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## Student–Staff Partnerships as Transformational: the ‘Students as Learners and Teachers’ program as a case study in changing higher education

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**ABSTRACT** In this article the author offers an example of a student–staff partnership program based in a higher education context in the United States. This program positions undergraduate students as pedagogical consultants to academic staff. The goal of the program is to counter traditional hierarchies and imbalanced power relations and foster a shift in institutional culture toward a more dialogic and collaborative approach to teaching and learning. Drawing on reflections of student and staff participants, the author illustrates how the program catalyzes student, staff and institutional transformation.

Transformation can be sudden or slow, but the change it constitutes is generally radical. The ‘Students as Learners and Teachers’ (SaLT) program at Bryn Mawr College, Pennsylvania, is halfway through its seventh year. As its creator and coordinator, I have seen profound changes at both the individual and the institutional levels, captured eloquently by reflections such as the following from a student participant:

[SaLT] has completely transformed my experience [as a student]. I do not think I will ever be able to go into a class and be passive ... But beyond that, it is the attitude I have in classes now that students are an equal partner with the [professor] in the teaching and learning process that has really changed how I exist in a classroom.

The ‘radical collegiality’ (Fielding, 1999) this student describes, and that staff experience as well, constitutes a transformation of student–staff relationships and, more generally, of the work of teaching and learning in higher education.

Below I offer a description of the SaLT program, provide additional examples of student and staff transformation, and reflect on the institutional transformation that results. Throughout the discussion I reference publications that offer detailed analyses of the program and its outcomes, should readers wish to delve deeper into these.

### **The Students as Learners and Teachers (SaLT) Program**

The SaLT program is modeled on a project that invites secondary students to serve as consultants to prospective secondary teachers. Between 1995 and 2006, I facilitated that program, working to ensure that the voices and perspectives of secondary students informed the preparation of prospective teachers – helping those teachers-to-be learn to listen to students, conceptualize students as partners in the educational process, and become the kind of teachers who continue to consult and collaborate with students. Through several face-to-face meetings, weekly email exchanges, and weekly meetings of the participating secondary students on site at their schools (which are audio-recorded and made available to the prospective teachers), the secondary students and prospective teachers develop partnerships based on respect, reciprocity and shared responsibility (see Cook-Sather, 2002, 2006, 2009b, 2010).

Those three qualities – respect, reciprocity and shared responsibility – are the three premises my colleagues and I argue for as foundational for student–staff partnerships in higher education as well (Cook-Sather et al, 2014, in press). They are the guiding principles of SaLT, the signature program of the Teaching and Learning Institute at Bryn Mawr College, a liberal arts institution in the United States that offers both four-year undergraduate programs to women and graduate programs to women and men. The program supports one-on-one partnerships between academic staff at Bryn Mawr and other area colleges and universities and undergraduate students enrolled at either Bryn Mawr or nearby Haverford College.

Through these partnerships, funded by The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation as well as the Provosts of Bryn Mawr and Haverford, staff and student pairs bring their different but equally valid perspectives into dialogue with the explicit goal of reflecting on, affirming and, where appropriate, revising pedagogical practice. The underlying goal of the program is to foster a shift in institutional culture toward a more dialogic and collaborative approach to teaching and learning; the program counters traditional hierarchies and imbalanced power relations through supporting the transformation of student–staff relationships into partnerships based on respect, reciprocity and shared responsibility. A total of 180 academic staff and 104 undergraduate students have participated in over 250 partnerships through the SaLT program.

Participation in the program is voluntary, and academic staff choose to participate for a variety of reasons: to orient themselves to the institution if they are new, to focus on particular pedagogical issues, or simply to engage in dialogue about teaching and learning. Incoming, full-time staff are given a

course release if they choose to participate in a seminar that includes a partnership with a student, and full-time, continuing staff earn stipends for their participation. All staff may apply to participate in a stand-alone partnership with a student consultant.

Undergraduate students apply for the position of consultant; the application process includes writing a statement about why they want to be a consultant and what would make them good at the role and securing two letters of recommendation, one from a staff member, and one from a student. This application process is designed not to exclude but rather to prompt students to reflect on their experiences and recognize the ways in which they have expertise and insights to bring to conversations about teaching and learning. Each consultant is paid \$10.15 per hour (approximately £6) for all the time she spends working on the partnership, which includes visiting a session of her staff partner's course each week, taking detailed observation notes, meeting weekly with her staff partner, and meeting weekly with me and other student consultants.

For several reasons, consultants are not enrolled in the courses for which they consult. First, the imbalanced power dynamics, within which students are graded by staff, would preclude or at least complicate a student's ability to offer honest feedback on pedagogical issues in the course. Second, having a single student in a course occupy a privileged position, with special access to staff and their pedagogical goals, would create inequity and possibly tensions among students enrolled in the course. Finally, unless it is a specific goal structured into the course, students cannot be both engaged learners focused on content and detached observers focused on pedagogical process. The role of consultant offers undergraduates a liminal space within which to be in between and at once learner and teacher (Cook-Sather & Alter, 2011).

### **Student Transformation**

The premise of the SaLT program is that undergraduate students have unique perspectives on teaching and learning and, when provided with forums that support reflection and dialogue with one another and with staff, they can become collaborators in the processes of planning, teaching and assessing pedagogical approaches (Bovill et al, 2011). The support, affirmation and challenge that the SaLT program offers students – designating them 'consultants', positioning them as partners to staff, providing them with weekly meetings within which they develop the language and confidence to engage in such partnership, and welcoming the initiative they take and the recommendations they offer for new directions in practice – facilitate the individual and collective transformation they experience (see Cook-Sather, 2011b).

Each semester since the advent of the program, student consultants have indicated that they are profoundly changed by their participation in student-staff partnerships – transformed such that they feel at once empowered as

learners, teachers and people and unable to go back to simply being students. They repeatedly describe an increase in confidence, engagement and skills. Virtually every student asserts that 'this experience has given me the courage to speak up more for myself and other students'. Another student offers a widely shared experience: '[SaLT] has made me more pro-active about my own learning' and '[it has] provided me with the vocabulary to speak with my professors'. Another asserts:

The language that I developed through being a consultant, and the skills/strategies I learned about problem solving, will stick with me long after the consulting experience is over. This role has helped me better understand student needs and will enable me to better articulate what helps me learn. These communication skills are very transferable.

The transformation students experience is irreversible (Cook-Sather & Luz, forthcoming); in both their awareness and their engagement, students cannot go back to being simply students. Regarding her awareness, one consultant explains: 'Now that I have been so exposed to this level of awareness, I really don't think it would be possible for me to enter a classroom WITHOUT thinking about the way class is being taught (as opposed to simply what is being taught)'. Regarding her engagement, another explains: 'I can't passively experience a classroom setting anymore, for better or for worse (no, for better).' This consultant's ambivalence about that change is typical, as is the assertion that you just can't go back. Another student reflects: 'It's like a great song: once you learn the words, you find yourself singing it on and off for years. It's a "tune" I've taken life from and given life to, and I couldn't imagine not doing it.'

In addition to the transformations individuals experience, the SaLT program has helped to effect the amplification of student voices and emergence of student leadership more generally in this particular higher education context. Students who would not have approached professors in the past now feel not only able to do so but also responsible for doing so. But beyond an increase in individual agency and engagement that affects those with whom these students come into contact, as a result of both participating in courses within which staff worked with student consultants and being consultants to staff, students take the initiative to speak and write about their experiences in wider contexts. Here are two examples: a student who was in the course upon which a staff member focused on threshold concepts for a seminar took the opening he experienced and extended it wider; and a student who was interested in the way her role as participant in the project described above, through which secondary students are paired with prospective teachers, intersected with her role as a consultant in the SaLT program also wanted to write about that. Both of these students will serve as guest editors of special issues of *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education* featuring student essays.

## Staff Transformation

The support, affirmation and challenge that the SaLT program offers undergraduate students is complemented by the support, affirmation and challenge offered to academic staff participants. Positioning staff members as partners to students, providing them with weekly forums within which they develop the language and confidence to engage in such partnership, and supporting both their affirmations and revisions of pedagogical practice – all of this facilitates the transformation they experience.

Given time/space and structure/support, staff can take up a more collaborative approach to working with students and can analyze for themselves what happens when they partner with students in this way. One new staff member offered an extended reflection on the transformation he discerned in himself as a result of working with a student consultant:

One unexpected side effect of working with the Student Consultant was a subtle change in attitude that I experienced. I have always strived to adjust course content and process to match student interests and needs, but I had always seen that as a process of *me* adjusting things for *them*. Mid-way through the semester of working with my Student Consultant, I realized that I was thinking about my class in a more collaborative way than I had before: I was thinking about building the course *with* the students, as partners. I first noticed this when a student came to talk to me about a concept she was struggling to grasp. We ended up talking about not just the concept, but how one could best teach the concept to others, and we designed and re-designed a new set of activities, re-teaching the concept for the rest of the class. We then implemented it for everyone, and got great feedback (and great test results!) from the new method. I felt this throughout the class: that the students and I were engaged in building this class together. I believe this change arose directly from my experience collaborating with my Student Consultant, and I think it's taken my teaching to an amazing new level – both for my students, and for me personally.

This staff member experienced a fairly thorough transformation within a single semester. For other staff the transformation is longer in coming.

In the first years of the SaLT program, I invited a colleague with many years of teaching experience to work in partnership with a student, who would observe his teaching and help him analyse his practice. In response, he sent me this email message:

I cannot stand having people monitor my classes (whatever the reason or purpose might be). My teaching relies on a relationship with my students that strives for a kind of intimacy and trust and I can't achieve with a colleague or peer in the classroom with me. The whole space becomes artificial, not to say distracting. Having been

subjected to various forms of ‘monitoring’ or peer observation over the last ten years as someone without tenure and often on the job market, I have had my share of ‘sample classes.’ Now that I have [a permanent position at the college], I feel like this is something I can do without. I understand that this is not an evaluative process and that the goal is to improve our teaching. I am more than willing talk about teaching techniques and so forth, just not have someone else in my classroom.

Several years later, after the SaLT program had become a more familiar fixture at the college and many more staff had participated, this same colleague worked with a student consultant in planning and teaching one of a cluster of courses as part of an innovative program at the college. Reflecting on that experience, this colleague wrote:

I think that having a [SaLT] consultant for [this program] should almost be a requirement .... I have really appreciated her feedback and have learned much from her. In some cases, I haven’t entirely agreed with what she has said, but it has been incredibly useful to have a student who is at the same time a peer. I am extremely grateful to her for everything she has brought and I think my classroom approach has benefited greatly ... I can honestly say that to extent that our [course cluster] is successful, she will have been absolutely key in making it happen. I can’t imagine having done this without her.

Many variables could explain this difference between the reactions of the new staff member and the one with more experience: personality, discipline, years of teaching experience, and more (see Cook-Sather, 2008, 2013). Another variable, though, was that the new staff member was participating in the SaLT program after it had become an established part of the institution, whereas the more experienced staff member’s initial reaction came when the program was just beginning, but his revised response came after the program was established. This difference leads me to my final set of reflections: on institutional transformation.

### **Institutional Transformation**

When enough academic staff and undergraduate students think and interact in the ways described above, transformation begins to take place on an institutional level. The ways in which both staff and students conceptualize and talk with others about teaching and learning change, becoming more open, more respectful of the different experiences each group has of education, more reciprocal in what people offer and take from one another, and more of a shared responsibility.

One form through which these changes manifest is the language people use to talk with one another and the fact that they do talk with one another more. Many staff have told me that they approach colleagues more readily and openly, seeking and offering advice – engaging in ongoing dialogue about teaching and learning rather than laboring in ‘pedagogical solitude’ (Shulman, 2004). Together, student consultants and staff have explored and offered insights on developing more culturally responsive classrooms (Cook-Sather & Agu, 2013). One staff member asserted that the SaLT program is making ‘a profound difference to the level of awareness at the college, of pedagogy, of roles, of possibilities, and also to the teaching and learning going on in all kinds of spaces here’. This staff member sees long-term implications, suggesting that as more members of the college community participate in the program, ‘it will really change the language and content of our conversations here about what it means to teach and learn in and across our disciplines at the college’ (see Cook-Sather, 2009a, 2011a, 2012).

At the more structural level, the fact that all incoming staff have the opportunity to partner with student consultants as part of a pedagogy seminar in exchange for which their teaching load is reduced by a single course in their first semester means that they each, individually, have the opportunity to develop into instructors who partner with students and they constitute an ever-growing group. With the exception of two or three who could not manage it in their schedules, every new staff member who has arrived at Bryn Mawr and Haverford College over the last six years has participated. Over time, if participation continues, a majority, if not almost the entire staff, will join the teaching community of the colleges through the portal of this seminar, which emphasizes dialogic engagement with student consultants as a way to clarify and develop one’s pedagogical convictions and, in turn, develop classrooms based on respect, reciprocity and shared responsibility.

### **Conclusion**

The change of state effected by transformation can be liberating and frightening, empowering and disorienting, strengthening and destabilizing. I have been inspired by the risks and revisions my colleagues – staff and students – have undertaken, and with them I have endeavored to contribute to the transformation of teaching and learning themselves. In researching student-staff partnerships across institutions of higher education, my colleagues and I have found the same outcomes I describe here: an increase in the respect students and staff have for one another; a willingness to engage in more reciprocal, collaborative approaches to teaching and learning; and a sense of shared responsibility for that work. These transformations are part of an ongoing process, sometimes sudden, sometimes slow, always profound.

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