The Peer Partner-in-Learning: Integrating the Practice of Reflection into the New Student Seminar

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Introduction
In recent years, student involvement in cocurricular activities is often cited as contributing to the sense of belonging that, for many undergraduates, is transformational (Camp 272; Tan and Pope 2). However, in my own classes at LaGuardia Community College, students who face the demands of work and family report having little time for the college clubs, workshops, and cultural events that often make up a central part of traditional college life. In addition, those with uneven or marginal high school experiences are perhaps less inclined to participate in campus offerings. Yet research demonstrates that the leadership skills usually nurtured by cocurricular experiences are particularly essential for students unfamiliar with the pathways to academic and vocational growth (Elliott 84).

Like many faculty interested in the full dimension of student development, I have always looked to the classroom itself to complement the broad range of activities offered by Student Life and other campus organizations. However, in my dual capacity as counselor in LaGuardia’s College Discovery (CD) program¹ and professor of the New Student Seminar (NSS), I decided to take a more deliberate pedagogical approach to the question of student leadership. Aware that strong student-faculty interactions have positive effects on student success (Hazeur 1), I invited Julio, one of my second-year College Discovery students, to assist me in the Fall 2008 seminar. From our relationship evolved a pilot project of “peer partners-in-learning,” a term designating the combined roles of mentee, teaching assistant, and peer mentor. While the mentoring of students as teaching assistants is rare at community colleges, I hoped that such practice might intensify and accelerate the development of leadership skills in both teaching assistant and students enrolled in our seminar.

To mentor Julio in his new role, and to prepare myself for the responsibility, I drew upon the practice of reflective inquiry that structured my participation in LaGuardia’s 2006–07 Difficult Dialogues Study Circles. Guiding my inquiry into the effects of peer partnering was a single question: Could student cofacilitation of the New Student Seminar, supported
by the practice of reflection, increase a sense of undergraduate belonging, autonomy, and independence in the student assistant? This paper views that question from the perspectives of both faculty and teaching assistant (hereafter referred to as “peer partner”) and emphasizes the potential of peer partnering to cultivate the independence of thought, attentive communication, and self-correction that characterize strong leadership. For the purposes of my exploration of the effects of peer partnering and reflective inquiry upon leadership development, I looked most closely at the peer partner’s classroom performance and cocurricular engagement. In Fall 2008, the use of reflective practice in the peer-partner experience as a method to increase academic, social, and personal confidence was evaluated by College Discovery counselor observations, peer-partner reflections, and qualitative surveys, integrated and presented here as a case study.

The Study Circle Model
Unlike many cocurricular activities, a typical study circle is set up less as a social event than a focused exploration of an idea or issue. Very often, as in LaGuardia’s Difficult Dialogues Study Circles, discussion is facilitated by reflective inquiry, also called process-orientation, which refers to activities by which a facilitator guides a group or individuals to awareness and insight by posing reflective questions (“Study Circles”). In the language of the psychologist, processing refers to the discussion of emotional reactions to an event or experience (Hill and O’Brien 121). As a participant in Study Circles, I have observed that facilitators generally respond to divergent viewpoints and feelings about a profound social issue in ways that keep the conversation flowing and move the group from dialogue to civic action. Attentive listening, mirroring, synthesizing, and balancing group dynamics all contribute to open, candid, and respectful exchange.

Equally important to the facilitation of the expression of feelings and opinions by participants is the reflective conversation shared between facilitators before and after the study circles. For example, during LaGuardia’s Difficult Dialogues, my cofacilitator and I met to discuss the effectiveness of our roles after each of the five weekly sessions. These regular exchanges of perceptions and impressions of the circles provided an opportunity to examine and improve our actions as facilitators. Inspired by the potential of reflective facilitation to transform my teaching practice and, most important, strengthen student leadership skills, I determined to incorporate its method into my
New Student Seminar. As in dialogue circles, the teaching challenge of the New Student Seminar is to balance practical and process-oriented objectives in ways that allow students to express not only academic concerns but also emotional needs.

The Use of Reflection in Professional Practice
Since Dewey, the term “reflection” has become central to the professional vocabulary of teachers and to pedagogical practices across the disciplines. Tom Strong discusses reflection in counseling as a dialogic practice through which clients make connections that are evident to the counselor but not yet evident to the client (“Reflections” 1001). In the field of psychology, reflection facilitates intentional self-inquiry into the ways one behaves, experiences, and forms perspectives about oneself and one’s life. It is a collaborative process in which the “reflective” counselor helps the client to identify, express, and clarify feelings in the hope that the client becomes immersed in his or her inner experiences (Hill and O’Brien 121). Primarily listeners, counselors probe or reflect upon what is said by the client; as a result, the client also begins to listen deeply to his or her own words.

The dialogic nature of reflection, particularly in counseling and in the classroom, implies that counselors and educators – and not only clients and students – develop the capacity for self-reflection as ongoing practice (Larrivee 987). “Reflection-for-practice is in essence proactive in nature” (22), write Reagan, Case, and Brubacher; that is, reflective practitioners examine their methods, seek new information, “challenge their own practices and assumptions” (Ross, Bondy, and Kyle 337), and modify their practice. In other words, reflective pedagogy can benefit the desire of both teacher and student to clarify self-knowledge.

In a counseling or classroom environment, awareness of self emerges as a result of sustained “inquiry into one’s experience [and] active participation in the events of our lives” (Fiddler and Marienau 76). Dewey’s belief that learning improves with the degree of reflective effort assumes a deliberate practice of “thinking for an extended period by linking recent experiences to earlier ones in order to promote a more complex and interrelated mental schema” (Clark). In Educating the Reflective Practitioner, Schön elaborates upon Dewey by including the collaborative aspect of reflection as a continuous process which, in the words of Joan Ferraro, involves “thoughtfully considering one’s own experiences in applying knowledge to practice while being coached by professionals in the disciplines” (2). Dewey’s and Schön’s concepts of
reflection are mirrored in the Japanese notion of *kaizen*, or the effort of “continuous improvement” in which “reflection becomes part of daily work and conversations” (Maiers). Collaborative, reflective, continuous: *kaizen*, or the practice of looking at one’s behavior and making changes in light of new discoveries, may well be applied in our classrooms. Continuous improvement, then, is achieved with continuous reflection. Through this process, “students will become more and more engaged in their growth and learning” (Maiers). It must be noted, however, that the traditional practice of *kaizen* cannot be fulfilled without the support of teachers and parents and, sometimes, an entire society. In the absence of a total environment of *kaizen*, my goal in the design of the classroom triad (teacher/peer partner/enrolled students) was to create a reciprocal flow of reflection in which all members offer views of past and present behaviors and beliefs, and project future plans.

The Case for Peer Partnering

Academic mentoring can take many forms, from tutoring and peer-based relationships among students within their disciplines, to preprofessional practicums and upper-division teaching assistantships under faculty who serve as mentors to doctoral students. The literature on peer-based undergraduate intervention, or peer mentoring, supports the increasing importance of mentoring in the first year of college as a means “to reduce first year attrition by aiding transition to university” (Hill and Reddy 98). In their study of the impact of mentoring on Latino undergraduate students, Hill and Reddy found that mentoring played a positive role in preparing new students for college life, academic success, and life after graduation. Identifying an important distinction in mentoring interventions, Hill and Reddy write: “Mentors’ advice reflected implicit academic values rather than strategic short cuts, and mentoring cued reflection on their own development” (98).

The term “peer partner,” as opposed to the term “peer mentor,” suggests a nonhierarchical relationship within the triad of teacher, peer partner, and students, one that places value on reciprocal relations. The advantages of the presence of a peer partner in a New Student Seminar are many. As role models, peer partners can lead first-year students in making the adjustment to college and to the new demands of college-level study. They can actively engage their fellow students’ attitudes about a variety of topics essential to academic success: for example, effective study and test-taking skills. Peer partners can also share first-hand experience of campus resources from transfer, tutorial, and finan-
cial aid services to the library and recreational facilities. But the deepest contribution of the peer partner to the seminar is shared self-exploration, a process traditionally facilitated by the counselor/instructor.

In addition to generating a new dynamic among my New Student Seminar students, the presence of a peer partner on a continuous basis required changes to my teaching methods. First, I redesigned activities to emphasize the roles of the peer partner and the processes of intentional reflective inquiry. Second, my peer partner and I agreed to schedule regular times to discuss classroom dynamics and student concerns, issues that I had formerly reserved for my colleagues. Finally, as a result of the increased sense of professionalism demonstrated by my peer partner, I began to rethink the roles and relationships of teacher and learner.

At first, I reacted with anxiety and uncertainty to having a student cofacilitate the seminar. However, this new arrangement provided both of us with several advantages. As the weeks of our New Student Seminar passed, Julio gradually assumed more leadership and modeled positive student behaviors. In each of the weekly one-hour classes, he actively engaged in class activities and shared his experiences from his first year as a student. Finally, in Julio’s character and actions, students could glimpse future possibilities for their own potential, and in the behaviors and views of the students, Julio recognized a younger, less experienced version of himself. Over time, I, too, adapted to the presence of Julio as a peer partner and to the changes in my classroom role. My comfort level increased and the traditional hierarchical barriers between my students and me eased. Gaining confidence, Julio interacted more fully in class and in our meetings together, contributing to a practice of reflection that provided more opportunity for classroom modification than the standard once-a-semester faculty observation.

A Case History as an Evaluation of Peer Partnering
Julio was quiet and reserved when we first met during the 2007 summer program for College Discovery students. Later, as a student in my Fall 2007 New Student Seminar for science majors, Julio presented himself as responsible and attentive, but, again, not as particularly active. Yet, throughout the year, Julio visited me regularly during office hours to inquire about his major and to discuss future career goals, and in Spring 2008, as a second-semester student, he registered for my section of the Counseling Seminar for CD students. Noticing changes in Julio as he grew more comfortable speaking in class, I invited him to help register first-year students. During registration, Julio’s liveliness as he talked
with students was even more apparent and pointed to a sharp contrast between peer dynamics and the typical interactions between students and faculty. Struck by these differences and imagining the effects of bringing second-year students into the classroom as peer partners-in-learning, I began to conceive a project that would cultivate the potential of students who, like Julio, did not demonstrate traditional leadership charisma, but did exhibit qualities of curiosity and inquiry essential to the practice of reflection.

The structure and process for “peer partners-in-learning” drew upon the Difficult Dialogues Study Circles model. In particular, my earlier experience as a study circle cofacilitator influenced the roles and responsibilities that Julio and I shared. For example, before and after each weekly class, we met for thirty minutes, intentionally setting our meetings for the same time as a sign of our commitment and investment in each other’s growth. As the weeks passed, during class and in our meetings afterwards, we grew increasingly aware of listening to each other and reflecting on the content and style of our interactions.

However, our initial relationship was not without frustration. Our double roles as teacher-student and cofacilitators tested Julio’s ability to offer opposing views or constructive criticism. Instead of leading discussions, he often sat in class as if he were one of the students. In response to open-ended reflective inquiry questions (e.g., “How do you think class went today?” “What was it like to share your personal experiences with fellow students?” “How did you perceive your role while working with me?”), Julio’s observations were unfailingly positive and overly general. “The class went well,” he would respond. “The students were attentive.” In sum, Julio was passive, taking less initiative than I had expected.

Sensing that Julio continued to see himself as a student subordinate to his instructor, I explored his feelings about assuming a stronger presence in leading class discussions. After he expressed uncertainty about how much he should talk in class, I developed several “reflection facilitation” techniques. To help him feel more prepared to facilitate the next class, Julio and I used our preparation sessions to review questions that we would later raise with the students. In addition, we discussed the dynamics between the students and ourselves and reflected upon our own participation. Prompted to share insights and observations, and given ample time to express himself, Julio grew less reticent and developed clearer forms of communication. In turn, I asked more demanding questions about how we conducted the class and related as partners.
“What should I have done differently?” I asked. “What did you notice about your presentation in class?” As our work progressed, Julio was able to respond to my deliberate questions with concrete suggestions for improvement.

Being in class together with a peer partner was a profound experience for me as well. Was the cause of my earlier perception of Julio as passive the result of an unfair expectation that he be more like me and other teachers who tend toward “dynamic” classrooms? I recognized that some students related more easily to Julio’s manner as similar to their own, and I understood their appreciation for an alternative leadership style. Reflecting on my own experience, I discovered that Julio’s reserve actually complemented my presentation. In this regard, Schön’s concept of reflection as “thoughtfully considering one’s own experiences in applying knowledge to practice” (Ferraro 2) took on new meaning for me. Awareness of my own evolving ideas and feelings about teaching, and of my behaviors in the classroom, opened me to insights that I would not have gained without Julio’s presence.

In sum, my intention to nurture student leadership development through the practice of reflection benefitted both Julio and me. Toward the end of the semester, Julio wrote a reflective assessment in which he described himself as more open to sharing his shortcomings and vulnerabilities in order to reach new students who harbored anxiety and fear of the unknown. No longer just a student, he forced himself to “break the ice” when the seminar was silent and unresponsive. Finally, Julio expressed a deeper knowledge of the position of the teacher, a role he had previously taken for granted.

Conclusion
Arun Jacob suggests that community colleges can serve as a “democratizing force in post-secondary education” if faculty implement comprehensive, integrated, complementary, and innovative approaches that promote increased student engagement ([ii]). Starting as an experiment in a single classroom, peer partnering with Julio has evolved into Peer Partners-in-Learning, a vital component of the College Discovery program that stresses engagement as a path to achievement. After conducting numerous studies, including one at LaGuardia, Tinto and Goodsell-Love concluded that students who establish a sense of belonging are more likely to succeed in college (20). A review of Julio’s educational journey reveals many accomplishments and multiple honors for academic excellence. Inducted into both the Chi Alpha Epsilon and the
Phi Theta Kappa National Honor Societies, Julio is also an officer of the College Discovery [Student] Club. Julio was accepted to the 2009 Intercollegiate Summer Program at Barnard College where he took two science courses. In addition, Julio won LaGuardia’s Alan Berman Scholarship and was recognized on Honors Night for outstanding service to the college. In the spring of 2009, I invited Julio to present about the Peer-Partner Program at the 10th Biennial Conference of the Tri-State Consortium of Opportunity Programs in Higher Education. After our workshop, many of the one hundred in attendance expressed the wish to replicate our program and commended Julio on his work and accomplishments as a peer partner.

Julio’s range of achievements demonstrated a capacity that he himself may not have foreseen. Certainly, his continuous effort as a peer partner, prompted by the practice of reflection, contributed to his academic achievements and emotional growth. But in the lives of many students, especially at LaGuardia and for a variety of reasons, the opportunity for a transformational experience may go unperceived, easily missed. To encourage students like Julio, we teachers must intentionally present them with opportunities, tapping their shoulders many times.

Angela Maiers observes that what many students really want is a relationship with their teachers. “When students feel valued, honored, and respected,” she writes, “there is an interest and energy in the process of learning that reaches far beyond the content we teach.” Maiers suggests that teachers “should stand before [students] as learners.” It is in this sense that the experience Julio and I shared brought home to both of us the value of the reflective practitioner’s unending commitment to growth, change, development, and improvement, in a word, kaizen.

Notes
1. The College Discovery program assists “students who have the potential to succeed in college but lack the educational foundations and economic resources necessary” (“About Us”).

Works Consulted


