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A STUDENT CONSULTANT'S PERSPECTIVE ON HOW THE 360 PROMPTS A RETHINKING OF TEACHING AND LEARNING TOGETHER

Sarah Brown, Haverford College 2012

This past spring, during my what was my last semester at Haverford College and my last semester as a student consultant for The Andrew W. Mellon Teaching and Learning Institute (TLI), I had the opportunity to work with Professors Pim Higginson, Alice Lesnick, and Robert Wozniak on the "Learning and Narrating Childhoods" 360 course cluster. In my role as a consultant, I was to help the professors make the three courses fit together in a cohesive manner and to help understand and record the processes of envisioning, planning, and executing a 360.

Before this project, I had worked as a student consultant with many professors through the TLI, and every semester I gained new insights into teaching, learning, and how to improve both. My experience working with three faculty members, rather than in a one-on-one partnership, allowed for a new perspective on these topics.

Carving out time to attend one professor's class and to meet with him or her each week is manageable. Multiplying that times three complicated things in many ways. The three professors and I met every week as a group, and I met individually with each professor every few weeks to discuss the individual courses. Logistically, this created scheduling challenges and also required a lot of attention in order to spend relatively equal time and effort on each of my relationships and balance the needs of all three professors. I scheduled individual meetings with professors based on occurrences in the classroom and scheduling availability. This was a somewhat effective strategy, but it might be easier and more effective for future student consultants to consult with each faculty member at the beginning of the semester to determine the expectations for the student consultant's level of involvement in each course. It would also be easier to set up regular meeting times before the semester begins rather than trying to fit them in whenever possible after the fact.

On a more substantive level, it was amazing to witness the diverse ways in which the professors approached the concept of the 360 and the challenges associated with executing it. In the individual, one-on-one TLI partnerships I have had with faculty members in the past, my faculty partners and I focused on pedagogical techniques within a particular course, body language of students and professors as they interacted with the material and each other, and the types of questions my faculty partner was asking. In my partnership with the three faculty members, our conversations were qualitatively different: we talked as a group about the overall cohesiveness of the cluster, how to encourage the students to apply their knowledge across courses, the goals of the trip to Ghana, and how to best organize additional meetings for the students to bond and prepare for the trip. Thinking more broadly about students' educational experiences was interesting and illuminated different aspects of teaching and learning than those revealed by focusing on only the particulars of a given course. It allowed the professors and me to better understand the students' overall experience and how students manage the simultaneous and very different demands of multiple courses. It was also interesting to have access to three courses and three professors' ideas. There were many more ideas flowing about the same topic and the professors shared insights about teaching and learning with each other.

In contrast to the partnerships in which I had previously participated, there was a sense of urgency that accompanied our work. In my previous partnerships, there were occasional moments that felt urgent and required immediate attention, but generally in one-on-one partnerships there was sense of exploration of a professor's pedagogy and philosophy of teaching. We accepted that change could be gradual and might manifest itself in the coming semesters rather than immediately. However, because we were one of the first 360s there was a sense of being a trial run for the program, and this seemed to add pressure to our work. There was also pressure to make the experience a success for the students because, unlike a regular course, this cluster comprised most of the students' academic experiences for the semester, plus there is an expectation that participating in a 360 is a special experience, so we wanted to make it that way for the students. In traditional partnerships, student consultants often caution their faculty partners against making significant changes after the midpoint of the semester because students have become accustomed to the course and professor's expectations. However, due to the urgency we felt this semester, the professors and I incorporated changes throughout the semester. These changes were successful even when they came late in the semester, which shows that student consultants and their faculty partners may not need to be so wary of changes late in the semester as long as they originate from student requests and are agreed upon by the students in the course.

These new foci and kinds of experiences prompted by the 360 also affected my relationship with students enrolled in the courses. I was visiting three classes per week instead of just one, so I was spending significantly more time with the students than I usually do as a student consultant. This, along with the time I spent scheduling and attending meetings for the students and professors outside of class and the nearly two weeks I spent traveling with the group, meant that I came to know the students quite well. This type of relationship between the students in the courses and the student consultant is enjoyable and can be a great resource in terms of understanding their opinions about the 360, but it is not always free of conflict. Inevitably, student consultants will be closer to some of the students in the course than to others, and it is important for the student consultants to remember that the viewpoints their friends in the cluster express may not be representative of all the students' opinions.

The professors also got to know the students well by meeting informally to prepare for the trip and by travelling together. This rapport with the students, and the fact that the professors and I asked for early feedback from the students, made them comfortable voicing their concerns and expectations to the professors and me. In addition to structuring time for students to give feedback during our meetings, we gathered feedback in informal ways such as having casual conversations with students about their experiences. Eliciting feedback in multiple ways allowed us to get a better idea about how students experienced different aspects of the 360. Asking for feedback early was key for the professors and me as it allowed us to understand student concerns earlier than if we had waited to elicit feedback at the traditional mid-semester point.

As we all worked our way into this new territory, we discovered parallel attempts by the students and faculty to determine how and where to draw lines between the courses in the 360. The professors and I discussed how to weave information from each course into the others, and I spoke with students about how they balanced the workload of the three courses and how they saw the courses informing each other. Although both groups were grappling with the same

difficult question, it appeared to me that they had somewhat different expectations concerning the degree to which the courses should be integrated. Both professors and students wanted information from all three disciplines to flow seamlessly among the three courses. However, in addition to this, the students wanted more cohesion in the scheduling and assignments of the 360 courses. They brought up concerns about simultaneous due dates and seemingly redundant assignments across the courses and expected more academic discussions where all three professors were present.

What was unusual about this situation is that, while faculty always want their courses to flow smoothly, they do not generally have to think about how to create that experience across courses. And while students often work to address competing demands of multiple courses, they usually think of their courses as distinct experiences rather than as a coherent whole. The expectations and requests from the students in the 360 revealed the degree to which they hoped the cluster would be a unified experience and the degree to which they wanted three professors to be involved and the information from the courses integrated in class conversations. The feedback also illuminated the students' struggle to bridge the gaps between the three disciplines (education, francophone literature, and psychology). Listening to and trying to address the students' comments highlighted the challenges that students in 360s face as they try to make sense of a topic and navigate the interdisciplinary nature of these clusters. This demand on the students may not seem too great, and I admit that before the semester began I had given little thought to the mental effort required of the students as they assimilated three disciplines. It soon became clear, however, that learning up to three new disciplines at once and applying them simultaneously, translating concepts and terms from one discipline to another, is a monumental task. It might be helpful for professors to be aware of these challenges before embarking on a 360. It is important both for students to remember that the professors are doing additional work to make the 360 a success and for professors to remember that the students are dealing with the increased difficulty of interdisciplinary work.

It was interesting to think about fostering an environment where professors and students work together to create cohesion. I also think it was a valuable experience for the professors to see specific examples of conflicts between courses in terms of scheduling and to watch students make proactive attempts to bridge courses together and integrate different disciplines' ways of thinking and displaying knowledge and learning. I think this experience could help faculty members better remember and understand what it is like for students to be pulled in different directions by their various courses.

Our structured collaboration gave us an opportunity to identify, explore, and address these issues. Halfway through the semester, the professors and I decided that, to help bridge the gaps between the courses, the professors should attend the other two courses on occasion. This allowed them to get an accurate idea of how the others taught and the different ways in which their students were being asked to learn and demonstrate their learning. The presence of other professors in the classroom also led to both the professors and the students making more connections between the courses. This adjustment also answered the students' request for more discussions with multiple professors present. I think these cross visitations were very successful in linking the content of the courses together along with allowing the professors a better understanding of what it is like to

be a student in a 360. Students also recognized that the faculty members were very invested in the 360 — willing to take extra time to make the constellation of courses work for students.

In response to the students' requests for more synchronized and linked assignments, the professors each examined their syllabi and combined or eliminated certain assignments and altered assignments and due dates to create a more meaningful and seamless experience for the students. We also decided to combine the final projects and papers from the individual courses into a single cross-disciplinary final project to serve as a connecting conclusion to the 360. This took significant collaboration and willingness to rethink the structure all three professors had put into place in their respective courses. While their willingness to revise demonstrated a genuine responsiveness to students, in the future, it could be possible to reduce the need to revise the three syllabi so heavily during the semester if the professors and their student consultant sit down before the start of the semester and attempt to create a master syllabus out of their three distinct courses. This may help the professors see any overlapping assignments and avoid having too many simultaneous due dates.

In order to further ease the challenges the students face as they strive to make sense of an interdisciplinary experience such as a 360, it might be useful for professors and student consultants to decide on a unified method of contacting students about course updates and to choose a single online platform for discussion. Doing so may reduce the amount of time and effort students spend worrying about whether they have missed an assignment or update and allow them to focus that energy on the assignments themselves and more time navigating the substantive challenges associated with the interdisciplinary nature of the 360 rather than the logistical challenges.

As a student consultant with several years of experience in the role, I gained numerous insights into the work of student-faculty partnerships and the collaborative work of an effort such as the 360. Most significant were the insights about the challenges and benefits of the 360 program and my increased understanding of the demands placed on students in a liberal arts setting where they take classes in a variety of disciplines each semester. Seeing the effort the professors and students put into the 360 and seeing them come together and work as one to make the program a success was inspiring and convinced me of the promise of the 360 program. Working with a 360 was an enlightening way to end my time as a student consultant, as it allowed me to step back from the individual courses and get a wider perspective on teaching and learning at liberal arts institutions from the three professors and all the students in the 360.