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Amaka Eze  
*Bryn Mawr College*

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## **FROM LISTENING TO RESPONDING TO LEADING: BUILDING CAPACITY THROUGH FOUR PEDAGOGICAL PARTNERSHIPS**

*Amaka Eze, Bryn Mawr College, Class of 2019*

As I reflect on my time at Bryn Mawr College, it becomes clear that my experience as a student consultant through the Students as Learners and Teachers (SaLT) program has been one of the most formative endeavors I have undertaken. Upon entering into this work two years ago, I had a series of aspirations, assumptions, and fears, all of which were tested quickly. Often new student consultants ask me what they should do to prepare for their first partnerships. Each time I respond with a less-polished version of: “You are already doing this work—you’re a student, and that learner’s intuition is at the core of your expertise.”

While that advice still rings true as the origin of student expertise in pedagogical partnership, over the course of developing four partnerships, each in a different discipline and with a different set of challenges and possibilities, I have come to see how deep listening, carefully modulated responding, and ultimately a kind of leadership informed by both have come to define the capacities I have developed through this work. In this essay I trace my movement through those experiences, aiming to describe how they evolved and how I built on them as I moved from one partnership to the next.

### **Adjusting Expectations**

In my first partnership, the professor with whom I was paired focused in her research and teaching on areas that are of interest and importance to me, too. However, this professor did not find the approach to classroom observation typically employed by SaLT student consultants to be a good fit for her needs. At first I found this unexpected challenge disorienting, as I had been prepared to follow the guidelines offered to student consultants to help me navigate my first partnership. But after my first week of in-class observation, the professor asked me to change my note-taking style to better fit her classroom comfort.

While I don’t purport to understand the complexities of professorship, I can empathize with the kinds of anxieties that might surface as one enters into a new teaching environment, intensified by being observed by a student consultant. To avoid undermining the development of trust and the miscommunications that can arise when people feel vulnerable, I came back with a new system for observational notes that focused entirely on the kinds of thematic pillars that emerged from class time, as opposed to any direct commentary on her teaching strategies. I re-focused my attention, drawing on the same attentiveness but representing what I saw differently, so that it was more directly linked to my faculty partner’s pedagogical commitments.

The approach I developed emerged only after a series of difficult conversations between Alison, director of the SaLT program, and the professor with whom I was working, and me. I had to revisit my expectations regarding the best way to reflect the classroom environment and dynamics back to my faculty partner, and it was important that I find a way to do that through which I could continue to try to build trust with her. Through listening carefully to how she

spoke about her pedagogical goals and looking for examples in class that appeared to be supporting students' pursuit of those goals, I was able to focus my observations in a way that felt more manageable to my faculty partner and thereby allowed us to focus on analyzing how she could continue to create structures for the kind of student engagement she hoped for.

While the look of this partnership differed greatly from my peers', I was able to develop a special awareness to some of the more covert tensions that arise in this work. Can consultants really effect change within the classroom, or can they only find ways to mirror back what they see such that professors can see it, too, and pose questions that have the potential to raise awareness? What does it mean to collaborate across and through fixed power dynamics? In this case, I often felt like I wasn't doing enough or making far enough strides as a collaborator. My focus was primarily directed on building a trusting relationship with my partner and working on the complex relational dynamics that emerged. I depended heavily on our weekly meetings of student consultants and Alison, in her role as director, to convince myself that the relational approach I was developing was effective, and would prove important for subsequent partnerships.

### **Consulting without Observing**

Given the complex circumstances of my first partnership, I came out of things having developed an important set of trust-building tools. The same sensitivity, attentiveness, and active listening capacities I had honed in that relationship would prove critical as I moved forward to the next partnership I had. Yet again, the structure of this partnership looked a bit different from that of my fellow consultants, as I worked with my faculty partner without in-class observations. Due to the sensitive nature of the course content and confidentiality agreements, my partnership grew from one-on-one meetings with my faculty partner, during which she relayed to me her own pedagogical experiences in the class, as well as any emerging tensions/concerns/successes that she observed. As exemplified in my first partnership, I focused my energies on building a trusting relationship. Integral to this process was my ability to engage in meaningful dialogue that prioritized active listening and boundaries. By letting go of my assumptions about what I thought a student consultant "should do," I was able to reorient myself as a more dynamic and resilient listener.

As in my first partnership, it became clear that flexibility and openness would allow us to make the most of our work. I entered into our initial meetings with my attention focused on getting to know my partner's interests, teaching style, and aspirations for the course, and I continued this conversation as the weeks progressed so as to better understand the context from which she was working. This pace differed from that of my fellow consultants, but I feel that it pushed me to realign my expectations, and further, to refocus my energy towards the specific needs of my faculty partner. Rather than leading with suggestions about what kinds of pedagogical changes she could make, I waited until we had established a strong rapport based on mutual trust.

This shift in perspective allowed me to develop a new kind of confidence and acceptance in the work I was doing, as my partner mirrored back to me on multiple occasions how important our relationship was to her thinking about the course. This kind of relationship-building work draws

on a central tenet of the SaLT program: every student-faculty partnership is different. One's ability to adapt is integral to this work, and with every partnership comes not only a new set of pedagogical concerns, but an entirely new set of relational terms. My anxieties about productivity and external expectations quickly dissipated as I realized that the most successful partnerships are those that adapt to the changing needs of faculty and students. I learned that I could respect my expertise while also staying true to my faculty partners' needs and preferences, and this balance is central to the mission of the program.

### **Expanding Both Scope and Content of Consultations**

As I entered my third partnership, there was a noticeable shift in the way that I conceptualized myself as a partner and my relationship to this work. As previously discussed, I spent much of my first year focusing on relational dynamics and working to reconceptualize my expectations of what a partnership should look like. My third partner self-selected into the program after having had a rich and rewarding experience with her student consultant as a new faculty member, and her enthusiasm for the traditional SaLT approach allowed me to engage my role in an entirely new way. She trusted my expertise from the start and was committed to being pedagogically flexible, inviting me to differently utilize my skill sets. In addition to attending and observing her class, I was able to engage more directly with the students through in-class mid-semester feedback. One of my partner's central concerns was supporting students as they prepared to write senior theses, so much of our work together was focused on trying to integrate critical writing and research practices into the classroom structure.

This experience encouraged me to focus on my faculty partners' pedagogical goals and be an advocate for the needs of fellow thesising students. This dual perspective, as both consultant and student working on my own thesis, widely informed the choices and suggestions I made throughout the partnership. Most notably, the midsemester feedback marked a unique and critical example of how student-faculty partnerships can effect classroom transformation. During this in-class feedback, during which my faculty partner was absent from the room, I was able to engage in a deep form of dialogue with students, creating a space and facilitating a conversation in which they could raise concerns and suggestions. Through intentional choices of language, I opened the space with questions about their learning needs and then moved into a discussion about the thesising process. This experience exemplified the unique position of a student consultant, bringing to bear my cumulative expertise as a partner *and* my experience as a fellow learner.

This partnership also made me think more deeply about how my work as a student consultant has supported me in developing a unique set of leadership skills. I have been pushed to re-learn the importance of listening for empathy and learning to respond intentionally and in ways that are most receptive for any collaborator. These skill sets have improved my ability to engage in all instances of collaboration.

## **Expanding Consultation to Explore Departmental as Well as Course Structures**

Based on the wide range of experiences I have had and capacities I have built, Alison invited me to work in partnership with a faculty member who wanted to address issues of diversity and inclusion, with particular attention paid to those concerning underrepresented and under-resourced students, across his entire department's curriculum. The goal for this partnership is to help the department to rethink its curriculum structure and offerings in order to better support students from diverse and traditionally underserved backgrounds. My faculty partner and I have devised an action plan through which I am the liaison for the department in gathering student feedback, both from within and outside of the major cohort, and then we will use this information to directly inform departmental and curriculum revision.

Thus far, I have hosted two open forums for students to relay their experiences taking classes within the department. During these forums, I have invited students to speak on their needs as learners, their experiences of inclusion and exclusion, and their recommendations for the department. These forums have been extremely illuminating and have allowed me to connect with students across a wide spectrum of experiences. I am compiling this feedback to share with my faculty partner in order for us to plan a set of workshops with all departmental faculty. During these meetings, I will make my recommendations for ways to further integrate student feedback and support student needs.

As this partnership further unfolds, I am made aware of how my own ability to speak to larger, institutional structures has developed over time and the ways in which this position has enabled me to speak on the complex dynamics between institutional practices and student experiences.

## **Conclusion: From Listening to Responding to Leading**

If I were asked to characterize my experience as a student consultant in one word, it would be: growth. From my first partnerships, which focused primarily on intentional listening and responding, to my later partnerships, through which have honed my facilitation and leadership skills, my experience with SaLT has tracked tremendous professional and personal development. In my initial partnerships, I was pushed to reconceptualize my place as a collaborator—coming up against complex interpersonal dynamics and unique structural arrangements, and in turn, refocusing my attention on developing as a listener. As time progressed, this strong foundation of listening and trust-building would allow me to move into a more active position as confidante and collaborator, with an emphasis on providing pedagogical suggestions, facilitating student feedback, and leading greater institutional change. SaLT has not only helped me to develop critical collaboration skills, it has also helped me to navigate my own trajectory as a student, radically transforming my perspective of the classroom space, the role of faculty, and the possibilities of meaningful partnership.