

REFLECTIVE ESSAY

Co-facilitating pedagogy circles for diversity, equity, and inclusion: Two student-partner experiences

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The idea of a “pedagogy circle” was developed by several faculty members and undergraduate students at Bryn Mawr College in the summer of 2020 through the [Summer Pedagogical Partnership Program](#). An extension of the [Students as Learners and Teachers \(SaLT\) program](#) at Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges, this work focused on preparing for the sudden shift to online teaching and learning prompted by COVID-19 (Cook-Sather & Bala, 2022). Starting in the Fall of 2020, the SaLT program began to offer [Pedagogy Circles for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion](#), co-facilitated by pairs of SaLT student partners and hosted via Zoom. This forum proved important both to continue to support college community members in managing pandemic conditions and to reckon with the demands that emerged from the [strikes](#) for racial justice that our campuses experienced that Fall, led primarily by BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) students.

These pedagogy circles foster cross-constituency dialogue about working toward anti-racism, diversity, inclusivity, and equity within and beyond classrooms. Any interested faculty member, administrator, staff member, and student in this bi-college consortium is welcome to participate. Each semester we send around an announcement of the forum and a sign-up form, which automatically sends a Zoom link to those who sign up. The sessions last for 1 hour, and we typically offer two or three sessions per week. This forum has expanded to include other options, such as the Pedagogy Circle for BIPOC Faculty—a space for BIPOC faculty co-facilitated by BIPOC students (Cook-Sather et al., 2023).

We are two SaLT student partners who began co-facilitating Pedagogy Circles for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in the Fall of 2022. Below we introduce ourselves and describe how we restructured and facilitated pedagogy circles that semester. By design, circles are open to everyone on campus, though the participants that semester were all faculty members. Since then, we have had students join us. We acknowledge that student and faculty responsibilities, both academic and otherwise, may prevent their participation.

In this essay, we reflect on what we have learned as students, facilitators, and people and how we see this forum as a unique space in which to practice this form of partnership work. The relationships we built as co-facilitators and with circle participants are collaborative,

thoughtful, and pedagogical, reflecting understandings of partnership common in students-as-partners work. Though we sit in the position of being facilitators, the structure of the circle allows for the exchange of insights between student and faculty. The space is built around trust, and we work together to promote multifaceted thinking.

WHO WE ARE AND HOW WE EXPERIENCE PEDAGOGY CIRCLES

Piper Rolfes, Bryn Mawr College, class of 2024

As a dancer and artist with a passion for accessibility and disability justice, I find the approach of the pedagogy circles to be essential in fostering meaningful connections across disciplines, positionalities, faculty and student roles, and beyond. When I am in the pedagogy circle space, I find I can bring in embodied knowledge that dance has allowed me to build, and faculty participants are excited to consider how this knowledge can shape their practice in their own classrooms. The circles are a space of openness where conversations about embodiment, accessibility, disability justice, and so much more can occur in a very honest way, guided by a strong desire to be there from those in attendance. In addition, the curiosities and interests that faculty bring into circles call upon the student perspective, and they see the experiences I have in and beyond the institution as offering valuable insight—a rare value.

Abhirami Suresh, Bryn Mawr College, class of 2024

My work as a SaLT student consultant in conjunction with my identity as a Tamil-Indian American has energized me to transform and cultivate new educational spaces, with an emphasis on restructuring perspectives towards education. I am exhilarated by being able to create spaces that practice diversity, equity, and inclusion, as well as racial justice and self-awareness. In addition, these spaces support faculty in their struggle with reframing their pedagogical approaches in terms of student responsiveness and universal design. In this space and in dialogue with faculty, I witness the beauty of these “aha moments, where everything clicks” (Jonsson, 2020, p. 152). The pedagogy circles are a way to build partnership between students and faculty and promote cultural competency and openness. By providing a space to learn, grow, and practice partnership, we create opportunities for faculty to be heard and to hear from students.

Who we are and what we value as people inform how we conceptualize and structure the pedagogy circles that we co-facilitate. Just as we are inspired by the openness and commitment participants bring to the circles, we want to show participants our own openness and commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion and to everyone’s growth. Facilitating the pedagogy circles requires us to lean into our student perspective.

STRUCTURING SPACES FOR PEDAGOGICAL DIALOGUE

SaLT student consultants originally designed pedagogy circles to be on Zoom and developed guidelines to ensure maximum inclusivity. Building on this original plan, we laid out the structure of the pedagogy circle in a Google Doc and shared this agenda verbally with circle participants in Fall 2022, with room for participants to bring up whatever they wanted. From the moment participants entered this Zoom space, we made it clear that anything and

everything could be asked, discussed, or thought about in what we hoped would be the kind of “brave space” (Arao & Clemens, 2013) that pedagogical partnership can provide (Cook-Sather, 2016; Perez, 2016; Perez-Putnam, 2016). Before diving into whatever content we might have planned for the day, we usually introduced the space with community guidelines such as: “This is an open conversation. All concerns, questions, and thoughts are valid. We are all coming into this discussion from many identities, roles, and places, and it’s a strength that makes the session valuable for everyone.”

Initially, the guide for weekly pedagogy circles included individual writing time centered around one prompt: “Write for 2–3 minutes about what hopes and challenges you are experiencing or are anticipating in relation to trauma-informed, anti-racist, remote/hybrid teaching and learning.” This particular prompt clearly originates from the pandemic. In the Fall of 2022, we wanted to recenter the effects of pandemic and hybrid learning among the ever-growing discussions about diversity, equity, inclusion, racial justice, and accessibility on our campuses. Seeking to offer more variety among writing prompts, we envisioned the areas that we wished were talked about more often in these spaces and with agency and urgency. We wanted to elicit productive discomfort in a space that is welcoming, affirming, and co-creating. Some examples of the writing prompts that we developed include the following (a full list is available in this example of a [plan for weekly pedagogical circles](#)):

- Write for 3–5 minutes on how you consider accessibility in the classroom. Do you use any multimodal classes? Do you talk about dis/ability?
- Write for 3–5 minutes about reciprocity in teaching and learning. How / what do you give back to students and they to you? Is there a cycle / anything you notice about this?

Offering those topics in a question format invited participants to think, reflect, and dive deeper into these areas. This kind of reflection includes explorations in relation to creating classroom environments and to developing pedagogical approaches. Responses differed among participants, making clear that faculty had different focuses (e.g., universal design, accessibility, providing feedback, and equity) and had engaged at different depths with these areas. The flexibility of the circle allows for an honest conversation between attendees and co-facilitators, creating multidimensionality across perspective and pedagogy. This form of continuous dialogue without the need for a definitive end goal is something that makes the circles unique.

Prepared with an outline of the sessions and prompts to guide discussion, our schedule for pedagogy circles usually unfolded as follows:

- Introduce ourselves as facilitators and talk a bit about who we are and how we’ve been involved in this work, then open it up to the rest of the group to do the same.
- Share verbally and in the chat about our community guidelines (noted above).
- Use a prepared guiding question, or, if it is a small group, single person, or new participant, allow various curiosities to guide the conversation.
- Ask the group to spend 3–5 minutes individually writing, invite everyone in the circle to share their writing and/or their thoughts, and facilitate discussion among everyone. We

also invite participants to ask us questions or, if they have a specific need or interest, to ask us our thoughts on it, and some weeks the circle evolved into a space that was less structured.

- Thank everyone for attending and remind them about future circles, then take notes to document each circle.

While we were able to facilitate these kinds of exchanges, we are not always able to problem solve or give advice to faculty when they posed a question or comment. When we welcome faculty in to ask questions or talk about something specific in their courses, we aim to participate in partnership, not problem-solving. We see this to be an exchange of insights, reinforced by the environment that we facilitate, which allows for honest discussion and the sharing of lived experiences. Moreover, we recognize many issues are deep rooted and when faculty come to us, it's usually in the first stages of rethinking pedagogy, practice, and application. Our approach to these questions is grounded in our experiences, academic and non-academic, and the problems faculty pose are not always "fixable." The goal, rather, is to share perspectives and brainstorm possible approaches or solutions together, as part of a dialogue. As we began this work, we, as co-facilitators, had to shift our mindset, and we found comfort in the act of being present and being a source of guidance, rather than a means to an end. We wanted to center ourselves in the inevitable discomfort that would occur when we heard from circle participants, in its non-finality, embracing the unknown for ourselves but excited for what's to come.

WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED FROM CO-FACILITATING PEDAGOGY CIRCLES

Institutional structures as well as personal participant desire to engage in conversations surrounding their pedagogy shape the realities of this forum. Encouraging participation has been one of the biggest challenges. For some faculty, the addition of another weekly meeting is a low priority. This is understandable, given the lack of institutional incentive for pedagogical development of this variety. This does, however, mean that the faculty who choose to attend pedagogy circles are doing so out of genuine eagerness to engage with this work. Because of this, the faculty who have attended our circles have often come prepared with their own curiosities, questions, and areas of their pedagogy they wanted to further.

We had two very regular faculty participants in one circle, one from computer science and one from English. This meant that conversations that might otherwise never occur across departments were able to unfold within the structured space we offered. For example, one of the circle participants discussed his pedagogical approach through Universal Design for Learning (UDL), allowing him to optimize teaching and learning for all individuals. The mention of this approach led to another circle participant asking for multimodal methods to engage her students in her English course, beyond discussion and written word. Their exchange created a mindset shift where the English professor considered that she did not have to go about the "accepted" and "predetermined" way; she could create her own form of a learning check-in that allowed students to be expressive and creative, while emphasizing their skillset.

Supporting faculty in sharing new perspectives through cross-disciplinary dialogue allowed us to step back and be enriched by the variety of perspectives as well as hear and

experience a different side of academia. Since we attend a liberal arts college, it is common among students to take courses across disciplines, but faculty are often siloed in their specific academic area. Because of this siloing, faculty seemed to find it inspiring and invigorating to be in these conversations, and we gained insights from the faculty perspective that we would not otherwise have had access to. This dialogue has also allowed the faculty and us to connect with each other across disciplines and exchange pedagogical practices and mindsets, something that the siloing might have prevented.

Another takeaway for us relates to the question: what if future educators experienced this kind of opportunity to be in dialogue about teaching and learning? In many contexts, there is no formal education on how to teach. Short of such formal training, having the opportunity to participate in pedagogy circles would create equitable, inclusive structures in education that support both faculty and students. We hope that faculty took away from our circles a variety of methods to enrich both their classroom environment and pedagogy, while also realizing how complex students are and that there are so many ways to teach. These various aspects of our circles invite faculty to be reflective on their own educational journey and experience: what worked and didn't work? When they have time for this reflection, they can more thoughtfully consider whether or not they perpetuate non-functional structures and practices, and they can consider how, if necessary, to adjust those.

UNIQUENESS OF PEDAGOGY CIRCLES AND CO-FACILITATION

Without even knowing us, faculty participants trusted us with their most vulnerable concerns. The trust we had in each other as co-facilitators was something they were able to connect with and draw on in conversation and learning. To be validated for our experiences is incredibly joyful and empowering.

When given the opportunity to ask questions, attendees brought forward difficult questions like; What does an antiracist, inclusive classroom look like? How do you avoid microaggressions? How do you co-create in the classroom? However, these questions are the stepping stones to "optimizing fairness," as a circle attendee put to us in his description of his pedagogy. He highlighted UDL guidelines that are used "to improve and optimize teaching and learning for all people based on scientific insights into how humans learn" (CAST, 2018, p. 1). We greatly appreciated that this faculty member came in with this grounded perspective, but even if a participant came in unaware, the openness of the space allowed for them to ask questions and learn more at their own pace.

Since not all faculty are prepared to teach while in graduate school, lack of preparation (combined with personal negative experiences and burnout) can lead faculty to perpetuate harmful structures and practices in academia, leaving both students and faculty feeling isolated. We want the pedagogy circles to be a place where the grind and uniformity of academia is broken, where faculty members understand why it's okay to try new pedagogical endeavors; it is this trying that allows them to envision and create what education might evolve into. This kind of engagement is a special type of skill that requires listening, reflection, and intentionality. In the pedagogy circle, we ask participants to be explicit about what their pedagogy looks like and how it functions for them and their students. It is satisfying for us as co-facilitators to see this transformation among faculty as they move from less conscious to

more intentional practice as a result of putting student perspective at the center of their restructuring.

Our co-facilitation of pedagogy circles has allowed us to engage in and support reciprocity. Regardless of whether this is between two participants, a participant and a co-facilitator, or us as facilitators, this reciprocity is the development of perspective and trust where circle participants are able to give generously to each other in a way that allows everyone to grow. This experience in the pedagogy circle encourages faculty to reflect on and further contribute to their reciprocal relationships with students as well. Reciprocity builds mutuality; it promotes collaboration, be it cross-disciplinary, across power structures, or across spaces on campuses. We hope that by experiencing the pedagogy circle, faculty are able to pedagogically connect the past, present, and future, all while being able to respond to their students.

As we mentioned in our introduction, in 2020, our first year at Bryn Mawr College, groups of primarily BIPOC students led strikes for racial justice on both Bryn Mawr and Haverford's campuses. The strike leaders issued a number of demands that called on the colleges to counter anti-Black violence, institutional racism, silencing, and instances of white supremacy. For us as students, experiencing the strike brought a variety of emotions and discomfort, and moving forward it has been important to us to see implemented the changes the strike collective demanded. Co-facilitating in the pedagogy circle allowed us to contribute to the colleges' growth toward being more equitable and inclusive places. It feels notable to us that the work we are doing right now is important enough to the college to grant us monetary compensation. Being able to contribute to core thought processes surrounding teaching, pedagogy, and the environment is fulfilling and empowering, but hearing from circle participants on deep-rooted systemic issues is incredibly frustrating, as we lack the capability and power to address those kinds of problems. Yet again, we emphasize that the circle is not here to solve these problems, but acts as a method to think through how these problems might directly impact pedagogy and a classroom overall.

When we started co-facilitating the pedagogy circles, we took the existing structure created by previous co-facilitators and modified it to embody our belief that these circles are a place of learning, guidance, and co-creation. We re-envisioned and wrote a variety of prompts addressing diversity, equity, inclusion, dis/ability, and pedagogy to respond to faculty worries and wonderings. We believe so deeply in this work, and this belief helped establish trust between the two of us—trust we carried into the circle environment. By entering this role together, as partners, we were able to exercise agency and feel empowered in our knowledge of student perspective and life. This combination of belief in the work, trust in one another, and the co-created structure of the pedagogy circle environment allowed faculty participants to begin, continue, and develop conversation and knowledge on these areas. At the end of most circles, participants shared gratitude for this space and this experience, which speaks to the care this work infuses into the rigid space of academia. And so, we thank them.

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