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OPENING SPACE FOR REFLECTION

Olivia Harkins-Finn, Bryn Mawr College, Class of 2023

Introduction

“You know we all have that one hour a week to go to the galleries, but it’s always so hard for us to find time to do that.”

“It’s even challenging for us to make time to eat lunch not at our desks.”

“When I was first hired here, Mike brought up that there could be a space where I could go to pray. Maybe we can make a meditation space.”

As I sat and listened to the museum professionals around me discuss needing time for rest and reflection, I felt grateful. Being in a work environment where this type of conversation was not only welcomed but prompted felt rare. It is not really something I expected I would experience as part of the bi-weekly Learning and Interpretation departmental meetings during my summer internship at the Toledo Museum of Art.

After this particular meeting ended, I felt a sense of peace that stayed with me as I walked home and all the way to my next meeting of the day, a Writing Circle session with three other undergraduates. The four of us are Student Consultants in the Students as Learners and Teachers (SaLT) program through the Teaching and Learning Institute at Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges. During the academic year, we and other undergraduates work in pedagogical partnerships with individual faculty members, groups of faculty, staff, and students, or whole academic departments to support discussion and critical thinking on teaching and learning within and beyond the classroom. This summer, though, we were meeting via Zoom to draft reflective essays about our partnership work.

As we usually do during our Writing Circles, we spent about 20 minutes doing some silent freewriting about our consulting experiences. As I thought and wrote a bit about some of my key consulting moments, I kept coming back to the theme of reflection. I suddenly came to the realization that I was feeling so connected to reflection as a vital element of the pedagogical partnership work because of the experience I just had in my internship meeting. As an employee of the Toledo Museum of Art, I was feeling thankful that we were all given space to talk about a need for mindfulness and calm, and I realized that this might be how professors or departments in a partnership feel when working with a Student Consultant: not only welcomed into but also supported in reflection.

Learning to Facilitate Reflection

My first partnership through the SaLT program was with the department in which I am pursuing my undergraduate major. This opportunity emerged for me because of a conversation I sparked in a departmental gathering prior to becoming a Student Consultant. I had brought up a question about order and structure in departmental offerings and how those opened but also constrained

learning spaces for students, and several faculty members expressed an interest in continuing this conversation. After reading about this experience in my application to be a Student Consultant, the director of the SaLT program suggested I offer to facilitate a series of reflective conversations with the department through the SaLT program. A number of the faculty in the department were excited about this new opportunity, so we established a regular time to meet.

Learning how to open spaces of reflection for faculty as a Student Consultant, particularly as a student who works with those same faculty in other roles, was not a straightforward process. I was eager to offer suggestions, but during weekly meetings with the director of the SaLT program and other Student Consultants, I learned that opening such space for reflection includes providing questions that let faculty come to conclusions on their own. Prior to my first meeting with the department, I had come to our weekly Student Consultant meeting with a few questions I was thinking of asking in the upcoming conversation. I had not fully thought about it this way, but after sharing my questions with other Student Consultants and the director, we all discussed how the questions were far too leading. Posing leading questions might have made the faculty feel criticized, leading to defensiveness not only through negative responses but also in the form of a person becoming more guarded and less comfortable or eager to continue talking. Although it would be valuable for everyone to work towards responding more openly to constructive criticism, that is unfortunately not something I can directly control as a Student Consultant. What I can control, however, is being very thoughtful about what I say and ask so that those I am speaking with feel open to reflection and critical thinking.

Working through this with the other Students Consultants and the director, I landed on bringing the question: “What pedagogical practices are valued and centered in our discipline and why?” During the meeting with the department, in response to the question, the faculty discussed many ideas, including theory, the image of practitioner of this discipline, graduate vs. undergraduate pedagogies, and, very importantly, the reputation of the department on campus. This last one was particularly in relation to students and their level of comfort in courses. Practicing the importance of allowing faculty to come to conclusions on their own, I would chime in occasionally during the conversation to affirm certain points, ask further questions or share some of my own experiences as a student in the department. I would not insert many overt opinions but rather contribute what I felt would continue to foster a space of reflection.

Towards the middle of the first meeting, still considering the initial question of what pedagogical practices are valued and centered in the discipline and why?, faculty began asking “What are the basic/foundational skills of the discipline?” One professor expressed that at a certain point in her career, she deeply considered this question and came up with, what she felt, are the four basic skills of the discipline. As soon as she said this, I saw many faculty get ready to write these four skills down. Some faculty even expressed their excitement and eagerness to hear these foundational skills. The way the group reacted to one faculty sharing these four skills made it clear that this was not something any of them had ever talked about together previously. Just like I felt grateful for that discussion of mindfulness and reflection at my departmental meeting for my internship, I imagine these professors felt appreciative that they had a space to share and hear thoughts regarding the discipline they have devoted their careers to.

Mutual Reflection in Partnership

Since facilitating conversations with one academic department, I have had two semester-long partnerships with individual faculty members who are in entirely different fields from my major area of study. These have both entailed attending the professor's class once a week to take observational notes as well as a one-on-one weekly meeting. Although I felt reflective during the conversations I facilitated my first semester as a Student Consultant, my work with individual faculty members the following semesters has taught me new ways in which reflection is central to the work of both Student Consultants and faculty partners. A concrete example of this is the observational notes I send to my faculty partner each week. As I observe their class, I take notes on what I see happening. Then, usually after a few days, I return to the observations I recorded and add reflections to each instance I describe. This process is incredibly reflective. As I read over my observations, I pause and consider—and write reflective notes on—what struck me as effective in my faculty partner's practice as well as what could be adjusted. Completing my observational notes is always a challenge because adding reflections truly demands that I pause and think. This process never fails to remind me that reflecting on moments as small as a one-minute dialogue between a student and professor can be incredibly generative and important. Observational notes push me to open space for my own reflection and fuel the energy I then bring to my professor partner.

Pedagogical partnerships in the SaLT program allow for a lot of freedom in terms of structure and focus. What remains consistent, however, is the presence of and necessity for reflection. The consideration of seemingly small moments and details is also a practice my current pedagogical partner and I bring to our weekly meetings. We often go through lecture slides and consider areas where there is room for improvement. An example of this is thinking together about how to make the explanation of complex concepts more engaging and digestible for students. Taking a moment to pause and think about whether various strategies can be implemented to increase student engagement and understanding is seemingly simple. This kind of reflection, however, is not a process that professors tend to have the encouragement or space for regularly. Asking my professor partner something as straightforward as “How could you do this differently?” creates space for re-imagining their pedagogy. Intentionally, my professor partner is not the only one thinking through these challenging questions. Each week I bring a critical lens to my recorded observations. We are both asking ourselves and each other similar questions, and each of us offers expertise in two imperative areas. My partner brings their knowledge of the subject area they teach, and I bring my experience of being a current student.

Conclusion: Carrying Forward an Appreciation for Reflection

As I have opened space for faculty and other Bryn Mawr and Haverford College community members to reflect, I have simultaneously practiced critical reflection myself. My engagement in and appreciation for my time interning in the Learning and Interpretation department at the Toledo Museum of Art, which I reference in my opening paragraph, is, in part, thanks to my work as a Student Consultant. Asking questions has always been important to me, and I have learned through my consulting work that carefully crafted questions can deepen my own reflection and support the reflection of those faculty members I work with in partnership. I am

partially drawn to museum education, specifically at an art museum, because I want to cultivate and foster imagination amongst people of all ages. This brings me back not only to the power of posing questions, but also to the importance of questions that allow space for those considering them to generate ideas and responses on their own. Imagination requires a sense of freedom to think outside constraints we often feel. My time as a Student Consultant has provided me with space to imagine and inspired me to create and support these opportunities for others.