

REFLECTIVE ESSAY

Reversing roles: Reflections on being teacher-students in an assessment practice course

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“Close your eyes and take a deep breath.”

This reflective essay explores a teaching partnership—a collaborative, vulnerable, pedagogical space—which emerged between Taylor, an English studies graduate student, and Mary Lou, an associate professor of linguistics and of teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL). At the time of the partnership, Taylor and Mary Lou were studying and working at a mid-sized public university in the midwest of the United States. The partnership began when Taylor was assigned to be the teaching assistant (TA) for a classroom assessment course taught by Mary Lou. The course topic, assessment, is especially challenging because (ironically) there is no single “right” answer. Assessment practice is informed by theory and research, but the application is always filtered through the intended teaching context—an assessment that is valid and practical in one context may not be in another. Some semesters the course is filled with graduate students who are preparing to teach undergraduate courses, such as Taylor. This semester, however, all the students were degreed, in-service K-12 teachers with years of experience in the classroom who were taking this online asynchronous course for professional development. Given their dual role, we will refer to the students as “teacher-students.” The roles shifted for the teacher-students as they moved from teachers in their classroom to students in this course, but also for Mary Lou and Taylor as they grew from instructor and student to student-faculty partners within the unique circumstances of this learning community.

TAYLOR’S REFLECTION

When I was a student in Mary Lou’s assessment course, we began every class with a minute of deep breathing to ease our anxiety. This small exercise helped validate the apprehension we might have had about this course (the mere thought of assessments can be anxiety-invoking), and it also offered an outlet for working through these uncertainties. Importantly, this exercise set a supportive tone for our learning community and is just one of the many reasons why I came to admire Mary Lou’s pedagogical approach. The assessment course wasn’t required as part of my interdisciplinary English studies program; however, I chose to take it after being in another one of Mary Lou’s classes. So, when I received a request to serve as the TA for the assessment course the following semester, I felt honored and excited.

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Although I was an instructor in the university writing program, I had never assisted in a graduate-level course and was eager to take on the role. However, my enthusiasm was coupled with fear. Could I really be a TA for a graduate course? Despite my previous success and enjoyment in taking this assessment course as a student, I found myself second guessing my ability to fulfill the role. My doubts were amplified when I discovered that the students in the class were K-12 teachers whose jobs obviously include regular classroom assessment.

My main responsibility was giving feedback on the teacher-students' assessment drafts. While a student in the course, I was very focused on developing assessments that would work best for me and my own undergraduate writing students. As a TA, however, I had to step out of my own context and think about the assessments the teacher-students were creating and about how they were balancing the principles of assessment as it related to their students. This proved challenging.

There were certainly instances when providing feedback felt more comfortable than others. For example, when the teacher-students were working on their writing rubrics, I felt more at ease because of my experience teaching writing. Conversely, I felt hesitant when providing feedback to K-5 teachers because their teaching contexts and assessment topics were unfamiliar. For instance, I am familiar with the various skills needed to create a successful argumentative essay, but I didn't know how to break down the skills of basic writing, such as the spacing between letters and words. Providing feedback on these unfamiliar subjects felt daunting. Frankly, I was also unsure whether the teacher-students would even want my feedback. I wasn't a K-12 teacher myself, and I wasn't the instructor for the course, so I worried my ideas wouldn't be well received.

Because of my unease, I would often hedge my comments, using phrases like, "I wonder if. . . ." I felt that this language protected me in that I wouldn't be wrong if I was wondering or suggesting. Additionally, I felt I needed to show respect for the teacher-students' knowledge about their teaching contexts; I did not feel I had the authority to tell the teacher-students how to improve their drafts. Rather, I gave suggestions for the teacher-students to consider, while trying to communicate that they would ultimately have the better solution for revising their assessments.

There were times—especially at the beginning of the semester—where I missed the mark. Specifically, some suggestions were not the best fit for the teacher-students' contexts, and this was brought to my attention either by a comment from Mary Lou or the teacher-students themselves. For example, I once suggested adding a reflection element to a self-assessment. The teacher-student replied that this would not be feasible because her elementary students did not yet have the necessary language skills. In moments like this, I saw the teacher-students advocating for themselves, leveraging their experience as teachers and what they knew about their students. However, these corrections weren't easy to hear. Moments where I "messed up" felt like evidence of my inadequacy in living up to the expectations of this role and initially impacted my confidence in giving feedback. I remember actually feeling anxious to make future replies on these teacher-students' drafts. At the time, I didn't bring up this feeling with Mary Lou. I was perhaps hesitant because, at this point, I saw her more as my boss and not yet as a faculty partner.

However, Mary Lou said that she herself was experiencing a learning curve with this population of students. She told me via email, "I realize that we are both learning how to give

good feedback, especially when this learning community has such different products than 1st-year grad students.” Reflecting on moments like this now, I think that our collaboration over working with this unique population formed the building blocks of our partnership. Mary Lou’s framing of these challenges as learning opportunities reoriented our relationship from me simply doing tasks for her to one of us experiencing and working through pedagogical issues collaboratively.

The collaborative nature of the course, both in my work with the teacher-students and with Mary Lou, helped my confidence grow. Mary Lou asked for my perspective when revising course materials and implemented my feedback, which made me feel like I was helping to improve the course. For instance, we met together and talked about the results of the exam and brainstormed how the exam could be revised and improved for future semesters. I felt reassured in that if Mary Lou was seeking my advice on her assessments, then certainly I had valuable insights to offer the learning community. As I continued working with the teacher-students, I was able to learn more about their subjects and students, and in turn, give better feedback.

In doing so, I grew more secure in my new role and was even able to leverage my experience teaching writing. In feedback to one elementary-school teacher, I suggested switching a self-assessment to a peer-assessment. The teacher-student was very receptive to this feedback and supported the change to her draft. In fact, not only did the teacher-student agree with my suggestion, but she also confirmed the quality of the feedback by explaining why this change would be helpful for her classroom. These moments reminded me that I could really help positively influence the teacher-students’ assessments and the course as a whole.

MARY LOU’S REFLECTION

When Taylor was a student in the assessment course, her submissions became so strong that my suggestions were merely variations to consider. Additionally, her peer feedback was exemplary. Giving effective peer feedback with grace can be difficult, particularly when a draft is under-developed, and Taylor’s skills are remarkable. So, when I had the opportunity to have a TA for my course in assessment, I really only considered Taylor. I trusted her abilities, which eased my anxiety about maintaining the quality of the course, specifically in regard to giving timely feedback in an over-enrolled course. I initially thought of this collaboration as a mentoring opportunity. I wanted to give Taylor agency and support her growth as an educator. I was open to a partnership rather than a traditional TA because I valued Taylor’s pedagogical opinions. I sought her advice on my own course documents.

At the beginning of the semester, I asked Taylor to review the course, focusing particularly on the quizzes and exam for typos, unclear wording, or unfair questions. As experts, we can forget all the knowledge and skills that go into successfully completing a task because this information has become second nature. Taylor’s review of the course materials was invaluable because she could review from a student perspective. I asked myself, were the learners given enough information to interpret the assessment or am I (the instructor) leaving information unstated and assumed? Additionally, the collaboration gave me the opportunity to articulate the motivations behind my pedagogy and to evaluate my teaching practice, which can often get lost at the bottom of an instructor’s to-do list.

Focused on her abilities, I did not consider whether Taylor would question her readiness to give feedback to experienced teachers. Because of the quality of her work, I was already thinking of her more like a partner in creating quality assessments. Upon reflection, I am a bit disappointed in myself that I didn't proactively address any possible insecurities, particularly because I was asking Taylor to do more than a traditional TA. I did, however, establish a context where Taylor could be successful while she worked independently. I gave Taylor an ordered list of which aspects of assessment to review when giving feedback. The list clarified my expectations and served to prevent Taylor from feeling overwhelmed during the process. I intentionally centered my feedback to Taylor on the process, rather than framing my feedback as judgment on her work. For instance, in the email where we were talking about giving good feedback, I ended it with: "I appreciate your flexibility as I'm figuring it out!" I was still figuring it out because her role was different from a TA who simply completes more mundane tasks.

Sometimes, we swapped tasks in response to a situation. For example, when I noticed that a teacher-student had submitted a draft which simply did not meet the assignment's expectations, I contacted Taylor to tell her that I would deliver the feedback that the assignment had to be redone. I wanted to protect Taylor from delivering difficult-to-hear feedback, particularly given the potential tension the teacher-students experienced in their student roles. I was also attuned to Taylor's author-as-expert feedback style. Although I respect Taylor's feedback style, I feared that these teacher-students would take Taylor's (polite) comments as mere suggestions when certain comments were in fact imperatives for success. Worried that the teacher-student would possibly reject the difficult feedback coming from a TA, I contacted the teacher-student, who did resist the feedback and defended the assessment that she had created. Likewise, I experienced resistance in response to my use of objective (i.e., right/wrong) quizzes to check understanding. After a quiz, I received emails from some teacher-students expressing disagreement with my pedagogical choices and questioning the value of a specific assessment practice.

The teacher-students may have found my choices destabilizing, perhaps because they were adhering to their teacher role and did not yet embrace the new teaching context where they were the student. It was emotionally taxing to address resistance to course design and expectations. In addition to shielding Taylor from potential conflict, I felt (and still feel) that the course design and assignments were my responsibility to defend. Later, I intentionally shared with Taylor my analysis of the situation, including honestly sharing my emotional reaction. I explained how I carefully crafted each response: first acknowledging their frustration, clarifying my purpose, and staying true to my pedagogical decisions. We also discussed how resistance is sometimes simply a part of learning and, therefore, teaching. For me, this faculty-student collaboration blossomed because Taylor was willing to discuss pedagogical challenges. Without the student-faculty partnership, I would have simply gotten through the challenging semester; with the partnership, the semester became more of a learning experience for me.

DISCUSSION

Cook-Sather (2016) has described the bravery required in student-faculty partnerships, such as "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" (p. 4). We felt that this was true both for our student-faculty partnership, as well as

for our learning community of teacher-students. This unique learning community encouraged us to confront the roles of teacher and student, which were no longer discrete. However, stepping into new roles isn't easy; it is destabilizing.

The context of an assessment course created a condition which really highlighted the expert/novice tension. To create effective assessments, we embrace the role of expert, in the sense that we must know our content area and our students. However, as students in this learning community, the teacher-students also had to pivot to "less than expert." The course design emphasized iteration and growth regardless of experience, which conveyed that we all still have things to learn about assessment. The process of drafting assessments and getting critical feedback necessitated that the teacher-students confront areas for improvement, from central aspects of their assessments to seemingly small design choices. We brainstormed what suggestions would work well in the teacher-students' respective contexts. Embracing a student role for these K-12 teachers was destabilizing, and so Mary Lou also recognized places where her role as instructor could be used to empower the members of the learning community. For instance, Mary Lou intentionally made explicit statements praising the teacher-students as dedicated educators.

In the role of instructor, Mary Lou also intervened to prevent Taylor from having to give difficult feedback. Alternatively, perhaps we could have collaboratively discussed the problematic draft, empowering Taylor to have the option to give that difficult feedback with Mary Lou's full support. At the same time, the course design and assignments were not Taylor's to defend. However, Mary Lou used this tension as a chance to mentor Taylor, explaining her pedagogical purpose. Further, Mary Lou explicitly stated that she herself was still learning, which allowed Taylor to imagine herself and Mary Lou as equal collaborators in a student-faculty partnership. Mary Lou has taught this assessment course several times, but the teacher-student population was different and having a student-faculty partnership was different. Mary Lou managed her vulnerability by being intentional and transparent about her pedagogical choices both with the teacher-students and with Taylor.

Taylor occupied a space between expert, as she is in her own classroom, and student, as she was in the course previously. Taylor's new role required her to shift her perspective from student to teacher, which was met with discomfort, particularly because of her initial perception of the teacher-students as the experts. However, her confidence grew when she was able to focus repeatedly on one aspect of each assessment draft, which helped her feel more assured of the quality of her feedback. We feel that this structure not only helped her to find her footing among the experienced teacher-students, but also helped establish a foundation of shared power in our partnership. Further, Mary Lou was open to collaboration, which affirmed the value of Taylor's contributions. Taylor could leverage her own unique status as a TA and as a former student in the course, demonstrating the value students bring to student-faculty partnerships. In admitting a need for improvement and valuing Taylor's insights, Mary Lou demonstrated a vulnerability—a willingness to step outside the role of expert and let Taylor into her "pedagogical thinking space" (Ntem & Cook-Sather, 2018) in a way that ultimately strengthened the course. In retrospect, Mary Lou modeled a similar vulnerability when giving feedback to Taylor when she was a student in the course, framing suggestions as options to consider, rather than required changes for the assessment. Mary Lou's acknowledgement that her feedback to Taylor as a student were often variations to consider

rather than “corrections” to be implemented built our trust for this collaboration. The partnership worked because we mutually recognized both the value of the other’s expertise and their commitment to growth as an educator. Now, we are equal experts in the shared experience during the student-faculty partnership and equal novices, learning together while writing in this genre.

CONCLUSION

Freire (2014/1970) wrote: “Education must begin with the solution of the teacher-student contradiction, by reconciling the poles of the contradiction so that both are simultaneously teachers *and* students” (p. 72). As our reflections demonstrate, this reconciliation is not always easy. Our partnership and learning community involved negotiating our roles and navigating uncertainty, vulnerability, and resistance. In this, however, we found real value for us and for the learning community as a whole. During the course and while writing this reflection, we often found that we had the best solution to difficulties when we worked through them together. We hope that the circumstances of our partnership can highlight how the roles we inhabit and the topics we engage with can be instrumental in the important work of continuous and intentional reflection as teacher-students ourselves.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors thank Jennifer Grouling-Snider, Ben Bascom, and the journal’s editors and anonymous reviewers for their helpful feedback on an earlier version of this essay.

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