

Pedagogical Love in Student-Staff Partnerships

Samantha Silberstein^a, Marissa Hamilton^b

- a. University of North Carolina - Wilmington
- b. Indiana University - Bloomington

Abstract

Higher education practitioners play a pivotal role in shaping learning experiences for undergraduate students. The co-curricular opportunities crafted for students can provide alternative pathways for consciousness-raising that deepens through the relationships established between staff and students. This paper takes up love as a pedagogical tool to cultivate and sustain student-staff partnerships. Love is an oft-undervalued component of these relations. From a feminist perspective, gendered norms and patriarchal values have trivialised the role of love in society (hooks, 2000). The authors of this piece have traversed many roles within their relationship as student/staff in a living-learning community, researcher/participant in a dissertation study, and friends. We have collectively developed more critically oriented views of the world over the last five years of our relationship.

Learning and growing as we go, multiple traumas established love as a force that provided the necessary support to grow as women, learners, and leaders. Centered in this growth and healing is an ethic of care and an embodiment of pedagogical love. To frame our understanding of love, we turn to the work of bell hooks (2000). Love is not simply an emotion but our behavior; it is action-oriented. Through love, we show compassion, and through love, we determine what is just, fair, and right. Love is not contained within a singular definition but is understood through what it affords. In defining the many facets of love, hooks (2000) conceptualises seven tenets: 1) affection, 2) respect, 3) recognition, 4) commitment, 5) trust, 6) care, and 7) open and honest communication. In this essay, we explore the application of these tenets to student-staff partnerships. We recognise the mutuality in this process, to both give and receive love, and apply these tenets from a student and staff perspective. For example, we see respect as honoring each other, and we actively recognise the knowledge, experiences, and perspectives each person brings into an educational space. In addition to the tenets established by hooks (2000), we offer the inclusion of vulnerability and open-mindedness to cultivate consciousness-raising in student-staff partnerships. Through this reflective piece, we hope to encourage the further application of pedagogical love to student-staff partnerships in higher education.

Introduction

A college degree is about more than credentialing and economic advancement. Those of us who enter HE are committed to students' learning and development. Campus staff and administrators have the opportunity to cultivate nurturing learning environments in partnership with students. Naming this relationship as a partnership recognises the active and intentional choice of staff and students to share ownership and responsibility for learning and development. Situating our work within feminist ways of knowing, we offer pedagogical love as an attitude and a practice for sustaining successful student-staff partnerships.

Love is an oft-undervalued component of student-staff partnerships. Gendered norms and patriarchal values have trivialised the role of love in society (hooks, 2000). Within an institution, like HE, that values the cognitive over the affective, love is pushed to the wayside and labeled frivolous or inappropriate. But love can also be subversive and serve as a tool to transgress traditional notions of teaching and learning (hooks, 1994). This piece reflects on the attitudes and intentions of pedagogical love within student-staff partnerships. We contextualise the piece within our student-staff partnership and provide a working definition of love that informs our critical reflections on our previous experiences of both missed and taken opportunities for embracing love in student-staff pedagogical partnership. Lastly, we call-in others to take up pedagogical love in their professional practice.

Our Journey to Student-Staff Partnerships

Our partnership serves as the catalyst for this reflective piece. We met through a living-learning community (LLC) for first-year, pre-service teachers where Marissa lived, and Samantha worked during her doctoral studies. A shift occurred when Marissa served as a peer leader during her sophomore year under the mentorship of Samantha and later as a participant-researcher in Samantha's dissertation.

Initially, our exchanges were limited to required meetings and formal programmatic interactions between student/leader and staff/supervisor. Marissa was the first to broach a more personal relationship, inviting Samantha out for coffee. Working together on Samantha's dissertation further encouraged deeper, critical dialogues, which, in turn, led to connective conversations on life, trauma, and love as women outside of the roles we were used to maintaining. These interactions became pivotal in our understanding of self and society.

As educators, we know the value of thinking pedagogically beyond the classroom to apply to student-staff partnerships. Living through traumas reinforced the need for reciprocal love to grow as learners, leaders, and women. We have learned the importance of an ethic of care and embodiment of pedagogical love that has allowed our friendship to blossom—to “*grow and ripen over time*” (Cook-Sather, Bovill, & Felten, 2014: 6) as a partnership. One of the most important steps in this process was defining how love can be an attitude and a practice within student-staff partnerships.

Understanding Love in Partnerships

Learning to love requires a shared understanding of its application as “*definitions are vital starting points for imagination*” (hooks, 2000:14). We asked ourselves, what can be imagined in student-staff partnership when guided by loving attitudes and intentions? To deepen our understanding, we read *All About Love* (hooks, 2000) and discussed the applicability to different partnerships we have experienced. Leading with love allows partnerships to flourish. We believe that the guiding principles for student-faculty partnerships that Cook-Sather, Bovill, and Felten (2014) name—respect, reciprocity, and shared responsibility—also apply to student-staff partnerships in spaces such as living-learning communities. These principles are similar to hooks' (2000) seven requirements for love to flourish: 1) affection, 2) respect, 3) recognition, 4) commitment, 5) trust, 6) care, and 7) open and honest

communication. These requirements are interconnected, deeply informing how each attitude is taken up and intentions acted upon in partnership.

For example, a respectful attitude includes honoring each other, and actively recognising the many forms of knowledge each person brings into an educational space. When our intentions are based on a caring and affectionate attitude, we are more likely to develop trusting partnerships. Love does not exist in isolation. It is through love that we consider wholeness beyond the self. Embracing hooks' conception of love, we recognise the many areas in which love can be cultivated, starting within the home and family, where the ways in which we receive and give love impact each of our relationships. Similarly, pedagogical love should be reciprocal. We recognise the mutuality in this process (to give and to receive love) and apply these tenets from a student and staff perspective. Within partnerships, students and staff have the agency and responsibility to maintain these relationships.

More than anything, love is a commitment and an active choice we make. As hooks writes, *"when we choose to love we choose to move against fear—against alienation and separation. The choice to love is a choice to connect—to find ourselves in the other"* (93). When we adopt loving attitudes and choose loving intentions, we are acting in such a way that we recognise the power of love to create change.

Love is inherently pedagogical in nature as it encourages learning for growth and consciousness-raising. Through love, we show compassion, and through love, we determine what is just, fair, and right. This is best exemplified through a reflexive look at our attitudes and intentions in past student-staff partnerships, which include both missed and taken opportunities for embracing love.

Reflecting on Pedagogical Love

A Staff Perspective

In the second year of my master's program, I served as the graduate assistant (GA) for our student union. I came into the role full of anxiety and uncertainty. I had left my previous position and was questioning my abilities as a practitioner. Reflecting on my graduate experience, I can see how fear clouded the partnerships I formed with student employees.

My role with the student union involved working closely with two groups of students. I supervised our games desk student staff and advised our student supervisors across all union functional areas (i.e., building managers, information desk, and audio/visual). I viewed my responsibilities differently for these two roles. Even the terms "supervising" versus "advising" suggest different attitudes. Whereas a supervisor seems more professional and transactional, an advisor is expected to be relational and developmental. While I now recognise that these distinctions are unnecessary, I can see how my attitudes and intentions varied between these groups of students.

More time for learning was built into advising student supervisors as we met weekly as opposed to monthly meetings with the games desk staff. Student supervisor meetings were developmental and personal compared to games desk meetings. These weekly advising

meetings included professional development topics and student-led conversations. Student supervisors were given agency to shape their own learning experience. Meetings with games desk staff were often brief, focusing primarily on schedule changes and policy updates. Looking back, my respect and recognition of the student supervisor role led me to commit more time and energy to their development. Perhaps if I had led with love, I would have had the same attitude of respect and care for the games desk, recognising their need as students and not just employees.

My time in my first assistantship made me cautious, leading me to create rigid boundaries and view my role not as an educator but as a manager. Irrational fears of being seen as unprofessional made me overcompensate and remove most aspects of love from my practice. This included how I handled what I perceived to be negative interactions with my student employees. For example, I had one games desk staff member who, at the time, I regarded as flippant and disrespectful. He was late to meetings, often lying down and closing his eyes as I talked. Towards the end of the year, there was an infraction—either he missed a meeting or was late to a shift. I brought this up with my supervisor, and she told me I could choose to fire him and that she would support me either way. It was only a few weeks out from graduation. I was focused on the next person to take over my position. Would doing nothing about this student make their job harder? Would it set a precedent for other students to behave similarly? I ultimately let the staff member go. The meeting was dreadful and awkward. He pushed back, I held firm, and eventually, he said fine, and the meeting ended. It felt like hours but was closer to 15 minutes.

At the time, I did not feel good, but I felt justified in my decision. I convinced myself it was the best decision for everyone and that, eventually, the student would see this as a learning opportunity. In hindsight, I think there were many things I could have done differently. I didn't build a good foundation. My responsibility was obediently placed with the job, not the student. Instead of taking the time to understand him better, I made assumptions that centered around my fear instead of his care and inherent value. There was a lack of trust and communication on both ends. If I had chosen to frame this partnership around pedagogical love, I could have used this as an opportunity to work with my student to have both of us develop better skillsets. He could have improved his time management skills and learned how to navigate a professional setting. I could have learned to be a better supervisor by creating more meaningful work experiences.

A Student Perspective

My path to the Education LLC was almost a straight line from when I was four years old. I had never questioned becoming a teacher, and I knew that's where I wanted to be. I found myself on the Education LLC as a preservice teacher during my freshman and sophomore years of college. Looking back, I see I had been surrounded by individual staff members who practiced love within our relationships, whether consciously or unconsciously. Each of those individuals contributed to where I am today, a graduated college student. This experience allowed me to carry forward an understanding and practice of love.

One experience was a critical moment in my life when I was handled with a care and love by a staff member on the Education LLC. On a routine check-in with the staff on the LLC, it is not required to be fully transparent. It's okay if the conversations looked like small talk.

However, it was important to me when the Assistant Director, Maria¹, created a safe environment for me to convey worries, feelings, and problems. In other cases, these one-on-one experiences would feel clinical, as we sat across a table in the white lights of the conference room, but with Maria, it felt different. Maria and I walked outside; her safe environment was a walk on campus. It was important she considered how relaxed I would feel. It had been two months since I started college, and almost all of my experiences caused a tightness balled up in my chest. And when you have a ball of tightness in your chest, conference rooms do not make you want to talk.

All of the staff on the LLC knew me and my issues. At this point in the semester, Maria and I had bi-weekly meetings that were mandated by our Campus Counseling Services. Maria would always have a warm kindness that radiated from her, and she always put others first. As we walked campus, I expressed my need to go to counseling. Maria took time out of her day to walk with me, on our check-in walk, into the basement of the counseling building, talk to the reception for me, and ask that I schedule an intake appointment. I spoke to the Counseling Director at that moment, and Maria waited in the lobby for me. As a freshman on campus, I would not have walked into a building and asked for what I wanted. Maria did not give me a phone number and direct me to call, because if that had been the case, I would have never done it. She gave up her time, she listened more deeply to my concerns than I asked for, and she responded with something I did not even know would change my life so much.

Since that day, I had been with that counselor for two years. It was a much larger support than Maria could have imagined, but I would not have made it through the things I did without that counselor, and by association, Maria. Maria not only knew the limitations of her role, she also knew the scope of my need. She knew and recognised the longevity of counseling in my life. I could not imagine my life without those two years of counseling. Maria facilitated a helpful and meaningful connection for me based on her ethic of care and what I recognise now as a practice of pedagogical love.

Maria's attitude toward her role was that it was filled with humanity and love. During this time, it was my responsibility to recognise what I needed and who could help me. While I might not have said, *I need counseling*, I did say I needed help and I couldn't do things by myself. Maria translated my wants and needs. But it was my job to be vulnerable enough to share and communicate with Maria. My role was to trust her and put as much effort into the relationship for the results I wanted to reap. I wanted to get better. Because of her attitude of respect for me and my experiences and her intention to partner with me in my learning and development, Maria had a hand in my recovery in the best way. hooks (200) emphasised the transferability of love:

Had I been given a clear definition of love earlier in my life it would not have taken me so long to become a more loving person. Had I shared with others a common understanding of what it means to love it would have been easier to create love. (11)

To be taught such a definition of love creates an ability to practice love regularly. To understand love as a student is to open yourself to the healing I describe above; to

¹ Pseudonyms were assigned to individuals in our reflections to maintain confidentiality.

understand it as pre-service teachers allows us to transfer love between people. I am grateful to have been granted experiences like the one I had with Maria that I understand now to be partially responsible for my understanding of love in my adult life.

Samantha's and my relationship was established my freshman year. From the first point of connection up to present day, Samantha and I have grounded ourselves a relationship built on a pedagogical love similar to the one hooks' (2000) described in her work. This love, provided during rough spots in my first two years of college, such as the one I describe above, allowed me to grow and graduate.

A Loving Call to Action

Many of us are taught "*early on to think of love as a feeling*" (hooks, 2000:5), which removes responsibility for our actions and behaviors. But in reality, love is a learned choice. Making such a choice starts by turning inward. Engaging with love means developing the attitude that self-care as well as community care matter (hooks, 2000), and it means acting on the intention of crafting a loving pedagogy, which necessitates the reciprocity of self- and community care. Pedagogical love encourages critical self-exploration, as we have shown through this reflective piece. An essential component of open and honest communication is being open and honest with yourself as well as others. Living authentically and ethically means loving yourself enough to be honest about your areas for growth and loving others enough to enter into partnership for growth and development.

This process requires first recognising and acknowledging opportunities, interrogating attitudes, re-imagining alternatives, and cultivating new intentions for partnerships moving forward. Looking through a lens of pedagogical love, staff should take time to think about what they hope students learn through the partnership they forge together and then consider the ways in which they can reach these goals. This growth only transpired for us through the collective nature of our endeavors. Our conversations were critical to digging deeper, taking in new perspectives, and supporting each other in our vulnerability. We also recognise the fear that comes with being open, honest, and loving in a culture that emphasises rationality and self-determination. This process or conversion to pedagogical love requires a level of vulnerability that may evoke fear. In those moments, it can be helpful to remember hooks' (2000) words: "*as we love, fear necessarily leaves*" (93).

Through this reflective piece, we hope to encourage the further application of pedagogical love to student-staff partnerships in higher education. How this frame is taken up will vary depending on each partnership's participants, contexts, and needs. What remains constant is the need for intentionality. While love may seem organic, it is often missing or misinterpreted. This is particularly true in a society that has relegated love to the sidelines. Pedagogical love is most powerful when you take the time to cultivate it by considering your intentions and attitudes as those inform inter/actions. Love's inspirations may vary, but what we all can bring to these efforts is a respectful and caring attitude that informs our intentions to learn, teach, and sustain ourselves and one another through the practice of pedagogical love.

Reference list

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