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Kathryn C. Oleson
Reed College

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INTRODUCTION – COLLABORATING TO DEVELOP AND IMPROVE CLASSROOM TEACHING: STUDENT-CONSULTANT FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING PROGRAM AT REED COLLEGE

Kathryn C. Oleson, Professor of Psychology and Director, Center for Teaching and Learning at Reed College

“Great teachers are not born, they’re made.”
Morgan Luker in Barton (2015).

How do we make ourselves into great teachers? Rather than believing that we either have the ability to teach or we don’t, being open to growth and change in our teaching can facilitate motivation and success in the classroom (Dweck, 2015). In this special issue, faculty-student pairs consider ways that a faculty member can develop and improve their teaching, by having the courage to risk trying new pedagogy and opening one’s self up to (possibly negative) feedback, by listening to a student partner’s and a classroom of students’ perspectives, and by engaging actively in collaboration around teaching goals.

Four pairs of student-faculty partners reflect on their experiences participating in Reed College’s Student-Consultant for Teaching and Learning Program. In two of the essays, the co-authors focus on a partnership for a single class. Another pair focuses on a collaboration involving two sections of the same class, while the final pair considers the benefits coming from participation for more than one semester. Their specific insights and stories differ yet they all support Benjamin Morris’ understanding that each “partnership is so powerful because student and teacher are able to work together to adapt the program and make it work for them... Teaching well is a learning process that never stops and the student perspective is invaluable to that process.”

Teaching excellence has always been central to Reed College’s mission. The newly created Center for Teaching and Learning is designed to support such teaching excellence by fostering the development of one’s pedagogy and promoting productive feedback about one’s teaching. At Reed, many classes are taught as discussion-based conferences in which faculty and students must come prepared to take risks, engage in deep dialogue about the material, and take shared ownership in their own active learning (Oleson, 2015). A great conference is one in which students feel competent that they can master the material, experience autonomy and personal responsibility, and feel genuinely connected to others in the class (Corpus, 2015; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Yet, there is no magic pill one can take that gives one the ability to facilitate a great conference. A primary goal of the Center for Teaching and Learning is to help faculty develop and improve their methods of instruction – of conference classes, lectures, studios, and labs. Partnerships between faculty and students seemed one promising approach for developing and improving one’s teaching (Cook-Sather, Bovill, & Felten, 2014).

At Reed, during the 2013-2014 academic year a team of faculty, staff, and students piloted a student-consultant/observer program, incorporating a number of the features of Alison Cook-Sather’s Students as Learners and Teachers (SaLT) program at Bryn Mawr. Based on their enthusiasm about the benefits of these faculty-student partnerships for teaching and learning, as

the first Director of the Center for Teaching and Learning, I established the Student-Consultants for Teaching and Learning Program as a defining part of the Center's programming. We formally launched the program in fall 2014 and it continues during the current academic year.

The program involves a fair amount of flexibility, with faculty at varying levels of seniority volunteering to participate and each partnership determining the specific details of their work together. Students apply to be consultants and are paid for their involvement. In the first semester, there were six faculty-student pairs, with seventeen pairs participating in the next spring. High levels of enthusiasm for the program have been maintained with eight partnerships last fall and nine beginning this spring. The basic structure of the program includes many features of the SaLT program: student observations throughout the semester, weekly meetings of faculty-student consultant pairs, weekly meetings of all student-consultants with the director, and midterm feedback for the faculty member solicited by the student-consultant from students in the class. As Michael Pitts and Hannah Baumgartner stress in their essay, these key structural elements—particularly the on-going weekly dialogue between the faculty member and the student-consultant and the midterm feedback—are important in the program's success.

Morgan Luker and Benjamin Morris open this issue by providing an affecting and insightful summary of "Five Things I Learned from Working with the Student-Consultant for Teaching and Learning Program." Presenting alternating viewpoints, they consider the powerful transformation that can come from collaboratively taking risks to improve one's teaching, including insights such as "I have a lot to learn about teaching," "Collaboration is powerful," "Little things make a big difference," "Content is only the beginning" and "Feedback is helpful."

Using a similar structure of shifting back and forth between each partner's perspective, Sarah Wagner-McCoy and Ezra Schwartz present a funny and penetrating look at "Gaining New Perspectives on Discussion-based Classes in English and the Humanities." Their essay considers the profound ways that a student-consultant can help overcome the limitations of a professor's perspective (including "Important Pedagogical Strategies, that sadly, just don't work") while also highlighting the challenges of dealing with differences in perspective.

In their contribution, Kara Becker and Alexandra Wood concentrate on "Group Dynamics: Lessons and Surprises from Multiple Sections of a Single Class." They write that "work with multiple sections reveals the key role of group dynamics in the success of a course, and allows for a pedagogical focus on responding and adapting to those group dynamics. Rather than attenuating the responsibility of the faculty member in course success, a focus on group dynamics highlights the intersection of student and faculty work and responsibility in the classroom." Following the time course of their two class sections, Becker and Wood demonstrate the ways that the trajectories were altered because each class had the opportunity to self-advocate and they present a powerful message about keeping the student perspective as a part of one's teaching.

Michael Pitts and Hannah Baumgartner's essay focuses on the "Benefits of Participating in the Student Consultant Program across Multiple Semesters." Although Hannah and Michael only worked together for one semester, their participation with different partners and for different courses has allowed them to distill three different categories of pedagogical strategies. Some

strategies are instructor specific/course general ones that a faculty member can employ across many of their classes, while others are course-specific/student-general ones that are especially effective in a certain course. Finally, there are student-group specific strategies that, like Becker and Wood's approach, stress the group dynamics of a specific constellation of students.

I encourage you to read these inspiring essays, considering your own classrooms and how they might be transformed by collaborating with a student observer to weave their insights into your pedagogy.

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