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STEPS IN WALKING THE TALK: HOW WORKING WITH A STUDENT CONSULTANT HELPED ME INTEGRATE STUDENT VOICE MORE FULLY INTO MY PEDAGOGICAL PLANNING AND PRACTICE

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Introduction

As an assistant professor of education, with a research agenda focused on student engagement and student voice, I was thrilled to have the opportunity to participate in the Teaching and Learning Institute at Bryn Mawr College in the spring of 2011. Here was a chance to align my teaching with my scholarship — to practice what I preach authentically, overtly.

Throughout the semester, I worked closely with a student consultant to find ways to make my students more active and responsible learners; to incorporate student voice into the design of lessons, assignments, and rubrics; and to address challenging classroom dynamics. My student consultant assisted me in a course called *Diversity and Inclusion*, a required course for education majors, designed to prepare them to teach in heterogeneous classrooms. The class met twice a week for an hour and 15 minutes for 15 weeks. My student consultant attended the course once a week for 10 of our sessions. At first, we met in my office to debrief a day or two after her observation, but as time went on, we began to debrief in the classroom directly after the students left.

My student consultant freely shared her experiences and perspectives with me, offering a glimpse into her life as a student and the insights she derived from observing students in my classroom. In each case, the experiences and critical perspective she offered led to my rethinking a perception or assumption I had and, in many cases, prompted me to make an immediate change in my practice. These reconsiderations and changes constitute for me, as I look back at them, a series of steps that carried me further along the path I was already committed to walking — toward more fully integrating student voice into my pedagogical planning and practice.

In this essay, I draw on excerpts from my weekly reflections as well as my recollections of our work together to reveal what my interactions with the student consultant looked like, how they shaped my approach to the course, and how they continue to influence my practice today. I present a series of glimpses into our work together to show how it unfolded over the course of the term.

Inside Our Meetings

Week 3: Our First Meeting

Because my student consultant attended a neighboring college, she and I were initially interested in understanding the culture not just of the class, but also of our respective institutions of higher education. We talked about institutional norms, the differences between co-ed and single-sex classrooms, and the differences between non-sectarian and religiously affiliated learning environments. We were especially interested in how these structures and cultural codes affected student voice and engagement. In the reflection for that week, I wrote:

My consultant and I are exploring issues of classroom participation. We are trying to understand how a class develops a particular culture; to what extent it derives from the culture of the university, the department, or the particular dynamics among individuals in this particular course; and to what extent a professor can influence its formation and evolution.

At this meeting, my consultant made two suggestions that I could immediately implement to address the participation imbalance we were already noticing in the course. First, she recommended that I pull aside one of the more vocal males in the class and compliment him on his strong contributions, while encouraging him to try to let others have a chance to respond. In fact, she suggested that I ask him to follow “the five person rule,” which means that five people must speak before he chimes in again. In addition to having that conversation with the student, at my consultant’s urging, I passed out index cards in the next class to all the students and asked them to jot down any things I could do to promote more equitable participation among all members of the class. Their responses ranged from limiting students to two comments per discussion to setting up more opportunities for small group discussion. Already my student consultant was encouraging me to solicit student voice, not just in response to the course material, but in response to the pedagogical challenges with which we were grappling, something which I continue to do now in informal ways throughout the semester.

Week 4: Our Second Meeting

My consultant and I discussed the students’ index card responses. We puzzled over what to do when the responses contradicted one another. For example, while one student advocated for cold-calling, others dismissed this practice as unfair and unproductive. My consultant strongly disagreed with those who felt that cold-calling was unwarranted. She explained that cold calling reflects an expectation that everyone is a) prepared and b) able to contribute an idea or perspective. Her insistence that this viewpoint be communicated prompted me to rethink whether and how I enforce and enact the expectations I set out on the first day of the course (and on the syllabus) regarding participation and preparedness. By refraining from cold-calling, was I allowing these expectations to lapse? Was it fair to only remind students of my expectations with a mid-term participation grade? Should I involve students in using my guidelines on the syllabus to develop a participation rubric, which also includes their ideas about what strong participation entails?

At this meeting, my student consultant also observed a trend that completely reoriented my own perspective on the class. She focused me on the tendency of three of the most vocal males to band together to publicly agree with and “reinforce one another’s views,” as she put it. In my reflection, I expressed concern “that this tendency is detracting from their own learning (because they seem closed-off and unreceptive to hearing the ideas of others—including my own, their classmates, and the texts/research we read) and creating a toxic air in the classroom.” I honestly do not know if my consultant had not been there to point out this phenomenon to me how long I would have remained oblivious to it. Her observations helped shift my attention from the single student whom I had pulled aside in the previous week to the dynamic he had developed with two other males in the course.

As we analyzed the classroom dynamics further, my consultant and I discussed possible responses to it. I shared with her a chart I had encountered in a discussion about managing bias in youth participatory action research, and speculated about how it could be profitably applied to classroom participation. The chart was a 2×2 matrix. The question on the top asked: Are personal experiences named and used as resources for interpreting data? Yes or No. The question along the side asked: Is interpreter open to data or disconfirming evidence? Yes or No. The box with the two yes answers was labeled: The interpretive zone. My consultant suggested that we adapt the chart by replacing “data” with “arguments in class texts” and encouraged me to discuss the idea of the “interpretive zone” with the class. She also goaded me to speak directly and openly with the class about what constitutes learning and how it happens. She reminded me that learning is “uncomfortable, that it stretches you outside your comfort zone.” She compared her experiences in classes that challenged and unsettled her versus those in which she could assume a more passive, complacent role. As she told these stories and reflected on her own experiences, she made me want to teach in a way that would prompt my students to catalogue my course in the challenging and unsettling bin. Another argument, she reminded me, for cold-calling. Mindful of her words, I have since developed greater comfort with this practice, using it more regularly throughout all my courses.

Week 5: Our Third Meeting

During this week, my consultant and I realized that the changes I had made in the last two classes (cold-calling, talking about the “interpretive zone,” and asking students to develop a participation rubric that included evidence of students being in “the interpretive zone”) had not done enough to counteract what I now recognized in my weekly posting as the “negative energy emanating from” certain male members of the class. My consultant suggested that I consider disallowing two of the males from sitting together. I observed that allowing them to sit together actually made it easier to separate them in groupwork, which we did frequently, if we counted off by numbers; however, she pointed out that before I began class, their loud conversations often set the tone for class. She drew my attention to the importance of shutting down this talk at the pass, prompting me to try to be the first person in the classroom so I could engage students in productive, relevant conversations from the get-go. I now always try to beat the students to the classroom and to engage them in conversation as they enter. My presence, I now realize, has the benefit not just of redirecting or cutting off unproductive conversations and breaking up cliques, but also of conveying my preparedness and excitement for class. To the students, I appear eager for class, not burdened by having to show up.

Week 6: Our Fourth Meeting

During the seventh week of the course, the students were scheduled to deliver mid-term presentations. Per the syllabus, the students were instructed to

choose a current district, state or federal policy related to issues of diversity, research the history and background of the policy and examine its implications for schools, classrooms, teachers, and students. During the week of February 22nd, you will present your findings to the class in an 8-10 minute presentation, involving PowerPoint.

In anticipation of these presentations, my consultant and I spent our fourth meeting discussing how we could structure the presentations to promote active listening and learning. My consultant observed how oftentimes during student presentations, the other students sit back and tune out. Given the timing constraints of the class, we realized that though we would not be able to promote discussion after each presentation, we could establish a structure that could invest students in one another's presentations and build classroom community and mutual accountability.

First, I sent an email to all students, warning them that before they presented I would ask them to submit a slip of paper to me with their objectives: what it was they wanted or intended their classmates to learn from their presentation. Before the first presenter spoke, I explained the system my consultant and I had invented to foster greater active learning: After each presentation, I asked students to offer feedback to one another anonymously on a note card, and I told them that this feedback would be incorporated into my own narrative assessment. Finally, after all the presentations concluded, I would randomly distribute a notecard with the name of a classmate on the top to each student. The student would then be charged with writing what he or she learned from the presentation of the classmate whose name topped the card. When I gave the students feedback and a grade, I not only incorporated their peers' suggestions, but also reflected on the alignment between their stated objectives and the evidence of their peers' learning from the note cards. The students appeared to appreciate the opportunity to support one another and their note cards did demonstrate that they had paid attention to and indeed learned from one another.

Weeks 7-8: The Mid-Term Evaluation

Participating in TLI provided a structured opportunity for me to solicit mid-course evaluations from the students. Prior to my experience with TLI, I had frequently engaged in this practice, routinely asking: "What, if anything, is going well in the course and what, if anything, would you like to see changed?" My student consultant and I spent a good amount of time reflecting on what questions we should ask on the evaluation and why. Ultimately, we came up with the following questions, which she typed up and submitted to me as a worksheet for the students in the course to complete.

- This class is most productive for me when...
- What is the professor doing well and what could the professor change to improve your learning experience in this class?

- What are you doing well and what could you do differently to improve your learning experience in this class?
- How often do you refer to your syllabus?

It was due entirely to her advocacy that questions 3 and 4 were included. She argued that the kinds of questions asked convey messages about the students' responsibilities for learning—yet another way to remind students of my expectation that they take an active role in their own learning process. I continue to ask questions 2 and 3 of students now on mid-term evaluations.

My student consultant collected all the feedback, typed it up so I could have a single document with the responses organized by question, analyzed the responses for patterns and trends, and led a discussion with the students over the course of two classes based on their feedback. So that she could assume the role of ombudsperson, I was not present in the room during these discussions; however, she did debrief with me on the conversations, and offered me constructive ideas for tweaking the course in the remaining weeks, per the students' suggestions.

For example, the students overwhelmingly felt that class was most productive for them when they worked in small groups; however, they felt that sometimes the report-backs from these small groups were either rushed, overly-repetitive or stilted. My consultant suggested that after the small group discussions, I ask each member to take a moment to jot down one key take-away or insight from their discussion and then cold-call various members from the groups to read what they had written, performing a modified version of the think-pair-share exercise. She again emphasized to me that such a set up would promote mutual accountability and force students to articulate their learning. She explained, "Every profession requires you to express yourself coherently; part of learning is learning how to be comfortable in your discomfort."

Week 9: Our Seventh Meeting

During her observation this week, my consultant focused her attention on one student in particular, who in previous discussions we realized sat in my blind spot, immediately to my right. She described his facial expressions and body posture during whole group discussion, what he did when I turned my back to write on the board, and how he interacted with his classmates in the small group activities. Perhaps because he sat in my blind spot and because he tended to be quite quiet in class, I did not feel I knew this student very well. I wondered how interested and engaged he was. His written work did not always demonstrate a strong command of the material. He was, for me, at that point, a shadowy presence in class.

My consultant's descriptions, however, suggested that he was highly engaged and responsive—quite animated in the small group discussion. To my surprise, she relayed that he frequently rolled his eyes, even cringed during the whole class discussion when his peers expressed strong viewpoints with which he seemed to disagree.

My consultant encouraged me to ask the student to meet with me during office hours so we could chat about his experiences in the course. That conversation during office hours turned into a lengthy and productive discussion about not only the course, but also his career interests. It led me to create an alternative final project for him, more directly tied to his interests, and it led him,

I believe, to sign up to take another course with me the next year, and to become a frequent visitor at my office hours. If my consultant had not drawn my attention to this student and appealed to me to meet with him outside of class, I doubt that he and I would have the relationship we have today. As a result of this surprising turn of events, I try now to pay more heed to my blind-spots and to seek out and make time for those students who seem to fly beneath my radar.

Week 10: Our Eighth Meeting

In anticipation of the final group projects, my consultant and I spent time discussing how to arrange students in their groups. After much deliberation, we decided that it was best that I design the groups rather than allowing students to choose; however, their input would inform my choices. On a note card, I would ask them to write with whom they would ideally like to work and why as well as their ideas, at this point, about topic choices.

At this point, we also discussed an activity, which my consultant thought would be appropriate for the class: the human barometer. In this activity, students stand against a wall. A statement is read aloud, and students move to various sides of the room, as if positioning themselves on a Likert-type scale, to indicate their agreement or disagreement. Students from various positions are then asked to explain their placement. As students listen to one another's explanations, they are free (in fact encouraged) to move. My consultant thought that this exercise would help promote responsive thinking on the part of the students; if they indeed moved and were complimented for having the courage to move, they would understand that the purpose of discussing these difficult ideas is to push themselves to consider new perspectives and to have their own understandings and viewpoints evolve. She made a strong case to me that this activity would unmask the learning-in-class (as opposed to learning-for-class) process. She also came up with several of the statements I could read, based on the course material.

When I tried it the next week, the human barometer was a triumph, and I have since used it to great effect in many of my classes. The students loved it: it generated a rich discussion (we only got through 2 statements), and it led to one of the most memorable moments in the class, when one student walked from one end of the room clear across to the other end, persuaded by the passionate and insightful argument of a classmate.

Week 11: Our Ninth Meeting

After relaying the account of the implemented human barometer activity to my consultant, I brought out the note cards the students had submitted about their final projects. We discussed various grouping rationales on the basis of the students' expressed preferences. My consultant, at that point, knew the students' tendencies as well as I did and she could anticipate how various arrangements would or would not work. Her thoughtful insights helped me feel more intentional about the grouping rationale.

At this point, she also suggested that I ask the students to write contracts with their group mates. She advised that the contracts take the following form:

For my final project...

- Here is what I need from you:
- Here is what I will offer/promise you:
- Here is what I expect of you:

My signature:

Your signature(s):

My consultant suggested that rather than asking students to complete these contracts in class, I allow them to take them home and think about them and ask them to bring what she called “something of substance” back to turn into me. I would then make copies for each group member.

Though a formal reflection was required on the syllabus as part of the final project, my consultant advised that I mention to students that this reflection should include commentary on how they and their groupmates did or did not honor their contracts. I have since used this format in two other courses to structure group projects, each time with great success.

Week 12: Taking Stock

In our final meeting, my student consultant and I reflected on the course and my growth as an instructor. In particular, we looked back on her advice to me that I be more explicit about my intentions for my students’ learning. Over the course of the semester, she had advised me to create structures and spaces that would enable me to share my goals and expectations. For example, she encouraged me to provide guiding questions for the readings; to offer handouts after mini-lectures with bullet points that, in her words, “solidify the main take-aways,” and with blank spaces for their notes and questions; to generate a reading guide that would scaffold students in parsing difficult theoretical texts or dense research papers; to co-construct grading rubrics with the students; to discuss openly what we mean by “intellectual risk-taking” and to acknowledge the discomfort that often accompanies learning.

Under her guidance I had expanded my own pedagogical repertoire; I had learned about myself and my tendencies as an instructor; and I had revised some of my own assumptions about what students need and how best to support their learning. I had also developed a deep, trusting relationship with a student, and already I anticipated missing her. In my blog that week, I wrote:

I sometimes felt that the most noteworthy or interesting things to happen in our class happened on days when my student consultant was not there. I do not know that it would be practical to have a consultant attend every single class, but I bring this up as an example of how keenly I felt her absence on the days I was not able to debrief with her afterwards.

Our relationship was always professional and collegial, but there was a warmth to it as well, a sense of mutual respect, even affection. Because she was my ally and my advisor, she helped transform what might have been one of the most frustrating professional experiences of my

career into one of the most rewarding, and my teaching today is enriched because of all that she taught me.

Conclusion

Before I began meeting with my consultant, I have to admit that the prospect of opening my classroom to the critique of another was intimidating. I felt vulnerable and more self-conscious about my teaching than I ever have before; however, now when I think back on my experiences with my consultant, the sole feeling that washes over me is gratitude. On the final reflection for the TLI, I wrote:

I learned so much from our [my consultant and my] debriefings, as they gave me a chance to reflect and articulate my own sense of what happened and why, and as my student consultant pushed me to inquire further into my practice.... My consultant helped me to see things going on in the class that I hadn't noticed before. She gave me helpful suggestions and ideas for future classes, both this term and next. And she offered (greatly appreciated) validation and support. [But] the most significant benefits were gaining understanding and insight from a student's perspective not only on what I do or do not do in the class, but also on what her peers (fellow classmates) do and do not do to affect her learning experience.

One of the things I have found particularly helpful in my conversations with my student consultant is the framing she offers. She often pauses before speaking and says, "I imagine that if I were a student in this class, I would feel.../I would want.../I would need...." One thing I would like to continue to do is build in reflection time after each class, when I can pause and envision the course experience (that particular class, the handout, the assignment descriptions, etc) from the vantage point of a student, to try to see it through different sets of eyes, not just from my own perspective.

Although I entered into the TLI already a strong proponent of student voice, this experience affirmed my belief that students have unique perspectives on the learning environment, which, when shared, can bring about changes in classroom practice that support deeper, more lasting and more substantive joint learning. My consultant no longer walks alongside me; however, her words and wisdom continue to guide, encourage, and inspire me as I continue my quest to become a more effective and reflective teacher-learner.