

REFLECTIVE ESSAY

Transforming the Student-Professor Relationship: A Multiphase Research Partnership

***Chanelle Wilson** and **Mercedes Davis** Education Program, Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges, USA

Contact: cwilson3@brynmawr.edu

When we envision the classroom, we desire a space where traditional roles are deconstructed to engage all members of the learning environment equitably. This requires critical reflection to inform transformation that disrupts power relations between learners and educators. We embarked on a partnership to try to create a classroom that worked toward these goals. Chanelle was the instructor of record and identifies as a Black American, feminist woman. Her educational journey has taken her from a K-12 practitioner to a teacher educator who is committed to educational equity. Mercedes is a current student of sociology, with a focus in education. She identifies as a Black woman whose first-generation college experience and socioeconomic status inform her perspective and work. Both authors are particularly interested in the intersections of race, class, and gender in academic institutions and combatting educational inequity and injustice. Drawing from Bettina Love's (2019) work, we agree that "the push for justice. . . cannot be done without solidarity and reflectiveness" (p. 112). We chose to structure this essay to acknowledge our different perspectives and to accurately depict the relationship by giving voice to each partner in a collaborative reflection. Given that we are trying to negotiate and mitigate power dynamics, it is imperative to make space for each other; we hope this is apparent in our approach to partnership.

INTRODUCTION TO PARTNERSHIP

Chanelle

When presented with the opportunity to participate in a student-faculty partnership in my qualitative research methods course, I was eager to explore my practice with a student. In my professional journey, most supervisor observations carried an air of anxiety and judgment. A student partner felt less threatening, and her presence and feedback could also provide me a window into my students' experiences.

At the start of the semester, I was committed to changing the atmosphere in my courses. Over my years of teaching and conducting research, I had become attracted to the idea of constructivist pedagogy and creating learning environments where students were active, rather than passive, participants. This required me to deliberately create space for such engagement, and I remember I wanted to "talk less" in class. I initially hoped that my student

partner would hold me accountable to this practice, specifically look for the impact that my communication practices had on the classroom environment and student participation, and serve as a thought partner – one who critically influences another’s thinking - in accomplishing this work.

Mercedes

The opportunity to partake in a student-faculty partnership appealed to me because it posits both students and faculty members as learners. My motivation to participate in this partnership arose from my experiences within the classroom and my interest in pedagogical methods. There exists an unsaid hierarchical relationship between students and faculty members, where students are understood only to be receivers of information. I realized that this partnership could have a significant impact on the way that students would experience the qualitative research methods course. Positioned as an informant, I would serve as a resource to students enrolled in the course and to the faculty member by offering a unique positionality in and outside the classroom. My hope for the student-faculty partnership was to take into account students’ perspectives and to make transparent the pedagogical methods of my faculty partner.

Partnered with a new faculty member, I was also able to offer insights about the landscape of the college and the student body. Additionally, weekly meetings, observation notes, and feedback from students gave us the opportunity to establish course goals that we would revisit throughout the semester.

DEVELOPING A FOCUS FOR PARTNERSHIP: PHASE 1

Chanelle

Initially, our partnership took the form of observer/informer. Mercedes attended class and observed, and then we would discuss and plan for the following week. I looked to Mercedes as an accountability partner in my initial goal to solicit discussion, rather than dominate it, in the classroom. This was accomplished after a few weeks, and I wanted to deepen Mercedes’s and my partnership.

The class was comprised of five students. Mercedes and I both felt that we had to prioritize making people feel comfortable to speak—to ask questions and learn with and from each other—because many students felt intimidated by the idea of conducting qualitative research. I wanted to fight against the hegemonic, competitive nature in traditional classrooms (Summers & Svinicki, 2007). Building classroom community (Booker, 2008; Kay, Summers, & Svinicki, 2011) stemmed from wanting to actively center my constructivist philosophy.

Mercedes’s input gave me institutional background on the ways that classrooms in this bi-college consortium (Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges) can stifle student participation. She shared the cultural norm of performing smartness in class, where students primarily speak only if they can display knowledge and stay quiet when they don’t understand. Countering this, I encouraged students to bring questions to sessions because I was not going to stand and lecture for three hours. Mercedes and I also considered conducting a qualitative study because it might be helpful for Mercedes and me to practice the concepts as I was guiding students to

understand them. Students were informed of this self-study, but it did not require any additional labor from them, so we received their consent and proceeded.

Mercedes

Our partnership focused on building community among the students enrolled in the course. This focus was inspired by the small number of students enrolled in the course. While participation and engagement can take various forms, we realized that particularly within the context of our educational institution, there is a culture of students being too afraid to speak for fear that what they are saying is wrong or problematic. Acknowledging this, we wanted to combat it directly, so Chanelle and I set out to make sure that students had the opportunity to participate.

In trying to address this culture of fear (Fisher, 2011), we also realized that in predominantly white, elite institutions, students of color are further pushed to the margins of the classroom and university. Our goal grew bigger than just addressing this culture of fear: it became a desire to ensure that the classroom is a place where students could draw on personal experiences and one another as resources.

GROWING THROUGH PARTNERSHIP: PHASE 2

Chanelle

Working in partnership with Mercedes was a new learning experience for me; I had not had the opportunity to work so closely with a student. In many ways, I welcomed this, but I cannot pretend that it was easy the entire time. For example, there was one student who frequently missed class or was very late. I noticed this, but Mercedes forced me to hold the student accountable. There were no times I can remember where I disagreed with feedback Mercedes offered, or when I did not heed her advice. I seriously valued Mercedes' input because as an instructor, I might ignore or forget something that happened in class, but Mercedes brought these things back to my attention: comments that students made, body language, the fact that I forget to take breaks, etc.

Through this partnership, I realized that teaching, though a public act, is something very private; having a partner helped to make the teaching process a collaborative one. Mercedes and I decided to engage in classroom study to understand the dynamics of classroom community in our shared space. Through reflecting on my practice in a structured way, I was benefiting from seeing my classroom space from her perspective and that enriched my experience.

Consequently, I was more transparent with the enrolled students about instructional choices and decisions within the classroom space. Further, I was not afraid to solicit questions and suggestions from the class and respond immediately by changing practices or implementing different strategies. This partnership helped me to practice being the reflective and responsive educator that I wanted to be, inspired by bell hooks (1994), Bettina Love (2019), and Paulo Freire (1973).

Mercedes

Initially, I was fearful of the partnership because I thought that the borders and boundaries around student-faculty relationships were clearly defined and established. When a student does not adhere to these borders and boundaries, there are consequences. Feedback and collaboration were never a part of the traditional student-faculty relationship, unless it was anonymous feedback for the course during mid-semester or end-of-semester evaluations.

Working with Chanelle made me realize that the relationship between students and faculty members could evolve into something more. The classroom did not have to be a space where the professor was the only holder of knowledge and where collaboration was only encouraged between students and their peers (Dewey, 1938). Her openness to learning more about her own teaching style and practices, and her dedication to not take up too much space in the classroom, were foundational in our partnership. Together we could restructure the classroom and transform the student-faculty relationship.

EXPANDING THE PARTNERSHIP BEYOND THE CLASSROOM: PHASE 3**Chanelle**

Once the semester ended, Mercedes and I wanted to share what we learned through our self study. We began collaborative reflection on our work with the goal of writing an article together. Continuing this project, we navigated countless challenges from our responsibilities, yet our findings felt meaningful and were also supported by the literature.

Our partnership empowered me to think about how to share our work with a wider audience because in academia, too many instructors do not consider the classroom community. The toxic environment of higher education, especially for students of color, is not one that many academics contemplate in their everyday teaching practice. I was compelled to highlight the necessity for professors to think about what makes the classroom one where students want to be, and one that the professor has some stake in creating. I also knew that Mercedes was interested in a career in academia. The thought came to me to take a draft of our work and submit it for a conference presentation. Even though we had not fully completed data analysis, it was worth sharing.

Mercedes

The earlier phases of our partnership were primarily built around a structured program at our institution, the Students as Learners and Teachers (SaLT) program. Although the program provided us with support, we molded and shaped our partnership into one that integrated our interests and pushed us to be reflexive and critical. Our investment in the partnership naturally evolved beyond the classroom study. Chanelle reached out during summer break to ask if I wanted to attend a conference with her to share the data that we had collected. The idea of presenting our work to other professors and instructional leaders illuminated for me that the work we were doing was necessary.

CONFERENCE PRESENTATION AS AN ENACTMENT OF PARTNERSHIP: PHASE 4

Chanelle

Preparing to present our work was exhilarating, but also a learning process. At the beginning, I realized that I had made assumptions about the qualitative skills that Mercedes had. I had not worked through research with a student partner before, so some of her tasks carried unrealistic expectations. The first experience where this became real to me was when I realized I assumed she knew how to code data. I was shocked by my own behavior of not scaffolding our work because we were in partnership. It was eye-opening to consider how to teach the skills necessary for qualitative work, while simultaneously engaging in the process.

Presenting together was similar to when we were working in our classroom-focused partnership. I did not struggle with maintaining a position of ultimate authority, and I tried my best to be completely collaborative. I offered suggestions for the direction that we could take and solicited Mercedes's input. But, as this was her first full experience moving through the qualitative data analysis process to reporting out, I did have to take the lead at times to direct our work together.

However, once it was time to develop, solidify, and present our work, I felt that Mercedes and I were equal partners. We had the same amount of airtime, and we both had equal say in content, along with fielding questions. Our partnership shifted as a result of this experience in terms of us being willing and voluntary partners. Though we enjoyed our work together, we still had been assigned, rather than it being our choice, to work together. It was helpful that we both cared enough about our focus for inquiry to move forward and share our learning.

Individually, I also grew as a professional mentor. My mentor work has primarily been to support students' personal goals; I had not yet had the opportunity to share collaborative professional work with a student that would also help them improve professionally. It was a joy to observe Mercedes engage with professional colleagues during the conference and to see her flourish in navigating conversations and feel able to discuss her work and professional interests in ways that left a positive and lasting impact.

Mercedes

Much like the classroom-focused partnership, facilitating a presentation together required us to reflect on our social locations in order to figure out how to move forward and how to inform the work that we wanted to undertake/accomplish. Chanelle and I co-created the presentation. Throughout our research, Chanelle provided tremendous support to me, explaining how to code the data that we had collected, which was something that I did not have experience with. Our partnership grew in a number of ways as a result of co-creation; we became research peers rather than student and professor.

TAKEAWAYS FROM WORKING IN A MULTIPHASE PARTNERSHIP

Chanelle

This multiphase partnership has taught me much about collaboration. The first lesson is patience: in our second phase, Mercedes and I struggled with setting times to meet, sticking with deadlines, navigating life, and feeling like we were moving forward. But, once I prioritized

that the work would get done, and we were both learning how to co-create, having patience gave me peace. Our conference acceptance also gave us a concrete timeline to work within, where our research paper, with a self-defined timeline, is still in progress.

Further, I've discovered that it's necessary to present opportunity to students. As the professor in the relationship, I had access to information that Mercedes did not, and I took the initiative to make this research an option for her. In my own life, doors have been opened for me because people considered me. In fact, my very first conference presentation and publication came from my university supervisor taking my senior honors work and submitting it to a conference, which resulted in a publication. So, the insight I gained is to be a pathway for students to encounter new experiences and capitalize on opportunities that they don't know even exist.

My partnership with Mercedes taught me a lot about the ways that I need to grow as a partner, so I took it to the next level. This semester, I am co-creating and co-teaching an entire course with an undergraduate student. I am excited for all the ways that she and I will mutually grow and benefit from our work together.

My advice to others who are considering multiphase evolving partnerships with students is, first, to do it! The results of work between two generations will have a positive impact on the students' opportunities and the professor's understanding of their own work.

Second, remember to scaffold the work. My work with Mercedes started out slowly because I forgot that in addition to participating in the process, I also had to be teaching and guiding her. This encouraged me to slow down and really understand and appreciate what I was doing, rather than rushing through. It was also more satisfying to share the experience with another person. Sometimes research, like teaching, can become so personal, but in this work, there is another person to share it all with.

Finally, don't be afraid. Some people may be hesitant to engage in partnership because they are apprehensive about dynamics. This is something to consider, but do not get stuck there. Every new experience is one that both parties will grow from, and fear will only get in the way of creating something beautiful together.

Mercedes

This multiphase partnership with Chanelle has taught me that there are professors who care not only about the content that they are teaching but also the ways in which they are teaching it. Within our partnership, there was room for both of us to grow professionally, and we also created a space of listening where we could openly and honestly talk about the structural problems of our educational institution. Most importantly, our partnership required flexibility and passion. We had a deep love for the discoveries made through our study, so returning to the work never felt like a burden.

Chanelle served as a mentor to me and valued my desire to pursue a career in academia. Her experience as a professor gave me insight into a career that I had limited knowledge about. As a gate opener, Chanelle provided me with the opportunity to present at an international conference—an opportunity that otherwise would have not been available to me. From this partnership, I have been able to learn how to collect data, do ethnographic

research, develop an argument, and present findings, while also gaining a mentor in the process.

To others considering a multiphase partnership, I would highly recommend that they do it because the experience is invaluable. Each participant can gain a new understanding of the classroom and of the possibilities to transform learning experiences in higher education.

NOTE ON CONTRIBUTORS

Chanelle Wilson is a Professor of Education, at Bryn Mawr College, and specializes in Critical Race Theory, feminist thought, and diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Mercedes Davis is an undergraduate student and student consultant, at Haverford College, with a major in Sociology and minor in Educational Studies.

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