took did not take any particular skill, learning style, or level of confidence for granted, and thus offered a variety of ways to contribute to class discussion. Further, as part of the course, I was given the opportunity to reflect on my past educational experiences and share them with others as part of the class' collective learning process. I was given the opportunity to participate in meaningful yet unconventional ways through class exercises such as 'pair sharing,' where we could discuss class material with one other student rather than having to speak in front of the whole class, and 'gallery walk,' where we were given the opportunity to respond to different prompts and quotes in writing and then read and respond to others' thoughts that way, offering a space where I could make a contribution and get feedback with enough time to process it and without the anxiety of how I was being perceived.

Though there is certainly value in being able to express, defend, and respond to ideas in the context of a large group, these exercises made me feel more confident in making contributions by taking away the social pressure of saying something 'valuable' or smart, rather than asking genuine questions and furthering my learning in other ways. It also made me feel validated when a classmate reacted to one of my comments, whether in a pair share or written down in a post-it note, which empowered me to share my thoughts verbally more often.

Finding a Place of Belonging in Pedagogical Partnership

During my second year, upon the recommendation of the professor who had taught the education course I describe above, I began working as a student consultant in a SaLT partnership within TLI. My faculty partner and I quickly established a very communicative and positive rapport that allowed for our work relationship to be founded in trust and mutual respect. At the start of the partnership, we examined her syllabus together and discussed aspects such as the clarity of the instructions for assignments and class procedures, whether the weekly workload seemed fair, and whether the themes of the course made sense in the order that they were presented. Once the semester started, I visited her class once a week, took observation notes, and provided her with comments to discuss in our weekly meetings. Often, my partner would ask me to focus my notes on something particular, such as her teaching pace, whether she was allowing for enough student participation, whether the exercises were engaging, among others.

As we discussed my observations and suggestions, my faculty partner was incredibly open to thinking through new ways of going about class exercises with me. What made this such a positive experience was the fact that I felt listened to and valued because I brought a particular perspective that she naturally was not able to see from her experience. In this context, I was able to use my experience as a student with certain needs and learning styles to advocate for others who might be in similar positions. As with the sense of "belonging uncertainty" I had experienced, I knew this phenomenon of mattering through having my experience and perspective valued. Research also suggests that belonging is based on feeling "valued, needed, and accepted" in a certain system or environment, and having "a sense of fit" (Hagerty et al.

[1992, 1993] cited in Asher & Weeks, 2014, p. 287). Through this relationship, I began to recognize my perspectives as valuable, and thus began to believe that I could belong in this new place.

In my subsequent partnerships, I sometimes struggled to connect with my faculty partners, but nonetheless felt my sense of belonging grow. The confidence I had developed in my first partnership helped to reassure me that my perspective matters; I just had to find a way to express it so my faculty partners could hear it. During my final partnership, I struggled due to differences in communication styles between me and my faculty partner. In one instance, my partner and I had – as trivial as it may sound – very different ways of expressing ourselves in writing, so our email exchanges often times led to misunderstandings and thus a lack of trust. I made a focused effort to make my email messages sound more like hers, both to try to make them more accessible to her and also to build a new kind of strength for myself. This was a different way of finding a place of belonging for myself. While I didn't feel as fully welcomed for my whole self as I had in my first partnership, I did feel that my partner respected my perspective, and I also felt strengthened by making a place for myself through my efforts.

As with my first partnership, I always reminded my other faculty partners that not all students feel as comfortable participating in traditional classroom settings or approaching professors for a variety of reasons, and I used my own experience as a basis for that kind of dialogue. I advocated for more exercises like the ones that empowered me to feel confident in my sense of place in the classroom. As an Anthropology major, one of the greatest challenges I faced was trying to make suggestions based on my experience to faculty partners in science classrooms due to the fact that I was not familiar with the classroom culture in such classes and often felt as if my suggestions were not entirely adequate. Nevertheless, it forced me and my faculty partners to search for common ground and brainstorm ways in which more collaboration and student participation could be brought into lecture classes in science. As a result, we were able to reimagine ways in which lecture-based classes could be structured in order to become places where students can take a more active role.

Expanding My Sense of Belonging Beyond My Partnership

At the same time as I was changing my sense of my self through the SaLT partnerships, my work with my faculty partners also helped transform how I viewed professors. As a result, how I saw myself in the classroom setting also changed. Seeing how much effort and care goes into preparing a course and reflecting on it every week exposed me to the fact that professors are people – as funny as that sounds – who in similar ways as students care about the course, worry when a class does not go well and celebrate when it does, and, most importantly, are in their own learning and growing process as teachers and students themselves. Learning this about my faculty partners made me realize that it was true of all professors.

When I had first arrived at Haverford, I had spent so much time and energy planning how to participate in my classes to show I was doing the work. Working with my faculty partners made me realize how much professors value participation, not as a basis for grading but as a contribution to the learning environment they are working so hard to create. These learnings in

my partnerships immediately translated into my experience as a student in my classes at the moment, and I began to be unable to ‘switch off’ this awareness about the classroom dynamic and how each member, professor and students, was contributing to the learning experience of everyone else in the room. I gained a better understanding of how much just my and others’ participation could shape how the class went, which then reflected on the course as a whole. Every contribution was heard and valued. This realization was pivotal for my confidence and empowered me to actively bring my own culture, language, and lived experiences to my classes. I not only felt responsible for making a positive contribution to the space, but also felt proud and affirmed in doing so.

As this was happening, I was able to discuss ideas, work through obstacles, and celebrate small and big victories with fellow student consultants during our weekly meetings with Alison, our program director. During these meetings we talked about our partnerships and our experiences as partners, which gave us space to reflect on how our roles as consultants were playing a role in our process of personal growth that year. Talking to fellow consultants, particularly women, who were sharing similar thoughts and questions even though we were all coming from very different backgrounds and experiences, made me feel supported in the feeling of ‘otherness’ I had been feeling, and empowered me to embrace it as a tool for offering perspective and thus advocating for equity in the classroom. It made me feel a sense of belonging that was founded in the acceptance and celebration of my identity and what it could contribute to the transformation of our classroom culture at Haverford and Bryn Mawr.

By my senior year, I truly felt as if I was building meaningful relationships with my professors and contributing to the classroom in ways that I could not have imagined during my first year. I felt confident in myself and what I bring to the classroom, and found myself constantly thinking about how I was affecting the classroom dynamic. As we describe in “The Pedagogical Benefits of Enacting Positive Psychology Practices through a Student-Faculty Partnership Approach to Academic Development,” an article student-faculty partners co-authored, the deeply collaborative engagement faculty and student partners have through SaLT and the weekly meetings of all student partners create environments in which everyone is encouraged to identify and share what is working well in their partnerships, to identify strengths in fellow students’ partnerships, and to develop a collective commitment to giving affirming and empowering feedback. These collaborations make us all more aware of and more responsible for creating inclusive classrooms.

Finally, having had the experience of observing pedagogy so closely and critically, I also felt more empowered to question and reflect on the classes I was enrolled in as a student at the time of my partnerships. I often found myself thinking about why professors were structuring class time the way they did, and what the purpose of grouping certain readings together was. I wondered about learning objectives and how professors felt about how class had went after each session. During my senior year, I even visited a professor to ask her about the rationale behind a research paper that she had assigned: “Good question”, she responded, “I haven’t thought about that in a while...” This led to a conversation about what skills she envisioned us gaining in the process of writing and what would be the best ways to approach the assignment in order to get the most out of it. Her explanation made my process of researching and writing a much more meaningful one, and I was able to show her that I had really been thinking deeply about the

rationale of the assignment. Reflecting on it months later, in comparison to my initial fears about office hours and professors in general, I saw a clear example of how much my experience as a student consultant had given me the tools to think critically about and question the learning environment I was in, and how much I had grown and learned about myself and my community as a result.

Conclusion: Carrying Belonging Forward

Participating as a student partner in SaLT gave me the opportunity to learn about myself and grow within my community and as a person with the privilege of having a space to process that growth as it was happening. The space we created during the weekly meetings of student partners, and with our faculty partners, was one of mutual understanding and support that always highlighted what was going well and offered the time and venues to process that we were struggling with. The sense of community that I felt with my peers in the SaLT program helped me make sense of my place within my community as a whole. It makes me wonder what would happen if there were more spaces like these in our community, where students and professors had a chance to share perspectives as a way to improve our classroom, and thus our community, cultures. Rethinking our relationships to each other in the classroom, and focusing on opportunities for growth and learning, could really have an impact on how we start to see each other outside.

If everyone in our community were given the opportunity to go through this experience of reflecting on our classrooms as places where we can begin to practice understanding and equity and where more people can feel comfortable in who they are, we would be seeing a change in the culture and would be benefitting from the experiences/voices we might not be making space for hearing as things are now. In other words, if we all engaged in partnerships through which we reflect and discuss how teaching and learning experiences can include and value everyone, our campuses would become places of belonging.

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