

## Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education

---

Issue 17 Winter 2016

---

# Five Things I Learned from Working with the Student-Consultant for Teaching and Learning Program

Morgan Luker  
*Reed College*

Benjamin Morris  
*Reed College*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://repository.brynmawr.edu/tlthe>

 Part of the [Higher Education and Teaching Commons](#)

[Let us know how access to this document benefits you.](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Luker, Morgan and Morris, Benjamin "Five Things I Learned from Working with the Student-Consultant for Teaching and Learning Program," *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education: Iss. 17* (2016), <http://repository.brynmawr.edu/tlthe/vol1/iss17/2>

## **FIVE THINGS I LEARNED FROM WORKING WITH THE STUDENT-CONSULTANT FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING PROGRAM**

*Morgan Luker, Assistant Professor of Music, Reed College*

*Benjamin Morris, Class of 2015, Reed College*

Morgan Luker is Assistant Professor of Music at Reed College in Portland, Oregon. An ethnomusicologist, Morgan's scholarly work focuses on the cultural politics of Latin American music, with special emphasis on contemporary tango music in Buenos Aires, Argentina. His first book on this topic is forthcoming from the University of Chicago Press. Morgan teaches a wide variety of courses on world music and culture at Reed, including "Music and Politics," "Latin American Popular Music," and "Musical Ethnography," among many others. Benjamin Morris graduated from Reed College in 2015 and is currently studying developmental psychology at the University of Cambridge. Morgan and Ben collaborated on "The Cultural Study of Music," an introductory-level course in ethnomusicology that is open to all students in the college and required of music majors. The class examines how music communicates and is made meaningful within specific historical and cultural contexts, taking a comparative approach to a variety of world musical cultures.

### **1. I have a lot to learn about teaching.**

**MORGAN:** I have a deep commitment to achieving excellence in the classroom. That is a core part of who I am as a professor at Reed. But the fact is that I have received very little training in how to be an effective teacher. I served as a teaching assistant while in graduate school and later taught several courses on my own, even supervising other graduate teaching assistants, but I wouldn't call that training as much as being thrown in the deep end. The important question at that time wasn't whether I was implementing effective pedagogical strategies but if I would sink or swim. When I arrived at Reed there was a lot of emphasis on being a great teacher, but I had very little sense of what that meant in practice, especially in the conference style or discussion driven undergraduate classroom that is predominant at Reed. For the first year or two my teaching work felt like a matter of trial and error more than anything, getting into the classroom and hoping things worked out, which, in hindsight, isn't really that different from the sink or swim feeling I had as a graduate student. That is why the new Center for Teaching and Learning has been such a wonderful resource for me, and why I jumped at the chance to participate in the student-consultant for teaching and learning program. More than anything, partnering with Ben through the student teaching consultant program has helped me understand what achieving excellence in the classroom looks like, what it feels like. Pedagogy is a field that exists, and there is a lot to learn.

**BEN:** Teacher training is not something I ever gave much thought to before I started considering teaching as a profession for myself. As a student, you inevitably encounter all manner of teachers, often with visibly different degrees of experience; however, it is rare to see teaching as something that is dynamic and constructed. That is precisely what the student consultant program is about. Even the greatest teachers can continue to improve and hone their craft. As a consultant, I wondered how I might give informed advice about teaching until I realized that the program

was only asking me to bring my experience as a student. While I knew little about teacher training at Reed, I knew a great deal about ‘student training.’ After three years at Reed, I had learned much about conference style learning and learned enough to know that being a good conference member is an ongoing process. I was eager to participate in the program because I felt as though it truly respected the value of student input and I wanted to support such efforts. I also had a burgeoning interest in teaching and felt that this experience would shape me as a teacher and learner.

## **2. Collaboration is powerful.**

MORGAN: As a teacher I had become accustomed to being the central authority figure in the classroom, so it felt like taking a real risk to collaborate so closely with a student teaching consultant, to invite Ben into the classroom and give him the space to say whatever he wants about what he observes. But on balance it has been a totally positive experience, even transformative. There is an awful lot going on in the classroom, and having an additional set of eyes and ears there to monitor and keep track of things is really valuable. I have a background as a serious jazz musician, and teaching is a lot like playing music; it is impossible to perform to the best of your abilities while also observing yourself in a detached way. Once you become self-conscious, the whole thing falls apart. So it is amazing to have my consultant’s play-by-play record of what happened during a particular class session, because once class time is up and the students walk out the door it is hard to remember the details. Where before I would leave with little more than an intuitive feeling that class conversations went well (or not), I now have a detailed understanding of which students contributed to our conversation, how many times they contributed, who they were speaking to when they contributed, how many minutes they spoke for, how many minutes I spoke for in response, and so on. Working with Ben gave me a much better sense of what was actually happening in my classroom, and that was a real revelation. Another thing that I think made our collaboration even more powerful is that Ben didn’t have any previous experience in my field and was not involved in music. This allowed us to focus on the pedagogical things that were going on in the class beyond the details of the content. He wasn’t helping understand how to teach this material better, but how to teach better period.

BEN: The program’s success rests on the partnership between student consultant and professor. It is a partnership that is truly collaborative. I was initially unsure about how to help as a student consultant, especially having never studied music. After the first lecture, I was simultaneously wary of seeming judgmental and of having little to contribute. I knew that insight into Morgan’s teaching would come with time and familiarity. I was anxious to ensure that Morgan saw I was a resource, not an evaluator. Thankfully, these concerns were quickly alleviated because we were able to forge our own dynamic. Working together, we organically developed key areas to focus on both over the entire course and on a week-to-week basis. Thus, we were both able to direct and shape the process. Having Morgan’s guidance, I could observe the class as an informed and allied partner, not as a detached third party. These observations could be both honed and complicated through our discussions, creating new pedagogical topics to focus on and new experiments to try in the classroom. The discursive element of this process should not be overlooked. Actually sitting down with Morgan gave us the chance to share and respond to one another’s perspectives. Often our views were in harmony and we were immediately able expand on what was brought up. Perhaps equally as often, we had seen things differently or one of us

had noticed something the other may have missed. These are the key opportunities that this kind of collaboration allows for, where talking with someone opens your eyes to something new. The partnership is so powerful because student and teacher are able to work together to adapt the program and make it work for them.

### **3. Little things make a big difference.**

MORGAN: Ben's attention to detail helped me identify seemingly small things that nevertheless had a big impact on class dynamics. For example, he pointed out that I often peppered my explanations of class material—including my descriptions of technical music terminology—with the words “clearly” or “obviously.” It was something I did without even being aware of it, like a verbal tic. Nevertheless, using those words made students feel more reluctant to express doubts or ask questions about course materials, which weren't in fact obvious at all, especially to those who were encountering them for the first time, as most of my students in this introductory course were. He also helped me understand how to give students more space to enter our conversations, showing that the seemingly endless awkward silences that occasionally happened in our group conversations—which I tended to quickly fill with the sound of my own voice—usually lasted no more than fifteen to twenty seconds. They marked moments where students were gathering their thoughts more than dead ends in the conversation, and certainly weren't invitations for me to say more about what I thought about whatever topic we happened to be covering that day. Learning how to not occupy those spaces, how to keep them open for student participation, also meant that I occasionally needed to be willing to let some of the points that I wanted to share about the material go without being said. As a professor that felt hard at first, but it made for a much more inclusive and creative classroom experience overall.

BEN: Observing a classroom as a student consultant is an active process. This program is predicated on the importance of having a student perspective when thinking about teaching; however, that student perspective radically differs from the perspective we normally bring into the classroom as students. While a student might be trying to absorb content or to participate in a heated discussion, a consultant needs to look beyond those factors and see the classroom more globally. For example, in listening to a professor's lecture, it may be most important for a consultant to gauge how the students are responding. Moment-by-moment descriptions of such dynamics become meaningful evidence of larger patterns upon reflection. Through these accounts, the power of the little things becomes clear. Whether it is seeing the effects of using a particular word or recognizing that a seemingly inattentive student is actually diligently taking notes, consultants are able to see the minutia of the classroom in a way that is impossible while actively teaching. This level of detail also offers an appreciation for the heterogeneity of the students in any class. Every teacher knows that teaching is far from a one-size-fits-all endeavor. At best, teaching is one-size-fits-most. Keeping track of the little things helps to figure out what works for which students and how to address those differences.

### **4. Content is only the beginning.**

MORGAN: Working with Ben through the student-consultant for teaching and learning program, I realize that I used to think of each class session as a mode of content delivery. We have this much time; we have this much content. The primary challenge of teaching, from this point of

view, was to make the two categories correspond to one another. That was certainly the approach I took to the lecturing I did before arriving at Reed, but it was also true of my early efforts at conference style teaching. I would come into the classroom with a secret checklist of all the points that (I thought) needed to come up in our supposedly open ended conversations. If students didn't arrive at these points on their own, I would just rattle them off right before the end of class, sending everyone the message that this is what we should have been talking about the whole time. In hindsight, I can see that it wasn't a very positive or productive strategy for anyone, including me. After working with Ben, I learned that I should think of each class session as an opportunity to reinforce the kind of learning I wanted students to be doing with our course materials, be it analytical listening, focused discussion of the readings, open conversation in small or large groups, and, yes, occasional lecture style explanations from me. As basic as it might sound, this approach to class time came as a real revelation, and has completely transformed how I plan my lessons. Where I used to worry about if I would have enough time to cover all the content, now I plan according to how much time I want the students to spend on what kind of activities. I used to feel too shy to ask students to do these different kinds of work in class, but as I learned from Ben, students are asked to do different things all the time in their classes.

**BEN:** The practice of teaching seems fundamentally concerned with what knowledge students retain after leaving the classroom. Thus, there is inevitably a question about what a professor wants their students to get out of a course, a unit, or even a particular session. Working with Morgan, I got a glimpse into just how much planning and preparation goes into structuring each session. In this way, teaching is invisible art; when it is done best and with great effort, it looks effortless. Students rarely put much thought into just how consciously a course is curated, focusing instead on absorbing what content might be important for the next test or for the next paper. From both sides of the table, it can be deceptively easy to consider class pragmatically. In observing Morgan's class and discussing his goals for the course, it quickly became clear that he was trying to do something much larger than communicate content. Like all great teachers, he wanted to shape his students as learners. I think having a second pair of eyes helped him to take that perspective more consciously and to recognize how he was able to do that effectively. This was one of many times where I felt I functioned more as a sounding board than a force of my own, helping Morgan to see something that he already seemed to know.

## **5. Feedback is helpful.**

**MORGAN:** Being able to talk with Ben about pedagogical issues on a weekly basis has been tremendously helpful. As a faculty member I really exist in a vacuum, without getting much feedback until after the end of the semester when my formal teaching evaluations are returned to me. The information conveyed in those evaluations, for how helpful it can be, really represents just a moment in time. On that day students felt this way and wrote this. The student consultant program is much more process oriented, providing substantial feedback on a weekly basis. This allows me to reflect upon and adjust my teaching strategy from session to session, not semester to semester. At the same time, the things Ben and I worked on together didn't end when this class was over or when Ben graduated from Reed and went off to do the other wonderful things he is doing. We worked together to build a set of tools and strategies that I can bring to all my teaching work, both now and in the future. And while working with Ben has highlighted huge

areas of my teaching that I need to continuously work on in order to improve my effectiveness in the classroom, a lot of his feedback has been positive. Getting that positive feedback has boosted my confidence as a teacher tremendously. I remember we had a week where I did too much lecturing and felt like I just wasn't very effective. Those sessions won't go down in history as great classes, but it wasn't the end of the world either. Ben helped me see that: "There's a lot to work on. Yes, your instincts are correct, but don't beat yourself up over it." In the absence of other feedback, his words made a big difference to me.

**BEN:** The adaptable, real-time feedback student consultants are able to give is critical to the program. The feedback is so powerful because it comes from a collaborative observer who knows how you taught last week and who has some ideas about next week. End-of-term evaluations are rarely sufficient from a student perspective, in addition to their restricted usefulness for teachers. Students may forget something worthy of comment because too much time had passed. Further, and more consequentially, while end-of-term feedback can help teachers reshape their courses for future years, it is too late to address students' concerns with the students who raised those concerns. The student consultant program is a great step toward remedying this flaw in the structure of course feedback. Working with Morgan, we were able to immediately discuss a previous class and then develop novel things to try and then discuss next week. After having participated in the program for one year, I have come to see that some of the most important parts about being a student consultant are some of the simplest parts. The program offers professors a dedicated time each week to thoughtfully reflect on their teaching. The presence of the consultant allows professors to think out loud, often reaching their own conclusions and then inviting further input. My experience as a student consultant greatly changed my perspective in the classroom, but the program's success stems from the flexible and unique opportunity it presents to the teachers. Teaching well is a learning process that never stops and the student perspective is invaluable to that process.