

Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education

Volume 1
Issue 29 *Winter 2020*

Article 5

February 2020

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Recommended Citation

Jackson, Sophia "Making and Taking Space: SaLT as a Model for Generative Classrooms," *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education*: Iss. 29 (2020), <https://repository.brynmawr.edu/tlthe/vol1/iss29/5>

MAKING AND TAKING SPACE: SaLT AS A MODEL FOR GENERATIVE CLASSROOMS

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I initially applied to the Students as Learners and Teachers (SaLT) program at Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges for the Spring-2019 semester because I was in desperate need of a work-study job and my friend, a fellow education minor, referred me. I was working multiple jobs that semester, and while I knew that the role of a SaLT student consultant would be a little different from my job cleaning treadmills in the college fitness center or giving tours in the admissions office, I did not expect to come to think of my time involved with the program as my *favorite class* that semester. The program is not purposed as a class per se, so my reference to SaLT as my favorite class may be confusing. But, if we proceed with the definition of “a class” as a space where deep learning takes place, I would argue that the SaLT program is a class, as it facilitates just that: capacious, collaborative, and exciting learning.

For the Fall-2019 semester, I decided to approach my work as a student consultant for the SaLT program explicitly as *a student in a class*: I treated my partnership, my personal reflections, the weekly meetings with my fellow student consultants and with Alison Cook-Sather, the director of the SaLT program, as an independent study for academic credit. Through this re-imagining I was able to delve more deeply into the dynamics the SaLT program fosters for students and faculty members who engage with it. I was participating as a student consultant, like all of my peers—conducting weekly classroom observations in my faculty partner’s classroom, meeting with my faculty partner—but also as a student: analyzing the types of the spaces and relationships we were creating through our partnership work. As the semester wore on, I began to notice, once again, that the meetings with my peers and Alison, the kind of reflections I was engaging in, and the excitement I felt about the work I was doing rendered it my favorite class. In this essay I dig deeply into what it was that made the SaLT program so valuable, engaging, and generative in the way we might hope our classes are.

What Makes SaLT Feel Like a Generative and Exciting “Class”?

Over the course of the first few student consultant meetings of the Fall-2019 semester, I picked up on comments made by my fellow consultants that reflected my sentiment that the spaces SaLT carves out are some of the most generative and exciting of all of their classes. So, what is it about the SaLT program that makes each and every one of us feel this way?

“Every week ... is different, it’s not monotonous or predictable like class.”

“[SaLT] feels more collective than even my smallest discussion classes.”

“I love how we all have a shared goal in this work yet such different content to our partnerships. We have the chance to name and define our work the way we see fit but we fit into a collective whole: *diversity of content but congruity of experience.*”

“[This is] one of the only spaces on campus where I feel like an equal to everyone involved.”

The quotes above are verbatim quotes from student consultants in various meetings. They helped to elucidate how our work through SaLT compares to classes and what, if any, steps we can take to make our classroom spaces more like the spaces SaLT opens up for its participants. At base, SaLT consultant meetings are discussions similar to those a college student might have in a traditional class—characterized by engaging in deep thinking, exploring new ideas and perspectives, wrestling with complexities. However, the traditional classroom space is burdened by entrenched dynamics, precedents for how students and professors act and exist within the space. In the majority of the classes I have taken as a college student there have been specific expectations.

Classes that have been offered for many years are often governed by tradition and precedent, and the same can be said for those professors who have taught for many years without questioning or changing these dynamics. The set-up of a lecture classroom tends to create a vertical power dynamic between professors and their students, and there is an innate vulnerability that is part and parcel of traditional classes: their evaluative nature plagues students, and the pressure to teach to a high standard or to be liked by students plagues professors. Traditional classes also often abide by rigid structures that define how and when students participate. Finally, traditional college classes, at least in my experience, are wedded to certain conceptions of rigor. In classes that fit some, or all, of the molds described above there is a critical lack of space for student autonomy and creation because the spaces are filled by something or someone, the professor or the professor’s inclinations, and the capacity for generation, iteration, excitement, agency, and criticism, is limited or non-existent.

In classes that lack space, I have found that the only option for me as a student is to function within the confines of the *professor’s* classroom dynamic. Often, complaints or even constructive criticism feel futile because there is no space for adaptation or transformation of teaching practice, and so frustration reigns. Being a successful student in these classes has meant, for me, and for many of my peers, conforming to rigid structures and accepting what I detested but felt I couldn’t change.

Conversely, in SaLT, there really are no specific expectations other than to be present and engaged. The structure of the meetings is malleable, and every person in the room is granted their own space for participation, engagement, and commentary. Although each week our meetings follow similar structures, all of us are free to engage in any way we see fit, actively and individually. Furthermore, we are tasked with active engagement with our peers, and them with us. This peer-to-peer engagement expands the space with multiple perspectives. We each have our own set of experiences and tactics with which we approach the work, and that individualism is lauded. An aspect of this capacity for individual action and the value attributed to student experience and suggestion stems from SaLT placing deep importance on the small, granular insights—“noticings” and “wonderings.” Organic, novel, and personal reflection, regardless of its “gravity” or “importance,” is deeply valued in this program and, as a result, there is almost an endless capacity for newness, expression, and meaningful collaboration.

Below are snippets from a SaLT meeting in which students voiced what makes them love to engage with SaLT:

“Knowing that my opinion is valued, feeling like I have something to offer at every turn”

“We all feel valuable”

“Deep and reciprocal listening, creation of structure over time (sustained, iterative, and unfolding)”

Students who participate in the program, myself included, engage more deeply and actively because they feel valued.

How Participating in SaLT Affects Me as a Student

I have found over the course of the last year, as a student in my own classes as well as a participant in the SaLT program, that I inform my classroom practice as a student using my SaLT experiences. I search for ways to feel valued in my classes in order to access the kind of meaningful learning I do in SaLT. For example, I find myself seeking relationships with my professors that transcend the transactional nature of many student-professor relationships and bear resemblance to my relationships with my faculty partners in SaLT. Although the student-professor relationship is very different from the student consultant-professor relationship, I have found that the respect and reciprocity that governs student consultant-professor relationships are worth attempting to transfer to student-professor relationships.

For example, there is a precedent in many classrooms that positions students as passive receivers of knowledge given by professors. For a student to be successful in these classes, they need to be amenable to the professor and their style of teaching. I have found that in many classrooms, professors and students are stagnated by these precedents, despite the willingness of both parties to upend the passive role of students and the authoritative role of professors. In my own classes, as a result of SaLT, I find myself searching for ways for me, my peers, and my professors to do away with this dynamic. These have included advocating for myself more actively with my professors, and making them aware of both my interests and excitements with the class and my frustrations and confusions. They have also included dialoguing with my peers outside of class not only about class content but also about class dynamics, how they are engaging with the professor, and whether there is commonality in sentiment and therefore a reason to enact real change. These tendencies I now apply to my own classes in order to make space for change stem from SaLT and the way in which students can define their own role within the program and engage in their own ways.

How Could Classrooms Be More Like SaLT Spaces?

The comparison of SaLT spaces to classroom spaces begs the question, What practices that make space in the SaLT program could be applied to classrooms? I have found that, primarily, the

capacity for students to occupy multiple roles within their classrooms creates space. The work of a student consultant with their faculty partner is to affirm and support, observe and reflect, discuss and suggest. These efforts are approached differently by each partnership, and therefore, although the structure of the SaLT partnership program in essence is the same for every pairing, the capacities for individual engagement make each partnership altogether unique. Classrooms that allow for similar diversity of engagement in turn open up space. Furthermore, diversifying avenues of engagement makes space for students' individual and unique contributions to be celebrated; instead of devaluing a student for their difficulty in engaging with a rigid standard, there is space for their original and personal contributions to be lauded.

In both traditional classrooms and the SaLT Program there are demands upon students that shape the kind of work they are able to do. For example, in many classes there is a demand on students to fit within the spaces delineated by someone else, the professor. However, in SaLT, the endless capacity for newness and unique thought is exciting but it is also demanding because it asks us, the students, to shape and define our work. The duality that exists within the demands of the SaLT program—the challenge of having to delineate spaces ourselves and the excitement of the autonomy that delineation grants us—acts to create space.

Conclusion

This comparison between the kinds of demands placed upon students in classrooms and upon students in the SaLT program has reinforced for me the importance of carving out space within classrooms for students to shape and define their own work, despite the daunting requirement such work places on students of motivating their own learning. As I go forward as a student in my last semester as an undergraduate student and partner, I plan to continue this work of unfolding and defining spaces where students and faculty feel valued and excited. Furthermore, as I look ahead to a career in teaching, I plan to draw on this deepened understanding about what makes for a generative and exciting learning space to co-create such spaces for my future students and colleagues.