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Layered Learning: Student Consultants Deepening Classroom and Life Lessons

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Abstract

The action research project reported on here took as its central problem of practice the absence of students from forums for faculty development in higher education. Findings suggest that, when undergraduate students are positioned as pedagogical consultants to college faculty members, multiple layers of learning unfold. After a brief overview of The Andrew W. Mellon Teaching and Learning Institute that serves as the context for this study, I present student reflections on the ways that student consultants gain a more informed critical perspective within and beyond classrooms and build greater confidence, capacity, and agency as learners and as people. The final portion of the discussion focuses on how the lessons student consultants learn inform my own learning and practice.

Key words: student consultant, learning, perspective, agency, responsibility

Sometimes an approach taken to meet one pedagogical goal ends up addressing another. Illustrating this phenomenon, a professor described her work to develop a more culturally responsive classroom with the support of an undergraduate student positioned as a pedagogical consultant:

[My student consultant] identified things that I had done for some other reasons, for reasons of pedagogy but not to be culturally responsive....[She] said, ‘Those things really make the classroom seem more open and inclusive.’ Then I could

think about how I would use [those approaches] in the future to include that purpose as well.

Through a process of exploring ‘practical questions evolving from everyday educational work’ (Altrichter, Posch, and Somekh 1993, 5) — in this case, how can I make my classroom more responsive to diverse students? — this faculty member and her student consultant identified pedagogical practices that the faculty member had not realized were culturally responsive and that could then become intentional strategies.

An entire program can also start out with particular pedagogical goals and end up addressing others as well. The Andrew W. Mellon Teaching and Learning Institute (TLI), piloted at Bryn Mawr College in 2006 and in which the professor quoted above participated, was designed with the goal of supporting pedagogical exploration and development for faculty members. Further funded in 2007 and fully established in 2009, the TLI creates forums for such exploration and development through seminars for faculty members and individual partnerships between faculty members and undergraduate students who serve as pedagogical consultants. Through an action research project I have conducted on these forums for the last three years, I have discovered multiple ways in which the TLI has not only supported faculty development but also deepened student consultants’ educational experiences, thus addressing in an unanticipated way higher education’s core goal: student learning.

These examples highlight one of the most generative and important potentials of action research: to find the unexpected and to make changes in response. As I attempt to illustrate in the following discussion, exploring known problems of practice can catalyze analysis of unanticipated but related educational issues, thus both constituting and fostering what I call layered learning. Extending the assertion offered by one student consultant — that ‘learning is

really big; there are so many layers to it' — I use this notion to include layers of intention and surprise, layers of insight and practice, layers of relationship, and layers of action research — student consultants' research in their faculty partners' classes and with me; my research with both faculty and students; and more informal self-reflection and meta-cognition as research.

The formal action research project I report on here took as its central problem of practice the absence of students from forums for faculty development in higher education. Very few faculty development opportunities include students (Cox 2001; Cox and Sorenson 2000; Sorenson 2001), and only recently has a strand of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning begun to count students among those who can contribute to our understanding, analysis, and revision of the teaching and learning that unfolds in college classrooms (Mihans, Long and Felten 2008; Werder and Otis 2010). Modeled on a project that invites high school students to serve as consultants to prospective secondary teachers (Cook-Sather 2002, 2006a, 2009b, 2010a, 2010b), the TLI positions undergraduate students as active, constructive participants in faculty development.

My approach is informed by and can, I hope, inform notions of reflective practice, improvement in higher education, and the proposition of action research itself. Integrating students into the 'cycle of interpretation and action' (Rodgers 2002) that constitutes reflective practice, the project upon which I report models a fresh approach to reflecting on 'knowledge in action' (Schön 1987, 12) and provides me as an adult learner with a unique forum within which to access and revise my assumptions, engage in reflective discourse, and take action in my work (Lawler 2003; Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner 2006; Mezirow 1991). Engaging, collaborative opportunities to analyze one's own practice in dialogue with differently positioned participants in higher education hold particular promise for improving the educational

experiences of all involved (Cowan & Westwood 2006; Cox 2003; Huston & Weaver 2008; Richlin & Cox 2004; Wright 1995), especially when students are among the key interlocutors — a lesson learned from student voice work developed largely within K-12 schools (Fielding 2004, 2006; Levin 2000; Rudduck 2007; Thiessen and Cook-Sather 2007). Combining action with research to challenge the routines of the *status quo* (Somekh & Zeichner 2010), I hope this effort both contributes to the construction of networks of trust and reciprocity across educational stakeholders (Elliott 2010) in higher education and inspires others to create similar projects in collaboration with students.

I report elsewhere on the learning in which faculty engage through the TLI, including how they gain perspective on their practice (Cook-Sather 2008), recast the assessment of teaching and learning as a shared responsibility between faculty and students (Cook-Sather 2009a), increase their capacity to engage in pedagogical approaches that inspire active learning (Cook-Sather under review), and develop a deeper sense of community, greater confidence, and increased intentionality in their teaching (Cook-Sather 2010b; see also Bovill, Cook-Sather, and Felten under review). Here I focus on student consultants' layered learning as it informs my own.

In the course of my analysis of participant feedback on their experiences in the TLI, I was struck by two interrelated, recurring themes in student consultants' comments. In weekly reflective meetings, in mid- and end-of-semester feedback, and in open-ended follow-up interviews, students consistently asserted that taking up the position of student consultant deepened learning and engagement not only in their partnerships with faculty members but also in their own courses and beyond in terms of their perception and of their engagement. Student consultants have repeatedly described the following experiences:

- (1) gaining a more informed critical perspective within and beyond classrooms through

- multiplying their own angles of vision
 - discerning and analyzing professors' pedagogical intentions
 - recognizing themselves and classmates as a community of learners, and
 - revising their worldview, and
- (2) building greater confidence, capacity, and agency as learners and people through
- taking more responsibility as learners
 - becoming active researchers of learning, and
 - refining communication skills.

Learning these lessons about student experiences in the TLI deepens my learning in turn and prompts me to be more intentional about supporting students in their position as pedagogical consultants and fostering the development of the educational and life lessons students describe.

In the following discussion, I describe the context of the TLI, provide a brief overview of TLI forums, and outline the methods used in this action research study. I then present student reflections on each of the experiences listed above. The final portion of the discussion focuses on how the lessons student consultants learn inform my learning and my practice as coordinator of the TLI.

Context and Methods of the Study

Bryn Mawr is a selective liberal arts college for women in the northeastern United States. In response to interest expressed by multiple constituencies (administrators, trustees, and faculty) at the College, and with a grant from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, I developed the TLI. Through this program, faculty members at Bryn Mawr College and at nearby Haverford College, a similarly selective but co-educational liberal arts institution, participate in two linked forums: (1) a semi-structured, semester-long seminar in which four to six faculty members meet for two

hours each week and engage in dialogue informed by weekly posts to a closed blog and facilitated by me in my role as coordinator of the TLI and for which they are awarded a course release (new faculty) or a stipend (ongoing faculty), and (2) individual partnerships through which faculty members invite undergraduates who attend Bryn Mawr or Haverford College to assume the role of student consultant and to explore pedagogical issues in the faculty members' classrooms. For the second forum, called Students as Learners and Teachers, each student consultant is paid by the hour to visit one of his or her faculty partner's classes each week for a full semester, take detailed observation notes and share them in weekly meetings with his or her faculty partner, meet for an hour per week with me and other student consultants to reflect on this work, and make five visits to the faculty pedagogy seminars in which participating faculty meet each week.

Part of the Teaching and Learning Initiative at Bryn Mawr College (www.brynmawr.edu/tli), the TLI aims to foster dialogue and collaboration across community members who occupy traditionally distinct and delineated institutional roles (Lesnick and Cook-Sather 2010). TLI programs are neither formally evaluative nor intended to be remedial. Rather, they support faculty interested in participating for a variety of pedagogical reasons and strive to create 'radical collegiality' (Fielding 1999) in which students engage actively as dialogue partners, as co-conceptualizers and co-constructors of educational experiences and revision. (See Cook-Sather 2010b, 2009a, and 2008.)

Since the advent of the TLI, I have engaged in collective, collaborative, self-reflective, critical inquiry (McCutcheon and Jung 1990) into the premises and practices that guide the program, my facilitation of it, and the experiences of participants in it. In regard to how I structure and support the seminars and partnerships, I have moved repeatedly through the 'spiral

of self-reflective cycles’ of planning a change, acting and observing the consequences of the change, reflecting on these processes and consequences, and then replanning (Kemmis and Wilkinson 1998, 21). In the following discussion, I draw on data from this ongoing action research project approved by Bryn Mawr College’s Institutional Review Board, including audiotaped conversations of weekly meetings of student consultants, mid- and end-of-semester feedback from those students, and follow-up interviews conducted by a student co-researcher. My student co-researchers and I transcribed and coded these data using constant comparison/grounded theory (Creswell 2006; Strauss 1987) in order to determine themes and trends in the experiences and perspectives of participants. In reading and rereading the data and through ongoing conversations with my student co-researchers, I generated the concept of layered learning to try to capture the multiple levels on which learning is taking place and the various kinds of learning at those different levels. Out of the numerous examples we listed under each category, I include only representative examples here. Although the particulars vary, any quotation included is representative of a perspective or experience articulated by at least three student consultants.

Deepening Classroom and Life Learning

Bain and Zimmerman (2009, 9-10) argue that the most successful students are ‘deep learners’ and also ‘adaptive experts’ — those concerned with understanding, with applying their ideas to consequential problems, with implications, and with ideas and concepts. Such learners are likely to ‘theorize and make connections with other ideas and problems...[and]... to become adaptive experts who both recognize and even relish the opportunity and necessity for breaking with traditional approaches and inventing new ones’. The analysis Bain and Zimmerman offer is focused on classroom learning. Striking about the feedback from student consultants in the TLI

is how they become such deep learners not only within but also beyond the classroom. One student consultant captured succinctly her experience through the TLI: ‘I am learning as much from this as I am from my classes. The only difference is that the skills I learn...will probably be more applicable to my life after I graduate’. The skills student consultants develop can be captured under the umbrella of gaining of a more informed critical perspective and are played out in the building of greater confidence, capacity, and agency as learners and people.

Gaining a More Informed Critical Perspective Within and Beyond Classrooms

The gaining of a more informed, critical perspective within and beyond classrooms that student consultants describe takes various forms, including (1) multiplying their own angles of vision, (2) discerning and analyzing professors’ pedagogical intentions, (3) recognizing themselves and classmates as a community of learners; and (4) revising their worldview. The emphasis in this first set of experiences is on critical reflection — careful looking both inward at the self and outward at those people and contexts with whom one interacts.

Multiplying their own angles of vision

One of the consistent insights student consultants identify is the importance of discerning, and working to see from, more than one angle of vision in the classroom. Rather than privilege only their own preferences and goals, student consultants recognize that there are multiple people and perspectives represented in any given classroom. This understanding is obvious on an abstract level, but it is different to realize it in relation to — and have it inform — one’s own lived classroom experience. One student consultant articulated this realization in this way: ‘It makes me a much more conscious student. I look at my classes through the perspective of both students and teachers’. Another said: ‘Participating in [this program] has allowed me to take on new roles and enter a classroom with a broader perspective than just a random student, bringing

in faculty and consultant ideas and experiences as well’. A third explained: ‘Whereas before I might have assessed a class period more based on how much *I* enjoyed it or how engaged *I* was, now I am much more likely to be conscious of the entire class community, professor included’.

Through their experiences in the TLI, student consultants not only recognize that there are multiple angles of vision but also, and importantly, develop a concomitant increased awareness of both professors’ and other students’ experiences. The multiple viewpoints become especially apparent during the conversations in which student consultants prepare to visit meetings of the faculty seminars. That is when they most directly discuss their own preferences as students. As my student co-researchers emphasize, they get a broader understanding of the range of student preferences in those meetings as well as from conducting midcourse feedback in faculty members’ courses, where they have access to a larger group and can interact more closely with the resulting information and investigate all the different responses students give.

Such intellectual and experiential development enriches a student’s education, not only in classrooms but also more broadly. One student consultant explained:

I just feel like it helps in general life to be able to look at any process you are involved in a bit more objectively. Learning is really big; there are so many layers to it. It’s a good experience to be able to change roles and see things from a different perspective.

Because the new angles of vision that student consultants develop have to be sustained over a whole partnership — being a student consultant requires consistently taking into account the professor’s and other students’ viewpoints when describing or critically analyzing the class — achieving a more informed perspective becomes a practice. Therefore, student consultants not

only gain skills for the duration of this experience, they develop capacities that extend beyond this particular context. A former student consultant, now a secondary math teacher, explained:

Because of the position and redefining the roles that all the programs in the [TLI] foster, it creates a real sense of humanity. No matter in what stage of life, we all just come with this very human element. We all have something to give, share, and learn. Looking at people in that way, and looking at others on that level, has certainly helped me in my relationships with my students.

Discerning and analyzing professors' pedagogical intentions

One of the angles of vision to which the TLI gives students access is that of the professor. Through their weekly classroom observations and meetings with their faculty partners, and through the weekly meetings with one another and me, student consultants gain access to the planning, the analysis, the challenges, and the overall demands that inform efforts to shape meaningful learning experiences for students. Analyzing and articulating their pedagogical rationales is one of the main activities in which participating faculty engage, and as one faculty member pointed out, being in dialogue with faculty members engaged in that process gives student consultants a unique angle on classroom practice; student consultants get to 'see the mechanisms that are going on behind the scenes in putting together a class', which gives them 'much deeper understanding of the content of the class.'

Student consultant feedback not only corroborates this faculty member's argument that the student consultants' experiences deepen their learning but also sheds light on how their newly developed reflective understanding informs their experiences in other classes. About her experiences during class time, one student consultant explained: 'Now when I am a student in a classroom, I am much more conscious of thinking about why professors are making the decisions

they do and how certain approaches, strategies, or activities work out’. About the new way she approached an assignment as a result of her participation in the TLI, another student consultant explained how she considered more carefully what the professor’s intention might have been in offering a particular prompt for a paper:

It was interesting to realize that I don’t think I would have thought of this last semester, I would have just answered the question. Whereas I was more like ‘What is the intent behind these questions?’ and ‘Why are these questions set up as they are?’ and ‘How can I write a paper that is going to engage in a way that the professor is looking for us to engage with the material?’

It is important to note that identifying the professor’s goals in students’ own courses is not an over-arching goal of the TLI. Developing this critical perspective within her own courses is a result of having explored the goals of her faculty partner — recognizing that faculty have goals and perhaps developing trust in the integrity of those goals, or at least acknowledging the value of and opportunity to learn from discerning those goals. Part of the work of the TLI is to make these goals more negotiated between faculty and students — to have students inform as well as discern faculty members’ goals.

Student consultants also describe how their heightened awareness not only informs their experience of other courses but also will shape future experiences:

Now I am constantly aware of how pedagogy works or fails, and I find myself constantly studying the teachers I admire — perhaps more than I study the material they teach. I think this sense of elevated consciousness alone will shape my thinking far into the future; now that I have been so exposed to this level of awareness, I really don’t think it would be possible for me to enter a classroom

WITHOUT thinking about the way class is being taught (as opposed to simply what is being taught).

This new level of awareness is what Flavell (1979) called meta-cognitive awareness — awareness of one’s own learning processes — which in turn improves learning (see also Kulesz n.d., and Underwood 1997).

The shifts described here — from dwelling on personal enjoyment to attending to pedagogical purpose and from thinking only about learning content to thinking about how one teaches and learns content — increase student appreciation for their professors’ pedagogical intentions and deepen their own learning. The deepening, and layering, here has to do with the capacity the student consultant develops to take her new perspective from one space/person to another, where she meets a potentially new/different set of circumstances and has the opportunity/challenge to negotiate without the structures of the TLI.

Recognizing themselves and classmates as a community of learners

In the same way that student consultants come to understand and appreciate professors’ pedagogical purposes and employ that understanding to improve their own learning, they develop an appreciation for what their fellow students can contribute to their learning and what they themselves can contribute to other students’ learning. In one student’s words: ‘My work as a student consultant has helped me appreciate the contributions of others. I can remove myself from the competitive atmosphere within the classroom to see other students’ assets’.

This shift from a competitive frame to a more collaborative one can help students rethink how they position themselves in classroom conversation — a repositioning that requires them to take greater responsibility for their learning and for the learning of others (Cook-Sather 2010a). Sometimes that means speaking less in class. One student consultant said:

I'm a lot more aware of the dynamics of learning now. I feel a major issue for me now as a student is thinking before I speak and being more considerate of others and their learning styles and expectations of the course and maybe in a way it makes me a bit more patient.

Sometimes taking greater responsibility means speaking up in class. Another student consultant explained:

It makes you much more aware of yourself, your presence in the class. You don't think about yourself and the impact you'll have just by what you say and how you say it. It's easy to not say what you want to say for the fear of how it will be perceived. [But] just putting yourself out there might make the difference in the way the class goes and the way people think. I have been inspired [through my work with my faculty partner] to be not as cautious if I have something to say — I say it but frame it in a way that I try not to alienate people.

There is a powerful intersection here between students recognizing what they can learn from their classmates and recognizing their responsibility to contribute to their classmates' learning. This intersection contributes to the sense that everyone in the classroom is responsible for the education that unfolds there. As one student consultant put it:

I no longer think that professors are responsible for having all the answers and making a class perfect and wonderful to suit my own needs. It is up to the entire community to make learning spaces function, so that means students have just as much responsibility as professors.

These insights and commitments constitute an important counterbalance to the individualistic and achievement-oriented focus of many educational contexts and a compelling

extension of Shulman's (2004) call to make teaching 'community property'. The TLI strives to support this work as dynamic and unfinished, encouraging student consultants to make their learning layered across courses and beyond. The awareness student consultants develop about their positioning, the capacity they develop to affect and be affected by other students, and their intentionality regarding their participation within and beyond their classroom experiences are all ways in which they layer their own learning and make it more layered for others.

Revising worldview

Engaging in the kind of analyses they do, student consultants not only reconceptualize and deepen their own individual learning experiences and their relationships to others in the learning context but also gain a broader perspective on education itself and how, more generally, people could engage with one another. One student consultant explained how, as a result of her dialogue with her faculty partner and the weekly student consultant meetings, she recalibrated her understanding of education:

Before there was just one yardstick, and anything outside of this is unnecessary.

Now I see that a lot of things are learning experiences; any way I use my energy can contribute and connect to my education. We just need to find those pathways.

The images this student uses — yardstick, pathway — capture the ways in which her thinking has broadened. It is as though she has added dimension to her understanding — expanded what might count as educational — and as part of this expansion, she has realized that she can 'contribute and connect' to her own education in ways she had not realized previously.

The insight this student consultant offers into how she conceptualizes and pursues her own education is complemented by other student consultants' realization that the educational system itself could be different:

I think I'm learning, or really just beginning to think about, how much our education system is really stuck in a certain worldview. I used to think that education just is the way it is — teacher at the front because that's where he/she belongs. Even when I experienced more inclusive or empowering learning environments, I sort of thought of them as outliers and that it would be unreasonable to expect all educators to create a classroom that was more like a community. Now I've begun to think about how this actually reflects a more general worldview — and how some version of [this program], which I feel like at base is just meant to encourage more direct communication and caring between people who are supposedly separated by various levels of power and authority, could be really beneficial in other environments outside of classrooms. It would be wonderful if all working, living, learning environments could become more communicative and balanced.

Extending the insights she gained from within her partnership and the TLI forums, this student consultant questions educational — and larger cultural — norms and imagines new possibilities for both classrooms and the wider community.

These students are posing deep and critical questions about education — how it is and how it could be structured and supported — but beyond that they are formulating life questions: How can we find and forge the most educative pathways in the world? How could environments, both educational and beyond, be more 'communicative and balanced'? Because they experience, in the structured and supported context of the TLI, an opening up of possibilities for teaching and learning and a simultaneous realization that these possibilities could unfold beyond this immediate context, student consultants apply these larger questions to other realms of their lives.

To put it slightly differently, they begin to see layers of possibility wherever they look, and their experience prompts them to ask themselves — and others — what those possibilities might look like were they to be played out. In this sense they not only discern the possibility of a different kind of education — and world — but also become potential agents of change.

Building Greater Confidence, Agency, and Capacity as Learners and People

The complement to the various forms of critical and reflective thinking in which student consultants engage and that deepen their learning within and beyond the classroom is the development of greater confidence, capacity, and agency as learners and people, manifested through (1) taking more responsibility, (2) becoming active researchers of learning, and (3) refining communication skills. The emphasis in this second set of experiences is on engaged interaction: deliberate action in relationships with people in context.

Taking more responsibility

The confidence and capacity to take action spring, for student consultants, from their deeper understanding of teaching and learning and from the affirmation they get from various facets of their participation (from their interaction with their faculty partners, their fellow student consultants, and from me; from the legitimacy the TLI confers) that they have something to say and do about what is happening in classrooms. One student consultant explained: ‘I am able to articulate what makes a class “good” or “bad” with much more clarity and feel more empowered to address these points with other students or professors in appropriate ways’. Another said: ‘I have gained the confidence to talk to my own professors about how their teaching affects my learning. I have also noticed that my course evaluations are more thorough and specific than in the past’. A third student consultant explicitly named the fostering of these capacities as the development of responsibility:

This program has really made me more aware of my responsibility as a student — in my own classes, how and when I approach faculty members and the effort I put into my work, as well as with friends or other students who may be having difficulties with other professors.

The confidence and agency student consultants develop can go beyond the standard forums for communicating with professors, such as end-of-semester feedback forms. One student told a story of how she took it upon herself to approach a professor about a course in which she was struggling. After writing some notes to herself about ‘what was problematic for me and my learning, and what would be helpful for me’, she took the list to her professor and said: ‘I am a student consultant, so I look at these things, and I don’t want you to think that I am constantly sitting there critiquing you, but I have to say something for my own learning in this class.’ Drawing on her newly forged critical perspective and her growing confidence in her capacity not only to discern pedagogical issues but also to affect how they are addressed, this student consultant extended to one of her own professors the kind of collegial relationship she had with her faculty partner through the TLI. The result was that the professor invited the student to complete a different kind of final project because, the student explained, ‘she wanted it to work for me and she wanted me to get something out of it’.

The confidence and sense of agency this student developed through her participation in the TLI led her to this strong conviction: ‘I see it now as my responsibility in a learning community that you have to say something if it’s affecting your learning’. Important to note in regard to this student’s comment is that students becoming better advocates for their own learning does not have to come as a threat to professors. Indeed, their goal is the same —

learning — and having faculty members and students take responsibility for working together toward that goal is a benefit to both.

Not only do student consultants develop confidence and agency within their current courses, they bring those qualities to their planning for future courses. One student consultant explained how she became more proactive as a student:

I now look at syllabi with a very critical eye. I've emailed most of my professors for next semester to see what they plan to teach and from that, I've been able to discern what kind of class it might be and to also email the professor about specific parts of the syllabus. I feel responsible for consenting with content now, not just for my participation in the classroom. For the future, I definitely see my learning as an experience that requires reciprocity.

Student consultants see this kind of assumption of agency in educational settings as transferable to life situations. They talk about 'having the courage to step forth' in work contexts. One former student consultant described the feeling she had as she started a new job after graduating:

The lessons that I learned in those four semesters [of working as a student consultant] are still with me, and I went into my first day with great confidence in everything that I know and everything that I am. I know that wherever I go and whatever I do, I have a responsibility to express my thoughts, my experiences, and my voice.

Former student consultants use the word 'confidence' perhaps more than any other:

'Participating in this program just gave me so much confidence, and it's something I'll always

take with me wherever I'm working, teaching, whatever I'm doing.' This confidence is in part the capacity to discern layers of learning and in part the courage to create them.

Becoming active researchers of learning

In their position as consultants, students, like the faculty members with whom they work, 'attempt to closely interlink, relate and confront action and reflection' (Altrichter, Posch, and Somekh 1993, 6). As co-researchers with their faculty partners of the pedagogical practices unfolding in college classrooms, student consultants develop observational and interpretative capacities, which they apply in their partnerships and beyond.

In the position of student consultant, students are required to take detailed observation notes during each visit to their faculty partners' classrooms. These are basically ethnographic field notes; they include three columns: time, observations, and reflections/analyses. This method sharpens students' observational skills, raises their awareness about the difference and relationship between observation and interpretation, and provides data for discussion with faculty partners. Students quickly come to see the value of the skills they develop. As one student consultant explained: 'I really think that is an important skill — to separate events from how you feel about them'. Another student consultant said: 'I found important insights through my observations of the class I worked with and the note taking/analyzing process, which I think is instrumental in any educational setting'.

Student consultants transfer these observational and analytical skills to other classrooms and contexts. As one student consultant asserted: 'As you are sitting in your own classrooms as a student, you can step back and use the skills you have gained in this formal observation process'. Another student consultant said: 'Now in my classes, the way I take notes is to split my page in two. I have a column for the content and then a column for reflections — questions,

connections, interpretations’. Another student kept such notes systematically to inform her own ongoing thinking about teaching and learning and the feedback she planned to offer on a class.

She explained:

In one of my classes I actually have been writing down specific instances where I think the professor could have used a different method to better teach the students.

I have part of my notebook designated for that purpose and the rest of my notebook for actually taking notes about the content.

Taking themselves seriously as analysts and actors in the production of knowledge about teaching and learning, student consultants develop capacities and confidence to join conversations about effective classroom practice and integrate into their own modes of being in the world the skills they develop and the agency to act on those. As they are learning content, they create another layer for themselves — a layer in which they analyze their learning of content — and potentially yet another layer: for the faculty with whom they interact, for the student consultants and others with whom they share their insights, and/or for their own future selves as teachers.

Refining communication skills

All of the capacities discussed thus far inform the development of a capacity to interact — to communicate and work with others. The capacity to communicate well requires a deep understanding of what constitutes and facilitates communication. One student consultant articulated such an understanding:

The most important insights I had are the nuances of communication. I learned that there are really different levels to what you say and understand. There can be a marked difference between what one person says and what the other person

interprets or there can be a difference between what one person thinks the implications of something are and what another sees as the implications. Before this semester, I knew different people had different views, but I didn't understand that what one says and means can be interpreted so diversely.

Another student consultant captured the importance of communication in these words, demonstrating her understanding that this work entails ongoing translation (Cook-Sather 2006a):

It becomes more and more clear that no experience is truly shared — everyone experiences a given situation in a different way, and any instance of understanding necessitates translation of those personal experiences. We are always translating ourselves to other people, and the only way to get good at it is through practice.

Acting on this understanding, student consultants put their insights into practice, as they engage in the ongoing process of 'building and strengthening...communication skills':

Working with my faculty partner, who at times saw things very differently, provided me with an opportunity to work through the ways I needed to adapt my words or ideas that would make them easier to hear or understand. I think being able to be multilingual in this way, so that we can communicate across disciplines and perspectives in ways that do not force direct translation but allow for creative interpretation and a space for understanding, is an invaluable life skill.

Student consultants argue that these communication skills are transferable. They describe drawing on the 'capacity to communicate with people who have different perspectives from my own' to help diffuse tense situations in the workplace and to redirect colleagues' energy onto a more positive path:

It was a good way for me to learn how to deal with frustrating situations and how to make my comments easier for someone to hear. I think I got much better at being diplomatic because of the difficulties in my relationship with my partner. These are just great life skills to have and I'm really grateful for the experience. I wouldn't have learned this much about how to give difficult feedback and how to control my frustrations had my partnership been perfectly smooth and everything I suggested got immediately enacted without any issues.

Although such learning experiences can be challenging, they also have the potential to strengthen, as one student consultant explained: 'the effort it required really taught me to have greater patience and conviction in myself'. A former student consultant, now a high school teacher, explained:

My principal and I have a great relationship. I think it's because of the [work I did through the TLI]. I learned how to communicate my thoughts regarding pedagogy in accessible but profound ways. And I learned how to navigate a relationship with someone who wasn't my peer.

Communication is already a layered activity, requiring listening, discernment, interpretation, and expression, among other skills. Through their experiences in the TLI, student consultants hone and further develop these skills and bring them to bear within and beyond TLI forums.

My Own Learning and How I Act On It

In addition to the insights I have gained by listening to student consultants reflect and by reading student consultant feedback, as outlined above, I have been prompted through this action research project to think about what I currently do and what I could do

to better support the kind of layered learning student consultants have brought to my attention.

Both direct student feedback and the richness of what student consultants have offered reinforce for me the importance of having regular forums for reflection and analysis, which the weekly meetings, periodic feedback sessions, and follow-up surveys within the TLI provide. Having these forums, and becoming increasingly explicit about the ways in which students are invited to fill them, are clearly essential to student consultants' engagement and success. Equally important are the multiple forums for dialogue, both of like constituencies (student consultants, faculty members) and across constituencies. The ways in which these different forums support both the development and the juxtaposition of multiple perspectives contribute to everyone's layered learning.

Where student feedback has challenged me to rethink or refine is in the following three areas. First, on the programmatic level (as an institutional structure) but also on the very personal level (for each student consultant), I have reconsidered how to invite student perspectives without suggesting or implying that students have all the answers or solutions to pedagogical challenges. In other words, I have given new thought to how better to frame student perspectives as essential and authoritative but not definitive or omniscient. As one of my student co-researchers pointed out, it is a challenge to avoid the danger Storrs and Mihelich (1998) identify: that 'a politics of experience often has the unintended result of reducing one's complex identity into its most visible component' (p. 7) — in this case, student. A consultant could be reduced to her student-ness and we would lose all the context, personal preferences, and other factors that influence her experience. Thus, in the TLI, we value experience, but we do not rely on it entirely:

student consultants continually remind themselves that their opinions and how they personally experience a moment in a faculty member's class is one valid — but not the only valid — way to experience that moment. Student consultants learn to trust their experiences and interpretations of them, but they simultaneously become more open to the legitimacy and value of other viewpoints; I learn to value but not overemphasize the insights student consultants offer, explicitly putting them into dialogue with others' perspectives.

Second, on the interpersonal level, I have reconsidered how to manage and help student consultants manage the tension born of student consultants' hope for rapid and sometimes sweeping change and many faculty members' need to take and make change more gradually. This tension is inevitable, to some extent, since students are expected and largely able to change quickly (to learn what is hoped of them) within the rhythms of any given semester, whereas faculty members are neither expected nor accustomed to such a rate or kind of change. This tension highlights an underlying question regarding this work: To what extent need it be about change? Or, more specifically, when is deepening or clarifying one's awareness of practice sufficient change and when is revision of practice the goal?

Finally, on both a conceptual and a practical level, I have been challenged to consider how to invite and explicitly name the links between classroom and life lessons that emerge, not in a prescriptive way but in a way that acknowledges and affirms the links where they emerge. Now that student consultants have raised my awareness about these links, how can I better support other student consultants making and acting on them without suggesting that they must do so?

My approaches to all three of these sets of questions center around spaces I endeavor to open (Cook-Sather 2010a) and spaces I ask student consultants to open and fill. Specifically, I am becoming increasingly intentional about framing questions regarding and highlighting more deliberately the challenge students face as they offer their perspectives, the frustration they sometimes experience regarding rate and kind of change, and the links they experience and discern between classroom and life lessons. During reflective meetings of student consultants, I reiterate more frequent reminders that the liminal position student consultants occupy offers both challenges and possibilities (Cook-Sather and Alter in press), that dramatic change need not be the goal of their work with faculty members, and that they might ask themselves about the links between this work and the rest of their current and future work. I more often ask questions like, “How might Jennifer frame that insight or critique so that her faculty partner can best hear it?” “What is a reasonable and appropriate goal for this partnership?” “Does anyone have any thoughts about how what Susan just described might be applicable in other situations?” Thus, these challenges, complexities, and links become explicit layers of discussion that we carry on throughout the semester, but they are framed in ways that each individual student consultant and each group of student consultants can take up in their own ways.

A second approach asks experienced student consultants to do the same thing — to open up spaces for learning, to fill those with their own experiences, and to invite current student consultants to contribute their own experiences and perspectives. I more frequently invite students who have served as consultants previously to share stories and offer analyses of how they experience, make sense of, and act upon the challenges and tensions they have experienced and the links between classroom and life lessons. And as

each semester progresses, student consultants often take the initiative in sharing their experiences, take the lead in facilitating discussion, engaging in analysis, and offering guidance. Especially important to me about this approach is that it builds on the commitment of the TLI to structure student voices into learning about pedagogy; this approach achieves that goal both for me and for other students, as well as, more indirectly, for how student consultants interact with their respective faculty partners. Related to this, as one of my student co-researchers pointed out, it is also the case that a community of learners forms within the student consultant group, and they are able to negotiate these issues not only with their faculty partners but with each other as well, and with me, as a professor-not-in-a-professor-role, adding further layers to the ones I have already mentioned.

Finally, having surfaced some of the gaps that exist between student and faculty experience and perspective, such as rate of change but also including differences in perspective on issues such as who is responsible for ensuring that students take advantage of faculty office hours, I work to accept and acknowledge, and help student consultants accept and acknowledge, that these differences exist and cannot be eliminated, only addressed. This last finding is important because it helps me, and, in turn, student consultants and faculty members, recognize this work as ongoing, as complex and complicated, and as unlikely to admit of any easy fixes — as part of the larger project, as student consultants highlight, of striving toward more ‘communicative and balanced’ relationships. Layered learning is nested in such relationships, and action research itself must continually grapple with such pace of change issues. Like action research, the work of the TLI is both revolutionary and evolutionary, and it can be challenging to move

between those spaces for different people at different times. Action research as a whole, since it is embedded in practice, has a similar quality.

All of these findings have informed the development of the TLI in multiple ways. Like the faculty member I quoted at the outset of my discussion, I have become both more aware and more intentional about structuring support for and addressing key emergent issues within student consultants' experiences. These revisions have become folded into the processes of the program. The TLI positions all participants as researchers — faculty of their own practice, student consultants of that practice and of their experience of the classroom, mine of my facilitation. The layered analyses of, interactions around, and enactments of teaching and learning that the TLI supports and facilitates help to erode 'the boundaries between action and knowledge-generation' (Somekh and Zeichner 2009, 6), between classroom and life lessons, between teacher and student, and between teaching and learning. They will continue to evolve through the dynamic tensions between intention and surprise, different kinds of relationship, and various forms of action research.

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