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LEARNING TO NAVIGATE QUICKLY AND SUCCESSFULLY: THE BENEFITS OF WORKING WITH A STUDENT CONSULTANT

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Participating in the New Faculty Pedagogy Seminar through the Teaching and Learning Institute (TLI) at Bryn Mawr College has been one of the most integral parts of my first semester experience in the Bryn Mawr/Haverford community. The weekly seminar meetings among first-year faculty not only allowed me to build a junior faculty network to grow together but also provided regular opportunities to explore the academic identity that I would like to establish. One of the best features of this institutional support for junior faculty is to provide us with a semester-long collaborator, a student consultant.

When I first received the news that I would have an assigned student consultant who would sit in my class and observe my teaching on a weekly basis, I did not think I felt comfortable. Receiving the sample of student consultant notes that has sections to comment on my lecture minute by minute provided uncertain added stress. I was thinking that I would have a “boss” sitting in my class and watching me every second, which is not quite what we academics are trained for at grad school.

During my previous teaching experience, I have had multiple teaching consultant visits once or twice a semester but never had regular visits throughout the whole semester and never with a consultant who was a student. However, the presence of my student consultant has turned out to be one of the most constructive factors in navigating my first semester at Bryn Mawr, one that will have lasting impact on my pedagogical commitments and academic identity as a teacher. The very value lies in the fact that the visits are regular and the consultant is a student working in collaboration with Alison Cook-Sather, in her role as coordinator of the program; Alison constantly provides guidance to both faculty members and student consultants.

In the Fall 2013, I taught an intro-level political science class titled “China and the World: The political and economic implications of China” at 8:15 am. My student consultant, Lyra Li, attended both classes on Tuesdays and Thursdays, and she sent me a weekly report on my class every Monday. We met on Tuesdays to discuss the weekly report and reflect on my teaching while setting up objectives and actions plans for the following week. I want to use this essay to discuss three main benefits of this partnership.

The first benefit of having a student consultant derives from the fact that I met with Lyra on a regular basis. Weekly meetings with Lyra helped me refresh and revisit my teaching goals and objectives in an ongoing way. In the past, I tended to think a lot about those goals in the beginning of the semester, but often got lost during busy schedules. Just talking to someone every week really energized me to fully commit to my own teaching goals and made me think about how I can do better at what I am doing and what kind of identity as a teacher I want to develop.

In addition, the comments in her notes were very comprehensive, examining everything from my opening statement, to time management, to ways to ask questions and encourage participation, to

transitions. Thus, I have become more mindful of putting further thought into the whole flow of class from the opening statement to the ending statement. This was especially important for my early morning class to attract their attention or to give some time for students to warm up before diving into the main part of the lecture. Engaging opening statements and ending statements enhance the learning and boost the energy level of the class. Meeting with Lyra and reading her notes helped me learn how to think from the students' perspective while I prepare my own class. I design my session from the teacher's position but also increasingly develop a sense of seeing class design from the student's perspective.

The second benefit comes from the fact that Lyra is also a student of this bi-co community. Unlike my initial worry about having a "boss" in the classroom, her presence in my class did not affect the class dynamics at all, because she blends with other students and quietly takes notes while paying great attention to my lecture not just as a student consultant but as a learner as well. Moreover, Lyra is not just observing my teaching but paying a great deal of attention to students. Partly because my course is on Chinese foreign policy, my class had almost 50 percent students from China, and Lyra is also from China.

In the beginning of the semester I was asked by another junior faculty member whether I would have liked a non-Chinese consultant, given the fact that Lyra is a friend with most of the Chinese students in my class. However, Lyra was always very professional, focusing on her consultant role rather than identifying herself as a "Chinese" student consultant. She was very respectful and careful when she wanted to provide some of her comments on the substance of my lecture. Instead of being a problem, her cultural background rather greatly helped me navigate the semester smoothly because from the beginning we discussed the importance of mediating bifurcated views between Chinese and American-trained students.

Fortunately, I did not have any big issues where students had hot debates on sensitive issues, but this is also due to the great collaboration between Lyra and me. For example, one of the class assignments was a group presentation by four students on China's diplomatic relations with key countries. I put a significant amount of thought into how to encourage students to form a group representing diverse views. Through discussions with Lyra, we had students sign up for their top two choices on the weeks/ topics they wanted to present, and I was able to mix students from diverse cultural and institutional backgrounds. Luckily we did not have to implement this strategy, but Lyra also suggested the usefulness of having students take a moment to write down their thoughts and evaluate different viewpoints if the debate gets too heated. Through my collaboration and partnership with Lyra, I learned different pedagogical approaches because she has experienced various pedagogical approaches during her first three years of college life and had first- and secondhand experience of what works well and why, and why some approaches need revisions.

Because she understands both students and me well, Lyra was in the best position to provide overall feedback on the class throughout the semester, and on how well I did in terms of those changes and improvements. I also found her presence was extremely valuable during the informal mid-semester evaluation. She conducted the mid-semester evaluation and led the discussion with students for about 10 minutes on what was working and why, and what needed more improvements. Then she wrote a summary report of the evaluation and discussed action

plans with me while providing the students' perspective. I believe that my collaboration with Lyra and her presence positively affected students as well and enabled them to realize how much the bi-co community cares both about the quality of education for students and about a smooth adjustment of first-year faculty to the institution.

The third benefit of the student consultant partnership comes from Alison's guidance for student consultants. The pedagogy seminar meets every week among first-year faculty, and student consultants also meet with Alison on a weekly basis. Alison supports them in learning how to play the role of professional consultant and how to best help faculty members. When I was thinking about how to form the presentation group and how to make the presentation experience more conducive to learning, I discussed the issue at a pedagogy seminar and received great feedback, and Lyra raised the question to Alison and got her own input. In that way Lyra and I could find the most suitable solutions. Moreover, Alison invited student consultants to faculty seminars so that junior faculty as a group could hear the various experiences of student consultants' perspectives.

Regular meetings with my student consultant under Alison's guidance provided me an incredible opportunity to quickly come to an understanding of bi-co college culture, students, and different pedagogical approaches. And Lyra has been a bridge between me and students, me and Alison, me and Bryn Mawr College, and the first-year novice faculty to a more experienced member of this community. I will always open the end-of-the-semester note Lyra wrote to me, with extensive suggestions for how to make better classes and things to keep in mind, whenever I revisit my courses and need some reminders of how teaching should be a mindful journey and conversation between a teacher and students.