

## REFLECTIVE ESSAY

## The choreography of partnership: Reflections on making space for co-teaching with undergraduates

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In the Spring of 2023, after 9 years teaching in higher education, I took a professional and pedagogical leap—I co-taught my first class with an undergraduate. As I embraced this new level of partnership in my practice, I was guided by Cook-Sather’s (2022) three principles of co-creation in higher education: (a) “be guided by a commitment to equity,” (b) “provide structures, not prescriptions, for engagement,” and (c) “make rather than take up space for learning and growth” (p. 3). While all three principles speak to my experience co-teaching an undergraduate urban education course at Haverford College with Maya, a third-year undergraduate, it is the third that resonates with a generative tension that emerged in our work together.

In my experience of co-teaching over the semester, I learned that space matters both metaphorically and physically. Cook-Sather (2002) suggests that, for faculty, “making space is to use one’s expertise to create room for engagement, exploration, experimentation, reflection, dialogue, action” (p. 99). I found that “creating room” was an ongoing negotiation—a pedagogical, curricular, and interpersonal dance. It required that I attend to individual and collective goals, to my own and Maya’s strengths and areas of development, to both our temperaments and personalities, and to power dynamics. I found it to be a complex and nuanced choreography—sometimes planned, often improvised. In the following discussion, I share about my positionality and co-teaching context, set the pedagogical stage, and then highlight three “moves” that I made as faculty partner to make meaningful space for my student co-teacher.

### POSITIONALITY AND CO-TEACHING CONTEXT

Since 2017, I have been a visiting assistant professor in a bi-college education department at Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges, two small, selective liberal arts colleges located on the land of the Lenni Lenape outside of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Co-creation is an underlying pillar of our departmental philosophy, catalyzed and sustained by the work of the Teaching and Learning Institute at Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges and the Students as Learners and Teachers (SaLT) program, a flagship faculty development model that pairs undergraduates with faculty to reflect upon their teaching.

I am a white, cisgender, upper-middle-class educator who has been teaching, first in secondary classrooms and then in higher education, since 2006. As a pedagogue, I consider myself a critical constructivist—my classes operate from the premise that each individual enters

the classroom with unique views shaped by their own life histories and social locations and that knowledge is constructed collaboratively. I also believe that classrooms are not neutral spaces and that illuminating, interrogating, and reimagining traditional power structures in higher education, including those between faculty and students, is part of the necessary work of making tertiary education both engaging and equitable.

In Spring 2023, I was slated to teach *Geographies of School and Learning: Urban Education Reconsidered*, a gateway course to the departmental minor and major that examines race, space, and place in education. Although I have taught “Geographies” on my own for many years, I decided, with support from both the Education Department and the Teaching and Learning Institute, to co-facilitate this course with an undergraduate during the Spring semester. I made this choice because I felt that co-teaching with an undergraduate student was the next, necessary step in my own evolution as a critical constructivist—an opportunity to boldly challenge traditional notions of who holds legitimate authority and knowledge in the college classroom and, in doing so, open up new opportunities for the development of a classroom environment and modes of engagement characterized by sharing power and responsibility.

In selecting a co-teacher, it was important to me that the student had taken the course with me in a prior semester, had a demonstrated interest in and commitment to issues of equity and inclusion, and had a complimentary approach to teaching and learning. Given the focal context of the course, I was particularly interested in co-facilitating with a student of color who had experience in or adjacent to an urban district like Philadelphia, unlike my own upbringing in a predominately white suburb. With these criteria in mind, I reached out to Maya, a junior at Haverford College who identifies as Asian-American, who grew up in the Philadelphia metro region, and who had taken two courses with me in prior semesters including an earlier iteration of *Geographies*. She was also a student consultant as part of the SaLT program, reflecting her interest in and commitment to equitable teaching and learning in higher education, and was considering teaching as a professional pathway. Beyond these characteristics, it was the way in which Maya carried herself in our time together that most inspired me to take this professional leap with her. Maya’s critical eye, sensitivity to intersectionality, and quiet leadership made me feel that this could be a meaningful partnership.

Practically, co-teaching with Maya involved 80 minutes of instructional time twice a week. In addition, we met for an hour weekly to both reflect upon the past week’s instruction and to plan for the week ahead. While Maya neither had the responsibility to grade students’ work nor was she considered institutionally as the instructor of record, she provided critical feedback to students, held her own office hour weekly, and had an equal say in our curricular design decisions. I chose this structure for the partnership because I believed that it was reflective of my desire to make space for Maya as both an individual and as a co-teacher and to ensure that enrolled students had ongoing opportunities to benefit from her knowledge and keen insight. While intentional, sharing pedagogical and curricular space with an undergraduate in this way was new for me. I was both excited and anxious about the possibilities and challenges that the experience would offer.

## SETTING THE STAGE

Maya and I began our co-facilitation experience with an initial pre-semester goal-setting meeting. It was important to me that I create room early in the process for Maya to share her hopes for our partnership so that I could be better attuned to her needs and desires as we thought together about how to create a responsive classroom community for enrolled students. In this meeting, Maya spoke about wanting to develop her skills as a facilitator. She shared that as she had begun considering her own future professional pathways in the field of education, she wondered about the development of a “teacher presence.” In listening to Maya, I felt excited about the opportunity to help her develop this critical quality that I believe was central to my own practice. I was unsure, however, about how to best scaffold the experience and wondered about what making space for her to make progress towards this goal would look like in practice.

In our initial class sessions, we decided that it was simplest to each take responsibility for enacting a specific section of our planned lesson. For example, Maya was passionate about starting each class with a “check-in” question as a way to build community, so she opened up our sessions while I covered any direct instruction. Yet, even with these defined responsibilities, I found it difficult to cede power and space, finding myself steering conversation during her “check-ins” rather than following her lead and participating. For example, I found myself affirming and elaborating on students’ comments with a rapidity that prevented Maya from having the opportunity to do so first. This was the pedagogical equivalent of stepping on Maya’s toes.

During our weekly debrief and planning session after our second week teaching together, I asked Maya if there was anything else that I could do to support her in our co-teaching relationship. She mentioned that while she knew that I was a strong facilitator, it was difficult at times for her to, in her words, “establish herself” without having the space to do so. Here, Maya was speaking about her need for metaphorical *and* physical space. She needed me to both see her as a facilitator and to physically create opportunities for her to lead. She needed me, drawing upon Cook-Sather’s (2022) third principle of partnership, to “make” rather than “take up” space in our shared classroom, particularly during full-group discussions. While hearing this was initially difficult and triggered slight internal defensiveness (I was sharing, wasn’t I?), I knew that it was true. Following this discussion, I experimented with three “moves” in future class sessions with the intent to de-center myself and make room for my partner: (a) moving to the margins, (b) changing levels, and (c) exiting stage left, described below.

### **Move to the margins**

In the early weeks of our co-teaching experience, I was reminded of the power of attention. Cook-Sather (2006), in a discussion of metaphors for teaching and learning, draws upon the words of Ladson-Billings (1994; 2009) to lift up “teacher as conductor” as a way of being in the classroom. Describing how two teachers in her study of effective teaching for African American children commanded attention, Ladson-Billings offered, “We can visualize an orchestra conductor who approaches the orchestra stand, all members of the orchestra have their eyes fixed on the conductor” (p. 23). Teachers in this context are the master of ceremonies, the focal point, the fulcrum. Where they move, attention follows.

As a pedagogue, I have experienced this phenomenon, particularly in classrooms without fixed chairs where my students and I can move around freely. The classroom in which Maya and I taught, consisting of six round tables with four chairs at each, was such a space. In our early class sessions, regardless of whether I was speaking or “in charge” of instruction, where I went, enrolled student attention followed. As a result, I found it necessary to, at times, marginalize myself physically in order to create space for my student partner to take the lead. To do so, I would move to the periphery of the classroom, occupying a free seat towards the back on either side. The act of moving to the side, to physically make space, afforded Maya the opportunity to be the focal point, both visually and pedagogically. Enrolled students began to reorient their gaze, more closely attending to Maya and her contributions rather than my physical presence. While occupying this position in the classroom and experiencing the sudden absence of attention felt initially strange (I had become accustomed to, and perhaps even fond of, the spotlight), I tried to lean into this unfamiliar vantage point. My new seat offered a perch from which my presence could better support my student partner and our classroom community.

### **Change levels**

As the semester continued to unfold, I found that Maya and I also needed to be attentive to “levels,” particularly in full class discussion. “Levels” in dance terminology is related to “the height of the dancer in relation to the floor” and is typically classified as low, middle, and high (The Kennedy Center, n.d.). In our setting, students, seated at tables, could be described as occupying a “middle” level. Initially, Maya and I also occupied this level, sitting at one of the six tables. This was intentional as I believed that having instructors inhabit the same level as their students can importantly signal a desire to interrupt traditional, hierarchical faculty-student relationships. However, this positioning also posed an initial challenge for Maya as she began to cultivate her “teacher presence.” Maya is petite in stature and quiet by nature; when she sat at a table with students and attempted to project to facilitate discussion, we found that her voice did not carry through the space.

After several weeks, I suggested to Maya that she might want to move to a higher level and stand while facilitating. This enabled her to be both seen and heard by all enrolled students. Critically, as a co-teaching partner, I stayed seated while she did so, continuing to occupy the middle level. This choice made a visible and audible difference. It also signaled a shift in power. Like moving to the margins, described above, this move felt initially uncomfortable as I was not used to positioning myself to mute my presence. Yet, in the acoustics of our classroom, I heard Maya’s voice loud and clear and was gladdened that enrolled students would have the ability to hear what powerful insights she had to share.

### **Exit stage left**

Towards the end of the semester, Maya and I were faced with a choice. During one of our remaining class meetings, I was slated to be away presenting at a conference. We discussed the option of canceling the class or whether Maya would feel comfortable facilitating a session in which students could work independently on an ongoing inquiry project. This would be an opportunity for Maya to be fully responsible for drawing on her own experience to hold space for enrolled students. Maya was up for the challenge.

As we scaffolded towards the date when I would be absent, we designed a rehearsal session that would operate much like the session she would oversee. We began the class by sharing with enrolled students about the upcoming conference and explaining that this would be a “practice” session for Maya. By this point in the semester, enrolled students were familiar with Maya and my goals for our co-teaching partnership, including the chance for Maya to develop new skills and confidence in teaching. As a result, they were overwhelmingly and openly supportive of this trial run, cheering Maya on as I stepped outside of the classroom and took a seat near the open door. From this location, I could hear the happenings of the classroom and could, if necessary, answer questions and provide support to students and/or to Maya, but I was physically removed. While I was visited by one or two enrolled students during the class session, the majority of my time was spent listening to Maya deftly engage with students’ questions and support their learning. While physically removing myself could have been read by outsiders as an abdication of responsibility (I was, after all, the teacher “of record”), I saw this move as the culmination of efforts to share responsibility and space with Maya and our enrolled students. As I heard Maya fill our shared space with probing questions, supportive suggestions, and the elicitation of student voice, I was filled with pride.

## CONCLUSION

For the final class of the semester, Maya encouraged our classroom community to change the physical space into a true circle where each person could be seen by the other. She then offered a prompt, asking folks to lift up or affirm someone or something in the course that supported their learning. As the affirmations flowed, I was particularly taken by the students who lifted up our student-faculty partnership and its imprint on their course experience. One student shared how “impactful” it was to see our co-teaching relationship grow over the course of the semester. This was underscored in several course evaluations, such as when a student offered:

I am grateful to Kelly for stepping back many times to allow for Maya to lead the class. Maya was very knowledgeable and I really loved how thoughtful her comments and lessons were. She was really good at making me, the student, feel heard. Maya seemed a bit shy at first when the semester began, but she really found her voice as the class went on. I hope she is able to hold onto that confidence and start her next class with strong communication.

The student’s use of “stepping back” speaks to both the physical and metaphorical act of making space in our co-teaching relationship. In my experience co-teaching with Maya, space, and the way that it was created and navigated, mattered. I found the choreography of our partnership to be emergent and iterative, requiring me to let go of some of the traditional steps and postures that I had been used to as a solo facilitator and to lean into a much more dynamic way of being in the classroom. While trying out these new pedagogical moves may have felt initially uncomfortable, it was ultimately meaningful as it created opportunities for Maya to develop a pedagogical presence appreciated by those in our classroom community, for enrolled students to experience a different kind of learning undergirded by the principles of co-creation, and for me to grow as both a learner and as a teacher.

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## NOTE ON CONTRIBUTOR

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