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Theo Smith  
*Haverford College*

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## **PERSPECTIVES AND PEDAGOGY: USING PARTNERSHIP PRACTICE AS AN AVENUE TO SHARE, REFLECT ON, AND ADJUST PERSPECTIVE**

*Theo Smith, Haverford College, Class of 2023*

Perspective is never constant. It shifts as we have new experiences, meet new people, and learn new things. While certain perspectives do not change—for example, a younger sibling will always be seen as younger to an older sibling—other perspectives have the capability to change, given a supportive context. Traditionally, a teacher is seen as having more power than their students in the classroom due to the established, structural dynamic of the relationship. However, the dynamic can be changed and affected by both sides: teachers and students can create a more collaborative, beneficial, and meaningful dynamic. I know this because I have experienced this unique, refreshing dynamic both as a student in courses and as a student consultant in the Students as Learners and Teachers (SaLT) program of the Teaching and Learning Institute (TLI) at Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges.

### **The Importance of Perspective in Learning and Teaching**

The job of student consultants is to offer to any professor who would like insight from a student not enrolled in their course a student perspective on their teaching approaches or the pedagogical challenges they face. Personally, I brought to this role an understanding, based on my experiences as a student, that perspective is central to how I learn in classrooms. Reflecting on my own learning experiences, I discovered that I could more quickly and thoroughly understand concepts or themes as they were taught if I knew what the educator's pedagogical motivation was—if I had a sense of their perspective on their practice as well as the subject matter's relevance. By knowing their perspective, I could more readily create a mental framework of how to situate a given topic learned in class within my greater understanding of the field or why it was important for me to learn that specific piece of information.

When a professor shares their perspective with me, and communicates why they are teaching what they are teaching, it builds my trust in them and creates a more meaningful dynamic because they are being transparent in how and why they are utilizing class time and class materials. When this does not happen, it can look like concepts are being taught just for the sake of making students learn new information. I remember learning about atomic structures called ligands in my general chemistry class, but I did not know why or how they were significant to my understanding of chemistry, so I did not feel as inspired to fully understand them beyond getting a good grade in the class. Years later, I was speaking with a chemistry professor and asked why I learned about ligands in general chemistry when I had even taken organic chemistry and they still had not been referred to again. She told me that they were very significant to inorganic chemistry, which was why I had not encountered them yet, but since this was never expressed when I learned about them initially, I did not know how to factor them into my greater understanding of the field of chemistry. This was significant because I did not pursue a bachelors in chemistry partially due to my negative reaction from when, sometimes, the lessons that had been taught to me were not contextualized in my greater understanding of chemistry.

A professor sharing their perspective from their side of the classroom demonstrates vulnerability. This act of openness by the professor then encourages and affirms students to also demonstrate vulnerability—which can look different ways for different students—through asking more questions, speaking up when they realize they do not understand the point of a lesson, or vocalizing that they have misunderstood a previously taught concept that is vital to the present topic. Because I knew that perspective, and particularly an awareness of perspective (in my case, where my teachers were coming from pedagogically), plays a crucial role in making education spaces meaningful learning spaces, I brought this frame to my work as a student consultant.

### **Asking Questions that Invite Reflection on and Sharing of Perspectives**

During my time as a SaLT student consultant, I've had four partnerships: three one-on-one partnerships with individual faculty members new to Haverford College, and one with an entire department. In my three individual partnerships with new professors, my first step in working with them was to understand their relationship with teaching by asking them to tell me about some of the pedagogical choices they make and their intentions behind those.

I initially establish that our partnership is not a space for me to express judgment. Instead, I explain, it is an open conversation where I offer honest thoughts that come from my perspective as a student, so that they can adjust (or keep the same) their pedagogical choices to line up more effectively with their intentions. I then ask questions that prompt my faculty partners to reflect on what they have noticed in the past, such as: "How do you want students to engage with this [prompt/essay/assignment/quiz] and how do you typically see them engage with it?" This is important because it can illuminate if there are components to the class that have a certain goal in the mind of the professor and whether or not the students are understanding and achieving that goal. If there is a disconnect, I can offer my perspective on how I would approach the situation, so that the professor can take that new perspective into account before doing it again.

I also ask professors about how they communicate with their students. For example, the question "Do students ask enough questions or engage in successful and consistent ways during class?" creates an opportunity for professors to see how they have access to student perspective in the way students engage with the class. If students are not engaging in the ways the professor would expect, but are still understanding the content through other avenues—like group studying or asking questions to a neighbor before asking the professor—it suggests that the professor is anxious about something that does not have to be worried about, which might encourage them to ask more direct questions to the class or leave more pauses in the lecture for possible questions/comments from students.

These kinds of questions serve to further both the professor's and my understanding of the professor's pedagogical choices and their impact on the classroom. Based on what I learn from my faculty partner's responses, I can ask more specific questions and offer more detailed insight in the future. In addition, the professor can refer back to notes from our meeting and reapply the questions to a different context within the classroom in the future.

Once I have a sense of my faculty partners' pedagogical choices and intentions, we openly discuss whether they feel that these choices lead to the desired outcomes for students. These discussions are informed both by our own reflections and also by feedback we gather from enrolled students and by my observations of class sessions. Student perspectives—my own and enrolled students'—help to shape the classroom experience with the goals of students engaging more consistently, having more opportunities to speak up, or simply having a better understanding of the topic at hand.

Student perspectives inform faculty reflection because of the SaLT program—because I am in pedagogical partnership with the faculty members. It can be difficult for teachers to get feedback from students, even through feedback forms or direct questions they explicitly provide, because of the structural power dynamics I mentioned above and because not enough students feel that their perspective is valued or relevant. My making the space for faculty reflection in my partnership—which in turn can make space for student reflection on their learning—contributes to faculty considering how to remain informed by student perspectives going forward. Inspiring this kind of consideration requires affirmation of the power of perspective.

There are a few ways to encourage and promote the value and power in considering perspectives in the classroom. I use three starting phrases in my meetings with faculty partners to do this. The first of these phrases is: “I noticed this...” This phrase can be used to point out certain pedagogical choices the professor makes while wrapping up the idea with *why* I noticed those specific pedagogical choices. Phrasing my observations like this is important because it demonstrates how students with different values and intentions in the classroom may pay attention and interpret pedagogical choices by the professor in different ways, which is something to consider because a professor should not create a classroom that is only accessible to one kind of student.

The second phrase I use is “I really appreciated this...” This phrase puts an observation in context; it conveys why I as a student value certain pedagogical choices. I typically use this to validate when professors use humor to explain concepts, connect ideas, or break up a long lecture. To me, when professors use humor, it shows that they are engaging with the students not only in the academic sense, but also understanding that they are people with limited attention spans and it can be a great way to re-engage students. Frequently when I use this phrase, professors have not even realized that they did whatever I appreciated, which then empowers and affirms them and reveals how students pick up on even the smallest pedagogical choices.

One of the final phrases that I use is “I wondered about this...” and then ask to clarify what the intention behind a pedagogical choice was. Once the professor shares their intention, I can then provide how I as a student interpreted its purpose within the classroom. This can be a gentle way to challenge certain behaviors that professors may have, which might cause discomfort among students in ways that professors did not intend. By framing the situation as a difference in perspective, I can help professors go forward with a greater understanding of how their pedagogical choices impact their students so that they can take more steps to more clearly convey their intention or change the pedagogical choice to more effectively line up with their pedagogical intention.

All of these phrases are very useful because they center the role of perspective in the work that goes on during a one-on-one pedagogical partnership, while also supporting reflection and honest communication between students and professors.

### **Making Multiple Perspectives Transparent**

Making space for reflection and affirming as well as complicating perspectives was a different kind of challenge for me as a student consultant working with an entire department. In my partnership with a whole department, the perspectives that the professors held on a myriad of topics varied incredibly. And with different perspectives, these professors had different ideas about how to approach their work, inside and out of the classroom. Here is a partial list of topics they felt differently about: how professors should approach mentoring students, how veteran professors should mentor new professors, who should teach what introductory class, how a classroom should be managed, how to navigate being an expert in the subject while teaching introductory level concepts, and how to navigate co-teaching with fellow professors within the classroom. This last concept was the core issue of my partnership with the entire department. Working with another SaLT student consultant, I interviewed each professor in the department, and attempted to both gain their perspective and to offer our own insights about how students may perceive their presence as co-facilitators in the classroom.

What we found was that the pedagogical actions in the classroom were perceived differently by each perspective in that space. One professor felt a certain way, with the other more or less on the same page—perhaps a less nuanced perspective, but similar enough—whereas the students perceived the pedagogical actions of the professors' dynamic as hostile, and even harmful to one professor. However, the professor that the students saw as being harmed did not interpret the situation in the same way because she had a different perspective, and interpreted it differently, because the two professors as co-facilitators in the course had different roles and academic perspectives as well. What my fellow student partner and I suggested to hopefully help all those involved see the pedagogical choices made in the classroom in the same way was to more intentionally outline the professors' working dynamic to the classroom before there is any opportunity for students or faculty to become concerned or worried. In other words, we encouraged each professor to share their perspectives with the students, because they both had different approaches to certain problems related to course-work due to the fact that they had different academic focuses. This was not made clear to students, even though it was understood by both professors.

My fellow student partner and I came to the same conclusion to suggest this transparency in the classroom because it was similar to the process we took when approaching our work at the start of this partnership. We interviewed each professor and understood their perspective on the situation and the problem—even whether they thought there was one or not—and we sought to understand the specific actions that made them have this perspective. Then, we looked at all of the perspectives we had heard and took each one at face value. These were the perspectives of many passionate professors that all had similar goals—furthering their students' educations—but did not necessarily agree on the best path to achieve that goal, partially due to their varying perspectives. It's important to recognize that not only will perspectives affect how a given person

interacts with a particular space, especially in education, but also that they will influence how pedagogical choices are perceived and rationalized, which is why transparency, moments for reflection, and support for all individuals in a classroom is important.

### **The Equity Implications of Reflection on Perspectives**

Reflection on pedagogical choices as well as on one's intersectional identities is critical for radically supportive education in the classroom. Frequently in higher education institutions there are DEI trainings that encourage those involved to reflect upon our own identities within the space, whether in the classroom, office, or elsewhere. However, the insight gained from considering identities should not happen sporadically and separate from analysis of what happens in the classroom; it should constitute a core component of planning for and analysis of classroom practice. This analysis and reflection of identity and perspective are integral to having a classroom that supports everyone involved in the collective process of furthering learning and education. Teaching without this reflection and acknowledgement can further the exclusionary practices that some people experience in higher education. This is why partnerships can be so critical and valuable. The basic identities that pedagogical partnership brings into dialogue are teacher and student, but each individual teacher and student approach that positionality as an intersection of their own multiple identities. Making space for and supporting reflection on those can contribute to shifting power dynamics and making classrooms more collaborative, meaningful spaces of learning.