

2015

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Dialogue Across Differences of Position, Perspective, and Identity: Reflective Practice in/on a Student-Faculty Pedagogical Partnership Program

Alison Cook-Sather

Teachers College Record, 117 (2015), 2

Background: *Inspired by various conceptualizations of both cultural diversity and cross-role partnership, this discussion challenges the assumption that holds sway in many people's minds: Differences primarily divide us. The context for this argument is a program that pairs undergraduate students and faculty members in semester-long partnerships to explore and revise pedagogical practices.*

Purpose: *The purpose of this article is to explore how dialogue across differences supported by a student-faculty partnership program can inspire greater openness to and appreciation of differences. The focus is on fostering deeper connection and empathy across student and faculty positions, perspectives, and cultural identities.*

Research Design: *Through systematically documented reflective practice, I draw on audiorecorded conversations, mid- and end-of-semester feedback, and follow-up interviews with student and faculty participants in the program, as well as on my own reflective notes and less formal communication with participants, to identify the ways in which these faculty and students conceptualize differences as resources for learning.*

Findings: *Through supporting the demanding work of communicating and collaborating across differences, this program makes it normative for differences to exist and for people in relationships to benefit from them. The student-faculty partnerships evoke deliberate consideration of differences in position, perspective, and identity within collaborative work, which, in turn, generate ongoing critical reflection with the promise of changing higher educational practices.*

Conclusions/Recommendations: *Higher education needs to create more opportunities for students and faculty to engage in dialogue across various kinds of difference. Suggestions are offered for how to create structures and support within which faculty and students can forge new perspectives that allow them to draw on differences as a uniting rather than a dividing force.*

INTRODUCTION

"Difference unites us." That is the premise that underpins Solomon's (2012) analysis of the challenges parents face in raising children who are different from themselves (p. 4). Drawing on insights gained through his research into various conditions considered illnesses by some and identities by others (e.g., deafness), Solomon at once owns his own differences from the dominant culture and argues that what all of us have in common with all other people is that we are, in some way, different from them. By turning the common assumption that differences divide us on its head, Solomon invites us to reframe both how we conceptualize difference and how we think about our relationships with others. His assertion challenges us to foreground empathy and engagement with, rather than disregard and fear of, people who are different from ourselves. Solomon's focus is on the experiences of individuals in families and the cultural constructs that inform and constrain those experiences. However, his premise applies equally well to the differences of position, perspective, and identity that students and faculty experience in higher education, including the particular dimensions of those differences that are the focus of this discussion.

Diversity as a principle is ostensibly embraced and even pursued in higher education. Many admissions offices advertise collaborations between those differently positioned in colleges and universities, especially

faculty and students, most often through undergraduate research opportunities. They also highlight the different experiential perspectives of current and past faculty and students, and they point to the benefits of bringing different disciplinary perspectives together in the proliferating interdisciplinary programs on their campuses. In addition, many institutions seek to enroll students from different places of origin, ethnicities, and socio-economic backgrounds, and arguments abound for the need to diversify faculty in higher education both for reasons of equity and for those faculty members' important contributions to undergraduate education (Umbach, 2006).

Despite both rhetorical claims and real efforts, however, actual differences of position, perspective, and identity are too often conceived and experienced as reinforcing the differences between and among people, and thus further separating them. The range of positions, perspectives, and identities that exists in higher education is too wide to be encompassed by any single discussion. I therefore focus on forms of diversity within these differences that overlap with other forms but that also pose distinct challenges in terms of fostering empathy and connection. Within the category of "position" I focus on the roles of "student" and "professor"—roles that are afforded different (and generally clearly delineated) responsibilities and different degrees and kinds of power. In terms of "perspective," I focus on what students and faculty discern from where they stand: the angle of vision each one has by virtue of his or her institutional position and also his or her identity. By "identity" I mean how individuals define and experience themselves and are defined by others—how an individual/personal sense of sociocultural location and character intersects with how that individual is constructed in many different ways within any given culture and society. In this discussion, I focus on cultural identity, particularly racial and ethnic identity, both because this dimension of diversity is generally recorded in official documents more often than others, and because it emerges as particularly salient to the faculty and students with whom I have worked.

All of these kinds of difference have both internal/personal (experienced and conceptualized) and external/social (perceived and imposed) dimensions, and those two dimensions are always interacting. Likewise, dimensions of diversity within each category are also always interacting; many faculty would claim identities as perpetual students, for example, and many faculty who self-identify as White are also, for instance, Jewish. My goal is not so much to delve into how those interactions unfold. Rather, I use position, perspective, and identity as frames within which to present participants' and my own reflections on how the student–faculty partnership program supported by the Teaching and Learning Institute at Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges inspires deeper connection and empathy among diverse students and faculty and helps effect a reconceptualization of differences as resources for learning and growth.

I begin with a brief explanation of why I have chosen to focus on the particular forms of position, perspective, and identity I have. I then offer an overview of the student–faculty partnership program, and I describe the systematically documented reflective practice in which student and faculty participants and I have engaged since the program's advent. From there I move to situate the program and my study of it in relation to several bodies of literature. The first encompasses two interrelated areas of study: student voice and student–faculty partnerships. Both of these argue that students have essential perspectives to offer on learning and teaching, and stress the importance of collaborating with students in the analysis and development of educational practice. The second body of literature argues for increasing diversity in higher education. I include as well perspectives that complicate these arguments. These bodies of scholarship assert from different angles that education should embrace differences as resources; they support the premise that differences are both what distinguish us and what can connect us across our diversity.

The majority of the paper is devoted to the reflections of student consultants and faculty members who participate in the student–faculty partnership program. I focus first on the ways that the program supports dialogue across differences of student and faculty position, of perspective, and of racial or cultural identity within student–faculty partnerships focused on individual courses. I then turn to the ways that the program supports dialogue across these differences in and through partnerships focused on an interdisciplinary program that links multiple courses. Across the examples, faculty and student reflections illustrate how this program makes it normative for all of these differences to exist and for people in relationships to benefit from them. I conclude by discussing the implications for student and faculty participants, for facilitators of such partnership programs, and for higher education.

WHY THESE DIMENSIONS OF POSITION, PERSPECTIVE, AND IDENTITY?

The dimensions of difference upon which I choose to focus here are among the most discernible and the most often cited by participants in the student–faculty partnership program as particularly salient. Each of them has a tendency to reinforce differences in ways that undermine the potential to connect, empathize, learn, and grow.

Differences of position between faculty and students tend to be reinforced by clear delineations of role and the hierarchical arrangements (Glasser & Powers, 2011), and, in particular, the assessment practices in most higher education contexts. Differences of perspective among participants in higher education often end up being used in ways that flatten out their real meaning. And students and faculty from all backgrounds can come to feel tension and distrust when they do not feel genuinely addressed and included. In particular, though, “noninclusive pedagogies and ineffective college and university cultural programs” ensure that students from underrepresented backgrounds “continue to experience racism, insensitivity, and a lack of intercultural understanding and social support (Baber, 2012; Harmon, 2012; Lee, 1999; Tobolowsky, Outcalt, & McDonough, 2005; Wilson, 2000), sometimes resulting in a distrust of nonminority students and university officials” (Simmons, Lowrey-Hart, Wahl, & McBride, 2013, p. 2).

A disturbing trend shows that higher education is failing “as the great equalizer” (Carnevale & Strohl, 2013; Lederman, 2013), and many students of color within higher education feel the need to seek “counter-spaces”—academic and social spaces on and off their campuses “where deficit notions of people of color can be challenged and where a positive collegiate racial climate can be established and maintained” (Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000, p. 70). Likewise, many faculty of color still experience a negative climate and report inequities (Cook & Córdova, 2006; Fries-Britt, Rowan-Kenyon, Perna, Milem, & Howard, 2011; Patitu & Hinton, 2003). While particularly pronounced for underrepresented students and faculty, reinforcement of difference is a problem experienced and owned by a range of variously positioned people in higher education who claim all kinds of identities.

In our classrooms and in the other arenas within which we interact in higher education, we do not often enough strive for “cultural synergy” (Cortazzi & Jin, 1997, in Zhou, Jundal-Snape, Topping, & Todman, 2008, p. 72; see also Keddie & Niesche, 2012)—mutual efforts from both teachers and students to understand one another’s cultures rather than expecting students simply to assimilate. Even less frequently do we consider ways we might embrace difference as a resource and change our institutions and ourselves in response to what we learn from diverse students (Cook-Sather & Agu, 2013; Cook-Sather & Li, 2013). Differences can, therefore, divide and drive students and faculty into groups of people like themselves rather than support a making of connections across differences. As I will discuss throughout this article, the issue is what we do with the distance that difference creates; it can inspire fear and disdain, and we can conceive of it as constituting unbridgeable divides among us, or it can inspire respect and empathy, and we can see it as a basis for developing connections and as a resource for learning and growth.

In the interest of the common good in a pluralistic and democratic society, higher educational institutions ought to help students and faculty critically examine how we conceive of and respond to difference, seeking ways to support connections across, empathy for, and learning from various dimensions of diversity. Solomon’s notion that difference unites us is a useful heuristic for exploring the experiences of undergraduate students and college faculty members who engage with one another and with me in extended dialogue and reflective practice through participating in the Students as Learners and Teachers program at Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges. The student–faculty partnerships that unfold within this program evoke conscious and deliberate consideration of differences in position, perspective, and identity that, in turn, generate ongoing critical reflection with the promise of changing higher educational practices.

THE STUDENTS AS LEARNERS AND TEACHERS PROGRAM

“SaLT looks for differences; it is not looking for everybody to be the same. The work is looking for different voices present, so there isn’t one dominant voice. In most educational settings, everyone is trying to come to one point, to agreement; SaLT is always trying to find what others have to say and trying to make it normal.” – Student Consultant

The Students as Learners and Teachers (SaLT) program is the signature program of the Teaching and Learning Institute based at Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges, two selective liberal arts colleges in the northeastern United States. With several grants from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and support from the Bryn Mawr and Haverford College Provosts’ Offices, the Teaching and Learning Institute has supported pedagogical partnerships between faculty members at Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges and other area colleges and universities (including Swarthmore and Ursinus Colleges and Villanova University), and Bryn Mawr and Haverford undergraduate students. Through these partnerships, faculty and student pairs bring their different but equally valid perspectives and their diverse identities into dialogue with the explicit goal of reflecting on, affirming, and, where appropriate, revising pedagogical practice. The underlying goal of the program is to foster a shift in institutional culture toward a more dialogic and collaborative approach to teaching and learning.

The SaLT program offers faculty and students two options:

- (1) individual partnerships through which a faculty member invites an undergraduate who attends Bryn Mawr or Haverford College (but is not enrolled in the course upon which the faculty member wishes to focus) to assume the role of student consultant and to explore pedagogical issues in the faculty member’s classroom for several weeks, a full semester, or longer;
- (2) a semi-structured, semester-long seminar facilitated by me in my role as coordinator of the Teaching and Learning Institute; in this seminar faculty members meet for two hours each week, engage in dialogue informed by weekly reflections, and participate in a one-on-one, semester long partnership with a student consultant as outline in (1) above.

This program is neither formally evaluative nor intended to be remedial. New faculty who participate in the seminar have a reduced teaching load during the semester in which they participate. Continuing faculty who participated in the program in previous years earned a stipend. Faculty have indicated that they participate for a variety of pedagogical reasons: to get oriented to the college, to address a particular pedagogical issue, or simply to refresh their practice. Faculty participants have spanned disciplines, years of teaching experience, rank, and identity. The racial and/or ethnic identities of participants, foregrounded in this article, intersect in important ways with differences of gender, socio-economic status, sexual orientation, religion, and more. While these intersections are beyond the scope of this discussion, they are worth noting.

Any student, sophomore through senior, enrolled as an undergraduate at Bryn Mawr or Haverford College may apply to be a consultant, and all consultants receive stipends for their work. Students also participate for a variety of reasons, including a general interest in education, plans to become a secondary teacher, or a desire to become a professor. As with faculty participants, the racial and/or ethnic identities of student participants intersect in important ways with other dimensions of diversity. The program creates a “counter-space” not only for students of color (Cook-Sather & Agu, 2013; Solórzano et al., 2000) but also for many students who might feel on the outside of the college experience and culture.

Each student consultant visits one of his or her faculty partner’s classes each week, takes detailed observation notes, and shares those notes in weekly meetings with his or her faculty partner. Applications for this position include an explanation of how students are qualified for the role, letters of recommendation from a faculty or staff member and a student, and a signed confidentiality agreement. Students attend an orientation, receive a set of guidelines for developing partnerships with faculty members, and participate in weekly meetings with me in my role as coordinator of the program and with other consultants to discuss

how best to partner with faculty in the work of recognizing the diverse identities, experiences, and perspectives students bring to their studies—and faculty to their teaching—and developing classrooms that are both welcoming and productively challenging.

Between 2006 and 2013, 165 faculty members and 103 student consultants participated in a total of more than 250 partnerships through the SaLT program. Of these, 24 were full professors, 27 were associate professors, 80 were assistant professors, and 34 were continuing non-tenure track or visiting faculty; 16 self-identified as people of color from the United States, 28 as international, 83 as White, and 28 did not self-identify. Student consultants major in a variety of subjects, vary in experience with education (from those seeking state certification to teach at the secondary level to those who have never taken an education course), and claim various identities: Of the 103 students who took on this role between 2006 and 2013, 40 self-identified as students of color, 15 as international students, and 48 either as White American or did not self-identify. As with faculty, these are by no means the only dimensions of difference among students, but they emerged in the reflections of student consultants as particularly relevant.

Across all of these differences, participants are respected for their unique contributions and compensated for their participation. Because all participants are valued and remunerated for their time, and because the program is treated as a supplementary and professional activity, there is a certain status accorded it and an inclination for all involved to take it seriously.

METHOD AND FOCUS

Since the advent of the SaLT program in 2006, I have engaged in systematically documented reflective practice as I have supported the faculty and student participants in the same. Being reflective “encompasses both the capacity for critical inquiry and for self-reflection” (Larrivee, 2000, p. 294). In higher education, as at all levels, opportunities for reflection are not generally built into the “structure of teaching” (Elbaz, 1987, p. 45; Felten et al., 2013). Yet in the absence of opportunities to reflect on our “knowledge in action” (Schön, 1987, p. 12), we run the risk of “relying on routinized teaching” and “not developing as a teacher or as a person” (Reiman & Thies-Sprinthall, 1998, p. 262; see also Hunt, 2007; Klenowski, Askew, & Carnell, 2006; and Zeichner & Liston, 1987).

The more traditional notion of reflective practice has the practitioner tacking between analysis of assumptions and feelings on the one hand and how those apply in practice on the other (Imel, 1992). Working toward a more dynamic notion of reflection, Lesnick (2005) uses the image of a “mirror in motion” to argue for “an understanding of reflection that admits of ongoing movement, change, and interaction, so that ‘success’ in reflective practice is a matter of agility, mobility, flexibility, and, importantly, of the interdependence of one’s movements with those of others on and beyond the reflected scene” (p. 38). When students are invited into the “cycle of interpretation and action” (Rodgers, 2002) that constitutes reflective practice, participants in that cycle—both students and faculty—experience a unique opportunity to access and revise their assumptions, engage in reflective discourse, and take action in their work (Cook-Sather, 2008, 2011a; Lawler, 2003; Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2006; Mezirow, 1991).

The SaLT program is premised on the necessity of reflective practice for good teaching and learning, and the structures it provides for participants support both critical inquiry and self-reflection (Larrivee, 2000). The program builds into the structure of teaching (Elbaz, 1987) time, space, and support for those who seek opportunities to reflect on daily classroom engagement and affirm, clarify, and/or revise pedagogical approaches. The structures that support reflective practice include the weekly meetings between student consultants and me, the weekly meetings between student consultants and their faculty partners, the weekly meetings between faculty (if they participate in seminars) and me, mid- and end-of-semester feedback completed by both students and faculty participants, and periodic follow-up, group interviews.

The weekly meetings are generally semi-structured but open ended. These spaces for reflection afford faculty and students rare opportunities to talk about teaching and learning, both within same-constituency groups and across roles, and to reflect back to one another their different perspectives. Mid- and end-of-semester feedback invite participants to discuss the benefits and challenges of working in partnership and to

identify pedagogical and broader insights they have derived through their participation, thus promoting and documenting more individual reflection. The follow-up interviews, generally conducted in small groups, sometimes invite participants to address an open-ended question such as, What have you carried forward from your partnership work into your practice? Other times they ask participants to address more structured questions, for instance, by completing sentences such as, “I am more comfortable . . .”, “I am less comfortable . . .”, “I work with students . . .” These group interviews are conducted roughly once a year. All past participants are invited to join the meetings, and the sessions are organized according to people’s schedules, with three to five participants in each. These meetings allow participants from different years and cohorts to talk together, creating a temporal as well as a spatial dimension of reflection. Complexities of participants’ schedules make these difficult to arrange, but it is a forum that those who have been able to participate have found rejuvenating. Approximately one third of participants in the program have been able to take part in these follow-up discussions.

In turn, all of these sources of participant reflection afford me as facilitator the opportunity to reflect critically on my own practice of supporting faculty and student reflection and to discern ways in which participants experience their partnerships and analyze the insights they gain through their collaborative explorations. With the permission of participants, I collect audio recordings of selected meetings and all mid- and end-of-semester feedback, which participants understand to be gathered for purposes of critical reflection—theirs and mine—and to document our work for the Mellon Foundation, provosts, and wider audiences. I also keep email messages from participants and notes to myself about how better to facilitate their partnerships.

The data I have gathered through this reflective practice have been transcribed and coded using constant comparison/grounded theory (Creswell, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967) in order to determine themes and trends in the experiences and perspectives of participants. The related themes of discerning or recognizing differences and striving to embrace and learn from differences, rather than reifying them as only divisive, have emerged repeatedly. Identification of such related themes of revision of perception and practice is the first step in the constant comparison method, what Glaser and Strauss (1967) call identifying a phenomenon. Having identified these related themes, I engaged in open coding: “the process of breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing, and categorizing data” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 61). In this case, that process yielded multiple examples of differences of institutional position, perspective, and identity. The faculty and student quotations included in this discussion capture the themes that a majority of participants raised.

This particular analysis builds on previous discussions of this program and participants’ experiences within it. In previous discussions, I have analyzed how students across sociocultural backgrounds who have participated in the SaLT program experience their identities and perspectives as legitimate and important, develop their voices within the program’s forums, build confidence in their capacities as students and consultants, and feel empowered within and beyond their partnerships (Cook-Sather, 2010, 2011a, 2012). I have also discussed how both students and faculty develop into more reflective practitioners, work more as partners in the processes of teaching and learning, and experience multiple forms of engagement and transformation (Cook-Sather, 2008, 2009, 2011b, 2013). Finally, I have collaborated with faculty and student colleagues to co-author explorations of the liminal role of consultant (Cook-Sather & Alter, 2011), the experiences of student consultants of color working with faculty toward more culturally responsive classrooms (Cook-Sather & Agu, 2012, 2013; Cook-Sather, Cohen, & Shumate, 2011), and the experiences of students in leadership programs on Bryn Mawr College’s campus (Cohen et al., 2013). As with the majority of those analyses, this paper was read and responded to by the students and faculty whose non-anonymous reflections I include.

In this discussion, I analyze the experiences of student and faculty partners to demonstrate how—rather than “trying to come to one point, to agreement,” as the self-identified international student consultant quoted at the beginning of the previous section put it—SaLT provides support structures within which participants can discern differences of position, perspective, and identity, and at once respect and preserve those differences and learn from them. And, as captured in the shifting mirror image of reflective practice, notions of what those differences are tend to shift through this process, such that position, perspective, and identity are not stable either. Through engaging in reflection on (shifting) differences, participants not only

embrace diversity but also, again in that consultant's words, "make it normal"—make it normative for differences to exist and for people in relationships to benefit from them. While this is not always easy or fully achieved, faculty and student reflections offer us glimpses into the effort and the lessons such effort itself has to teach us.

Most discussions of difference and diversity focus either on students or on faculty, but in this discussion I strive to integrate these, exploring dialogue across differences of position, identity, and perspective through student–faculty partnerships focused on work within individual classrooms and at the programmatic level. This focus builds on previous work but poses a particular challenge to those of us in higher education to reconceptualize difference, and to think about the kinds of structures we can provide for students and faculty engaging in the necessarily challenging, ongoing work of such reconceptualization in their classrooms and on their campuses. This reconceptualization includes both changes to our ways of thinking and more literal structural changes to classrooms, such as different kinds of seating and physical spaces.

THEORETICAL SUPPORT FOR DIALOGUE ACROSS DIFFERENCES

"Push for things your expectations tell you are normal, and you'll find frustration, disappointment, resentment, maybe even rage and hatred. Approach respectfully, without preconceptions and with openness to learning new things, and you'll find a world you could never have imagined." – Jim Sinclair, quoted in Solomon, 2012, p. 279

Sinclair offers essential advice for reconceptualizing difference. "Normal" has come to carry negative connotations for many people, signaling a homogenization that suppresses and erases differences. That notion of normal, as Lee (2004) points out, is actually "quite limited and is in fact just reflecting a particular experience" (p. 146). And yet those "norms" have infiltrated our thinking and are often reinforced through the structures and practices we accept within higher education. Therefore, while approaching without preconceptions may not be possible, it is possible to identify and challenge preconceptions as well as engage with differences in ways that loosen their pre-assigned meanings and prompt revision.

SaLT invites participants to approach one another, as well as teaching and learning, with the respect and openness Sinclair calls for, not because faculty and the students are the same but because there are similarities and connections as well as differences and disconnects to be discerned and learned from. The program supports participants' conceptualizing the distance between their positions, perspectives, and identities as a source of respect, insight, and even inspiration. The program is grounded in theoretical support from—and models, affirms, and calls for—student voice work, student–faculty partnerships, and increased diversity in higher education. It at once invites and facilitates reflection: both individual, inward-looking analysis and collaborative, interactive exploration through dialogue.

STUDENT VOICE AND STUDENT–FACULTY PEDAGOGICAL PARTNERSHIPS SUPPORTING DIALOGUE ACROSS DIFFERENCES

Rather than relegating faculty to the all-knowing and isolated position of sole expert and students to the position of recipient of faculty wisdom and direction, both student voice work and student–faculty pedagogical partnerships conceptualize students as legitimate informants (Feuerverger & Richards, 2007) on the student experience and partners "work[ing] alongside teachers to mobilize their knowledge of school and become change agents of its culture and norms" (Fielding & Bragg, 2003, p. 4). Striving to create "radical collegiality" (Fielding, 1999), both student voice and student–faculty pedagogical partnerships position students as active participants in analyses and revisions of education (Cook-Sather, 2002, 2006b; Bovill, Cook-Sather, & Felten, 2011; Cook-Sather, Bovill, & Felten, 2014; Fielding, 2011; Rudduck, 2007). Both insist on bringing into dialogue students' experiences and perspectives, which are necessarily different from teachers' experiences and perspectives, but equally valid and important.

Student voice, developed largely in the context of K-12 schools in Australia (Holdsworth, 2000), Canada (Levin, 2000), and the United Kingdom (Fielding, 2004, 2006; Rudduck, 2007), embraces a students' rights perspective (Lundy, 2007). The basic premises of this work are that young people have unique perspectives

on learning and teaching; that their insights warrant not only the attention but also the responses of adults; and that they should be afforded opportunities to actively shape their education (Cook-Sather, 2006a, 2009b, 2012). “Voice” can be understood as the actual practice of each person speaking as and for herself or himself, but also as the valuing of what is said by students collectively as an essential contribution to dialogue that informs action.

Positive manifestations of voice include the presence, active participation, and influence of students within conversations about educational practice and its reform. But voice can also be problematic when it is reduced to tokenism and manipulation (Fielding, 2004; Lodge, 2005). And it is important as well to acknowledge the importance of silence—to keep in mind that some things cannot be said, understood, or put into dialogue (Cook-Sather, 2006b; Ellsworth, 1997; Sommer, 1999). These arguments for and about voice surface the possibilities and limits of what we might rightfully expect to say to and know of one another, highlighting the productively differentiating as well as potentially unifying qualities of diversity of position, perspective, and identity.

The amplification of student voices does not assert or imply the silencing or muting of faculty or other voices. The goal is to bring student voices and faculty voices into dialogue—to have each be informed by as well as inform the other, while still recognizing the limits of such dialogue. Collaborative models of professional development that include students as partners in faculty development programs bring the fact and spirit of student voice work to the post-secondary context (Bovill et al., 2011; Cook-Sather, Bovill, & Felten, 2014). Such models position students as pedagogical consultants (Cook-Sather, 2011b, 2010, 2009a, 2008; Cook-Sather & Alter, 2011; Cox & Sorenson, 1999; Sorenson, 2001), members of teams with faculty and staff who design or redesign course curricula (Bovill, 2013; Delpish et al., 2010), and partners in wider dialogues about and research into teaching and learning in which students are included “not as objects of inquiry . . . but as co-inquirers, helping to shape key questions, gather and analyze data, and then push for change where it is needed” (Hutchings, Huber, & Ciccone, 2011, p. 79; see also Werder, Thibou, & Kaufer, 2012; Werder & Otis, 2010).

Through these and other programs, students are not only partners but also change agents, a term that “explicitly supports a view of the student as ‘active collaborator’ and ‘co-producer,’ with the potential for transformation” (Dunne in Foreword to Dunne & Zandstra, 2011, p. 4; see also Healey, 2012; Neary, 2010). Both student consultants and faculty members comment regularly on the experience of such collaboration and co-production. One self-identified African-American student consultant asserted: “I felt like I could create change or make an impact because I was working as a partner alongside those that are typically viewed as having the power [faculty].” And a self-identified White faculty member wrote about the change in the way he worked with his own students after partnering with a student consultant: “I realized that I was thinking about my class in a more collaborative way than I had before: I was thinking about building the course *with* the students, as partners.” Again, the potential here is in the partnership, not in collapsing or conflating different experiences and perspectives, but rather in maintaining and learning from them as part of an unending process. Indeed, making connections across differences sustains the unresolved and the unfinished; productive lack of resolution can lead to deeper engagement as our unfinishedness makes us educable (Cook-Sather, 2006b; Freire, 1998).

EMBRACING DIVERSITY TO SUPPORT DIALOGUE ACROSS DIFFERENCES

Like student voice and student–faculty partnership work, embracing diversity requires respectful openness to difference and the recognition that none of us is ever finished learning and growing. It requires seeking out and accepting variation among individuals, within and across differences in the position and perspective of student and teacher, and across all the other dimensions of diversity that students and teachers bring. It requires the belief that we are all, both younger and more mature, equally deserving of “a flourishing life, not just a life” (Grant, 2012, p. 911).

Diversity of all kinds enriches learning experiences in higher education and can transform undergraduate education to prepare the next generation of citizens for a democratic society and a multicultural world (Gurin et al., 2002; Hale, 2004; Hurtado, 2007). Indeed, without attention to diversity, higher education will not only fail to build institutional capacity (Smith, 2009), it will fail those whose experiences do not

necessarily reflect the majority (e.g., hegemonic) population (Clark, Fasching-Varner, & Brimhall-Vargas, 2012) and in so doing will fail all of us. But embracing of diversity must be genuine, not just rhetorical or tokenistic. And because “identities enter the complex interactions that make up the processes of teaching and learning” (Renn, 2012, p. 262), faculty need to develop pedagogical approaches that recognize and value diverse students (Colbert, 2010; Fasching-Varner & Seriki, 2012; Gay, 2002; Pappamihel & Moreno, 2011), and we as faculty need to engage rather than obscure our own differences.

Focusing on student diversity, Paris (2012) has argued for “culturally sustaining pedagogy” that supports young people “in sustaining the cultural and linguistic competence of their communities while simultaneously offering access to dominant cultural competence” (p. 95). At the same time, we need to be careful of too fully delineating differences such that they lead to resegregation. As Fish (1991) has argued, “Once a line has been drawn around difference, it ceases to be what it is” (in Gless & Herrnstein-Smith, 1991, p. 247). Explaining this assertion, he continues: “Strange as it may seem, the effect of bringing difference into the spotlight front and center is to obscure its operation” (p. 248). To draw lines around and to spotlight are to take out of relation, to isolate and disconnect and also, potentially, to force people to limit themselves to a single identity or align themselves with a single aspect of their complex identities. Thus, we need to balance discerning and engaging differences, on the one hand, and reifying differences and reinforcing the ways they divide, on the other. For both students and faculty, we need to look to differences as resources for deeper empathy and connection, including empathy born of the challenge and frustration of trying to connect across differences, not as reasons either to disregard and fear one another or to assume or aspire to sameness.

In a discussion of her place of origin as a significant source of difference and of insight, a self-identified Chinese national student consultant reflected: “Being different is the first step to know who I am and being able to understand other people.” This student is not “drawing a line around” or spotlighting her difference; she is discerning and claiming it as a catalyst for connection and a source of empathy. Another student, who self-identifies as African American and was previously a consultant, elaborated on this idea:

Being part of the SaLT program allows you to relate to other people. So even if I never was a student with special needs, like the students I teach now, because I know that I am an African-American female, and that is at the forefront of my identity, it helps me understand my students and my families’ needs. Because of this experience, you transcend your otherness to connect with other people.

The language these consultants use—of recognizing one’s difference as “a first step” and “transcend[ing] your otherness to connect with other people”—reflects both the potential and the partiality of connecting across differences.

Faculty offer similar reflections. One self-identified African-American faculty member emphasized that, through partnering with her student consultants, both of whom self-identified as people of color, she was able to rethink her role and sense of responsibility for the discourse and engagement in the classroom; she explained how she came to realize that she need not “be the only voice speaking” in the learning and teaching process. One can stay oneself but also feel deeper empathy and greater connection with others, through both the easier forms of connecting across differences and the more painful, hard-earned connections, if one is supported in constructing differences as sources of learning. In the examples included in subsequent sections of this discussion and in the implications section, I offer suggestions for how to provide such support.

Together, faculty and students can find ways to discern differences—among people and as a catalyst for individual growth and responsibility to the collective. Such a process calls for “a pedagogy of opposition, not unlike critical pedagogy but specifically committed to collective, not merely individual, empowerment” (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 160). The ways of understanding diverse participants in higher education catalyzed by the SaLT program help both students and faculty see that what at first might seem to divide them can inspire empathy and connection.

DIALOGUE ACROSS DIFFERENCES AT THE CLASSROOM AND PROGRAMMATIC LEVELS

In the following several sections I explore the ways that the SaLT program supports dialogue across differences of position, perspective, and identity in student–faculty partnerships focused on individual courses and then partnerships focused on an interdisciplinary program that links multiple courses. I ask readers to keep in mind that, while these kinds of differences are separated out for purposes of analysis, they inform and are informed by one another and, in the lived experiences of participants, are not so easily extricable from one another.

DIALOGUE ACROSS DIFFERENCES OF POSITION

In an essay through which they aim to complicate the divisions between the teacher and student roles that are deeply ingrained in higher education, Glasser & Powers (2011), a faculty member and student, respectively, who both self-identify as White, suggest that traditional faculty and student roles “involve hierarchical positionings in which faculty are the primary or sole experts in a course, leading or facilitating classes, often determining lessons, creating assignments, and evaluating student performance.” In contrast, they suggest, “students are disempowered relative to faculty and are often told what to do, expected to meet faculty members’ expectations, and accept faculty members’ decisions about a variety of things, including assignments, grades, and what views and ideas are (most) valued in the course.” Because these positions are an inherited aspect of higher education, “both faculty and students often accept these roles, establishing and reinforcing hierarchical structures that can create dissonance in their interactions.” As another faculty member, who self-identifies as a person of color, points out, not only do faculty and students accept these different roles, “they seek them out and resist changing them because they are comfortable” and also because “they are synonymous with many people’s definitions of what it means to teach, learn, be at a college, etc.”

SaLT complicates these hierarchical structures and, in doing so, invites faculty and students to question them in an informed way. One student consultant, who self-identifies as Haitian American, mused: “One of the things that is most frustrating for me about education in general is that there is a hierarchy. They are the teacher and you are the student and you are supposed to sit there and absorb.” She contrasts this experience with her partnership through the SaLT program: “What I really appreciate about my partner and my role in the classroom is that . . . she would acknowledge all the time that she had learned and that the students were also teachers.” This consultant helped her faculty partner engage in such learning. As the faculty member, who self-identifies as White, explained about her consultant, “her focus returned my focus, again and again, to the connectivity between the two: teacher and students—to attending to communication channels and gently encouraging me to clear, focus, and widen them as much as possible.”

This student consultant and faculty member value the complication of traditional positions they are expected to assume, and they embrace the differences between them and among students as resources for learning and growth. They did not reach this reciprocal appreciation without struggle, however. Early in their work together, I received a message from the faculty member expressing concerns about some of the ways the student consultant seemed to be conceptualizing both the partnership and what should be happening in the faculty member’s classroom. One particular concern the faculty member had was that the consultant had seemed, from the faculty member’s perspective, to have made a decision about interacting with the students without consultation: She had extended the mid-semester feedback discussion beyond the agreed-upon questions because the students offered further thoughts. Because she had not conferred with the faculty member ahead of time, since it came up spontaneously, this decision made the faculty member feel vulnerable.

At the same time, early on in the partnership the student consultant had felt that she was contributing little from her position in the partnership, struggling to recognize what she brought to the pedagogical exploration, and hoping for clearer guidance from her faculty partner about what she should be doing as a consultant. Through supported dialogue, in weekly meetings but also through individual e-mail messages and meetings with one another and with me, these partners were able to honestly express to one another both their discomfort and their good intentions and desires. They gained the confidence and trust to discern

their differences—of position, of role, and of interpretation—without being as threatened and destabilized by them. They were each able to recognize their own capacities and strengths as complementary to the other's and to trust one another in the partnership such that their differences did, ultimately, unite them through an examination and rethinking of their roles and responsibilities. A reflection the faculty member offered on how the partnership informed her thinking about her classroom applies equally well to what she and her consultant achieved: "She was able to take various perspectives in considering the strengths and weaknesses of class meetings and assignments and to advocate for the best version of all."

The very premise of the SaLT program—student–faculty partnership in pedagogical explorations—challenges the institutionally inscribed differences in role and responsibilities between faculty members and students, and examples like those above illustrate the complexities of acting on that premise. By challenging this fundamental notion of difference in position, the program also opens possibilities for explorations and revisions of differences of perspective and identity.

DIALOGUE ACROSS DIFFERENCES OF PERSPECTIVE

The design of the student–faculty partnerships through the SaLT program structures a bringing together of the student and faculty perspectives. As one consultant, who self-identifies as White, explained: "Our different perspectives mean that we are seeing different things, and we have different biases, so we sometimes have some conflict when we meet about what's going on in the classroom." This is conflict of a beneficial even if also uncomfortable kind. Different angles of vision, different biases, and different interpretations can lead to the impulse to dismiss or disregard. But as this consultant continued, "that gets at the root of what [my faculty partner] wants to get out of the discussions [with me], and what she wants her students to experience in class." Thus, in both their partnership and in the classroom within which their partnership was based, conflict played a generative role. It is not the kind of conflict that divides; or rather, these participants did not frame it as that kind of conflict. Instead, through the candid and open dialogue they established, they were able to see it as a source of insight within their partnership, which in turn allowed them to clarify the kind of bringing together of different perspectives the faculty member wanted to happen in the classroom.

Juxtaposing different perspectives is not simply an intellectual exercise: It can transform the way students and faculty understand what is happening in a classroom. One faculty member, who did not self-identify, described the way in which his consultant was able, as he put it, to observe what "I cannot from my vantage point." He explained that he meant this "not only figuratively but also literally, as she has a line of sight into the space of the classroom which I do not have from where I stand." The "line of sight" that the student consultant has illuminates the classroom in new ways. As this faculty member put it: "Her observations have helped to open up for me the space in the classroom in ways which I have not seen before." The literal difference between what the student sees and what the faculty member sees need not be perceived as contradictory and irreconcilable realities; rather, the two angles of vision can be understood as constituting, both literally and figuratively, perspective.

Bringing into dialogue the different perspectives of student consultants and faculty members does not always easily result in a new, more fully informed perspective. Sometimes it results in a compromise that acknowledges the validity of both but does not seek to reconcile or integrate them. For instance, a faculty member who did not self-identify and who was shifting from teaching a large lecture course to teaching a small seminar chose to establish a partnership with a self-identified White student to develop strategies for this new pedagogical context. For the first few weeks of their partnership, they both experienced tension in their meetings, they reported separately to me, as the faculty member felt challenged and vulnerable and the student felt frustrated that her faculty partner was not taking her advice. Realizing that they were coming from dramatically different perspectives regarding what enables good discussion to emerge within a course, they both took a step back and decided to refocus their partnership work, the student partner looking more at what was working well and the faculty member trying out a few approaches with which he had not been comfortable before. To do this they had to respect each other's perspective enough to empathize with it—to acknowledge its value without devaluing their own.

The recognition of diversity in perspectives that both faculty members and student consultants experience, and the ways in which they work to be more accepting of and responsive to those in classrooms, extends to other forms of diversity. Particularly relevant to this discussion is the diversity of identities that students claim and have imposed upon them, and how those intersect with faculty identities.

FOSTERING DIALOGUE ACROSS DIFFERENCES OF IDENTITY

As with role and perspective, how identity is conceptualized has a significant impact on the educational experience. As I discussed in the introduction, racial differences continue to pose profound challenges for students and faculty in higher education. I have noted how racial and ethnic differences intersect with other dimensions of diversity, but as a difference that emerges often in student and faculty reflections, I focus on the racial and ethnic dimensions of identity here.

Because colleges and universities have not yet fully taken “responsibility for changing the system of unequal societal relationships based on race” (Allen, 1992, p. 42), we all still struggle with the ways in which race and related dimensions of diversity play out in classrooms and the wider college community. A self-identified White student reflected on this phenomenon when she became aware of how her identity as a White person, as it intersected with her socio-economic background, informed her classroom participation:

I had never thought about white privilege (or class privilege) in the context of my classroom interactions. I had spent my entire life attributing my sense of comfort in the classroom to personality. To have it re-attributed to an entitlement stemming from privilege, to have it re-attributed to an assumption that I will add to the classroom and that my addition will be valued because I have shared it in the *right* way, was paralyzing for me. (Abbot, 2013)

In her essay reflecting on this issue of privilege, Abbot (2013) works through how to connect with other students in classrooms with different identities rather than remain paralyzed by the realization of how these aspects of her difference put her in relation to other people. As she explains: “The way I interact with my peers and the way I view classroom interactions and dynamics has completely shifted. I find myself stepping back more frequently to welcome other voices.” Abbot used the spaces provided by the SaLT program, including the journal in which she published this essay, among other forums, to engage in reflection and dialogue about this challenge. She recognizes, however, that this is an ongoing, perhaps unending, process; she concludes her essay with these words: “I do not think I could ever finish thinking and working through ideas of privilege.”

The student consultant role can provide a particularly enabling vehicle for exploring and revising identity. One self-identified African-American student explained how she navigated her education prior to becoming a consultant: “For as loud and outspoken as I was, I was timid student. I just wanted to be in the class and get my work done. So I just struggled in silence and not knowing what was going on.” The student contrasted this experience to how she perceived professors and herself after taking on the consultant role:

But as a consultant and being in a room with profs and having conversation, that was like immersion therapy for me. It was important to be able to remove that untouchable cloak I gave my professors. I definitely went to office hours more and talked with them more and that helped me learn differently. I wasn’t always bogged down with thinking I wasn’t learning. I was able to focus on getting the things I could get and asking what I needed to ask.

The capacity this consultant developed to engage in dialogue with her own professors, fostered by the dialogue in which she engaged with professors and other student consultants through the SaLT program, allowed her to be more active and engaged, to have more agency, and thus to move toward “a flourishing life, not just a life” (Grant, 2012, p. 911) as a student at the college. Her difference no longer only divided her from others.

Both of these students initially conceptualized their differences, once perceived, as problems, albeit very different ones. Through dialogue with others and their own critical reflection, they came to reconceptualize those differences, finding and further developing their voices in relationship with others without trying to change who they are. When faculty have the opportunity to engage in this same reflection and dialogue, they also discern differences of identity and revise their pedagogical approaches and sense of themselves in relation to others in ways that draw on differences as resources.

In describing her work with a student consultant of color, one self-identified White faculty member focused on the ways in which her discernment of differences in language use, based on differences of identity, challenged her to rethink her practice in a creative writing course. She explained that the “slight communicative misses” in her conversations with her consultant made her “more sensitive to our socio-economic, value, and racial experience and age differences.” What might have remained barely or not at all discerned and yet potentially distancing in a destructive way became, through dialogue and reflection, sources of insight and inspiration for this professor. As she explained: “Listening to and talking with [my consultant] after class widened my interpretations and often cleared the way for me to listen and see more sensitively and with expanded or adjusted context in subsequent classes.” This faculty member is not talking about eliminating the differences she identified but rather attuning herself to them and committing herself to learning from them and changing her teaching in response. The differences she discerned inspired empathy and connection.

The challenges White faculty face in striving to discern and respond to differences of identity prompt one kind of critical reflection. Partnering with students whose backgrounds and experiences differ from theirs gives these faculty members, they report, access to experiences and perspectives they would likely be unable to discern otherwise. Faculty of color, who are still grossly underrepresented and inequitably treated in many higher education contexts (Cook & Cordova, 2006; Fries-Britt et al., 2011; Patitu & Hinton, 2003), report that having the opportunity to partner with a range of students, particularly student consultants of color, affords a different kind of opportunity to connect through differences. One faculty member of color, who partnered with a student consultant of color, reflected that “race was a very open topic because we both self-identified. It prompted a generative conversation about how diversity issues are certainly relevant for those students themselves but also relevant for everybody.” Although—or perhaps because—she and her consultant disagreed about how explicit and public one should be about one’s racial identity as a teacher, the conversation was a generative one. In her words: “Dealing with the uncomfortable places real conversations can take you allows you to reconstruct more productive approaches to the classroom.” The uncomfortable places in this case were caused by differences in belief between people who shared the identity of person of color, albeit a different ethnic background. Here, too, the differences became sources of empathy and connection, in this case gained through the sometimes painful sharing of past and present vulnerability and discomfort.

Consultants can also connect with the students enrolled in a faculty member’s course in ways that help the faculty member think differently about her own as well as the students’ differences. Commenting on how the positioning of student consultants of color benefited the students enrolled in her courses, one self-identified faculty member of color explained:

In my classes, I have a majority of students of color, and for them to see my consultants, who were both students of color, come in and to know that students of color can be authorities in the classroom, was incredibly transforming and powerful for the students who were actually participating in the class—to know that here is a student of color who is impacting the kind of learning environment and teaching climate throughout the entire semester. . . . It was incredible for these students to see these students of color in positions of authority that they may not always have on our campuses.

The benefit of this difference—of identity and position—served as a catalyst for this faculty member’s sense of connection with students. Through working with her student consultants, she realized that she “can share the responsibility for what happens in the classroom with students.” Here, difference that usually divides and separates, making those students and faculty of color feel separate and disconnected, serves to unite those in the classroom, both the people of color and those not of color. Through dialogue with

students of color who partnered with her as consultants, this faculty member was inspired to engage in dialogue and collaboration with all her students.

These reflections are vivid illustrations of how we might conceptualize difference as a shared dimension of experience and source of learning and growth. The kinds of insights and revisions that happen for students and faculty in the context of collaborative pedagogical explorations at the classroom level are extended when student consultants and faculty members work together to develop and enact new programmatic options. That is the focus of the next section.

DIALOGUE ACROSS DIFFERENCES AT THE PROGRAMMATIC LEVEL

Several years ago, Bryn Mawr College developed a new curricular model for students and faculty called the 360° Course Cluster Program. As the then provost the college and creator of the program explained, a 360° course cluster brings together “a set of discipline-based courses around a single topic, theme, issue or research question.” The goal is to promote “interactive educational experiences both in and out of the classroom designed to challenge both students and faculty to bring into dialogue and to integrate these different perspectives to address the topic of the 360° in rigorous and meaningful ways” (Cassidy, 2012). As faculty and students who have participated in this program have learned, it is particularly difficult to support and facilitate dialogue across differences of position, perspective, and identity while also striving to support dialogue across different subject areas. It is also particularly rewarding when that can happen.

Since the advent of this program, the Teaching and Learning Institute has provided the opportunity to all participating faculty to work with student consultants to develop, teach, and assess their 360s. The majority of faculty who have participated in the 360° program thus far have taken advantage of one or more of these opportunities to partner with student consultants. In the following three sections, I discuss how student–faculty partnerships focused on supporting this interdisciplinary program foster dialogue across differences of position, perspective, and identity.

DIALOGUE ACROSS DIFFERENCES OF POSITION

When faculty members and student consultants partner in planning 360° course clusters, they experience and model a connection across differences of position at the programmatic level. Rather than the standard approach, whereby faculty plan and then students take a course, collaboration in planning, teaching, and assessing 360° courses with the support of the SaLT program allows faculty and students to draw on their different positions in all three phases. One self-identified White faculty member captured what many faculty members have said about this experience:

Working with the student consultant has helped to generate/deepen conversation among the faculty members of the 360 about our teaching. It’s wonderful to have an opportunity to share this immersive experience with someone so thoughtful and insightful, someone who’s both in it and not fully in it.

In the position of “someone who’s both in it and not fully in it,” the consultant helps to create a space within which the distances between and among students’ and faculty members’ positions can be drawn on as resources. In another self-identified White faculty member’s words: “Our student consultant has really been the glue that has held the three courses together. While we have attended each other’s classes, she has done so in a way that has really provided continuity between the courses.” That connecting across, and providing continuity among, positions and courses is also essential for students enrolled in the courses.

The self-identified White student consultant who worked with all of the faculty members who created the very first 360 (which consisted of five courses offered across two semesters) reflected on her perception of and approach to meeting this challenge. She worried that even though the “uniting link between the three classes [in the first semester] was obvious to me, not every student in every class was making the same connections” (Chiles, 2012). To address this concern, Chiles took the initiative to create an additional space outside of class, what she described as “a brand new and very powerful *sixth space*, an extracurricular roundtable where students exchanged content knowledge and helped one another elaborate on

understandings” (Chiles, 2012). By creating a sixth space among the cluster of five courses from her position as “someone who’s both in it and not fully in it,” this consultant was successful in helping students make connections across the courses. As one student enrolled in that 360° course cluster reflected: “‘Last year I felt like my classes were each in a little box—isolated from each other. It’s not like that with the 360°. Everything feels so connected now’” (Chiles, 2012).

For both the faculty and students planning the 360° course clusters and the students taking the courses, differences of position can make participants feel disconnected and at odds, or those differences can be discerned and brought into productive dialogue. The latter approach deepens understanding both of course content and of other people involved in the teaching and learning of that content. The student consultant is uniquely positioned as neither student in nor teacher of the class, yet still a student and focused on supporting the teaching. This kind of multilayered positioning is important in terms of simultaneously being—and being able to see oneself as—marginalized and marginalizing others; it is important as an aspect of developing into a person more aware of the ways our positioning influences the position of others and a person committed to diversity of position, perspective, and identity as a resource. Such a position inspires empathy in the person who occupies it and equips that person to encourage empathy in the faculty and students with whom she or he is working.

DIALOGUE ACROSS DIFFERENCES OF PERSPECTIVE

The differences among perspectives of students and faculty, always an issue within classrooms, are amplified when three sets, rather than one, of faculty, students, and courses come together. As with the connections across differences of position discussed in the previous section, participants find that, in one self-identified White faculty member’s words, “Inasmuch as the whole structure [of the 360° program] is about coordinating between courses/faculty with disparate disciplines, having someone who can, from the student perspective, point to how, where, why, such conjunctions might occur is absolutely invaluable.” Another faculty member, who also self-identifies as White, pointed to the way the consultant working with that 360° course cluster “offered valuable insight into how we might reposition each course in order to generate a more productive tension between them.”

While coordinating the conjunctions and generating productive tensions are the goal, it does not always go smoothly. Even when both faculty members and students are deeply invested, differences of perspective can lead to potentially destructive collisions. One self-identified White faculty member described just such a situation as she and her faculty colleagues and the group of students were planning a trip as part of their 360° course cluster. While faculty had been “working double-time to attend to the practical and intellectual demands of this ambitious program” and, having just concluded a discussion with the students about the upcoming trip, were feeling “intrigued, gladly challenged, [and] engrossed” (Lesnick, 2012), students had a different perspective. As Lesnick (2012) describes in her essay on this experience, a student took the floor, “saying she now speaks for the group to share serious concerns they have about how the 360 is going.” This student explained that the students in the course cluster were “feeling overwhelmed and under-supported in the amount and styles of work” the faculty were requiring of them. Lesnick called this situation a “frame clash. Faculty and student expectations and experiences of the 360 are at odds.”

The self-identified White student consultant working with Lesnick and the other faculty members provided her perspective on the frame clash:

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. (Brown, 2012)

According to Lesnick (2012), Brown offered detailed elaborations on and interpretations of the student statements:

Yes, too many tech platforms, no the students’ expressions of concern do not signify a lack of dedication on anyone’s part. Yes, sometimes students’ perceptions gathered steam

because they were spending so much of their time together; yes, we needed to show, by taking positive action, that we were listening. No, we were not asking too much of the students, but yes, the ask could be clearer, and some of the challenges more rewarding to meet.

Lesnick (2012) explained that Brown's "insider/outsider perspective—insider to student culture, outsider to standing in the course; insider to some of the faculty's efforts, outsider to some of same—proved a critical resource." This analysis illustrates how Lesnick, Brown, and their colleagues turned the differences in perspective the participants were feeling from a potentially explosive to a unifying situation. Their differences were not eliminated but embraced as resources for learning; these faculty and students were united in the shared effort to make the course the best it could be, even as differences in experience and perspective remained.

Student consultants play a unique role in facilitating such recognition of differences, and such a facilitation of communication and connection across them, because they are privy to both the faculty members' perspectives and the students' perspectives, and they bring their own perspective to the analysis of both. Another student consultant, who self identifies as White and who worked with a different group of faculty members and students in another 360° course cluster, characterized her work as "mediating discussions with students in the class and then participating in discussions with the professors." She explained that her work as a consultant "consists primarily in translation." A particular kind of apprehension and recasting of meaning, translation is very much about spanning distances in the most productive ways possible.

The metaphors faculty and students use—"frame clash," "translation"—point to ways of perceiving and responding to difference that honor and learn from it, rather than strive to eliminate difference. The ways in which these consultants and faculty members worked together, and with the students enrolled in the courses, took up differences of perspective as learning opportunities. Through the ongoing reflection built into the SaLT program, they were able to articulate and work with those differences in ways that developed empathy and deepened understanding.

DIALOGUE ACROSS DIFFERENCES OF IDENTITY

The need to reconceptualize difference in relation to identity poses related but distinct challenges in the context of college-wide programs. One self-identified Asian-American student consultant, who was in the complicated position of being a consultant in one 360° while enrolled as a student in another 360°, reflected on the important role differences of identity can play in educational experiences. She explained that the diversity in the 360° within which she was enrolled was the demographic she had been searching for since her first semester at Bryn Mawr College. In her words: "I so badly wanted to be in classrooms where people were different, where people could experience sameness and challenge difference, but where those identities and conversations were possible." Being in a classroom where that all was true made this student realize how differences matter. In her words once again: "Race matters, ethnicity matters, gender, class and stories matter. They have bearing on how we connect, challenge, experience and learn in the classroom." The differences this consultant names matter not only in and of themselves, but also because they challenge participants to find connections, to conceptualize diversity as both distinguishing and unifying.

This student consultant articulates clearly what faculty also embrace when they conceptualize differences as resources for learning and growth. It is in part a commitment many faculty already bring to their practice, but having the opportunity to have it deepened through dialogue with student consultants and through reflection on their experiences encourages faculty to affirm and extend this commitment. One faculty member who did not self-identify described how his work with a self-identified student consultant of color to develop his 360° course gave him permission to let differences become catalysts for his own as well as students' learning. He had worked in a previous semester with this consultant, focusing on creating a more culturally responsive classroom. Carrying that partnership and the insights generated into the planning for his 360°, he applied them to his development of a course on the history of Philadelphia. Among the differences that surfaced in this context were those of identity, specifically of place of origin and race, and it became evident how those differences informed students' experiences of themselves and others in the course.

Setting the context, this faculty member explained that Bryn Mawr College campus, where the students were studying, has the “bucolic look of a late nineteenth-century American fantasy of an Oxford College” (Shore, 2012). Students bring a variety of experiences and assumptions from their own places of origin to the study of the city, only a few miles from the college. Shore (2012) suggests that driving from the college to the city can reinforce for some students “what some of us would call the prejudices of a casual passerby, who sees deterioration and neglect with the eyes of someone accustomed to mowed lawns, impeccable housing and clean streets.” He points out that “the ease with which one blames the inhabitants for their circumstances can ooze quite readily into the classroom” (Shore, 2012). Here we see another version of differences that can easily reify divisions: different socio-economic and, often, racial backgrounds associated in unexamined ways with particular environments and their condition.

Shore highlights a moment during which these kinds of differences had the potential to further divide. During one class session, “a student of color spoke up about how she experienced Philadelphia as a less racist city than her city of birth, Boston” (Shore, 2012). Because, Shore explains, the student “spoke from such a position of confidence,” it seemed to him that the rest of the students in the class “had gone silent.” Building on the work he had done with his student consultant in the previous semester, Shore (2012) “gently engaged [the student] in conversation” and tried to move away from a conversation where it seemed to be that “absolute judgments were based on anecdotal and partial evidence” and “toward a more considered but still engaged analysis.” He wondered at the time if what he was doing was effective and useful. His student consultant assured him after that class that, from her perspective, an important change had come over the class at that moment: “the exchange had helped give us all permission to question received wisdom, or statements made from a position of perceived privilege” (Shore, 2012).

By finding a balance between engaging the student’s experience and perspective and ensuring that there was space for other students’ possibly different experiences and perspectives, as well as his own, Shore made this complex intersection of differences of identity into a moment of engagement and connection across those differences. Shore did not ignore or try to eliminate the differences; rather, he asked the student who spoke, and thus modeled for other students, how to frame particular, perceived difference in alternative terms.

It is precisely that step—taken over and over again—that constitutes a conceptualization of difference as a resource for learning. At the programmatic level, where multiple courses intersect and students and faculty must strive to create even greater coherence and connection than within individual courses, the need for such conceptualizations of differences is particularly pressing and complicated. As Renn (2012) reminds us, “identities enter the complex interactions that make up the processes of teaching and learning” (p. 262). Therefore, discerning and affirming the differences across those identities is critical to facilitating engaged learning that respects and draws on the diversity present, if not always expressed, in any classroom.

IMPLICATIONS

As suggested throughout this article, the student–faculty partnerships in the SaLT program evoke conscious and deliberate consideration of differences in position, perspective, and identity that, in turn, generate ongoing critical reflection. When differences are not only discerned but embraced and valued as resources by individual faculty members and student consultants, the effect spreads beyond the immediate classrooms and programs in which the work is being done and across the institution.

If, as Sinclair reminds us, we approach others who are different from us “respectfully, without preconceptions and with openness to learning new things,” we find a world we “could never have imagined” (quoted in Solomon, 2012, p. 279). Finding points of connection where there seem to be only divides, seeking and celebrating differences, ensuring that divergent perspectives are both respected and challenged—these are all ways to connect across differences that can lead to greater empathy and understanding. Finding the points of connection does not mean collapsing what is on either side; indeed, it is the generative balance of distance and proximity that allows for empathy. This is the balance between having sufficient distance to have perspective and discerning enough resonance to strive to understand someone else’s perhaps very different experience.

It is challenging, although not impossible, to create an institutional culture that conceptualizes difference in this way. Glimpses of such an institution-level reconceptualization are evident in student consultants' and faculty members' reflections on the ways in which they feel changed through their dialogues across differences, and they have implications across higher education contexts.

CHANGES FOR STUDENTS AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS

Students from different backgrounds find inspiration and deeper connection at the institutional level through participation in the SaLT program. For instance, a student who self-identifies as a Chinese national explained that: "It is hard for international students to find a place on campus, a mainstream place in the campus." However, she suggested that "participating in the SaLT program helped me find a place on campus and identify more with Bryn Mawr College and get more involved." In addition to this greater sense of connection and involvement, she explained, "it built my confidence and enthusiasm about the Bryn Mawr experience." Pointing to the kind of experience that we know is necessary for student engagement and success (Astin, 1993; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005), this student stated: SaLT provided me with an opportunity to engage with faculty and classes and also an opportunity to interact with more students (if I didn't participate in SaLT, I wouldn't talk to students)." This reflection reveals a sense of belonging, of importance, of flourishing, not by becoming less different but by participating in a program that frames differences as resources and supports participants who want to draw on those resources in their learning and growth. The interactions this and other students have within the SaLT program strive for cultural synergy (Cortazzi & Jin, 1997; Zhou et al., 2008) by supporting mutual efforts on the part of both teachers and students to understand one another's positions, perspectives, identities, and ways of being. They draw on and connect across their differences rather than conform to a single way of understanding and interacting.

Such capacity to connect across differences is also developed for students who come from more hegemonic backgrounds. A U.S.-born student who identifies as White explained: "I was really surprised to realize how much more connected I feel to [Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges] now that I have interacted with the community in a new and very different way." She stated that she felt like "a more legitimate member of the community" because she "contributed something to the schools" as well as did her "best to help future teachers and learners on the campus." Integral to this help was the way this student discerned and worked with differences between her faculty partners and the students in their classrooms. This student makes clear how interacting in a different way—in a different position, from a different perspective—contributed to her flourishing as an individual and as a member of the community: Her giving time and attention "for self-improvement or the benefit of others" (Grant, 2012, p. 912) deepened her connection and commitment to the colleges.

This sense of connection to institutions and to others who teach and learn within them is essential for all students but particularly important for those who have been underrepresented in higher education. For students who have had to seek counter-spaces to counterbalance "the daily barrage of racial microaggressions that they endure both in and outside of their classes" (Solórzano et al., 2000, p. 70), finding and feeling empathy, connection, and empowerment can transform their sense of themselves and their engagement with others. One self-identified African-American student captured what many students of color have expressed: "I feel like being a Student Consultant literally gave me a voice. I started being more vocal in and outside of class." She indicated that participation in the SaLT program "made me feel like who I am is more than enough—that my identity, my thoughts, my ideas are significant and valuable." This student's experience demonstrates the importance of the attention to diversity without which higher education will fail those whose experiences do not necessarily reflect the majority population (Clark et al., 2012).

The affirmation and empowerment this student describes extend beyond the parameters of the SaLT program, as another self-identified African-American student explained: "Being a Student Consultant gave me voice as a person of color when I was not in the role of student consultant." The program achieved this "by reinforcing that not only did my perspective, assessment skills and commitment to make spaces safer for underrepresented groups deeply matter—they could drive important transformation in classrooms and

in the student–teacher relationship.” This “important transformation” is part of the necessary change in undergraduate education to deepen learning and to prepare the next generation of citizens for a democratic society and a multicultural world (Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, & Gurin, 2002; Hale, 2004; Hurtado, 2007).

These are profound changes. Students experience “collective, not merely individual, empowerment” (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 160). They are agents in and co-producers of institutional change (Dunne & Zandstra, 2011; Healey, 2012; Neary, 2010); they are enacting “radical collegiality” (Fielding, 1999) in a way that connects across while preserving differences; and they are sustaining the unresolved and the unfinished in ways that can lead to deeper engagement and that make us all more educable (Cook-Sather, 2006b; Freire, 1998). These changes have equally profound implications for higher education, connected to the increasing calls for student engagement: “Arguments have been put forward that engaged students find their learning personally meaningful, they believe the learning tasks are challenging, they find that accomplishing learning tasks is worthy of their time, and they focus on improving their performance and keep on working even when they encounter difficulties (Schlechty, 2011)” (Nygaard, Brand, Bartholomew, & Millard, 2013, p. 2).

The deeper connections, the willingness to complicate, the commitment to better understand, the openness to risking revision and change, and yet the understanding that total understanding is impossible—these capacities and insights are developed through discovering and engaging with differences. They allow students to make deeper connections beyond individual classrooms and at programmatic levels, and lead to lasting forms of engagement and empowerment. This is not about abandoning difference or dissonance; it is about forging connections across differences. It is about approaching respectfully, without preconceptions and with openness to learning new things, and extending those opportunities to others.

To support these kinds of experiences for more students, institutions of higher education need to create opportunities for dialogue and reflection beyond those that their individual classes already provide—to make connections across and beyond classes. It is through making such connections that students can achieve the most generative balance of distance and proximity that allows for empathy and deeper learning. We need to create opportunities for students to reposition themselves, to share their perspectives on the process as well as content of learning, and to have their diverse identities conceptualized as resources. Faculty and administrators might think of possibilities within and beyond classrooms through which to create these opportunities, either through programs like SaLT or through partnering with faculty in Scholarship of Teaching and Learning projects, for instance (see Felten et al., 2013). What such opportunities have in common is that they create structures and undertakings that explicitly bring faculty and students into dialogue and invite them to reflect on their respective and shared experiences. By designing structured opportunities that not only benefit from but actually require the different positions, perspectives, and identities of faculty and students in order to be successful, institutions of higher education can support a shift to conceptualizing difference as a resource for learning and growth.

CHANGES FOR FACULTY AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS

Faculty members’ reflections also capture the sense of affirmation and connection that student consultants describe; they, too, reconceptualize their own and others’ differences as resources. Analyzing their experiences of participation in the SaLT program and in partnership with student consultants in particular, faculty articulate the sense of deeper connection they feel, which changes not only their individual teaching experiences but also the overall feeling they have within the wider college context.

One faculty member who did not self-identify explained how working with a student consultant promoted a shift in the way he conceptualized his work with all students. Rather than see their different roles in terms of “me” and “them,” he described how students in one of his courses brought suggestions for revision that he and they then implemented. He explained: “The students and I were engaged in building this class together,” and he argued that “this change arose directly from my experience collaborating with my Student Consultant.” He suggested that “it’s taken my teaching to an amazing new level—both for my students, and for me personally.” Another faculty member captured this shift succinctly: “I work with students more as colleagues, more as people engaged in similar struggles to learn and grow.” These faculty members have found points of connection between their differences of position and perspective from students. They do

not occupy the same position or have the same angle of vision, but they are engaged in shared processes from within their respective positions and informed by their different perspectives.

Likewise, faculty come to believe that their differences in identity—from students and from one another—need not be sources only of division. One faculty member, who self-identifies as a person of color and who conveyed that she has struggled in the past with what role her own and her students' racial identities should play in their relationships, explained that, through working with her student consultants, she has “learned how to understand my relationship with students differently and how to work through the issues and questions they raise for me more effectively.” Rather than have “‘an’ answer to how the teacher–student relationship ‘should’ work,” as she has felt in the past, she indicated that she became “much more comfortable with and interested in the ambiguous, fluid nature of this connection.”

This greater comfort with uncertainty and fluidity of relationship, of evolving in response to difference, informs faculty members' sense of their identities as researchers as well as teachers. One self-identified White faculty member who has worked with two different student consultants in the context of two faculty pedagogy seminars explained how these forums have contributed to his sense of “wonderful synergy between my teaching and research.” Rather than experience these different identities, often set at odds with one another in higher education, faculty can experience these differences as synergistic.

What these faculty reflections throw into relief is the deep sense of connection they experience through having embraced their work with student consultants and faculty colleagues—work that affirms their different perspectives and identities as resources for their own and others' learning. One self-identified Asian-American faculty member captured what many experience:

This was a transformative experience; it reconnected me with my love of, and investment in teaching; recharged my understanding of the connections between the classroom, my scholarship, and my work as a member of my college community; and reawakened my faith in the potential academic institutions have to be sites of innovative and vital work for all who are part of the community.

This sense of connection comes from discerning differences as they both distinguish and unite participants in shared as well as individual processes of learning and growth.

An implication of these outcomes is that faculty and administrators need to find ways of affirming and rewarding this kind of partnership work with students. How might faculty be encouraged to build courses together with students, drawing on their positions, perspectives, and identities to inform the development of the courses? How might the unspoken uncertainties about one's identity as a teacher in relation to the identities of students become more of an explicit topic of conversation? How might researching and teaching identities be brought out of conflict and into greater synergy? How might all of these be more fully recognized in processes of review for reappointment and promotion? There are many complexities involved in such undertakings, which my colleagues and I detail and address elsewhere (Cook-Sather et al., 2014), but if we begin to have conversations about such possibilities on our campuses, we might be able to move toward implementation.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THOSE FACILITATING DIALOGUE ACROSS DIFFERENCES

Programs like SaLT and any program or opportunity that aims to support a reconceptualization of difference as a resource have to be led by people who are willing and able to bring together differences of position, perspective, and identity and to hold the tensions as well as find the connections. This means making and spending time with participants fostering and facilitating communication among them, and it means helping people find empathy and understanding within themselves at the same time as they engage in the deep, critical analysis expected within higher education.

Making and spending time with participants includes creating support structures for formal engagement. Without such formal structures, faculty and students are unlikely to find time and will be unlikely to move beyond the positions they occupy in day-to-day life and the perspectives those positions allow. Within

those formal structures, one must relentlessly invite into dialogue and affirm the connections and distinctions between what people share. As with all learning, repetition and ongoing support, as well as opportunity to develop on one's own, are essential. But beyond providing these formal structures, a facilitator of a program such as SaLT must be available and responsive when people need more individual consultation and support. Meeting one on one, talking on the phone, and exchanging multiple e-mails are unpredictable but necessary aspects of this work; such responses help bridge the chasms that differences can create and allow participants to reach back across those chasms toward one another.

Facilitating a program like SaLT requires that one offer support even when one disagrees with or is disturbed by a participant's stance or actions. In other words, the facilitator must also find a way to have difference unite rather than divide him or her from participants. That does not mean one has to agree with or accept people's stances or actions, but it does mean genuinely and respectfully engaging with them. It also means finding ways to help participants who are in conflict with one another find ways to perceive and acknowledge, even if not accept, one another's experiences and perspectives, even if some of those are in conflict with one's own views or experiences.

In order find empathy and understanding within oneself at the same time as one engages in the deep, critical analysis expected within higher education, both facilitators and participants need to develop an awareness of assumptions. They need to have patience—the ability to see that with time people may change or grow in unexpected ways and in ways one can only achieve with a firm, patient hand from the facilitator, and thus the facilitator learns patience as a pedagogical tool. In addition, everyone involved, but particularly the facilitator, needs to learn to see challenges as opportunities. While this is often regarded as a cliché, there is always a way to bridge differences between people, or at least there is a way to help people see the issues in a different way, when one does not react in a judgmental way or from a position of superiority. And finally, the facilitator of a program such as SaLT must see higher education in a more holistic way: Students and faculty must be seen as whole people in ways that lead to questioning practices in the institution that stand in the way of the learning possibilities in difference. To effect these forms of making connections while preserving differences, all participants must have multiple opportunities to talk candidly but respectfully with one another and to take the time to wrestle with, reconcile, and/or accept the persistent dissonances within themselves and between themselves and others.

All of this can be uncomfortable and destabilizing, and it is certainly a major responsibility to be the one who organizes and oversees work that induces vulnerability and is also potentially highly empowering. My experiences and reflections over the years of coordinating the SaLT program have both humbled and strengthened me, and they continue to teach me the slow, essential lessons of learning from differences.

CONCLUSION

Intimacy with difference fosters its accommodation. – Solomon, 2012, p. 6

Solomon's work makes clear that accommodation of difference means acceptance of, engagement with, and responsiveness to, but not homogenization or elimination of, what constitutes the differences. As I discussed in the introduction, diversity as practiced in higher education can often be tokenistic, and even when inclusion is genuine, it is only the first step, and most colleges and universities do not follow up with the necessary support and by changing themselves in response to diverse students and faculty. Since the typical reaction to difference is to see it as strange and threatening and to seek to band together with people who seem the same, what is needed is for those of us in higher education to rethink our positions, perspectives, and identities in ways that move us toward greater empathy and from there to deeper understanding of one another.

The SaLT program helps participants, and those with whom they come into contact, begin to make that move. As one self-identified Asian-American student consultant, who has since gone on to teach, put it:

Being a student consultant made me more aware and conscious about individual perspectives but also group dynamics and chemistry. This understanding made me more sensitive at work teaching toward both individual students but also to how students' own

identities and life experiences affect each other and influence one another to create a community and group culture.

Through (1) taking up a role that confers access and status, and via which consultants facilitate student–teacher interaction, (2) engaging in wide-ranging conversations with one another, the faculty with whom they partner, and students enrolled in those faculty members’ courses, and (3) developing a more informed perspective and a deeper sense of capacity and responsibility, consultants at once experience and illuminate how difference can connect and even unite students and support them in becoming agents in their own and others’ education. Faculty members also become agents in their own and others’ education through entering into partnership with students in ways that value their experiences and perspectives; through being willing to open themselves to the diverse students in their classrooms and to the complexity of needs and relationships that such opening implies; and through sharing the responsibility for teaching and learning with students.

The ongoing work of conceptualizing difference as what unites us requires what Welch (1990) has called a feminist ethic of risk: “an ethic that begins with the recognition that we cannot guarantee decisive changes in the near future or even in our lifetime” and that “responsible action does not mean the certain achievement of desired ends but the creation of a matrix in which further actions are possible, the creation of the conditions of possibility for desired changes” (p. 20). Inviting faculty and students into partnership, seeking and affirming differences, and embracing diversity as a resource—these actions embody a feminist ethic of risk and constitute some of the ways that difference can unite us and help to effect change in higher educational practices.

Acknowledgments

Thanks to SaLT program student and faculty colleagues Sophia Abbot, Roselyn Appenteng, Sarah Brown, Hayley Burke, Mia Chin, Jody Cohen, Anne Dalke, Mary Encabo, Ivana Evans, Ken Koltun-Fromm, Alice Lesnick, Esteniolla Maitre, Olivia Rauss, Erica Seaborne, Marc Schulz, Elliott Shore, J. C. Todd, and Alicia Walker for helping me think through and revise this paper. Thanks, too, to very helpful comments from reviewers on the initial draft of this paper.

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