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BENEFITS OF PARTICIPATING IN THE STUDENT CONSULTANT PROGRAM ACROSS MULTIPLE SEMESTERS

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Over the past three years, both authors have participated in the *Student-Consultants for Teaching and Learning Program* at Reed College multiple times. Hannah served as a student consultant as part of the pilot program in the fall of 2013 and then again in the spring of 2014. She was paired with Michael during the Fall 2014 semester for Cognitive Neuroscience, a 300-level conference class that consisted mostly of discussions of the primary research literature. Michael participated in the program again in the Spring of 2015, paired with a different student consultant for Sensation & Perception, a 300-level lecture/conference/lab course. Hannah served as a student consultant for the RELAY leadership program in the Spring of 2015.

In this essay we present some of the insights and topics that we explored throughout our participation in the program. We start by reviewing what we consider to be two of the most important structural aspects of the program, the weekly meetings between the faculty member and student consultant and the mid-semester feedback gathered from the class by the student consultant. We then discuss the benefits of participating in the program across multiple semesters by focusing on three categories of pedagogical development and implementation: instructor-specific strategies, course-specific strategies, and student-group-specific strategies.

I. Key structural aspects of the program

Weekly meetings

During the semester in which we were paired together, we set aside one hour per week to meet and discuss observations and trends from recent classes, as well as to brainstorm ideas for upcoming classes. Our conversations during these meetings were informal and largely unstructured. We often started with Hannah asking, “So, how do you think conference went on Wednesday?” Because we were usually rushing to this meeting from other commitments (Hannah taking other classes; Michael teaching other classes or working on research projects in the lab), it was helpful to spend 5-10 minutes easing into the conversation before we transitioned into full “pedagogical mode.” In these weekly meetings, we found that it was important to adopt a mutual open-mindedness perspective in which neither one of us was considered to be an expert. We agreed on a policy from day one in which Hannah would do her best to be completely honest, even if that meant heavily criticizing Michael at times. While this student-consultant program may be helpful to many faculty members, our intuition is that it may not work as well for individuals who are not willing or able to set-aside their pre-existing beliefs about pedagogy and genuinely listen to what the student consultants have to say about their teaching.

In terms of content, some of our weekly meetings focused on specific aspects of a recent conference discussion, such as student engagement with a particular reading assignment, frequency of student-to-student exchanges during the conference discussion, and whether

Michael was talking too much or too little during conference. In other meetings we spent the majority of the time discussing ideas for how to improve upcoming conference discussions. For example, we considered various strategies for "mixing things up" during conference by supplementing our whole-group open discussions with small break-out group discussions, mock debates, white board activities, experiment demos, and short video segments. By the end of the semester we had compiled a nice list of ideas for future semesters based on the topics we discussed during these meetings.

Overall these meetings provided an opportunity to regularly discuss pedagogy at a level that was specific to an individual instructor, course, and group of students. To the best of our knowledge, such opportunities are extremely rare, despite the very favorable cost-benefit ratios (one hour per week can lead to substantial improvements in one's teaching!). From the faculty member's standpoint, no advanced preparation for these weekly meetings is necessary. The student consultant prepares for these meetings by observing classes and taking notes. The student consultant can then take more notes during these weekly meetings, and later assemble an organized version of both sets of notes for the faculty member's records. In addition to the benefits listed above, simply having a specific time set aside for these meetings each week was very helpful, as this forces one to reflect on a class as it progresses instead of reflecting only at major checkpoints such as exam days or the end of the semester. We highly recommend incorporating these weekly meetings between the faculty member and student consultant into any iteration of the student-consultant program.

Mid-semester Feedback

Mid-semester feedback is a useful tool because it allows professors to adapt to the needs of the class while there is still enough time in the semester to implement change. While all classes at Reed solicit feedback from students at the end of the semester, anything learned from this feedback can only be applied to courses taught in future semesters. Students providing the feedback may feel less inclined to contribute thorough and meaningful suggestions for change, as they will never personally bear the fruits of this change. In addition, some of the feedback may be based on particular group dynamics of the current class and by the time any changes are implemented, an entirely different class dynamic is likely to exist. At a more general level, students seem to view the mid-semester feedback process very favorably, perhaps because they are encouraged by their professor's willingness to listen and adapt to their needs in real-time.

Student consultants facilitate this mid-semester feedback session, which takes about 30 minutes of class time and occurs right in the middle of the semester. The professor is not present during this session, and the student consultant ensures anonymity of student input to promote an open and honest discussion. In our particular version of the mid-semester feedback process, students first completed a written questionnaire which included questions about what Michael could do differently to improve learning in the class, what the students could do differently to improve their own learning, what aspects of the course have helped the students learn best, and an open-ended prompt to share any other feedback the students consider to be important. This solicitation of written feedback was followed by a conversation with the class led by Hannah. This group conversation was useful for several reasons. First, there were a few topics that emerged in the group discussion as central issues, despite having been only mentioned occasionally on the individual written feedback forms. Certain comments seemed to inspire additional comments, and these benefits of "crowdsourcing" ideas are not possible with standard (secret-ballot-style) written feedback. Second, students were able to see first-hand the wide range of (sometimes conflicting) opinions in the class which led to a better appreciation of the challenges the instructor faces when attempting to strike a balance that works for everyone. Finally, students who held strong minority opinions about specific aspects of the course were given a chance to voice these concerns. This resulted in either convincing their peers to adopt their view or accepting that the majority view should take priority when the instructor decides how to change the course.

Here, we provide two examples of specific issues that were discussed during the mid-semester feedback, one that led us to implement a substantial change and one that required only minor adjustments. For a conference-style class, Michael was worried about playing too large of a role in the discussions. In the first half of the semester we often discussed ideas for how to promote more student-to-student conversation and how to make the class feel more "conferencey" and less "lecturey." However, most of the mid-semester feedback we received, even from the most senior students in the class, clearly indicated that the class would prefer Michael to play a more active role in the conference discussions. It seemed that this request stemmed from a common underlying intimidation about neuroscience and the technical details in the methods and results sections of the assigned readings. We discussed this issue in a weekly meeting dedicated to interpreting the mid-semester feedback, and Michael agreed to adapt his role in conference for the second half of the semester. In addition, he decided to provide more background and spend more time on fundamental methods and analysis techniques at the beginning of each new section prior to the in-depth conference discussions. He also made it a point to preview each reading assignment with practical advice for getting the most out of the research papers. These changes seemed to alleviate some of the intimidation that was preventing some students from entering the conversation, which in turn led to some really great discussions during the latter half of the semester. Furthermore, we developed several ideas for countering this intimidation towards neuroscience at the beginning of the semester, which could be applied in future iterations of the course.

A second topic that was discussed at length during the mid-semester feedback session was student-led conferences. For two out of the three conferences each week, students took turns presenting summaries of the assigned articles and served as conference leaders, organizing and facilitating the group discussion. During the feedback session, some students suggested that they didn't like this format at all, and instead would prefer that Michael always serve as conference leader given his expertise in the topics we were reading about. However, the majority of students reported that leading conferences was the single most helpful thing in the class in terms of enhancing their engagement with the material, because leading conference required extra preparation in order to become somewhat of an "expert for the day" on a specific topic. When discussing this opposing feedback in our weekly meeting, we agreed that we did not want to minimize the voices of the minority view, but it was also clear that student-led conferences should be maintained as a useful tool for classroom engagement. In the end, we focused on tweaking some of the guidelines for leading conference per the minority view, such as shortening the length of the article summaries and providing more structure and examples for students leading conference to turn to. These small changes were aimed at improving the quality and consistency of student-led conferences.

II. Benefits of participating in the program multiple times

While we highly recommend participating in student-consultant programs, even for a single semester, we have come to appreciate the benefits of continuing participation across multiple semesters. In the following section, we summarize how participating in such programs for different classes or even for the same class with a different group of students can provide unique insight into various pedagogical issues.

Developing instructor-specific / course-general strategies

One of the reasons that teaching is so challenging is that a one-size-fits-all approach simply does not exist. It is common for more senior faculty to advise junior faculty to "teach to your strengths." Each instructor has a unique set of skills and an individual style. It is probably best to tailor one's teaching to align with these skills and styles rather than the other way around. Participating in the student-consultant program for a single semester may provide some initial insight into an individual's strengths and weaknesses, but participating multiple times allows one to distill stable instructor-specific aspects of pedagogy from more variable strategies used in specific courses or for specific group of students.

For Michael, participating in the program in two different semesters allowed him to reflect on his skills and teaching strategies that are likely to play a role in a wide range of courses and various group of students. For example, when reflecting on recent conference discussions in the weekly meetings, he and his student consultants noticed on multiple occasions that he has a tendency to become hyper-focused on the content and technical details of the articles being discussed while paying too little attention to the ongoing class dynamics. A skilled conference leader should be able to multi-task to a certain extent, shifting their attention from the material to other aspects of the discussion. For instance, it is useful to track who is talking too much or too little, which students are exchanging ideas with each other versus the instructor, and *how* questions are being posed, so that the instructor can intervene, carefully guide, or otherwise help improve the conference dynamics if necessary. Reflecting on this behavioral tendency was a necessary first step. Michael has since been working on improving this aspect of his teaching. Without having had multiple experiences in the student consultant program, it is likely that he would have attributed this issue to a course-specific problem (e.g., more complex material requires more attention to detail), rather than an instructor-specific / course-general trend.

Developing course-specific / student-general strategies

Even if a professor has nailed down his or her individual teaching style, adjustments are usually necessary for individual courses. The most common example is the different strategies one adopts for teaching a lower-level introductory course versus an upper-level advanced course. Participating in the student-consultant program at least twice, once for a lower-level course and once for an upper-level course may prove to be particularly enlightening.

Both of the courses that Michael targeted in the student-consulting program were 300-level, however, clear differences emerged in terms of how each course might be best approached. For example, his Sensation & Perception course deals with fairly straightforward research methods, thus more conference time can be devoted to discussing ideas for future experiments and relating specific research findings to more general theories. In his Cognitive Neuroscience course, on the other hand, the research methods are often complex and fully understanding an interesting new research finding might be the end goal of a particular conference meeting. To ensure that as many students as possible are on board with the details of an experiment, Michael has begun implementing a more systematic approach to the article summaries at the beginning of conference and at the beginning of a transition to a new topic. As mentioned above, the impetus for this course-specific adjustment came from the mid-semester feedback gathered by Hannah.

Hannah served as a student consultant for Michael's 300-level cognitive neuroscience course, but also worked with a different faculty member on a 300-level history course in a different semester. By consulting on courses in different subject areas, she noticed how conference courses must be approached differently depending on the material being discussed. Some professors express difficulty in knowing when or how often to step into a conversation in a conference class, and this often depends on the instructor's goals for that particular class as well as the content being covered. A one-hour class that covers two scientific papers will likely need the structure of at least covering the basics of the experiments before much theory can be discussed, and it might be more efficient for the professor to prompt discussions of each section of the papers in order. On the other hand, in a ninety-minute history class that covers multiple sources and readings, the professor might have more flexibility in allowing the conversation to last longer for topics that the class finds most engaging even if the professor had not planned on bringing up that specific section of one of the readings.

Developing student-group-specific strategies

As many faculty will readily admit, the particular group of students enrolled in a given course in a given semester can dramatically influence the classroom dynamics. Even if the instructor sets the tone of the class in the exact same way in two different semesters, one class could turn out to be lively, confident, and independent, while another class could be quiet, reserved, and insecure. Participating in the student consultant program across multiple semesters provides an excellent opportunity for developing a toolkit, a bag of tricks if you like, for adapting one's teaching strategies to a particular group of students.

In the two semesters that Michael participated in the program, the class dynamics couldn't have been more opposite. In one class, it was very easy to get the students talking and much of the conversation consisted of student-to-student exchanges. In the other class, it was often like pulling teeth to get someone to chime in on an issue and when they did, their contribution was often coupled with uncertain looks towards Michael, presumably to seek approval for their comment or question. The student consultants observed and took meticulous notes on the frequency, duration, and pattern of exchanges in each conference discussion. Hannah adopted a strategy of mapping out these exchanges spatially with drawings of the classroom, initials to indicate where each student was sitting, and lines connecting students to track the flow of the conversation. In our weekly meetings we discussed potential reasons for the reserved nature of the one class, and in the end determined that it wasn't the instructor or the course material but it was likely due to the characteristics of the particular group of students. We then developed various strategies for how to adapt conference discussions to inspire more active contributions from the quieter group of students, such as incorporating small break-out group discussions with students later reporting back to the group as a whole, and directing questions to individual students by name to proactively bring them into the conversation.

Another common cause of varying group dynamics in the classroom is based on the wide range of prior experiences that individual students have with a particular subject area. Before the semester even started, we discussed this issue as it was evident from the course roster that students enrolled in Michael's Cognitive Neuroscience class had various levels of previous experience with neuroscience. The roster ranged from sophomore-level students having just taken the minimal prerequisite (Introduction to Psychology) to some of Michael's research assistants who have been doing cognitive neuroscience research in the lab for 2-3 years. We discussed how to best handle the wide range of backgrounds in this class. We used the classroom maps Hannah created to track the conference discussions, to keep an eye on whether conversations were being dominated by the more experienced students. At first it appeared that this was exactly the case. However, we soon realized that this was not necessarily a silencing factor for the rest of the class. Many of these experienced students were able to easily communicate complicated methods and concepts from the assigned readings. Furthermore, these students were more likely to pose open-ended questions to the class at large rather than directing questions to Michael. Student-to-student conversation was therefore more likely after these more experienced students spoke, which turned out to make an important positive contribution to the class. In this case, we deemed an intervention unnecessary and things worked out for the best, however, in a different situation it may have been critical to track this aspect of group dynamics and perhaps hold outside-of-class meetings with the more senior students in order to guide them to adjusting their conference behavior for the good of the group.

Summary

In this essay we have shared our experiences with the student consultant program at Reed College and have discussed insights and topics that arose throughout our participation. We have reviewed two major aspects of the program that we found especially helpful, the weekly meetings and the mid-semester feedback, and have shared specific examples demonstrating the benefits of these exercises. Furthermore, we have discussed the benefits of participating in the program multiple times as this can highlight which approaches may be suited for a certain class and which techniques may be more applicable across a wide-range of classes. Continued participation across semesters provides a collection of insights which can be developed into instructor-specific strategies, course-specific strategies, and student-group-specific strategies. By considering these different levels of generalizability, the specific feedback and insights gathered through an individual partnership can be interpreted within a larger context and therefore more easily adapted for future courses with new groups of students.