

Developing ‘Students as Learners and Teachers’: Lessons from ten years of pedagogical partnerships that strive to foster inclusive and responsive practices

Alison Cook-Sather
Bryn Mawr College

Introduction

Writing in the first and the tenth year of the program’s development, respectively, two student partners offered insights based on their participation in Students as Learners and Teachers (SaLT):

“Culturally responsive teaching has been redefined for me as not just [focusing on] visible diversity but rather the culture of the classroom that you can work within.” – Student partner, 2007

“...if we all engaged in partnerships through which we reflect and discuss how teaching and learning experiences can include and value everyone, our campuses would become places of belonging.” – Colón García, 2017

These insights capture two critical re-framings of efforts to create more inclusive and responsive classrooms and campuses. Shifting from focusing on visible diversity to considering more holistically the culture of the classroom opens up this challenge to a wider range of approaches that strive to be inclusive of all students. Likewise, inviting all members of higher education communities into productive reflection, dialogue and partnership could, in and of itself, contribute to the creation of campuses as places of belonging. SaLT aims to do both.

SaLT emerged from a pilot project launched in 2007 in response to a group of five faculty members from different departments at Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges, all of whom expressed a desire to make their classrooms more inclusive of and responsive to the increasing diversity of students enrolled in their courses. We used a start-up grant from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation to develop a pedagogical partnership program focused on addressing the challenges these faculty members had articulated. This case study draws on my ten years of experience as director of SaLT to describe the organizational and historical context, specifications, implementation, partnership practice and evaluation of the program, as well as to summarise the lessons learnt.

Organizational and historical context

Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges are selective, liberal arts colleges located in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. Established in 1885 and 1833, respectively, both have Quaker roots, enroll approximately 1,200 undergraduate students from diverse socio-economic, cultural and educational backgrounds and offer a rigorous curriculum. Both also set high teaching and research standards for faculty and encourage a sense of independence and social responsibility in their students through offering opportunities to collaborate with faculty members in research and to participate in student self-governance.

Case Studies

In this context, and aiming to support the five faculty members who expressed a desire to make their classrooms more inclusive and responsive, I met, in the Fall-2006 semester, with several focus groups consisting of students who identified as people of color, members of groups under-represented on campus, or allies. I sought their advice on how to structure and launch the pilot partnership program: they recommended hiring students of color as the first cohort of student consultants to work with the five faculty members. Following their advice, I paired each of the faculty members with a student of color who expressed interest in participating or was recommended by a faculty member.

Specifications of the project

The five faculty-student pairs who piloted this project worked in semester-long partnerships. The student partners were paid through the grant to visit their faculty partners' courses each week, take detailed observation notes and meet with their partners weekly to analyze, affirm and, where appropriate, make suggestions for revising pedagogical approaches. The student partners were thus positioned as "holders and creators of knowledge" (Delgado-Bernal, 2002, p. 106; Cook-Sather and Agu, 2013) about teaching and learning alongside and in collaboration with their faculty partners. I met weekly with the student partners to explore the meanings of 'diversity' and 'culture', examine the insights generated through their particular positions and perspectives and identify strategies for drawing on these insights, so as to inform the efforts of the faculty partners to make their classrooms more inclusive and responsive.

A set of recommendations emerged from this pilot, which took the form of a report shared with all faculty at the Colleges. The recommendations included: make explicit your stance and pedagogical rationale, as well as your own and students' expectations; get to know students and share your own experiences; provide various forums for participation and use multiple, inclusive examples and illustrations; and analyze the role of silence in classrooms and be allies and advocates (Cook-Sather and Des-Ogugua, to be published). These recommendations are consistent with findings from other studies of creating inclusive classrooms (Harper and Davis, 2016; Hockings, 2010; Lawrie *et al.*, 2017).

In response to faculty feedback and with support from a second grant from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the pilot expanded to include optional seminars to which all faculty could apply, each seminar linked with a one-on-one, semester-long partnership with a student partner. This basic model evolved into SaLT, which remains the signature program of the Colleges' Teaching and Learning Institute. At this point in the program's history, all faculty members who join the Bryn Mawr or Haverford faculties are invited to participate in the program in exchange for a reduced teaching load; now too, faculty at any stage of their careers can participate in stand-alone, one-on-one, pedagogical partnerships with student consultants focused on pedagogical practice or curriculum design and redesign.

Student consultants are second- through fourth-year students enrolled as undergraduates at Bryn Mawr or Haverford College. They major in different fields and bring varying degrees of formal preparation in educational studies (from those with no coursework in education to those pursuing certification to teach at the secondary level). Students apply for this position (they submit an explanation of how they are qualified for the role, procure letters of recommendation – from a faculty or staff member and a student – and sign a confidentiality agreement) and they may not be enrolled in a course to which they are assigned as a

consultant. They attend an orientation and receive a set of guidelines for developing partnerships with faculty members. Through weekly meetings with other student consultants and me as director of the program, they hone the skills and capacities necessary to partner with faculty in the work of developing productively challenging, inclusive and engaging classrooms and courses. Students are paid for all hours they spend on every aspect of this partnership work.

To date, 230 faculty members and 145 student consultants have participated in a total of over 280 partnerships. The program has received grant funding from the Pennsylvania Consortium for Liberal Arts Colleges and the Arthur Vining Davis Foundations, as well as The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, but the majority of the costs are now covered by the Colleges themselves, demonstrating a significant level of institutional commitment. Since the pilot phase of the program, students with a wide range of identities have assumed the role of student consultant through SaLT, but the vast majority claim membership in one or more equity-seeking groups (e.g., students who are racialized, LGBTQ+, first generation). The affirmation the program offers all students, through valuing their being and knowledge, is particularly important for those who are under-represented in and underserved by higher education.

Implementation and discussion of practice

Every summer, interested faculty and students apply to participate in SaLT and partners are matched based almost entirely on participants' schedules; every semester, between five and fifteen faculty and students participate in pedagogical partnerships. All student-faculty pairs use the guidelines provided to establish and embark on their partnerships, but they build their own approaches to working together, informed by their identities and commitments and depending on the size, subject matter and learning goals of the class.

The student consultants begin their work with their faculty partners by focusing on what is working well and why in order to build a relationship founded on trust. They then draw on their observation notes and their conversations with their faculty partners to identify ways that the faculty members' classrooms could be more inclusive of and responsive to a diversity of students. This can mean naming strategies of which faculty are already aware as general pedagogical approaches, but not specifically as approaches that contribute to the creation of more inclusive and responsive classrooms; it can include as well suggesting approaches faculty might not have considered.

All participants have access to the original report or an article in which a student partner and I have reframed the recommendations (Cook-Sather and Des-Ogugua, to be published). The basic recommendations have not changed over the last ten years, but because faculty need and receptivity vary, and because both students and socio-political dynamics have changed, student partners, in consultation with me and other student partners, consider their faculty partners' espoused pedagogical commitments as well as their actual classroom practices and navigate between supporting and productively challenging their faculty partners. Such negotiations constitute a key commitment of the program; whilst we offer resources and recommendations, we do not impose any particular pedagogical approach. The feedback that student partners offer strives to make faculty more aware, confident and receptive to student perspectives on pedagogical practice and, ultimately, to enrich the approaches faculty take to developing more inclusive and responsive classrooms and courses.

Evaluation

Every semester, I gather feedback from participants in these pedagogical partnerships. Whilst some faculty do not fully embrace or maximize the potential of partnership, the vast majority do and thereby: gain insight into students' experiences; develop or deepen awareness of the experiences of under-represented and underserved students in particular; experience at once greater confidence and greater willingness to take risks in their pedagogy; and critically reflect on ways in which they can transfer some – although not all – aspects of their work with their student partners into partnership with the students enrolled in their courses.

Informal analyses suggest that the benefits described above carry over into conversations among faculty in their respective departments and into faculty-wide conversations about how to engage and work with the increasing diversity of students in increasingly divisive political times. It is also the case, however, that some faculty reject the premise of this form of pedagogical partnership and feel suspicious, distrustful and dismissive of the program. These perspectives mean that student partners, program support administrators and I have to be especially cautious about how the program is constructed and situated.

Regular mid-semester and end-of-semester feedback suggests that student consultants experience: improved understanding of others' experiences in the teaching and learning process; deeper critical thinking about teaching, learning and culture; a greater sense of comfort and confidence; and a sense of agency as students and, in some cases, as teachers. These outcomes influence their experiences as students in their own courses, their relationships with other faculty and students and their sense of their place and capacity within and beyond their institutions. Like their faculty partners, though, student consultants can experience vulnerability and uncertainty, particularly if they claim membership in one or more under-represented and underserved groups, but also simply in their role as students striving to be partners with faculty (Cook-Sather, 2015).

Lessons learnt

I have learnt many lessons from this work, but here I focus on insights I have gained into the structural dimensions of facilitating pedagogical partnership work that is specifically focused on fostering greater inclusivity and responsiveness.

1. Continuing dialogue with, support of, and affirmation of student partners is essential

One of the most basic ways in which this program fosters inclusive and responsive practice is through inviting students who are traditionally under-represented and underserved by institutions of higher education into the role of student consultant, affirming their identities and their knowledge (Delgado-Bernal, 2002) and supporting them in developing the language, conviction and courage to engage in dialogue with faculty. Student feedback consistently points to the role of the weekly meetings of student partners and me as spaces within which they feel both affirmed for who they are and supported in developing these capacities. This is especially important for students from under-represented and underserved groups, who often have to do both intellectual and emotional work that is invisible, undervalued and uncompensated; it is, nonetheless, important for *all* students as

they develop self-awareness, a sense of where they fit into larger social structures and of what role in promoting inclusive and responsive practices they can play.

Equally important is what I have learnt from the conceptual frames student partners find useful in analyzing partnership work. For instance, student partners have introduced me to the concepts of brave spaces (Cook-Sather, 2016) and epistemic in/justice (de Bie *et al.*, to be published) and have presented new insights on the relationship between resistance and resilience (Ntem, 2017). Our explorations of each of these concepts have at once affirmed the experience and knowledge of the student partners, challenged and deepened my own thinking as director of the SaLT program and informed wider conversations about pedagogical partnership and inclusive practice.

2. Reaching and supporting, rather than alienating, faculty can be a challenge

One of the greatest challenges of pedagogical partnership work focused on inclusiveness and responsiveness is finding ways to reach and support faculty without shutting down or overwhelming them. Those faculty who have not experienced being under-represented in or underserved by higher education are particularly susceptible to these tendencies. Faculty who have been under-represented in or underserved by higher education can experience very different kinds of resistance to both engaging in conversations about making their classrooms inclusive and engaging in partnership with student consultants.

The increasingly tight job market and the increasing divisiveness in the wider world exacerbate both kinds of faculty vulnerability, especially of those new to institutions who do not yet have a sense of the institutional cultures or secure positions. Trying to reach faculty through pedagogical partnership is both particularly difficult and, I would argue, particularly important in these cases and times. Student and faculty colleagues and I have emphasized the importance of trust and affirmation as we work to transform classrooms and institutions of higher education into more egalitarian learning spaces (Cook-Sather *et al.*, 2017).

3. Flexibility and evolution of the overall program are critical

It is easy for programmatic structures to ossify—for “the way we’ve always done it” to become “the way it has to be done.” Since November 2016, faculty fear, distrust, and sense of vulnerability have intensified on US higher education campuses; faculty and students of all identities must therefore rethink how they engage in higher education.

Given these shifts as they intersect with the perpetual challenges of creating inclusive and responsive classrooms, student partners, faculty partners and I are in the process of rethinking how the partnership program might be structured to support participants in the best possible ways, such as having the option to work with student partners outside of the classroom observation framework. Creating inclusive and responsive classrooms can be supported in different ways for different faculty partners and developing those ways, in partnership with faculty and student participants, is a respectful and generative approach. Therefore, a final lesson learnt that I want to emphasize is the importance of flexibility within and evolution of the program.

Conclusion

The 'Students as Learners and Teachers' project continues to be developed, both as a transformative approach to work in higher education and as a specific pedagogical partnership program. The overwhelmingly positive experiences and outcomes reported by the majority of faculty and student partners and the educative struggles and challenges experienced by a smaller subset of participants offer insight into the revolutionary nature of this work and the thoughtful attention necessary for pursuing and sustaining it. Productively framing and reframing efforts to create more inclusive and responsive classrooms in particular, as the students whose statements opened this discussion did, is another necessary part of our continuing development as learners and teachers – all of us.

Reference list

- Colón García, A. (2017) 'Building a sense of belonging through pedagogical partnership.' *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education*, 22. Available at: <http://repository.brynmawr.edu/tithe/vol1/iss22/2> (Accessed: 15 January 2017).
- Cook-Sather, A. (2016) 'Creating brave spaces within and through student-faculty pedagogical partnerships.' *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education*, 18. Available at: <http://repository.brynmawr.edu/tithe/vol1/iss18/1> (Accessed: 15 January 2017).
- Cook-Sather, A. (2015) 'Dialogue across differences of position, perspective, and identity: Reflective practice in/on a student-faculty pedagogical partnership program.' *Teachers College Record*, 117(2).
- Cook-Sather, A. and Agu, P. (2013) 'Students of color and faculty members working together toward culturally sustaining pedagogy.' In: Groccia J.E. and Cruz L. (eds.) *To improve the academy: Resources for faculty, instructional, and organizational development* (Vol. 32, 271-285). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Cook-Sather, A. and Des-Ogugua, C. (to be published) 'Lessons we still need to learn on creating more inclusive and responsive classrooms: recommendations from one student-faculty partnership program.' *International Journal of Inclusive Education*.
- Cook-Sather, A., Schlosser, J., Sweeney, A., Peterson, L., Cassidy, K. and Colon-Garcia, A. (2017) 'The pedagogical benefits of enacting positive psychology practices through a student-faculty partnership approach to academic development.' *International Journal for Academic Development*.
- de Bie, A, Marquis, E., Cook-Sather, A. and Luqueño, L. (to be published) 'Valuing knowledge(s) and cultivating confidence: Contributing to epistemic justice via student-faculty pedagogical partnerships.' *International Perspectives in Higher Education: Strategies for Fostering Inclusive Classrooms*, Volume 3. *Innovations in Higher Education Teaching and Learning*.

Case Studies

Delgado-Bernal, D. (2002) 'Critical race theory, Latino critical theory, and critical raced-gendered epistemologies: Recognizing students of color as holders and creators of knowledge.' *Qualitative Inquiry*, 8(1), 105-126. Available at: <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/107780040200800107> (Accessed: 15 February 2013).

Harper, S. R. and Davis, C. H. F. III. (2016) 'Eight actions to reduce racism in college classrooms.' AAUP. Available at: <https://www.aaup.org/comment/3881#.WhTRGbT81E5> (Accessed: 10 January 2017).

Hockings, C. (2010) *Inclusive learning and teaching in higher education: A synthesis of research*. York: The Higher Education Academy. Available at: https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/resources/detail/evidencenet/Inclusive_learning_and_teaching_in_higher_education (Accessed: 12 November 2017).

Lawrie, G., Marquis, E., Fuller, E., Newman, T., Qiu, M., Nomikoudis, M., Roelofs, F. and Van Dam, L. (2017) 'Moving towards inclusive learning and teaching: A review and synthesis of recent literature.' *Teaching & Learning Inquiry*, 5(1). Available at: <http://tlijournal.com/tli/index.php/TLI/article/view/141/157> (Accessed: 10 January 2017).

Ntem, A. (2017, May) 'Relating resistance and resilience in student-faculty pedagogical partnership.' Poster presentation, McMaster Summer Institute on Students as Partners. Hamilton, Canada.