RESEARCH ARTICLE

"Radical TAs": Co-creating liberatory classrooms with undergraduate students

Mattie Schaefer, Department of Education, University of Vermont, United States.

Tenaja Henson, Campaign Coordinator, Reproaction, United States.

Rehshetta Wells, Consulting Services, Keeling & Associates, United States.

Sarena Ezell, Department of Clinical Mental Health Counseling, Wake Forest University, United States.

Judia Holton, Project Creator and Steward, H2afrO, United States.

Donzahniya Pitre, Health and Welfare Unit, East Bay Community Law Center, United States.

***Krista Craven**, Department of Equity and Inclusive Communities, Carleton University, Canada.

Contact: KristaCraven@cunet.carleton.ca

ABSTRACT

In this paper, we suggest that when undergraduate students are engaged as full teaching partners with professors in the college classroom, more liberatory and transformative educational spaces can be created. This paper is based on findings from a qualitative participatory study led by a team of six undergraduate students and one professor who engaged in a series of collaborative teaching endeavors (known as the Radical Teaching Assistant Project) at a small liberal arts college in the southern United States. Our findings suggest that positioning undergraduate students as co-teachers in college classrooms (a) fosters deeper student engagement through relatability, (b) creates more accessible and generative learning environments, (c) subverts knowledge hierarchies in the academy, (d) challenges dominant discourses and norms in the classroom, and (e) provides a space to engage in prefigurative politics. We also discuss some key challenges that arise through this model of collaborative teaching. Our findings suggest that students have much to offer college classrooms when they are central actors in designing course curricula and facilitating class sessions for their peers.

KEYWORDS
co-teaching, curricular co-creation, social justice education

"Think about all the power you have as a professor. Can you imagine sharing that with your students? What would the learning environment be if that was the case? What are you missing by not doing that?" These questions, posed by JuJu, an author of this paper and a recent undergraduate student co-teacher at a liberal arts college, propel this article. Although there are several models of student-faculty partnerships in undergraduate education (Cook-Sather et al., 2014), and while undergraduate teaching assistants are becoming a more common feature of liberal arts college classrooms (McHenry et al., 2009), the extent to which undergraduate students are positioned as full co-designers and co-teachers in undergraduate courses varies widely (Bovill, 2019). In this paper, we suggest that when students are engaged as full teaching partners with professors in the college classroom, more liberatory, equitable, and transformative educational spaces can be created.

This paper is authored by six former undergraduate students and one former faculty member at a small liberal arts college in the southern United States. The seven of us engaged in a collaborative teaching endeavor we referred to as the Radical Teaching Assistant Project between 2017 and 2020. Our team conducted a participatory qualitative research project to critically reflect on our collaborative teaching partnerships and to inform our teaching practices moving forward. The voices of the aforementioned six undergraduate student co-teachers, who occupy various marginalized identities (racialized, trans, gender non-conforming, and queer students), are centered in this paper. We will illustrate how the student co-teachers in this study view deeply collaborative student-professor team-teaching as a radical act that has the potential to transform the classroom into a space with greater liberatory potential. This paper aims to illustrate the ways in which faculty members can learn from and work in close collaboration with undergraduate students to create more just, equitable, and engaged learning environments.

COLLABORATIVE TEACHING PARTNERSHIPS AS A FORM OF JUSTICE-DRIVEN PEDAGOGY

Cook-Sather, Bovill, and Felten (2014) suggest that engaging students as partners entails "a collaborative, reciprocal process through which all participants have the opportunity to contribute equally, although not necessarily in the same ways, to curricular or pedagogical conceptualization, decision making, implementation, investigation, or analysis" (p. 6–7). Bovill (2013) suggests that it is crucial for students to be "viewed as a knowledgeable and critical partner in learning" (p. 99). In doing so, the dominant norm of positioning professors as the "expert" and students as passive recipients of the knowledge bestowed upon them by their professor is upended (Mann, 2001). When faculty and students engage in deeply collaborative teaching partnerships where each individual's expertise and experience is affirmed and drawn upon in the classroom, notions of whose knowledge is valued and legitimated are expanded (Bovill, 2013; Matthews, 2017).

Matthews (2017) suggests that the deep relationship-building and engaged dialogue that occurs through such student-faculty partnerships challenges hierarchies of knowledge and

power, thus shifting the classroom dynamic in important and potentially transformative ways. Engaging students as partners in this manner has the potential to illuminate, contest, and reconfigure power dynamics in higher education (Marquis et al., 2021). Moreover, such partnerships provide an opportunity to prefigure the kinds of classroom spaces we seek to foster, creating "a space within which to try out this collaborative way of being 'as if' it were a way of life" (Cook-Sather & Felten, 2017, p. 187). By engaging in a critically reflective, iterative, and open process with student collaborators, there is thus an opportunity to collectively envision and work towards the creation of a classroom space that is deeply committed to developing and engaging in equity-driven and justice-oriented principles and teaching practices.

Several scholars suggest that fostering socially just partnerships with students also requires paying explicit attention to which students are invited to be co-creators and co-facilitators in the classroom and the ways in which these partnerships can reproduce broader social dynamics of privilege and power in the classroom (Bovill, 2019; Cook-Sather, 2018; Cook-Sather & Agu, 2013; Marquis et al., 2021). These scholars further suggest that students whose experiences and identities are traditionally marginalized should be centered in collaborations with faculty in an effort to address and transform these inequitable dynamics. In doing so, marginalized students are recognized and affirmed as "holders and creators of knowledge" (Delgado Bernal, 2002, p. 107).

Partnering with students who are traditionally underrepresented and marginalized in higher education is crucial to creating classroom spaces that are justice oriented and equity driven. For example, Cook-Sather's (2018) study of marginalized students' reflections on engaging in educational partnerships with faculty members finds that "the presence and participation of students from equity-seeking groups helps 'disrupt the exclusive nature of higher education and helps level the playing field to allow for students to achieve more than they thought possible before their voices were included'" (p. 925). Additionally, some scholars suggest that such partnerships are crucial in building connection, critical compassion, and solidarity among students and faculty, which provides the foundation for addressing issues of equity in the classroom (Gibson & Cook-Sather, 2020; Zembylas, 2013). Marquis and colleagues (2021) further suggest that "faculty members occupying privileged social locations develop more expansive understandings and equitable practices when working in partnership" with students who are members of equity-seeking groups. Socially just pedagogy can thus emerge or be enhanced through such forms of collaborative teaching partnerships.

THE RADICAL TEACHING ASSISTANT PROJECT

The heart of the Radical Teaching Assistant Project is bringing justice into the academy. Radical Teaching Assistants (RTAs) do this in many ways, but it feels important to begin with a discussion of who we are and how that shapes our work. The Radical Teaching Assistant Project is composed entirely of people who experience at least one form of social and/or institutional disenfranchisement, and most experience multiple forms. Of the six students involved, five are people of color, three are nonbinary, and most were femme-identified during our work as Radical Teaching Assistants (though gender identities have shifted for some of us since). Many of us are first-generation graduates, and many of us come from working-class backgrounds. In other words, we are not the people most commonly represented in the academy, especially as classroom leaders. In fact, 75% of university faculty in the United States are white (40% of all

full-time faculty are white men and 35% are white women; the demographic data-gathering tools have yet to account for non-binary gender identities) (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). The one faculty member involved with the RTA project, Krista, is a cisgender white woman with a physical disability. Additionally, she was a tenure-track assistant professor at the time this project took place. As the faculty member's social location is one of relative privilege, we view our co-teaching team as an important facet of challenging the norms and power dynamics present in higher education.

The liberal arts college at which we teach and learn, Guilford College, is situated in a mid-sized city in the Southern U.S. The college's core values, which are centered around justice, equity, and diversity, have much to do with the long history of progressive activism at the college. As such, many students with an interest in social justice and grassroots organizing are drawn to this institution. However, as will be illustrated in the Findings section, the college's commitment to its core values has been a topic of concern in light of some recent actions and policies that seem to contradict these values (e.g., staffing cuts, diverting resources from programs, creating a formal policy that requires administrative permission for protests on campus). Hence, the institutional context of this study is one in which many students have been actively engaged in conversations about what it means for a college to fully embrace justice and equity, even if their focus of study does not explicitly address such issues.

Each of the courses taught by members of the Radical TA team are situated within an academic program—Community and Justice Studies—in which the curriculum is explicitly focused on the priorities of social justice and liberatory social change, often through methodologies that include participatory action research, restorative and transformative justice, and direct-action grassroots organizing. Which is to say, classroom discussions are often centered on topics of marginalization, oppression, and social change—issues that directly affect students both in and outside of the classroom. In large part, it was because of our coursework that the people who became Radical Teaching Assistants felt called to the project.

The work that we do as individuals also influences who is likely to become a Radical TA. All of the people involved in the Radical Teaching Assistant Project—the students and professor—have experience agitating for social change on and/or off campus. This justice work is a central part of our academic work. Our academic work informs the actions we take in pursuit of justice, and the work we have done and continue to do in pursuit of justice influences what we teach as well as the ways we teach it.

Throughout the process of sharing our experiences of being Radical TAs with each other, one of the common phrases that arose was "lifting as we climb." This phrase has its roots with the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs (NACWC), one of the earliest Black women's advocacy groups in the United States. Our use of the language is slightly different, but largely holds true to the original message—as we climb the ladder, we must also lend a hand to people who share in our struggle. While the ladder for NACWC is different from the ladder of the Radical Teaching Assistants, much of the core is still there: the struggle against white supremacy, gendered oppression, and intersections thereof. Our use of the phrase broadens the scope of who all is included in the struggle, and it locates it directly within academia.

The first person on our ladder was Rehshetta, the first Radical TA. She taught JuJu and Donzahniya and lifted them up. Next, JuJu and Donzahniya taught Sarena, Mattie, and Tenaja, who then became Radical TAs. Except for Rehshetta, none of us began this work until we saw

someone else do it and then decided we wanted to take on a similar role. By occupying these roles at the front of the classroom, we were not only disrupting the traditional image of who leads college classes, but were also lifting others to carry on that work.

The process of being a Radical TA starts long before the class itself meets for the first time and continues often after it has finished. Over the summer, or prior semester in the case of Spring courses, the Radical TAs meet with the faculty member to discuss the course as it was when the RTA(s) took it. In these meetings, the professor and the RTA(s) unpack the experience of the students, discussing what was effective, what was ineffective, and what materials people did or did not read or understand. This is an important opportunity for reflection that is authentic and provided by people with definite investment in the course. Over the course of these meetings, the RTA(s) identify what material (assignments, readings, etc.) they want to remain in the course, what should be removed, and what should stay but in a different form. In these meetings, the RTA(s) build a feeling of ownership over the course.

During the course itself, Radical TAs take on a number of different tasks, which are perhaps most easily separated into two categories: in class and out of class. In-class responsibilities range from facilitating small introduction activities to leading full class sessions. The teaching team meet weekly to determine the facilitation methods as well as who will be responsible for facilitating or co-facilitating each part of the class. The way classes are co-taught varies based on the material, with upper-level courses often involving a more substantial participation from the first day. For lower-level courses, the RTA(s) will often take on lower stakes tasks early in the process, like icebreakers, then build up the amount of class time they spend leading class over the course of the semester. This process often culminates in a class period led largely by the Radical TA, or at least a session led in tandem with the professor.

The aforementioned principles and actions guiding our teaching team is why we call ourselves *Radical Teaching Assistants*. We aim to create a space where marginalized students' lived experiences are valued, affirmed, and centered as we co-construct knowledge, which we believe makes this work radical. Our framework and practices differ from the traditional classroom, where students might not feel comfortable engaging deeply and fully because we have been taught to believe that professors have all the right answers and that we are meant to learn *from* them rather than *with* them. Our team views deeply collaborative student-faculty team-teaching as a radical act that has the potential to transform the classroom into a space with greater liberatory potential. Throughout this paper, we use the term Radical Teaching Assistant (or Radical TA or RTA) synonymously with the term *student co-teacher*.

METHODS

Participatory action research

In alignment with our team's collaborative teaching practices, we rooted our research project in the principles and practices of participatory action research (PAR). Participatory action research is both an epistemological and methodological orientation toward research. Epistemologically, PAR suggests that those whose voices are not often centered in academic research possess "critical expertise" (Fine, 2009), which must be drawn upon to nuance our analyses and to imagine and work toward social and educational transformation. By drawing upon such critical expertise, PAR disrupts traditional notions of who has "expert" knowledge

(e.g., professors) by suggesting that those whose voices have not been centered in academic spaces hold expert knowledge regarding their own experiences. Methodologically, PAR involves critically reflecting on common issues and experiences through a process of collaborative data collection, analysis, and action (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Rodríguez & Brown, 2009). PAR is rooted in the lived experiences of participants. Thus, the diverse experiences and forms of knowledge that members of our team bring to the table shape the nature of the PAR process (Cammarota & Fine, 2008). We utilized PAR to provide a space to engage in critical reflection regarding our role as both teachers and learners in college classrooms. Moreover, we hoped that systematically documenting our experiences as teachers and learners in higher education would deepen our praxis (Freire, 2000) as we continued to engage in the practice of co-teaching in college classrooms. Each student member of our team had taken or was in the process of taking a 1.5-year long course focused on community-based participatory research with the faculty member co-leading this study. Thus, every member of our team was well versed in the principles and practices of PAR and trained in qualitative research methods prior to engaging in this study.

Data collection and analysis

For this PAR project, we collaboratively designed a two-part qualitative study. For the first part of our study, our research team developed a set of interview questions that focused on the Radical TAs' reflections on our role as teaching partners and our observations regarding the perceived influence of positioning students as full teaching partners in the college classroom. We, the six student co-teachers, conducted in-depth interviews with each other to chronicle personal experiences in higher education, engagement in the practice of co-teaching, and observations and beliefs about how to create meaningful educational experiences for college students.

The second part of the study entailed semi-structured interviews with students who had been in a course taught by members of our teaching team. To ensure students felt comfortable sharing their experiences and perspectives openly, two alumni who were not part of the teaching team and who had research methods training and experience helped administer the data collection process. Class rosters from six applicable courses were used to generate a random sample of six students per course. These courses were small in size, ranging from 13 to 25 students per course (a typical class size for this particular institution); thus, approximately one half to one quarter of students from each course were invited to participate in this part of the study. Each of the randomly selected students was invited to participate in an interview with one of the external interviewers. Nine students opted to participate in this part of the study.[1] The external interviewers conducted, transcribed, and de-identified each interview before sharing the transcripts with our team.

To analyze both sets of interviews, our PAR team employed a grounded theory approach in which key patterns and significant processes that emerged from the data were identified through a process of initial and focused coding (Charmaz, 2006). To engage in the initial coding process, we identified all processes, actions, reflections, and emotions shared by participants. Upon reviewing these initial codes, we identified key themes that emerged across the two sets of interviews. Via these analyses, the following key themes regarding the role of undergraduate students as co-teachers in college classrooms emerged from our interviews: fostering deeper

student engagement through relatability, creating more accessible and generative learning environments, subverting knowledge hierarchies in the academy, challenging dominant discourses and norms in the classroom, and practicing visions of a more just future. Additionally, we highlight challenges associated with the Radical TA project, including a lack of financial compensation and the significant workload for student co-teachers.

FINDINGS

Relatability as a catalyst for student engagement

One of the important things Radical TAs bring to the table is their shared status as undergraduate students in the classroom. The titles of "Doctor" and "Professor" are titles of respect, but they can also represent difference and hierarchy in the classroom. And although at our institution most faculty prefer to go by their first names in the classroom,[2] there still seems to be a notable difference between how students relate to undergraduate student co-teachers and how they relate to faculty at our institution. For example, when asked about her experience being in a class co-taught by a Radical TA, Joy[3] responded:

> I think I've noticed that I relate to undergraduate TAs a lot more sometimes. And that's really helpful when I have a question, for example, and I don't really want to go to the professor for whatever reason. Whether that just be my comfort, or just more like ease of understanding things.

Joy feels that, often, it can feel more comfortable to interact with her Radical TA rather than her professor. This comfort is related to her impression that undergraduate student co-teachers "can really tailor their help and advice to me in a certain way that the professors can't always do." Similarly, Lee observed that her undergraduate student co-teachers were able to develop a closer bond with students than faculty were able to due to shared contexts and experiences:

> The student experience has changed so much from when our teachers were in school. A lot of the time they don't know the school environment or the extracurriculars that we are going to be engaging outside class time . . . so like if there's, you know, protests happening on campus or just general things that are happening on campus . . . yeah, TAs definitely understand that, or at least are more empathetic to that because they are also a student and also engaging in those same environments as we are. Teachers who live off campus, like they can go home at the end of the day. You know, we don't ever quite leave.

The Radical TAs in our team also occupy an interesting position as they often have pre-existing relationships with peers in the classes they co-teach. These blurred boundaries have contributed positively to fostering rich and meaningful learning spaces, as illustrated in the following excerpt from Alexander, a student who had taken two different courses with Radical TAs:

> It was really special to witness their practice. I knew that [my Radical TA] had worked really hard on this lesson that they were about to lead, and I wanted to buy in because I

> wanted to support them because they're my TA, and they're my friend, and they're my peer, and it felt less hierarchical, and maybe not democratic, but like equal.

For Alexander, having a peer teach them was not only engaging, but made the learning space feel less bound by power differentials.

Creating more accessible learning environments

Student participants in this study overwhelmingly suggested that having undergraduate students positioned as full teaching partners can also be a crucial component of creating more accessible and generative learning environments. Several students suggested that language can be a barrier to their learning and engagement, particularly in relation to navigating the language and jargon associated with the academic disciplines they are studying. Although it is important for students to have a strong grasp of the disciplinary language of their field, the use of jargon can make it challenging for students to feel comfortable engaging in class discussions or assignments, especially for students new to the field. Joy shared that having an undergraduate student as an instructor can help with "the ease of understanding things." Elizabeth similarly reflected that:

> You're learning all these terms, and you're learning all these new frameworks, and it's all very technical. But I think that sometimes having a TA who is kind of fun, I mean it definitely depends on the person, can kind of put things into a different perspective. Academia doesn't have to be all frameworks and theories.

Here, Elizabeth is reflecting on the ways in which her Radical TAs were able to explain the concepts the students were learning and reframe them in a more accessible way. Of course, some classes *are* all frameworks and theories—the role of the student co-teacher here is to illustrate these concepts in a manner that some students may be able to better understand. Joy also mentioned that these reframing tactics helped her as well, sharing that

> a lot of times, it was honestly more fun and more engaging, just the way that they spoke was, they didn't use all this crazy jargon all the time. It was really great to understand the ways that they understood the topic of the course and how that was different from the professors.

It is evident that these students appreciated being able to reconsider their course material in new, more digestible ways.

Sarena, who had a Radical TA and then became one herself, highlighted how her own experience of being in a course with a RTA ensured that there was a space for all students to fully comprehend the curriculum content. Sarena viewed this teaching structure as an integral component of transforming power dynamics in the classroom:

> I didn't feel that I was lower than my TA, I didn't feel like they were smarter than me. . . . [The RTA] was there to assist, and help, and explain the things my professor could not. . . . She really kind of put things into perspective . . ., and because she was a peer as

> well, I guess it just made it a little easier to understand and the way that she kind of explained everything. . . . I felt that there was a barrier between me and all of my professors in a way just because I didn't really understand the language that they were speaking in. So, when she would come in and kind of sum up everything that we had been talking about, it was just really helpful.

Here, Sarena illustrated how her experience with a Radical TA was helpful to developing a deeper understanding of course content, particularly when she felt that she could not always understand the course content as conveyed by her professor.

Subverting knowledge hierarchies in the academy

Throughout the interviews, both Radical TAs and students who had classes with RTAs emphasized the importance of positioning undergraduate students as co-teachers in challenging and disrupting knowledge hierarchies in higher education. In particular, participants highlighted that when professors teach in full collaboration with students, the traditional notion of the professor as the expert is challenged. For example, Mattie stated that the role of the Radical TA should be to "subvert knowledge hierarchies and bring knowledge to people because the teacher isn't the only one that holds it in their heads. It's not just the teacher and the readings we are learning from, it is one of us." Similarly, Tenaja stated that it is important to "get rid of hierarchies in education [and] I think TAs really do that. . . . We all in higher education need to sit back and listen . . . and provide space—a safe space—for people to share, especially people who don't usually share." Tenaja suggested that the act of professors and students teaching together in a collaborative manner not only challenges traditional academic hierarchies, but also can create a safer space for students—particularly marginalized students—to participate in the classroom.

JuJu also emphasized the importance of students and professors working together to create compassionate and affirming educational environments that challenge knowledge hierarchies:

> I think of subverting norms of what it means to be a "TA" and moving into a space where you have more skin in the game. It's not seen as "this is this professor's class and I'm just here," it's "this is everyone's class," and "how can we make it meaningful and impactful for every student and have them walk away with something they take into other spaces?" I think it is being more intentional of the ways that knowledge is produced and redistributed. I think it is being intentional about the ways that we value knowledge or experience and affirm knowledge and experience . . ., and we're supporting each other and loving each other, and it is built off of compassion and not off of a legacy of academia that wishes to create a hierarchy in learning spaces.

Here, JuJu suggested that professors and students teaching in partnership with one another have the potential to create spaces in which multiple ways of knowing are embraced and affirmed, thus challenging traditional notions of whose knowledge is considered legitimate.

Challenging dominant discourses and norms in the classroom

For the Radical TAs in this project, our teaching practice is explicitly connected to our politics. As Rehshetta noted, RTAs "want to challenge societal norms. . . . We are also out here fighting for things, we are organizers." Each of the people involved in the RTA project have agitated for change on our campuses or in our communities outside of higher education, if not both. Some have experience working in electoral politics, some with policy work, some with reproductive justice organizing, some with housing justice, some with abolitionist movements—all this is to say, we are each invested in making a better, more just world. The RTA project is an extension of this work. The Radical TAs in this project felt called to engage in this work to challenge the dynamics of power and privilege that play out in college classes and transform classrooms into more just and liberatory spaces. For instance, Rehshetta shared:

> I wanted to be present as a TA. . . . I wanted to be present for folks of color, I also wanted to be in the face of white folks because often if you are a white person at a white institution, that's all you see, it's easy to keep holding on to your biases, so I just wanted to challenge that as well.

Our host institution is a predominantly white institution, and thus Rehshetta felt compelled to support her racialized peers while also providing a space for white students to engage in critical self-reflection and action. Donzahniya also noted that she is very intentional about the ways she challenges dynamics of power and privilege in her work as a Radical TA:

> You have to go into spaces that are predominantly white and teach about these uncomfortable things. . . . I provide spaces where we can talk about and compare how it is different for a person of privilege to experience certain things than it is for a person from an oppressed community. . . . There is no fear in my radicalness and in what I do and how I teach.

Donzahniya is intentional about the ways she brings content into the classroom and views this practice as a radical act. Her teaching practice is a way of challenging preconceptions of who holds knowledge and focuses on unpacking and grappling with the baggage of white supremacist culture that students bring with them to the academy.

The two permanent full-time faculty teaching within the academic program housing the Radical TA project were, at the time, two cisgender, heterosexual, white women. While both of them have a history of engaging in justice work, neither are as close to the lived experiences of some of the subject material as many of the Radical Tas are. Thus, JuJu suggests that:

> Having a co-facilitator is important, especially if your proximity to what you are teaching is not close . . . really leaning into the knowledge of the people who really, truly have the experiences that we are trying to learn about and work with and in solidarity.

This practice has taken different forms over the course of the Radical Teaching Assistant Project. For example, the expertise of trans Radical TAs is foregrounded when discussing transphobia and trans liberation in a class. Similarly, the experiences of Black women and non-

binary student co-teachers are centered when discussing the intersectional nuances of systemic racism and racial justice in a class. This practice of foregrounding lived experiences has provided opportunities for more nuanced and deeper understandings of complicated, weighty material while also providing an important foundation to build solidarity among members of the class.

Creating a classroom space that embraces the expertise and experiences of student co-teachers can also be an important element of building community among students. JuJu suggests that the Radical TAs fostered an environment where they could be "vulnerable and be real, and . . . also encourage that vulnerability and realness in other people." Donzahniya similarly suggests that drawing on Radical TAs' lived experiences and expertise created classroom spaces where students could be open and vulnerable with each other: "In the classroom, we could be personal, we could cry to each other, we could talk about things that made us uncomfortable and make others uncomfortable, and are rarely talked about." As Donzahniya succinctly put it, the classroom community that was created "was kind of like a family."

Practicing prefigurative politics in the classroom

Through the practice of being a Radical TA, the classroom can provide a place to challenge inequitable practices and structures while practicing visions of a more just future together. Specifically, JuJu elaborated on the importance of putting our values into action in the classroom: "It's doing it. It's not just talking about it. It's actually doing it and living our values and, and breaking down walls, and burning it down if it doesn't work." JuJu suggests experimenting with trying to build the types of classroom communities we aspire to create while recognizing that we may not get it "right" the first time.

For Mattie, it is crucial to create educational spaces that are rooted in values and practices of love and accountability. Mattie asserted that "love is a radical act, and to love in the academy is really important because this place can be really cold if you let it. . . . Part of being a radical is loving people." Mattie further stated that the practice of infusing classroom spaces with love "means challenging a lot both inside the classroom and outside of it." Tenaja similarly suggested that Radical TAs aspire to build supportive and accountable classrooms that are rooted deeply in community:

> We can't do this work if we all don't have community. . . . We need to unconditionally hear and we need to be gentle because everybody is at different places . . ., we need to meet people where they are at and treat people as valuable to the community of learning we are in. . . . People are not disposable if they want to learn and [we need to] hold that to be true. Because people want to learn, that doesn't mean that they are not harmful people. They can still perpetuate so much violence and pain. But we have to make sure our spaces are equipped to do that.

Tenaja's vision of a just classroom community is one in which all students can learn and grow together while creating structures of support to recognize and address the harm that can occur when engaging in this process. Sarena further suggested that Radical TAs foster inclusive and supportive classroom communities that embrace the complexity of each individual's identity and lived experience:

> A radical TA . . . knows that, first of all, that people are still learning, . . . [they are] a person that takes in every single identity into consideration every single time that they're talking to a person. Like it's something that's constantly on your mind, being radical is like a change of mindset. . . . [It] is like acknowledging where you are, and acknowledging where other people are, and kind of meeting them in the middle, and being able to make space in a learning environment.

The kinds of justice-driven and inclusive classroom communities that Radical TAs are working to build align with the values espoused, but not always practiced, by our college. When asked about her experience with higher education, Elizabeth said that our institution "was marketed to me as a place where there was a focus on equality and creating equality through equity, and everyone's voice really matters." Unfortunately, what Elizabeth initially encountered was different: "the college does do more to replicate the hierarchy that we find in society rather than focus on certain values that it markets and uses." What had been a place she imagined as inclusive, welcoming, and justice-minded was falling short of these espoused values. In contrast to the description Elizabeth provided of how she understands our institution, the RTA model provides a path towards connection, justice, and community—one more aligned with her image of the institution than her actual experience at the institution.

Contending with the challenges of being a Radical TA

Although findings from our study overwhelmingly highlight the benefits of positioning undergraduate students as full teaching partners in the college classroom, some of the Radical TAs highlighted challenges that should be addressed moving forward, namely compensation and workload. First, at the institution housing the Radical TA project, course credit is provided as a form of compensation rather than financial compensation due to the lack of funds made available at the institution for students to take on such roles. Mattie asserted that "frankly, we should get both [course credit and financial compensation]. It should be very simple that we pay people for work." Mattie continued by pushing back against the notion that acquiring teaching experience is adequate compensation: "And I know you can say that TAs are getting experience, but that's the same thing that people use to qualify unpaid internships. And we know that unpaid internships are going to white, wealthy people." Mattie highlights the racial and class disparities created by not providing financial compensation to students for engaging in such work.

Another issue highlighted by Radical TAs involves managing the significant workload associated with being a full teaching partner. For example, Donzahniya took five courses the semester she was a Radical TA and shared that "my only challenge was trying to balance everything else that I had going on and support students in the classroom." Donzahniya's experience was not unique to her but was also shared by the rest of the Radical TA team who juggled full course loads, full- and part-time jobs, engagement in community organizing efforts, and/or childcare responsibilities.

DISCUSSION

The Radical TA project has provided an opportunity for undergraduate students to design and facilitate classes with a faculty member through a deeply collaborative process. Both the Radical TAs and students interviewed for this study view this form of student-faculty collaboration as important in creating classroom spaces that feel more accessible, engaging, and justice-oriented. First, the shared status as undergraduate students between Radical TAs and the students in these classes creates a feeling of relatability that can act as an important catalyst for engagement. Students shared that being able to relate to the Radical TAs in their classes created a greater sense of comfort, interest, and connection in the classroom. We suggest that fostering a welcoming and comfortable educational environment is an important component of engaging in justice-driven and inclusive pedagogy that seeks to deeply and meaningfully engage every student in the classroom space.

The Radical TA project also appears to create a learning environment in which students feel that they can understand and engage more deeply with course content. Participants in this study suggested that Radical TAs are able to clearly convey challenging concepts to students, which can help students develop a deeper understanding of and interest in the course material. We believe that by ensuring that students are able to delve into the course material in a meaningful manner, we are creating an accessible and inclusive learning environment that meets the varied learning styles and needs of students.

The Radical TA project also challenges hierarchies present in the academy. By positioning undergraduate students as course co-designers and co-teachers, traditional notions of who holds valid knowledge in the classroom are upended (Bovill, 2019; Matthews, 2017). The Radical TA project illustrates how each individual possesses expertise derived from their lived experiences and that these forms of knowledge are crucial in the process of learning and co-creating knowledge in the classroom. Furthermore, participants in this study suggested that positioning racialized, trans, and non-binary students as leaders and teachers in the classroom is a radical act that challenges dominant norms and discourses in higher education. Doing so foregrounds the expertise of students' whose knowledge and experiences are often marginalized in educational spaces (Cook-Sather, 2018; Delgado Bernal, 2002). Thus, we suggest that reconfiguring traditional classroom structures to position students from equity-seeking groups as full teaching partners is crucial in fostering a more just and inclusive learning environment (Gibson & Cook-Sather, 2020; Marquis et al., 2021).

The Radical TA project also created a space to engage in a form of prefigurative politics. The Radical TAs in this project aim to dismantle hierarchies within academia while also fostering spaces of learning and growth that are rooted in principles and practices of justice and inclusion. By experimenting with the creation of spaces in which students and faculty can be in deep community with each other, the Radical TA project seeks to build more liberatory and justice-driven educational spaces. Trying to actualize visions of a more just future in the classroom challenges traditional power dynamics in higher education, which we view as having the potential to transform classrooms into more liberatory educational spaces (Cook-Sather & Felten, 2017).

For those who are or would like to engage in such forms of collaborative teaching, it is important to consider the challenges highlighted by the Radical TAs in this study. Being a Radical TA requires a significant investment of time and energy, which can make it challenging

to manage a variety of academic and personal obligations. Further, it is crucial that financial compensation is provided to student co-teachers. Financial compensation would recognize the significant labor of Radical TAs in doing this work. Moreover, providing pay for this kind of work is crucial in preventing the perpetuation of racial and class disparities in who can easily access these kinds of opportunities.

CONCLUSION

This paper illustrates how the Radical TA project is rooted in a collaborative student-faculty teaching partnership that positions students as full partners in the design and facilitation of college classes. Participants in this study suggested that the classroom spaces that have been created through this teaching partnership are more accessible, engaging, and supportive. Moreover, members of our team believe that this model of collaborative course design and facilitation is a radical act, as it aims to dismantle hierarchies in the academy and create more justice-oriented and liberatory educational environments.

Our findings suggest that undergraduate students have much to offer college classrooms when they are positioned as central actors in designing and delivering curriculum content and fostering spaces of deep inquiry, reflection, and action. The practices and principles illuminated by the RTAs in this project provide important insight for educators who are striving to create more equitable and inclusive college classrooms. This project also illustrates the ways in which faculty and student collaborators can engage in deeper praxis through the use of participatory action research.

While the Radical TA project reflects the liberatory values of the academic program within which it is situated, we see value for our colleagues in academic fields that are not explicitly focused on social justice. We hope that educators working within such fields reflect on how their programs could benefit from engaging in a model of collaborative teaching that is rooted in equity- and justice-driven principles and practices. Further, we encourage readers to reflect on the question posed by JuJu at the beginning of this piece: “Think about all the power you have as a professor. Can you imagine sharing that with your students? What would the learning environment be if that was the case? What are you missing by not doing that?”

This study was approved by the Guilford College Institutional Review Board (IRB #301820.03).

NOTES

1. All recruitment emails for this part of the study were sent to the student’s institutional email address. Several students who had graduated from the college did not respond to the interviewers’ emails regarding the study, possibly indicating that they no longer use their institutionally affiliated email address. We did not have access to students’ personal email addresses, which limited our recruitment efforts.
2. A notable exception has come from some women faculty of color who have expressed a preference for the use of their professional title, as they have found that their social position as women of color has led to increased levels of disrespect, specifically from white and/or male students, despite their status as faculty.

3. This is a pseudonym. All the names of students taking a course with a Radical TA in this manuscript are pseudonyms.

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NOTE ON CONTRIBUTORS

Krista Craven *(she/her/hers) was an Associate Professor of Community and Justice Studies at Guilford College when participating in the Radical TA project. Krista is currently a Learning Specialist in the Department of Equity and Inclusive Communities at Carleton University.*

Sarena Ezell *(she/her/hers) was a student in the Community and Justice Studies program at Guilford College when participating in the Radical TA project. Sarena is currently a grad student at Wake Forest University where she is studying for her MA in clinical mental health counseling. Sarena hopes to be a therapist for low-income students as well as a future student dean.*

Tenaja Henson *(they/them/theirs) was a student in the Community and Justice Studies program at Guilford College when participating in the Radical TA project. Tenaja currently is a Campaign Coordinator with Reproaction, an organization that seeks to increase access to abortion and advance reproductive justice. Currently, Tenaja is a trained full spectrum doula, supproting pregnant people as they navigate a variety of reproductive health decisions.*

Judia Holton *(they/them/theirs) was a student in the Community and Justice Studies program at Guilford College when participating in the Radical TA project. Judia is currently in, near, and under water as often as possible while launching H2afrO, the environmental-healing justice project they founded to widen swimming ability in Black communities. They hope H2afrO inspires Black folks to have a greater sense of personal freedom and all people to take action that positively combats global climate change.*

Donzahniya Pitre *(she/her/hers) was a student in the Community and Justice Studies program at Guilford College when participating in the Radical TA project. Donzahniya is currently working as a program coordinator at East Bay Community Law Center providing critical legal services to Alameda County Residents who are at risk of poor health outcomes due to poverty, unsafe living conditions, homelessness, inadequate health care coverage, and other destabilizing social conditions. Donzahniya also provides legal services to clients through the HIV/AIDS Law Project.*

Mattie Schaefer *(they/them/theirs) was a student in the Community and Justice Studies and Women's, Gender, and Sexuality programs at Guilford College when participating in the Radical TA project. Mattie is currently working towards their M.Ed. in Higher Education & Student Affairs Administration at the University of Vermont, as well as working in Residential Life at the University of Vermont.*

Rehshetta Wells *(she/her/hers) was a student in the Community and Justice Studies program at Guilford College when participating in the Radical TA project. Rehshetta holds a Master of Science degree in Adult Education from North Carolina A&T State University, where her research interests included education policy affecting adult/working learners. Rehshetta currently works in consulting services for a higher education consulting firm and is a part-time instructor at Guilford College in the Community and Justice Studies program.*

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