



Reflections

How We Got Over: The Bridge of Caring Between a Professor and Student

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INTRODUCTION

This reflective article explores the relationship between a professor and graduate student sustained over a decade. At the root of this partnership is the belief that allows both to feel they can be their authentic selves with one another (Luedke, 2017). Finding space to be authentic was an ongoing challenge for the student whose K-12 experiences were, similarly to her higher education experiences, a mix of Black and predominately white school settings. Throughout her educational experiences, she navigated racialized experiences such as inequities in grading and felt a great disconnect from her peers. Her lack of connectedness led her to resist the white spaces that ignored her existence. These experiences forced the student to seek guidance from mentors who had traveled these roads before her, which is how this relationship was born in a southern university in the professor's classroom, where the student was an older adult learner beginning her career as an educator. As the student navigated her career path, the professor was more than willing to share lessons learned from her journey. When they met, neither knew their paths would continue to converge through motherhood and career changes and eventually lead them to be colleagues. Through their stories, they hope to show how high-impact strategies aligned with mission and values work together to support students often marginalized in the classroom.

TERESA'S STORY

At 10 years of age, while tagging along on my older sister's Spelman College visit, I looked around and decided I would be a Spelman student one day. In all my 10-year-old wisdom, I made that decision not based on SAT scores (mine would be low) or financial ability to pay (my family was not wealthy), but because I felt I belonged, and as far as I could see, all the women were tall, smart (they had arms full of books), and beautiful. I would later find that my Whitefish Bay High School advisor would be unfamiliar with my college choice. I would also hear these words from a classmate: "You are wasting your time. You aren't going to college". Finally, I would watch my father talk nervously with the financial planner at his church about sending not one but two daughters (I am a twin) to Spelman simultaneously. Little did I know at 10, while visualizing myself on campus, that I would need to overcome many barriers—seen and unseen—to achieve this dream.

Thankfully, my father sees barriers as opportunities. The son of sharecroppers, he believes education is the golden ticket out of poverty. He always told us, "Education is the only thing people can't take from you, so get as much as you can". He lived that philosophy by being the first person in his family to earn a terminal degree. As an activist in Richmond, Virginia, my father understood the impact of poorly funded schools on students' trajectories. After years of fighting for equity in Richmond Public Schools, he was concerned that his children would enter the world ill-prepared. So, during high school, we moved North to "better" schools—or, in our case, Whiter schools.

The transition to these "better" schools started with a meeting between my educator mom and my preacher dad. The school did not want to accept our credentials but to retain us a year so we could "catch up". My parents refused that suggestion. It would not be the last time they made the trek to the school. Their involvement in our education was instrumental, and their voices were always heard. Yet, there truly were academic gaps. I felt I was in over my head at school, and I felt unsupported by my teachers. I longed for my Black high school, where not only did the teachers and administrators know my family and what I was capable of academically; but they also genuinely loved me, cared about me and encouraged me. I longed to feel smart again. The two and a half years at the Wisconsin high school took a toll on me, but there were bright spots. My French teacher was kind, patient, and nonjudgmental. Thus, I grew to love French and the peace my time with her brought. My band teacher was equally encouraging, and I reigned as first and second chair my entire time at the school. He overlooked that I played by ear and rarely counted a bar. Band rebuilt my confidence. I was the Queen of Band (in my mind) and participated in the concert, symphonic, and marching bands.

As my confidence grew, I remembered my dream as a 10-year-old. I worked hard reading about Spelman, writing scholarship essays, and thinking about the day I would return to the place I felt the most beautiful and smart. However, my classmate's comment caused my confidence to falter,

and I began to doubt myself. I thought, “What if Spelman doesn’t see that I need her? What if Spelman doesn’t realize that it is only the dream of landing in her arms that has sustained me?” So, as I poured myself into the admission essay, I spoke of my need to be in a place that celebrated my existence as a young Black woman because every day at my high school, I felt invisible and ignored. My package for Spelman was a mixed bag of low-test scores, mediocre grades, and a passionate essay. So, although I did not receive early-decision admission as I had hoped, my essay must have resonated with the college because I was eventually accepted. I could not wait to attend the college of my dreams and return to the place that made me feel I belonged.

Spelman, often referred to as the home of Black Girl Magic, was a transformative experience. I entered a broken, confused young woman, and I graduated 4 years later, a confident young woman determined to change the world. My 4 years provided a rich educational experience. I developed a connection to an institution that supported and girded my philosophy for living. That philosophy is “Ubuntu,” or “I am because you are”. In this loving and supportive environment, I thrived and grew. I was lauded as a brilliant thinker and strategist. I learned to use my voice, organize groups, and start a tutoring program. A spirit of excellence and respect guided my work. Years later, I was pleasantly surprised when one of the little girls I had tutored found me on Facebook and shared that our Saturday morning sessions were pivotal childhood memories. Spelman taught me to excel not only for myself but for the good of my community.

When I needed support, my professors were always there with an open door, a challenging question, and a quick hug. They pushed me to pursue a graduate degree at one of the top schools in my field. I can remember expressing an interest in a discipline. My professor asked my top three schools, and when I couldn’t answer, he implored me to research and apply to all three—so I did. I was shocked when I was later accepted to all three, and they all had scholarship money, a trip, and other perks. I did not know how to decide until my professor asked, “Are these merit-based or minority-based awards?” This was another question that required research. After much deliberation, I decided I would only attend if the scholarships were merit-based. That meant I was headed to the University of Chicago, the only school to offer me a scholarship based on my academic achievements. This decision meant some out-of-pocket expenses, but it was the price to pay to know I was there on my merit. Little did I know that there would be a greater price to pay.

My experience at the University of Chicago was the antithesis of my days at Spelman. While at Spelman I had felt a sense of connectedness to not only the other students, but the faculty as well. Whereas at the University of Chicago there was no sense of “ubuntu”, an African concept that refers to the humanness that exists between people within a community (Mugumbate, et al., 2019). My classmates were competitive in their interactions and the faculty were critical without much support. Yes, it was graduate school, so it is naturally competitive, but when I stepped on the University of Chicago campus, I felt as if I had entered an alternate universe with unwritten rules I could not decipher. There were not only classism and ageism issues, but also knowledge gaps

were exposed. My professors either overlooked me in class or I was needled with questions to determine if I had done the readings for the day. I felt watched, scrutinized and judged daily. And no, these feelings were not in my head and I was not being sensitive. I felt invisible. I felt inadequate and I rarely heard a positive or encouraging word. During class I became isolated, and I was very lonely. My interactions with most professors left me questioning my ability to offer critical analysis. Study groups were formed, but it was as if I had a large “L” on my head for “Loser”, so I was never invited to join the study groups. However, the worst attacks were to my writing.

The administration asked me to attend the “Little Red Schoolhouse” to learn how to write. I could not afford to take the course, but a beloved professor, Dr. Pastora Cafferty, found the resources to send me. The course was nearly \$800 back in 1990, and it required me to take a bus and train downtown one evening a week. The time I spent was precious time away from campus and from the safety of the university community. I was disappointed that no other classmates were encouraged to take the extra course. During this time, my parents made frequent trips to visit me and encourage me to “find my people”. So, I started hanging out in the lobby to find “my people”. One evening, I watched a group of Black people rushing in the building and my heart sang. These were the people I needed to meet. So, I spent many evenings and Saturday mornings connecting with these professionals who looked like me, but were older and wiser. I also found solace in my work as a research assistant with a dementia study. The team was kind and supportive. The study participants, who were confused initially eventually became surrogate grandparents, offering me advice and encouragement during our brief visits.

The two years I spent at the University of Chicago were humiliating and exhilarating. I grew as a young woman and a young professional. For all the racial trauma I endured as a student, I turned that pain into motivation to achieve my goals. I decided that if I could survive the brutality and isolation of graduate school, there was very little I could not do. Through the support of my friends, family, and food, I survived and thrived. I graduated with good grades and a job at a prestigious agency. In fact, I was one of the few students hired by my last student placement. It is this resiliency that has sustained me throughout my career. This ability to turn racial pain and trauma into success is not new to Black women.

Throughout my educational career, there was always a caring professor offering support. From Spelman to the University of Chicago to the University of Memphis, I have been privileged to find a friendly professor to offer encouragement and mentoring. It is at this point that my path converged with Dr. Tamecca Fitzpatrick. She was a strikingly tall professor with a commanding presence and a focus on excellence. Though her class was intriguing and challenging, she was available and supportive. I learned a great deal from her, and I asked to keep in touch when our class ended. Dr. Fitzpatrick eventually provided support to my son as he entered middle school while offering me guidance as an early career educator.

TAMECCA'S STORY

As a Person of Color who checked many of the boxes commonly associated with being a minority, I was oblivious to the microaggressions hidden in the labels to which I was assigned. Raised in a single-parent household, I often overheard the term “at-risk,” but I did not understand the limitations these labels placed on what others expected of me. In high school, I overheard students sharing good news from the guidance counselor, saw them receiving extra assistance in completing college applications, and witnessed the joy as my peers shared announcements of the recent scholarship awards. Assuming I had been inadvertently overlooked, I scheduled a meeting with the guidance counselor. My inquiries about colleges were quickly met with information about cosmetology programs and questions about my home life. Did my parents attend college? Had I considered a trade? Did I feel I was college material? The meeting ended abruptly with the advice that as a 16-year-old senior, I needed to stay close to home until I could mature and save money for school. One adult’s dismissive response to my interest was the motivation I needed to “do it myself”.

Following in the footsteps of my older sister, I applied to a university on the opposite end of the state. I was denied but not deterred. My appeal for admission and eventual acceptance was another life lesson: to never take no for an answer, with the understanding that a response of “no” meant I needed to rephrase my question. Ultimately, I moved from a deficit model, limited by what others expected of me, to a win-win approach, an internal shift in perspective that would contribute to my survival. I could waste my time arguing or focus my efforts on my personal growth; I chose the latter.

During my undergraduate years, in desperate need of a respite from the exhaustive attempts to ignore (and yet continually acknowledge) the harsh reality that my hue and hair made me a target, I enrolled in an African American studies course. Notably, this would be my first and only course taught by an African American professor. The course was at capacity with seemingly every Black student on campus, and for me, it was a place where I was free to just *be*. In that class, I heard of and read books I had never been exposed to. I was introduced to art that I had never seen, and I relished an environment where my perspective shifted from win-win to abundance.

That college classroom is where I acquired the language to identify the slights and injustices I had faced. Class discussions were filled with direct and indirect reminders of self-advocacy. We were encouraged to attend every instructor’s office hours, sit in the front of every class, arrive on time, and be sure our instructors knew us by name—advice my professor said she received from her parents. In one-on-one conversations, I received small, subtle lessons to always do and be my personal best, and when I fumbled, the reminders were dispensed with care and compassion. My professor never attempted to solve my problems; instead, she guided me through the hard work of becoming a problem-solver. As a student who unconsciously associated the professorship with emotionally unavailable older White men, I found that taking African American Studies from an African American woman inspired one question: How could I be a professor? The course also added a new level of educational attainment to my to-do list: doctor.

My path to the professorship was not direct. It began in an early learning environment, where I again witnessed the impact that language and expectations could have on young learners. My

student teaching experiences were examples of two extremes that remain in education today. In the first placement, I taught in an all-White, economically advantaged elementary school; my second placement was an all-Black middle school where most families lived at or below the poverty line. Although both placements were beneficial, the second was a textbook example of the broken windows theory I read about during my teacher education program indicating that in my urban placement, classroom discipline was a priority. I understood that my educational and professional success was based on my ability to regurgitate theories with which I could not wholeheartedly agree. I was again reminded that I could spend my time arguing, or I could focus my efforts on personal growth, graduate, and make a positive impact in my classroom; I again chose the latter.

Realizing that my teacher education program did not adequately prepare me to work in the type of environment where I felt I could be most impactful, I decided to prepare myself and others who aimed for a more equitable education system. It was during this time of discomfort that I was offered an adjunct position at the local university. Ill-prepared but passionate and eager, I quickly accepted the position. One night, while standing in the lecture hall engaging with my students (preservice teachers), I stepped to the rear of the room—something I did often—but this time it felt different. Initially, I did not understand why seeing my students turn in their seats seemed eerily familiar, and then it hit me: I had been here before, feeling much smaller and out of place. I recalled my mother sitting in one of the seats, looking back and giving me a thumbs up. I had been in this same room years ago with my mother as she took night classes, hoping to earn her college degree. Although she never completed her degree, her constant struggle motivated me and has always reminded me that support and encouragement are vital parts of student success.

As a life-long educator, I am not surprised that many of my most influential professional relationships stem from learning environments. When I first met Dr. Teresa Leary Handy, she was a passionate and driven student dedicated to her family and the educational process—a true standout who excelled academically and embodied many of the successful characteristics I learned from my undergraduate professor. While our paths could not be more different, they have crossed at various points on our educational journeys. Despite these apparent differences, there are several similarities in what helped us and how we now work to help other students.

HIGH-IMPACT STRATEGIES

Our relationship that began as teacher–student has evolved into colleague–colleague. It is demonstrative of what can result from high-impact strategies with students traditionally marginalized in the classroom. I am grateful when I think of the role Tamecca played in my career. I know her positive impact on my career trajectory is rooted in many of the 10 learning experiences seen as high practice. Among the 10 are performance expectations set at appropriately high levels, significant investments of time and effort by students over an extended period, interactions with faculty and peers about substantive matters, structured opportunities to reflect and integrate learning, and opportunities to discover the relevance of learning through real-world application (Kuh & O’Donnell 2013).

However, I prefer to define the high-impact strategies as human caring, equipment, culturally responsive lens, and people (HELP). First, students need human caring. I never doubted that Tamecca cared about me as a person, and she demonstrated that through inquiries into my well-being in and outside of class. The mentoring component is important because many marginalized students don't have anyone in their network to model themselves after. Second, students need equipment (tangible and intangible) directly connected to resources to meet their needs. Next, Tamecca was always available, providing resources or directing me to find more information. Yes, students need resources to be successful, but some of these resources are intangible. For example, students need time, talent, and a team: time to learn what they need to know to be successful; someone who knows what they are doing (talent), and a support team (financial aid, career counseling, campus food pantry, etc.).

Next, students need a learning experience with a culturally responsive lens. This includes culturally competent professors who understand the importance of a curriculum that reflects all learners' experiences. A decolonized syllabus requires appropriate "windows and mirrors" for seeing others' experiences and reflecting on personal experiences (Bishop, 1990). Although first introduced in connection to children's literature, the concept is meaningful in higher education, as well. Finally, students need people or communities of support. Gay (2004) suggested that professors of color intentionally make their classroom practices more culturally responsive to marginalized students, thus creating a community of support. This type of active engagement and collaboration between professor and student allows students to take responsibility for their learning while receiving coaching and mentoring from their professors. Communities of support extend to classmates, too. Now, years after my enrollment, Black students at the University of Chicago have an organized support group to meet over food for fellowship and study. I would have greatly appreciated that level of peer support as a graduate student.

When I reflect on how "I got over," I know it has only been through mentors and professors like Dr. Fitzpatrick who took the time to share their craft with me. In many ways, this sharing of knowledge is a form of social justice. The adage "knowledge is power" takes on a new meaning when aligned with one's mission and values. As a new faculty member, I draw upon all I learned from Dr. Fitzpatrick and other Black women who paved the way for me. Their high-impact practices have informed my work with my students—work rooted in mutual respect, a desire for them to succeed, and a willingness to do what's necessary to ensure that happens.

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