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**'What You Get Is Looking in a Mirror, Only Better':
Inviting Students to Reflect (on) College Teaching**

**Alison Cook-Sather
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The image of a mirror has been central to the notion of reflective practice for obvious reasons: reflection is the outward returning of a self-presentation to its possessor, a bouncing back to the self of both the intended and the unintentional image projected. Reflection refers as well to an inward re-turning — the formulation of an understanding after careful contemplation, a thoughtful conceptualization or reconceptualization. Given both the outward, more interactive and the inward, more intra-active dimensions of reflection, it is not surprising that the most common approaches to fostering reflective practice are participation in processes of peer observation and deliberate and systematic introspection on the part of individuals.

The first part of my title is drawn from a professor's description of her experience of inviting not a peer but rather an undergraduate student to serve as a pedagogical consultant in one of her courses. In the role of consultant, the student observed the faculty member's class meetings, reflected back to her the images she projected, and supported her, through dialogue, in rethinking her practice in light of those reflections. Developed under the auspices of the Teaching and Learning Initiative at two liberal arts colleges in the northeastern United States, the project in which this professor engaged introduces to existing models of reflective practice a new participant and a new process, both of which not only enrich professors' capacity to reflect on their own practice but also prompt students to reflect on theirs.

There is a growing body of literature on the value of consulting students about classroom practices in the K-12 arena and the benefits to both teachers and students of these efforts (MacBeath et al., 2003; Rudduck & McIntyre, 2007; Shultz & Cook-Sather, 2001; Thiessen & Cook-Sather, 2007). There are also a few programs through which undergraduate students are asked to serve as observers in college classrooms and give feedback to faculty members (Sorensen-Pierce, 1993; Wasley, 2007). There is little research, however, on what happens

when a student who is not enrolled in a particular college course is positioned as a pedagogical consultant within that course with the goal of promoting more reflective and effective practice. The project on which I report here, called Students as Learners and Teachers (SaLT), aims to fill that gap and to forge potentially generative connections between the literatures on reflective practice and student voice as well as to encourage pedagogical approaches responsive to the tenets of both.

Students as Learners and Teachers (SaLT): A Description of the Project

With the support of a grant from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and in the role of Coordinator of the Teaching and Learning Initiative at Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges, I have facilitated SaLT since the spring semester of 2007. The project's explicit goal is to support generative dialogue about teaching and learning that rarely unfolds between faculty members and students and, through that dialogue, to improve teaching and learning in college classrooms. SaLT is neither formally evaluative nor is it intended to be remedial, and faculty involved choose to participate for a variety of pedagogical reasons. To date, 44 faculty members have worked with a total of 26 student consultants in 63 partnerships. Faculty span ranks (12 professors, 3 associate professors, 13 assistant professors, and 16 lecturers and instructors) and divisions (12 in the natural sciences, 14 in the social sciences, and 19 in the humanities) and range from brand new to the colleges to those with more than 30 years of experience teaching. The project is structured as follows.

Selecting Participants

Student consultants, sophomores to seniors majoring in different fields and bringing varying degrees of preparation in education, apply to serve in this role, a process that includes writing a statement regarding their qualifications and securing two letters of recommendation, one from a faculty or staff member and one from a student. (A detailed discussion of the application process can be found at <http://www.brynmawr.edu/tli/NSDfeedback.html>). Faculty members are invited each semester to participate. Interested faculty contact me, and they are assigned student consultants on a first-come-first-served basis. Partnerships are formed based largely according to participants' schedules and, where possible, taking into consideration style and personality.

Supporting Participants

All participants receive detailed guidelines for participation (see “Guidelines for Consulting” at <http://www.brynmawr.edu/tli/NSDfeedback.html>) generated and revised each semester by me and student consultants with input from faculty. Faculty are supported on an as-needed basis — they contact me for advice, support, or other consultation — and I check in with each of them midway through their partnerships to see if they need further support. Student consultants are supported in weekly reflective meetings with me and with other student consultants through which we process what they are seeing, hearing, and experiencing. Together we revisit and reinforce the priorities of the program, including the critical importance of confidentiality and how best to engage in constructive, respectful collaboration.

The Work of the Partnerships

The faculty member and student consultant plan together a schedule according to which the student consultant will observe and/or interview students enrolled in the faculty member’s class. During the class meetings the student consultant takes notes on the focal topic determined ahead of time, which she subsequently writes up and shares with the faculty member either before or at their debriefing meeting, which is generally scheduled within a week of the observation or interviews. If the student consultant is interviewing, she consults with the faculty member about what to ask, gathers responses from students enrolled in the class, compiles the student responses, and shares those with the faculty member. At the debriefing meetings, the faculty member and the student consultant discuss what the student consultant saw and/or heard, both people’s interpretations of that input, and implications for teaching and learning in the class. Partnerships can last anywhere from one week to an entire semester, with student consultants attending a single class to attending a full semester’s worth of class meetings.

Assessing the Partnerships

In addition to the formative assessment conducted throughout the partnerships, at the conclusion of each partnership, all participants answer a series of questions that provide them an opportunity to revisit once more, from a retrospective angle, what the student consultant noted, what the faculty member learned from those observations and discussion(s) with the student consultant, and how the experience might shape their notions and practices of teaching and learning.

Evolving Notions of Reflective Practice

Although reflective practice as a concept can be traced to Dewey's (1933) work, Schön's (1983) *The Reflective Practitioner* is often cited as the catalyzing text that prompted educators to argue for reflection as essential to good pedagogical practice. Advocates of reflective practice assert that, in the absence of opportunities to reflect on one's 'knowledge in action' (Schön, 1987, p. 12), one runs the risk of 'relying on routinized teaching' and 'not developing as a teacher or as a person' (Reiman & Thies-Sprinthall, 1998, p. 262; see also Colton & Sparks-Langer, 1990; Hunt, 2007; Klenowski, Askew, & Carnell, 2006; Young & Irving, 2005; Zeichner & Liston, 1987). And yet at the college level, as at all levels, opportunities for reflection are not generally built into the 'structure of teaching' (Elbaz, 1987, p. 45), and the fact that the culture of teaching is characterized by 'pedagogical solitude' (Shulman, 2004) reduces the likelihood that faculty will seek opportunities for peer observation.

The more traditional notion of reflective practice has the practitioner tacking between analysis of assumptions and feelings on the one hand and how those play out in practice on the other. According to this notion, reflection 'requires individuals to assume the perspective of an external observer in order to identify the assumptions and feelings underlying their practice and then to speculate about how these assumptions and feelings affect practice' (Imel, 1992, p. 1). As indicated in my opening discussion, the perspective of external observer can be achieved either by an actual external observer attending a colleague's class or by an individual striving to gain critical distance on her own. Recently, some scholars have recast traditional notions of reflective practice in light of contemporary and postmodern insights. Working toward a more dynamic notion of reflection, Rodgers (2002) writes about the reflective cycle, and Lesnick (2005) uses the image of a 'mirror in motion' to argue for 'an understanding of reflection that admits of ongoing movement, change, and interaction, so that "success" in reflective practice is a matter of agility, mobility, flexibility, and, importantly, of the interdependence of one's movements with those of others on and beyond the reflected scene' (p. 38).

Bringing a student consultant's perspective into dialogue with a faculty member's view introduces both a new angle of vision and a more dynamic exchange of views on classroom practice that have the potential to extend both the traditional and the more postmodern notions of reflection. The student's angle of vision is informed by many years of observing while participating in classrooms, often in high-stakes circumstances and from a position of relative

vulnerability. Through this project she also is privy to the faculty member’s intentions, his or her pedagogical goals. As a faculty member who worked with a student consultant put it: ‘She was observing my classes but also knew what I was trying to achieve. She would ask, “Is this what you are trying to do?”’ Bringing to bear insights from both sides of the desk, as it were, the student consultant can reflect back to the faculty member the intersection of experience (students’) and intention (faculty member’s). Grappling with this intersection alters not only the faculty member’s immediate consideration of her classroom practice but also the way she might conceptualize her subsequent practice and, specifically, the roles and responsibilities she affords her students. Reflective practice that integrates students’ angles of vision and analyses thus has the potential not only to yield richer, deeper insights but also to change traditional relationships between faculty and students, and thus processes of teaching and learning.

Student Voice and Reflective Practice

Inviting students into dialogue about classroom practices with faculty members has the potential to make reflection a collaborative/collegial dynamic between faculty members and student consultants (Cook-Sather, 2008). It thus works toward what Fielding (1999) calls ‘radical collegiality,’ which, he argues, includes positioning students as ‘agents in the process of transformative learning’ (p. 22). Embracing such a radical collegiality ‘requires major shifts ... in ways of thinking and feeling about the issues of knowledge, language, power, and self’ (Oldfather, 1995, p. 87). In the evolving field of student voice, those major shifts have taken numerous forms, as explicated in several typologies that scholars have developed in an effort to differentiate the various practices that identify as student voice work. I elaborate briefly on three of these.

SaLT attempts to enact what Lodge (2005) calls dialogue, in which students are viewed as active participants, their voices included as part of an ongoing discussion, and listening and speaking are the twin responsibilities of all parties. The project also strives to embrace the commitments of what Holdsworth (2000) designates the penultimate and top rungs of his ‘student participation ladder’: ‘incorporating youth/student views into actions taken by others’ and ‘sharing decision-making, implementation of action, and reflection on action with young people’ (p. 358). And finally, the project aims to embody the three more radical types in Fielding’s (2004) four-part typology: ‘students as active respondents,’ ‘students as co-

researchers,' and 'students as researchers' (pp. 201-202). This work shares core commitments, including the beliefs 'that young people have unique perspectives on learning, teaching, and schooling; that their insights warrant not only the attention but also the responses of adults; and that they should be afforded opportunities to actively shape their education' (Cook-Sather, 2006, p. 359-360).

Faculty members' reflections on working with student consultants support researchers' claims. One faculty member argues that 'it's more effective to have a student come in rather than a colleague' because faculty 'look for something different than a student looks for. You observe what you expect to observe. You miss what you are not looking for. Students are looking at lecture and interactions totally differently than faculty do.' Not only do students look for something different, they can offer an angle of vision on whatever they observe that faculty colleagues could not, when they are not constrained by the regular power dynamics in a classroom. As another faculty member put it: 'I often ask students how things are going for them in my classes, and I do get feedback this way, but it was especially nice to receive recommendations from somebody who doesn't fear saying something I don't want to hear.' Another faculty member expands upon this point: 'The special status of the student consultant as a student NOT in the course frees up the relationship from some of the constraining social, academic, and emotional elements in the typical faculty-student relationship. This is key, I think, to the productivity of the relationship.' SaLT recognizes students as authorities, removes them — to some extent — from the typical teacher-student hierarchy, and creates forums within which they can draw on their authority to inform critical dialogue about teaching and learning. In these ways SaLT also enriches theory on reflective practice by addressing explicitly the workings of power in the practice of reflection.

Drawing on faculty members' and students' responses the assessment questions completed at the conclusion of their partnerships, I turn now to a discussion of how participation in SaLT can integrate the outward, more interactive and the inward, more intra-active dimensions of reflection, infuse processes of reflective practice with the benefits of student voice, and thus offer to faculty members an alternative approach to engaging in reflective practice.

Multiplying the Angles of Vision in Reflection

Underlying the first sense of reflection I identify — a bouncing back of the intended and unintentional image that is projected — is an assumption of the importance of vision, of seeing and re-seeing. Faculty members who participate in SaLT use the language of vision — of sight, insight, perspective — to describe what they expected and what they experienced through participating in this project. When asked why they wanted to participate, faculty members described a pressing need for someone to help them reflect on their practice. One experienced faculty member explained: ‘I have suffered from the lack of insights into what I do — what works and what doesn’t. I have been longing for the opportunity to have a dialogue with people who can give me concrete insights.’ Reflecting on his experience part way through the semester of working with a student consultant, a first-year faculty member said:

I find it really fascinating how much [my student consultant] is able to observe, which I cannot from my vantage point, and I mean this not only figuratively but also literally, as she has a line of sight into the space of the classroom which I do not have from where I stand. Her observations have helped to open up for me the space in the classroom in ways which I have not seen before.

And finally, reflecting on what she got out of the project after she completed it, an experienced faculty member said: ‘[The student consultant’s] feedback has caused me to look at some of my classroom practices in a different light.’

These three faculty members from across the academic divisions at the colleges and at different points in their careers highlight the ways that another source of illumination can provide concrete insights, a new ‘line of sight’ into the classroom space, and a re-illumination of the classroom. What faculty members are able to see through these forms of reflection surprises them. As the faculty member quoted above points out, student consultants can see, literally, what faculty members cannot. Another faculty member provides a concrete example:

There are some quiet students in my class — this was really powerful for me — one student was putting up her hand very slightly. I was literally blind to her. [The student observer] pointed it out. Then she [the student] did it next class, and I saw her, and she talked three times. When [the student observer] told me, I was stunned — I had just missed her. And when she did talk, she said very thoughtful things.

Seeing her classroom and, specifically, a particular student, reflected back to her by the student consultant allowed this faculty member to change profoundly the experience the particular student had in her class but also to sharpen her vision — to prepare her to look more carefully for such ‘invisible’ students in future classes.

Not only do faculty talk about seeing students they previously did not see, they also talk about re-seeing themselves in relation to how students see them and about reconsidering how to position themselves based on how they want to reposition students:

One of the things I learned is that during the [student] presentations I need to try to back out of it a little bit and not provide information whenever I see that it’s relevant. The more that I do that the more it promotes the idea that students should be looking at me to give them the information. Even things like if students ask a question during the presentation and look at me, and I look at the presenter, that redirects their gaze. It’s a lot about where they are looking. A lot of this I didn’t think about before. I am still the expert, but it’s a different attitude. I think I should just go sit among them.

The points these professors make about sight, insight, and perspective, about their vision — literal and more figurative — of students and students’ vision of them, have implications for how faculty members conceptualize and enact their roles as teachers. Learning to look more carefully for ‘invisible’ students requires more critical self-awareness of where and how one is looking as well as what one is looking for. Re-thinking where one positions oneself and how one re-directs the gaze, and thus focus, of students requires rethinking, or at least clarifying, one’s pedagogical goals. Taking an honest look at what student consultants reflect back can prompt this internal analysis, which in turn can inform practice.

Looking into the mirror in motion takes real courage, as what one sees might be unfamiliar and, potentially, less than flattering, but if one summons the courage not only to look but to rethink and change based on what one sees, the results can be transformative for everyone involved. As one new faculty member explained:

What was really unexpected [to me] was how wedded to my own pedagogical authority I was. Which reveals how insecure I was about it. Admitting that and handling it with the students in the community doesn’t damage the community. I know that’s the thing you’re supposed to say, but this [experience] really revealed how true that is. I was surprised how willing students are to be flexible and think through things. How useful it can be to have a failed assignment or discussion. I was really surprised at how entrenched I was and that it doesn’t need to be that

way, and actually students get a lot more out of it if you allow them to be part of the process.

As these faculty members' comments reveal, the 'gaze of the other' can be at once confirming and threatening, undesirable and essential, challenging and enlightening (Peel, 2005, p. 489). These benefits and challenges result from the fact that inviting the gaze of another diminishes isolation but also diminishes privacy — sharing ideas also means exposing uncertainties, and taking on new roles can also require assuming new responsibilities (Lytle & Fecho, 1991). In a faculty member's words: 'It is challenging to have someone watching you...Having an observer in the room makes me feel very exposed and vulnerable. But over time it has become less about "being good" or performing well and more about learning from my students and pushing their ability to engage with the material.' Another faculty member characterized the risk and benefit in a slightly different way: 'Yes, it makes you vulnerable, and in any relationship you don't gain anything if you aren't vulnerable. This project is making a safer place to be vulnerable and thus learn and grow and be out of your shell. So you can either be isolated and safe or you can be vulnerable and connected.'

The multiple angles of vision that inform reflection through SaLT intersect in the dialogue in which participants engage. Often, what we perceive does not register on the conscious level unless we articulate it, and as Yinger (1987) contends, being a reflective practitioner means not only developing the disposition to reflect on practice and on the complexities of relationships and approaches within different teaching contexts but also finding the words to express those reflections to others. One new faculty member explained: 'What I found most useful was talking to [the student consultant] about the class — just formulating what I was thinking and what I was worried about.' Through this dialogue, what is reflected is clarified, thus facilitating reflection in the second sense I discuss — the formulation of an understanding after careful contemplation, a thoughtful conceptualization or reconceptualization. This formulation can illuminate what needs to change or simply what the relationship is between what is intended and what is achieved. The student consultant reflects all of those back to the faculty member. As the professor quoted above continued: 'What I got was the opportunity to first articulate to myself and to interested people what I want to happen in the classroom, why do I teach to begin with. And then a useful conversation about enacting those goals. And then a better sense of the people I am trying to help, meaning students.'

Reflective Practice as Teachers' and Students' Shared Responsibility

When faculty members work with student consultants over time, reflection enriched by ongoing assessment of their practice becomes a dynamic process carried out between the faculty member and student and, by extension, with students enrolled in the course the faculty member is teaching. One faculty member explained:

Because I implemented a new [curriculum], I wanted to make sure it was working the way I had envisioned it. The fact that [the student consultant] was monitoring what was going on and looking at what could be improved was a big help. And she polled the students for mid-semester feedback and helped me with thinking about what to do. 'Is it working? In what sense? How can I make it more real? How can I use it more in class?'

As this faculty member moved through the semester, the student consultant moved with her, positioning herself at different angles to reflect what was happening in the class, what students were experiencing, and what she, as a student herself, made of it all.

This dynamic and collaborative process of reflection can prompt faculty members to think of teaching and learning as responsibilities they share with students. One faculty member said: 'I want them to know that they are in control, too. Things don't have to spin out of control if they speak up about it.' Another said: 'I definitely feel like there is more of a sense that we all own the class a little more.' Student consultants make similar statements regarding both the relationships between faculty members and students in their classes — 'Students are working with faculty to build courses, to build their learning experience' — and between faculty members and student consultants: 'I found that this collaborative approach worked very well for us, that Professor Z and I were able to feel like colleagues who were working toward the same goal but from different sides of the problem' (Cook-Sather, 2008).

Like the reconsideration of how to look for 'invisible' students and how to redirect students' gazes, and thus their sense of who is responsible for teaching and learning at any given moment, the reconsideration of who is responsible for the class changes both the faculty member's and the students' positions. As one faculty member explained:

I think I have a more collaborative model for the classroom...I feel there is a mode of professor as all-knowing font, and there's another possible model that I

am kind of a classmate, and that somewhere in the middle there, somewhere in the middle is “coach”...I am feeling from this experience that I can move more toward the classmate side of the scale.’

And another faculty member said: ‘It gave me a sense of students being able and wanting to take certain pedagogical responsibility, and the counter of that is me taking a learning responsibility.’

Recognizing students as authorities — as those with legitimate knowledge about teaching and learning and the capacity to engage productively as collaborators in classroom processes and analyses of those — makes for a very different model of reflective practice and of student roles and responsibilities in teaching and learning. As one professor explained: ‘Often conversations about teaching overlap with conversations about students — they are these Others that we are trying to understand. Including students in the conversation means that conversations about teaching are conversations in which students are engaged.’

Students Reflecting on College Teaching — for Themselves

Faculty members’ comments make clear the ways they can be supported in richer forms of reflective practice through working with student consultants. Working with faculty members also prompts students to reflect both on teaching and on learning. By listening to faculty members describe the pedagogical issues with which they struggle, student consultants gain perspectives and insights on teaching they otherwise would not be likely to have. Describing one of the insights she gained through participating in SaLT, one student consultant said: ‘I certainly learned a lot more about the teaching aspect than I was expecting. I didn’t realize there was so much work involved in thinking about teaching.’ Gaining access to the teacher’s perspective makes students realize not only what it takes to teach but also how much courage it takes to invite critical perspectives on one’s teaching. Another student consultant said: ‘The main thing I learned is that professors are very vulnerable. You don’t think about that as a student. Once you come outside of that role, you really notice this.’ Contrary to what some might think — that students seeing faculty members as vulnerable might decrease the faculty member’s authority or credibility — students find faculty members’ willingness to be learners very inspiring. One student consultant articulated what many student consultants and students in faculty members’ courses have expressed: ‘Students are gaining respect for their professors because they are doing this. All three faculty members [I worked with] inspired me with their desire to improve as

teachers and their ability to step back and “see” themselves and their practice with the assistance of my notes and the students’ interview notes.’

As constructive as the perspective students gain on faculty members’ experiences is the new perspective they gain on students’ experiences — their own and others’. One student consultant asserted:

You really don’t understand the way you learn and how others learn until you can step back from it and are not in the class with the main aim to learn the material of the class but more to understand what is going on in the class and what is going through people’s minds as they relate with that material.

Bringing the insights they gained into weekly reflective meetings with other student consultants and with me created a new forum for students to engage in critical analysis of teaching and learning. One student consultant offered a particularly powerful analysis of her experience:

[SaLT] really felt like it was a course because I feel like I learned so much. But it also felt like we were more like colleagues. I felt like this was the education that I came here for in college. I think all courses in college should be about learning to learn, instead of learning something. I really feel like being part of this group, I learned how to learn.

Learning how to learn might well be at the heart of Lesnick’s (2005) call for a recasting of traditional notions of reflective practice. The ‘mirror in motion’ is an image that captures the importance of both a bouncing back of an image and a moving forward in one’s interpretation of and response to it. The image and the interpretation/response are both in motion because the mirror itself, into which the person looks for a sense of ‘self,’ is also in motion — in shifting relation to others’ perspectives and practices. An understanding of reflection ‘that admits of ongoing movement, change, and interaction’ (p. 38) is particularly powerful when the participants in the process are all those affected by it — students as well as faculty members.

Challenges: Finding Time, Establishing Rapport, and Making Change

The three primary challenges we have discovered and clarified with SaLT have to do with finding time to participate in the projects, establishing rapport among participants, and defining what change means in this context.

The first challenge is purely logistical. Because faculty and students alike have very busy schedules, it can be difficult to pair faculty members and student observers. Many more faculty and students have expressed interest in participating than I can pair up, simply because of scheduling conflicts.

The second challenge is about establishing norms for participation in a new structure and set of relationships. Participating in these projects requires establishing common ground and developing thoughtful ways for faculty colleagues and for faculty and students to talk to one another such that learning happens all around and people do not get hurt or offended.

The third challenge is defining change — a difference in awareness? a modification of practice? a complete transformation of the classroom? — and how quickly any of these can and should happen. Whereas students hope to see change of all kinds happen quickly (as they are used to being expected to change themselves quickly), faculty members require more time and deliberation.

These findings highlight the importance of participants exercising care when they work with one another in these unfamiliar ways, not only considering the different perspectives people bring but ensuring that those are made explicit in language that the participants develop respectively and together and that everyone's expectations regarding outcomes are stated and revisited regularly.

Conclusion

The kind of reflective practice that a project like SaLT can foster stands in sharp contrast to the searching, projection, and debilitating danger that lurks behind asking a mirror to reflect back a fair image no matter what (as in the tale of the Wicked Queen in *Snow White*). This kind of reflective practice invites younger, 'fairer' creatures to reflect back to those in positions of greater institutional power what they intend and do not intend to project with the goal of improving how everyone looks — not as a passive object but as an active agent of education and transformation — and what everyone sees — not as a final act, but as an ongoing process of response and responsibility. Connecting work on reflective practice with work on student voice offers a way to bring reflective practice out of the literal narcissism of mirror madness, which is isolating and deadly, into a form of collaborative, bi-directional mentorship that supports communication, growth, and change — all of which need to be continually defined and

redefined. A collaborative effort to create opportunities for all involved to empower themselves and to improve everyone's experience of teaching and learning, the kind of reflective practice fostered by inviting student consultants into faculty members' classrooms is, in the ways faculty members and students who have experienced it describe, like looking in the mirror, only better. What makes this experience like looking in a mirror, only better, is that students are not empty or static mirrors, as it were; rather their own experiences and perspectives as well as what they see through observing faculty members' classrooms are reflected back to the faculty members. In this way, the 'mirror' they offer is richer, wider, and more inclusive than any single image, prompted by a singular looker, could be.

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