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Hannah Bahn
Haverford College

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FINDING COMMON GROUND AND BUILDING RELATIONSHIP IN TWO PARTNERSHIP PROGRAMS

Hannah Bahn, Haverford College '14

During my senior year at Haverford College, I participated in two partnership programs that create space and support for students to talk with prospective and practicing teachers about teaching. The student consultation model aims to positively inform classroom practices by drawing on students' unique perspectives regarding teaching and learning. Too often, however, in thinking about these perspectives and their ultimate impact on educators, we forget that the student consultation *process* is just as important as any particular outcome that transpires. Student consultation as a process is immeasurably valuable because it cultivates and encourages student voice and agency within the classroom. Students learn that they are capable of taking active, uniquely impactful roles in their learning experiences, and they acquire the tools to do so successfully. Teachers simultaneously benefit, as students are more likely to be explorative and open in the classroom and in their student consultant role, as a result.

My personal experiences as a student consultant with the Teaching and Learning Institute's Students as Learners and Teachers (SaLT) program have affirmed my belief in the value of this consultation process. During my time as a student consultant, I learned an immeasurable amount about teaching and learning, and I gained newfound confidence in my student experience and perspective. Moreover, I learned how to share this perspective in ways that were digestible for my faculty partners. The positive personal growth that I experienced as a student consultant, as well as the impacts that I felt that I had on my faculty partners' classrooms, fueled and continues to fuel my desire to create similar opportunities and experiences for my future students and myself, as their teacher.

Remarkably, in the fall 2013 semester, when I enrolled in the Bryn Mawr/Haverford College Education Program's Curriculum and Pedagogy Seminar, I had the opportunity to translate this goal into practice. In the Curriculum and Pedagogy Seminar, I participated in the Teaching and Learning Together (TLT) program, which aims to draw on high school students' perspectives and experiences to inform undergraduate education students' emerging teaching philosophies. In particular, as a participant, I exchanged weekly email messages about teaching- and learning-related topics with a ninth grader from a local Philadelphia high school, and I listened to recordings of my partner and her peers in weekly meetings facilitated by a teacher at their school in which they discussed topics ranging from teacher preparedness to technology in the classroom to classroom management.

The TLT program was extremely valuable for me, as my participation in it in many ways mirrored my work in my student-faculty partnerships. But, whereas in the SaLT program I was the *student* consultant, in the TLT program I had the opportunity to step into a new role as the teacher or, more accurately, "teacher-in-training." This process of shifting roles, from student to teacher, was incredibly eye opening. My own experiences as a student consultant and my belief in the importance of the student consultation *process* fueled my desire to cultivate similar opportunities for growth for my ninth-grade student partner and myself. This commitment was easier said than implemented, however. In this essay, I will explore two of the ways that my own

experiences as a student consultant informed my work in the TLT program, for better or for worse, and the ways that the two mutually-informing experiences have illuminated central parts of the consultation process for me, after that fact. I'll focus first on establishing a context and common ground for dialogue, and then I'll explore the importance of building relationships.

"I don't know enough": Finding Language, Finding Common Ground

Engaging in student-faculty partnerships can be intimidating for both student and teacher, alike. Students, specifically, often worry that they do not "know" enough about education to comment on their faculty partner's teaching style and classroom. Students falsely believe that they need to know particular educational theories and terms to be legitimate consultants; they forget that they are, in fact, already experts on their own student experience. Students' unique "student expertise" enables them to notice and make sense of the classroom in new and informative ways. It is precisely this unique perspective that makes student consultation so valuable.

The process of exposing students to their own strengths and particular perspectives is not always seamless, however. It took me a long time as a student consultant, for example, to recognize my unique, student-specific perspective. Like many of my peers, I worried that I would have nothing to contribute to my partnership. I falsely believed that I did not know enough. I did not give my student experience enough credit. Alison Cook-Sather, ever familiar with this fear, offered me some sound advice: start with your classroom observations.

Taking this feedback to heart, I stepped into my student consultation role as a diligent observer and scribe. Each week, I observed my faculty partner and her students interact in the classroom; I paid attention to time, topic, teacher-student and student-student interactions, etc. At first, these observations seemed quite mundane, and I assumed they would be just as obvious to my faculty partner as they were to me. But as I continued to take notes, make sense of them, and share them with my faculty partner, I began to discover that my student perspective was inherently different from hers. I was pleased to find that my faculty partner was continuously struck by the details that I noticed in her classroom and my ways of thinking about them. Details as small as where students directed their eye contact when speaking or who spoke first and most often opened up new doors, questions, and possibilities for my faculty partner and me. These discoveries and Alison's and my faculty partner's continuous encouragement and gratitude allowed me to discover that my student perspective was, in fact, unique and valuable.

This process of grounding my student consultation work in particular classroom contexts and partnerships continued to be helpful in my future student-faculty partnerships. Interestingly, however, I have not named this strategy until now. Thus, I did not think to ground my partnership with my ninth-grade partner Sasha (pseudonym) in the same way. Sasha, like I once was, entered our partnership with little exposure to educational theories and practices. She was not an "expert" on curriculum and pedagogy but she was an expert on her own student experience. My personal student consultation experiences enabled me to recognize and appreciate this student perspective from the outset. I knew that I wanted to tap into Sasha's unique student perspective but, at the time, I was not sure how to do so.

I wanted Sasha to act as an expert on her own student experience but, in asking her broad questions about education (topics that Sasha had probably never been asked to consider), I instead, unintentionally, asked her to be an expert on educational practices, more broadly. In fairness, Sasha's and my partnership was unique in that Sasha was not observing me teach; we did not have an obvious classroom context to work within but I, unfortunately, allowed this new set-up to become a distraction for me. Despite my own student consultation experiences, which had taught me that it is helpful to ground partnerships in specific classroom observations, I did not ground my partnership with Sasha in particular contexts. Sasha's answers were short and unspecific, as a result. Over time, recognizing this trend, I made an effort to ground our email conversations more by asking her about specific teachers or classes. But, if I were to do it all over again, I would try to be even more specific. In particular, I would strive to talk with Sasha about her current classes and I would treat these as our shared context (a technique which would be particularly useful, as I shadowed Sasha for a day, so I too would be able to observe her teachers teach). In other words, while Sasha and I did not have a shared classroom context, I think our partnership would have benefited from grounding our conversations in her current educational experiences.

While I did not identify this technique at the outset of my partnership with Sasha, our shared experience and, in particular, Sasha's short responses to my broad questions, prompted me to revisit my own student consultation experiences. In reflecting on my various, mutually informing partnerships, I have now come to recognize the importance of working from and within specific contexts, as it is more approachable, digestible, and true to students' experiences. We cannot expect students to have broad, complex opinions about education, as this is not something that they have had the opportunity to study. But students' unique insights shine through when they are asked to comment on particular classrooms, contexts, and experiences. Moreover, students will gain confidence in the student consultation *process* and in their own unique role when their faculty/teacher-partners are thoughtful about the context and scope of their questions and continuously affirm their student partners' unique observations.

Let's talk about the Zoo: Forming Relationships in Student-Teacher Partnerships

My experiences in the SaLT and TLT programs also taught me the value of forming relationships with student and faculty partners. No two partnerships are exactly alike and certainly not every partnership will evolve into a friendship, but I have been lucky to have had the opportunity to participate in partnerships that explored not only teaching and learning but also life. I formed friendships, mentorships, and relationships with my partners which were extremely beneficial to our particular partnership as well as us, as individuals, more broadly. These personal experiences have taught me that meaningful relationships that extend beyond teaching- and learning-related topics can greatly improve the overall consultation experience and outcomes. In other words, the consultation process can be about more than just education—it can also be about life.

While the two student-faculty partnerships that I participated in as a student consultant were remarkably different from one another, in each I formed a valuable relationship with my partners. My first faculty partner and I enjoyed discussing our travel experiences, for instance, and I learned a lot from my second faculty partner about the higher education system in his home

country. Our partnerships focused extensively on teaching and learning, but I also feel that I learned a lot about each of them as individuals, and they about me, in turn. Again, because I valued this component of my student consultation experience so much, I strove to create similar opportunities for me and Sasha.

In particular, Sasha and I spent a lot of time talking about her work at the zoo and about her soccer team. Reciprocally, I told Sasha about what it was like growing up in Seattle and about my family. Our weekly emails, then, incorporated a combination of education-specific conversations and sharing of our lives. In many ways, this was the most valuable part of my partnership with Sasha, experiencing what it felt like to develop a close friendship with a student. It was immeasurably valuable to learn about her life and to discover her passions. My friendship with Sasha fuels my desire to cultivate similar relationships with my future students—relationships that extend beyond historical content. I want my students to know that I care about them as individuals, not just students.

I also believe that the relationship that I formed with Sasha positively informed our more education-specific conversations. My own experiences tell me that students will gain confidence and comfort when engaging in the student consultation process if they have formed an actual relationship with their teacher-partner. Students need to feel that their voices are heard and they need to know that their teachers respect them as not just students but as individuals. Student consultation can open up a door, beyond the formalized teacher-student relationship, that can positively inform student-teacher partnerships, both within and outside of the classroom.

Looking Forward: What This Means for Me

These two examples are representative of the many ways that my simultaneous participation in the SaLT and TLT programs informed my broader appreciation of the student consultation process and my understandings of what makes it successful. In shifting roles, from student consultant to “teacher” participant, I was challenged to be much more intentional about how I approached my partnership and in what ways I could encourage Sasha to find her student voice and take ownership of it. In striving to cultivate a true partnership, where Sasha and I functioned as equals, I ended up learning an incredible amount about my own student consultation experiences. In particular, I have garnered a fuller appreciation for the types of questions that I explored with my faculty partners and the affirmation that I received from them. Moreover, my partnership with Sasha illuminated, for me, the value of the weekly meetings that I participated in with the other student consultants, as some of Sasha’s most salient statements were made in her weekly dialogues with her peers.

Looking forward, my desire to create similar student consultation opportunities in my future classroom is stronger than ever. I believe student consultation can inform educators’ classroom practices in fundamental ways, and it can provide space for students to discover that they have voice and agency in their educational experiences. The student consultation process ought to be facilitated in a way that continuously reaffirms the student perspective and provides student participants with space to guide the experience, so that they may garner more autonomy in their partnerships and beyond. As I mentioned at the very beginning of this essay, affirming students’ unique perspective will benefit teacher participants, in turn, because students will have the

confidence and the tools to share their insights. This openness is a central part of the consultation experience and is something that I hope to constantly seek in my future classrooms.