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Roben Torosyan
Bridgewater State University, roben.torosyan@bridgew.edu

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Roben Torosyan, Director Teaching and Learning Center & Part-time Faculty, Department of Philosophy at Bridgewater State University

From Juggling the Demands of Teaching, Scholarship & Administration to Shaking Up Norms

As a full-time academic leader and part-time faculty member, I have long tried to make the teaching, scholarly and administrative demands of my work complement each other. Initially, I worked with students simply to delegate work and free my time for bigger projects. But the more I read about student partnerships, and discussed them with colleagues at my institution and at national conferences, the more differently I began to see students.

After I joined Bridgewater State University as Director of Teaching and Learning, I hired my first undergraduate student worker, and his job transformed over three years from office assistant to student teaching consultant, giving me feedback on my class. I also invited a graduate assistant to push back to avoid chasing too many priorities. Finally, when I had assumed that involving outside graduate students in drafting grant ideas would make a small contribution, I was surprised that instead they contributed many substantive specifics.

Ultimately, however, these partnerships changed norms not only in terms of more authentic interactions with students, but in achieving richer results for each engagement. The students in my class and the consultant alike reported altering how they saw learning. Other student assistants made plans to deepen their work with our office the next year. With the outside graduate student feedback, the draft grant's promised intended outcomes to meet what future faculty say they actually need.

In the following sections, I discuss each of these partnerships. The students' names are pseudonyms, but the experiences were very real.

Schooled by a Student Teaching Consultant

First I felt I needed more time. I thought student "aides" could do copying and materials prep for our office's workshops, consultations and collection. I hired student workers as assistants in the office. Because they were from low-income backgrounds, each qualified for near-minimum-wage federal work-study funding.

With one student, Mark, I quickly developed a rapport and asked him to help copy materials for class, and set up technology in the room each session. An undergraduate business major, and former swimmer, Mark had an optimistic vitality. He exuded a calm kindness when I felt anxious, which was before every workshop or class I led—despite my having facilitated sessions for over 15 years at the time. One time, I was going to be late for class, and asked Mark to open the session for me, screen a video and start the discussion until I arrived. The next day, he said, "I told my Mom I got to teach class. She couldn't believe it." He shared how having such responsibility felt hugely meaningful. I began to ask him to help me prepare class materials, participate in discussions more regularly, and serve as a peer mentor to the students.

For years, I had also wanted to work with students more as equals. Reading of student co-researchers in the 1990s, I shared one manuscript with the student subject of its case study. In the 2000s, Zubizaretta described how students served as consultants to collect mid-semester focus group feedback about what's helping students learn, and what would help them learn better, in a class. As I read Cook-Sather's and Felten's work on the voices of students as partners, I began asking Mark to observe my teaching and offer me feedback about what works and what would work better.

In a class session several years into our partnership, students played a game theory simulation. Its aim is to show how to use cooperation rather than competition, to create win/win's, rather than assume one's win equals another's loss. The next class meeting, I asked people, "What was the point?" The first student to speak said, "It makes you wonder, should you trust people or watch your back?" Students did not say they'd seek more win/win's. Most failed to discuss how two parties could both win more if they played more cooperatively. One student noticed that her thinking could make a difference in the game's outcome. I left frustrated that students failed to change their assumptions about trust.

I lamented to my student consultant after that discussion, "They totally missed the point. It's just so frustrating!" My student consultant replied, "Yes it's frustrating. But while you can't control how that feels, you can control how you respond"—smiling. He alluded to a prior lesson on self-control and choice. He also told me things like how I "got in their face a bit." Thanks to the feedback, I realized I could instead ask what Parker Palmer terms a more "honest, open question," one to which I do not know the answer: "How long-term should you think when considering what's in your best interest? What are the benefits of that thinking? What are the cons? Are there other ways of thinking about it?"

We got to work together, off and on, for three years. I had to persist each year to retain him, texting and calling to stay in touch after his time abroad, to find out what happened to his financial aide, and to generally keep close. After his last year, Mark shared reflections about acting as a consultant on teaching and learning. What he found most engaging was "being that middle man between professor and student. I value the relationship I had with both and how my conversations with one could often benefit the other." Most distancing for him was "how few other professors practice something so beneficial." What he found most surprising was "how much thought, research, experimentation, and practice is put into the testing of new teaching methods" (Email, 04/23/2015).

When asked to talk about how he saw his role, Mark used the term "middle man." Students "would come to me, before they'd come to you, even in the middle of [a classroom activity]" (Interview, 05/07/2015). In the middle of the game simulation, for example, one student asked, "Hey Mark, when do we get to really play?" When asked what times stood out to him most from the whole experience, he said, "Honestly, it was the car rides over here, coming from the other side of campus. ... In the car... *anything* could happen. We'd talk about life, personal stuff, everything."

For instance, in one car talk, he shared that a math-intensive course was driving him nuts. He had already had to repeat it once. In the repeat course, he had fallen behind fast, again. When asked why, he eventually revealed, embarrassed, that he could not afford the $100 fee for the online module. This was in part because while he had saved up over $1,000, his family had asked to borrow money, and he felt obliged to lend it. I realized I assumed that parents generally put their children's needs come before their own. This experience, and reading Ehrenreich's *Nickel & Dimed: On Just Getting By in America* the same year, has prompted me to highlight more regularly with colleagues the need to prove to students that we "get" their relatively vulnerable circumstances, typically not yet settled into a career or life project, let alone a happy existence. For example, rather than "Students are penalized for absence," we can use an inviting tone in materials with statements like "You earn credit for attendance and participation by doing X, Y, Z."

In the interview, Mark also shared that he felt both frustrated that more professors did not partner with students, and at the same time was surprised at how much a professor would feel responsible when a student failed. I told Mark once, "Ugh, one of our students, I feel like he's leaving me no choice but to fail him." Mark said, "That's funny, I always assume it's me and my responsibility when I fail, not the professor." I said, "When a student fails, we usually feel we have failed."

Our students often assume it's intimidating to even email a professor, let alone go speak to one. Even when opportunities are explicitly there for students, like a career fair, someone like my student consultant said, "What if there's no one there I'd want to talk to? I'm embarrassed to even show up. It feels desperate." I can relate to that, having never once attended a college job fair during my college years at NYU. It brings to mind the question: How can students develop self-direction, including in how they take advantage of professors as mentors?

A counterexample came when I asked Mark to orient the next year's student teaching consultant I had recruited, a first-year student named Ariana. They met up after class one evening. After I packed up my things, I listened in on them, and tried to interrupt with my concerns. Ariana said, with a mock yell, "Don't rush us!" I was surprised by the challenge to my power—and respected her for it. Moreover, I felt a sense of relief. I realized she would own the work so much that she'd push back on her boss and make sure she could learn what *she* needed to learn to do the job. The encounter made me think how much more "meta" the activities in my course, on Human Flourishing, could be. One goal is for students to find support from others, and provide support to others. But I have yet to really step back and let them self-organize around what "support" means, and how they would get it from each other.

"Managed Up" by Student Assistants

As I worked with a growing student team, I had not anticipated that I would find my actions and direction challenged by those students. In the end, such authentic interaction has begun transforming the student positions into truer learning experiences and not simply office assistant work.

Two years into developing the Office of Teaching and Learning's undergraduate student worker team, I also made the case that we needed a graduate assistant. It was our luck that we found Elizabeth, who was pursuing a master's degree in counseling education. Working a full 20 hours per week, she teamed with me to support the professional development of graduate students, with workshops, consultations to programs, online resources and other offerings.

Initially Elizabeth agreed to my every idea for workshops (me: "We could offer A, B, C, D, E..."), following my every impulse about different directions we could go in (me: "Or we could develop a tool to do X, an online service to offer Y..."), and how much to include (I was in effect saying: "Let's do it all"). Eventually, she and I, and our entire team, found ourselves spread thin.

First Elizabeth began giving me feedback about how to better focus our work, suggesting things like giving the undergraduate workers each more specialized areas to own (database management, scanning and storing resources, workshop feedback transcription, focus group feedback transcription). Then she grew more assertive in keeping time during our meetings to prepare workshop sessions. She helped me discard ideas that would be nice but were unnecessary. She kept us realistically focused. She "managed up." She even commented on how we ran workshops for graduate students. To my surprise, she reported that the single most useful session was the one where participating students brought a class project they had to work on, and rather than discuss strategies, broke the project into tiny action steps and spent time working on those steps, using a timer to keep moving forward. It was a refreshing step back on how we tend to run workshops for faculty and administrators too, and how much more independent time participants can use in small group discussions and in solo work.

I often pride myself on delegating a lot, to avoid the opportunity costs of losing time for helping colleagues change their teaching plans and practices. There came a time, however, when Elizabeth tried to tell me I may be delegating myriad small tasks that have little connection to our core mission. She gently challenged me about which to do's were central to my job description or to the OTL's most important goals. I wasn't hearing her, however. It took hearing the same message from our full-time administrative assistant, Lori Benson, for me to get the point and see that I was getting lost in some details that, while nice if we had time, were not essential. We began changing our practices and routines to help me delegate more mindfully—particularly by encouraging everyone to push back when they feel it's needed. As a result, some student workers reported to Lori that they felt more autonomy and ability to manage the workload.

One way to force ourselves to share power with students is to facilitate more "self-organizing systems" among them. I was once asked by students to facilitate a group to discuss their student leadership roles. I chose to "stand beside" rather than lead them, except that a few minutes before the end of every meeting, I intervened to ask what worked well in how their process went and what would work even better. I also made observations like, "Sometimes women are deferring more to men; or men are taking up more floor time than women," and "The group seems stuck on whether to work more on their skills or on a project out there." The group self-organized by self-selecting for roles like agenda-setter, time-keeper, facilitator. Initially I felt untrusting that they'd "know" what to do. But ultimately they took up the work and truly owned their process, particularly if I withheld any say in their plans or priorities.

This memory reminded me that I can empower the eight undergraduate workers on my teaching and learning team to own their projects and priorities still more, if I step back and listen more regularly to their passions, talents and questions. One step in that direction: We have since created a shared online space where the projects and plans for our assistants all reside.

Humbled by Graduate Student Ideas for an External Grant Proposal

One final shorter anecdote is also illustrative. A dean in our university had held regional collaborations and a conference, to create a partnership between research-intensive and teaching-intensive institutions in the New England area. The mission was to improve how faculty and future faculty teach under the heaviest teaching loads, while increasing student access to the privileges of research-intensive resources and mentoring.

When asked by the dean for a consultation, I offered to bring grad students in on drafting grant ideas. I admit, however, that I was not even confident they'd necessarily know how to contribute substantively. Initially, I had felt the idea might flatter the students, and sounded good from the literature and from conversations with Alison Cook-Sather.

To get the partnership going, I recruited graduate students and post-doctoral students seeking experience in teaching-intensive institutions such as ours to join a conference call with the dean writing the grant. We began with introductions, and what I found valuable in both students' backgrounds. Our dean gave an overview of the vision.

Immediately the dean and I both learned from the students about ways each kind of institution could benefit. They clarified their own needs for experience before applying for full-time positions. They highlighted the special assets that they would bring "as more recent learners." They shared how "graduate students often do not get enough practice teaching, yet because they are students, they can often empathize especially well with undergraduates." They noted how the classrooms of teaching-intensive institutions could be enlivened by "micro-teaching activities led by graduate students with research-intensive backgrounds."

In admirable alignment with our institutional priority of increasing access to higher education in the region, they noted that they "want experience with low-income students, and to talk with faculty about how they manage competing demands on their time while juggling [four-four or five-five semesterly] course loads." In return, the same graduate students would "offer visiting undergraduates more developed collections, technologies, laboratories, supplies, facilities and other resources, at more well-resourced institutions." Thus undergraduates pursuing such advanced research would "gain unique experience that creates a differentiator for them as applicants, to graduate schools or in the workplace," or simply for their personal flourishing.

Interestingly, the cross-sector partnership dovetailed the interests of institutions with different missions, but the collaboration was also a microcosm for how student partnerships similarly dovetail the interests of people in different roles. In this case, an academic leader (the dean, and other grant collaborators) gained concrete grant outcomes statements, the faculty and faculty development practitioners (me and the other faculty involved) gained or will gain fresh ways of thinking about student capacities, and the graduate students and undergraduate students learn and develop their own portfolios of competencies for personal, work or civic life.

Conclusion & Connections

A theme across the three stories is the need to talk with students, and instead of telling them what to do, to listen and to find out what they say they want, what challenges they have already managed or are currently managing, and what exactly *they* say is getting in their way. Personally, I was humbled about my assumptions about status designations like "student," and that they even extended to "graduate student." Ultimately, hearing such intimate sharing from an undergraduate teaching consultant made me rethink why students struggled in my class, and in college in general, and what I could do to make a difference.

In every case, not only was I changed, but the results were improved. My students in the "Life change" course and the consultant alike reported some transformation in their mindsets. The graduate assistant, and newly recruited student consultant, committed to return the next year. The grant's intended outcome statements were beefed up by highlighting what future faculty actually predict they'll need, in their own words.

I conclude that I'm spiraling back, returning to that earlier impulse to stand *beside* students. I hope I'll bring more wisdom and be of greater service now. I am certainly finding myself more humbled.

References

Cook-Sather, A., Bovill, C., & Felten, P. (2014). *Engaging students as partners in learning & teaching: A guide for faculty*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.