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From Traditional Accountability to Shared Responsibility: The Benefits and Challenges of Student Consultants Gathering Midcourse Feedback in College Classrooms

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Abstract

The explicit purpose of gathering feedback in college classes is to improve those courses, usually along the lines of structure, organization, pace, or some other aspect of the course over which the professor typically has control. A potential outcome that is less immediately obvious is the shift that can take place regarding who is responsible and in what ways for the analysis and revision of pedagogical practices at the college level. In this article I take as a foundation for my discussion the premises of new wave student voice work, and I describe a project through which students were positioned as consultants who gathered midcourse feedback for faculty members. I analyze how those student consultants supported faculty members in revising not only their courses but also their relationships with students—both student consultants and students enrolled in the courses.

Key Words: midcourse feedback, student voice, dialogue, change, responsibility

The ostensible purpose of gathering feedback from students enrolled in a course is to assess what is working and what could be improved in that course. The common practice, however, is to gather such feedback at the end of a semester—a practice that has come to constitute in most college and university settings one component of faculty members' accountability. While such an approach might inform the revision of subsequent iterations of the course, and thus speak to an institutional sort of accountability, it does little for the students currently enrolled. Gathering feedback at the end of a class in anticipation of revising a subsequent iteration of the course assumes that student feedback is generic—that it can be applied to any class—rather than recognizing that student feedback is context and group specific: it is relevant to that particular class and participants and not necessarily to other ones. This approach to gathering student feedback assumes as well that while students can offer their perspectives and opinions, it is the faculty member who decides, on his or her own, what to listen to and whether or not to act on student feedback. For these reasons, gathering end-of-semester student feedback constitutes a form of accountability that can reproduce the traditional model of

instruction according to which students are recipients not co-constructors of their education (Cook-Sather, 2006a, 2002).

The project I discuss in this article provides an example of one effort to re-imagine not only the process of gathering student feedback on courses but also, more broadly, the role of students in critiquing and reforming their educational experiences. I argue that both revisions can move faculty members from traditional accountability toward shared responsibility. Proposed and co-designed by a group of students who attend a small, selective liberal arts college in the northeastern United States, the project is part of a larger effort to reposition students within the College through the Bryn Mawr College Teaching and Learning Initiative (htpp://www.brynmawr.edu/tli). This initiative, supported by The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, includes projects that position students as pedagogical consultants who meet with, observe, and talk with faculty members and/or interview students enrolled in their classes regarding pedagogical issues that faculty members identify. Collectively called Students as Learners and Teachers (SaLT), the projects include the one I discuss here: a student-led approach to gathering midcourse feedback.

In this article I take as a theoretical foundation the premises of new wave student voice work. Highlighting the differences between our student-directed approach and faculty- or staff-directed approaches to gathering midcourse feedback, and thus attempting to illuminate the gap in both practice and in research on that practice constituted by the absence of students in consultative roles, I describe how six students in SaLT are positioned as consultants who, in this particular project, gather midcourse feedback in 14 classes at Bryn Mawr College. Drawing on transcripts of semi-structured interviews (Creswell, 2002; Glesne, 1999; Silverman, 2004) with all faculty members and student consultants who participated in this project in Spring 2007 as well as on a transcript from a debriefing meeting with student consultants after they had gathered midcourse feedback in faculty members' classrooms and on student consultants' responses to a set of reflective questions, I analyze how the student consultants support the faculty members in critically reflecting on and revising not only their courses but also their relationships with students—including both student consultants and students enrolled in the courses. The project itself and the revision of responsibilities it fosters has implications for who can assume pedagogical roles and participate in assessment, how, and to what ends in institutions of higher learning.

Consulting Students versus Students as Consultants

Much attention has been given to student evaluations of teaching in higher education (Aleamoni, 1999; Caulfield, 2007; Goldstein & Benassi, 2006; Hativa, 1996; Kohlan, 1973; Marlin, 1987; Melland, 1996), with a focus primarily on end-of-semester evaluations. Those studies that focus on gathering student feedback midway through a course identify some of the ways in which such an approach addresses the problems I outline in the opening paragraph of this article. Gathering student feedback at the midpoint can help faculty members gain access to the student perspective and, if they choose to share student feedback with the class, it can promote "two-way communication with learners" and facilitate "open discussions about course goals and the teaching-learning process" (Diamond, 2004, p. 226) in which students feel "empowered to help design their own educational process" (Keutzer, 1993, p. 239). Furthermore, gathering and discussing student feedback allows for the possibility that concerns might be addressed and changes made within the same term (Caulfield, 2007; Clark & Redmond, 1982; Diamond, 2004; Hofman & Kremer, 1983; Keutzer, 1993) as well as for future classes.

The project I discuss here shares in and adds to these benefits. In addition to offering an occasion for faculty members to enter into dialogue with students enrolled in a course about what is working and what is not and to make changes during as opposed to only subsequent to that course, the approach I discuss here has the potential to make the course more of a shared responsibility of faculty and students and to foster the development of a collaborative/collegial relationship between faculty members and student consultants and between faculty members and students in their classes. 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 emerging 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 (for thorough discussions of the typologies, see Fielding, 2001a and 2001b, 2004b; Hart, 1997; Holdsworth, 2000; Lee & Zimmerman, 2001; Lodge, 2005; Mitra, 2007; Thiessen, 2007, 1997; Thomson & Holdsworth, 2003). Although these typologies focus primarily on work done at the K-12 level, they illuminate the various ways that students in any context might be positioned and what they can do from those positions.

I focus on three typologies that are most illuminating for the present discussion.

The approach that the group of student consultants and I developed to gathering midcourse feedback attempts to enact what Lodge (2005) calls dialogue (and which she juxtaposes to quality control, students as a source of information, and compliance and control). In this approach, 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). (The lower rungs of the ladder include, in ascending order, "youth/student voice: speaking out," "being heard," "being listened to," "being listened to seriously and with respect"). And finally, the project aims to embody the three more radical types in Fielding's (2004b) 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, 2006b, pp. 359-360; see also Levin, 2000; Rudduck, 2002; Fielding, 2004a). Few approaches within the realm of assessment afford students such an active role in both the conceptualization and the enactment of an assessment approach (for two exceptions, see Giles et al., 2004, and Lockwood et al., 1986).

A Student-Led Approach to Gathering Midcourse Feedback

The inspiration for the approach we take came from an experience one student consultant had with a faculty member with whom she worked in Fall 2006. In response to the faculty member's desire to access student perspectives on his course, the student consultant developed a set of questions in collaboration with the faculty member that she then asked each student in the course and which she subsequently typed up and shared with the faculty member. About this experience, the faculty member said: "[Having a student gather feedback on the class and share it with me] gave me confidence that [the feedback] was thorough and trustworthy, unlike end-of-the-semester course evaluations." Other faculty members expressed similar views: "In general I

have found [end-of-semester] teaching evaluations pretty useless"; "There is only so much reflection you can do from student evaluations; they are valuable but you miss things"; and "If one of the purposes of those teaching evaluations is for us to be better teachers, that is a poor forum." Faculty dissatisfaction with the existing tool for gathering feedback about their courses contributed to their openness to the new approach we designed.

     With the goal not only of creating a tool that would help faculty members to gather what they consider to be more useful and reliable feedback but also with the goal of creating different opportunities and relationships for students—and thus, in turn, for faculty members—the student consultants with whom I was working and I decided to design a project with relatively few faculty involved so that we could monitor our approach and make adjustments before inviting a larger group to participate. I sent an invitation to new faculty, who had gone through a New Faculty Orientation in which we had featured students' perspectives, and experienced faculty whom the student consultants and I felt would be interested in and open to participating. Seven faculty members indicated that they wanted to participate, and student consultants gathered feedback for these faculty members in a total of 14 classes. I recognize that this is a small sample, and what I am reporting is not meant to be generalized across larger populations. Rather, I wish to share substantive, individual experiences had and insights gained by these faculty members—and the students they worked with—who were willing to participate in this new project.

     The approach to gathering midcourse feedback from students that we created is similar in many ways to that facilitated by the University of Washington since 1974 (see Diamond, 2004). The major difference is that through our project student consultants, not teaching center staff, conduct the process of gathering midcourse feedback. This is a significant difference, both from faculty members' perspectives and within the conceptual framework and the convictions of student voice work. As one faculty member explains:

> It's more effective to have a student come in rather than a colleague. Perception is top-down processing: You observe what you expect to observe, and you miss what you are not looking for. Students are looking at lecture and interactions totally differently than faculty do.

Another faculty member puts it this way:

[The student observer] has insights that are really good, from the students' perspective; it's really helpful. At other institutions they often have a faculty member who does these observations. Faculty members look for different things; they are keyed in to noticing different behaviors. I think it's important to have someone who is still observing student behavior.

In our approach, each student consultant contacts and meet with the faculty member for whose class she plans to gather midcourse feedback; checks with the faculty member to make sure s/he is willing to respond to the feedback she gathers—that is, that the faculty member is willing to make some sort of change in response to student feedback and thoughtfully explain why s/he can make those changes and cannot make other of the suggested changes; and generates with the faculty member 3-5 questions to ask students in the class. Each set of questions is tailored to the particular course within some more general parameters. Many faculty use variations on the following basic questions: (1) What is working well for you in this class? (sometimes specifying particular components of the class upon which the faculty member wants feedback: readings, class discussions, assignments, class dynamic, etc.); (2) What is not working or what are you struggling with? (3) What could the professor change to improve your learning experience in this class? (4) What could you do differently to improve your learning experience in this class?

While versions of these questions are used by many faculty members to gather feedback on their courses, the process of generating the specific questions is, in our approach, a process of co-construction between the faculty member and the student consultant. As one student consultant explains:

> I met with both profs and I worked with them for about half an hour to an hour about each of their classes. We talked about what they thought they needed to have looked at, and they told me about their classes and what they do and approaches they have already been taking. We decided what to focus on.

The reiteration of "we" in this description reflects the collegial nature of these exchanges (Cook-Sather, 2006a). Another student consultant also makes clear the collegial premise of the approach:

> When [the professor] would describe the aspects of the course that he was interested in gaining insight into, I would pose questions or share thoughts based on what he had said that might help me to better understand this issue. Together we generated questions pertaining to his effectiveness in presentation of the material, structuring of the course, ability to engage students, effectiveness of

homework and other assignments and ensuring students' ability to 'see the big picture' of the material.

Once the faculty member and student consultant have co-constructed the questions that the student consultant will use to gather student feedback, the student consultant visits the faculty member's class with typed-up versions of those questions. Depending on faculty members' preferences, some student consultants spend the entire class period in the class, gathering a sense of the context and participants to inform her interpretations of the feedback she gathers. Others simply arrive and conduct the assessment in the last 15-20 minutes of the class. Those student consultants who have observed the class before conducting the midcourse feedback sessions have been struck by how much they notice, as students and as observers: "It was cool to see that there was a high correlation between what I had to say observing for just half an hour and what students had to say. Of course there were things that students said that I didn't pick up on or couldn't have. But I was shocked that I picked up on as much as I did." Again, having students actively involved in this process distinguishes this approach from faculty- or staff-led approaches; students see different things, and they see many of the things students enrolled in the courses see.

For the actual gathering of feedback, the student consultant asks the students in the class to answer the feedback questions on paper in silence, and then she asks the students to draw on what they have written to have a discussion in which the student consultant identifies and writes down broad categories of feedback, records these for the professor, and takes the written responses with her when she is finished. In being afforded the authority and responsibility for holding this conversation with students in the class, student consultants are the primary agents in gathering data, facilitating a discussion of them, and hazarding an initial interpretation of them.

The student consultant then takes the student responses away, organizes them, types them up in a form that can be shared with the faculty member and other students in the class, destroys the originals, and arranges to meet with the faculty member to share and discuss the feedback and how to share and discuss it with the class. Faculty members comment on the authority they assign to student consultants in this process:

> I wanted to leave it up to student [consultant] to decide how to present [the student] responses. She gave me a collation of every student comment and then a

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summation, which was a synthesis not only of her reading of the questions but also her discussion with students.

Faculty members talk as well about the importance of talking with the student consultant about the student feedback:

> She talked me through all of it. That was how I got to get at some of the details she might not have written…She brought up details that weren't in the writing—context, tone, body language that doesn't come off on paper.

Not only are student consultants colleagues in interpreting the data they gather, they take an active role in guiding faculty members in how to share the feedback with students in the class. A student consultant describes how she encouraged a faculty member to approach his students:

> As I did with the other faculty, I encouraged Professor Y to address the students about most of the issues that arose, particularly the ones that puzzled or intrigued him. Whenever he wondered aloud why a student wrote something or how students wanted him to change something, I suggested a way to phrase the question he could ask them or simply encouraged him to discuss the topic with his class.

Every step of this approach, then, positions student consultants as active participants (Lodge, 2005), co-partners in analysis and decision making (Holdsworth, 2000), and not only active respondents but also co-researchers (Fielding, 2004b).

From Traditional Accountability toward Shared Responsibility

Lewis (2001) suggests that the most important aspect of gathering mid-semester student feedback is responding to it. It can be a challenge to genuinely open up dialogue with students and respond in ways that both validate the students' input and honor the faculty member's pedagogical commitments. Presenting the data in its entirety to a class can be a first step. One faculty member explains:

> I made a PowerPoint out of the data…It was helpful to have the data and be able to say to them, "Here's what you are all saying" and for them to realize, "OK, the person behind me is faster and the person in front of me is slower." I was using the feedback to show the class where they are in relation to one another—to get them to recognize that different people are at different places and to recognize the possibility of, and even take responsibility for, more than their own individual experience in the class.

A student in the class offers her description of this process:

> She took almost 15 minutes at the beginning of last Tuesday's class. She had everything on PowerPoint slides, and integrated concepts of Statistics on the data that [the student consultant] had compiled, which I (and my friends) thought was funny, but really impressive, since it is a Stats course! She was not defensive, and when she talked about a certain comment that students made which was on a philosophy that she did not feel comfortable changing, she did a great job explaining why. It might have been better if she had given the class more chance to ask students what they were thinking about what she was saying, but that is about the only thing I can think of that was even slightly lacking. Overall, I thought the way she handled the feedback she received was impressive, and several things (e.g. having extra non-graded problem sets on blackboard, having different office hours) got changed.

This student notes several important aspects of sharing feedback identified by Keutzer (1993), including presenting all the data gathered and not being defensive. As the student comment highlights, however, presenting the data isn't necessarily enough; although it is a start, it doesn't necessarily lead to dialogue. Engaging in a process of negotiation with students moves closer to that goal. The same faculty member explains: "[Students] are afraid that I am going to call on them. So I said, 'OK, I won't call on you if you're hand isn't raised.' But since I said I wouldn't call on them, I said they have to raise their hands and talk." A student in the class corroborates this development and adds her sense of how the class indeed became more of a shared responsibility: "She really is actively doing it; she said, 'I promised not to call on you but you have to talk up,' and people do."

Some faculty members take more extensive steps toward making the class a shared responsibility. One faculty member describes the process he undertook after a student consultant gathered feedback in his class:

> One of the complaints students had was that they wanted fewer longer assignments and more short assignments mainly so they could get more feedback…I have dropped the second paper and instead they have to do a journal. Once a week they have to think about in writing either something in readings, lecture, or discussion, whatever that week got them thinking more and interested them. I proposed this idea, and that's what we had a discussion about. Then we had to work out all the problems. How are we going to turn it in? Paper? Email? Blackboard? But eventually we settled on that they are going to email it to me on Sunday. Then we had to work out how it was going to be graded. So I said OK,

made it worth what the second paper would have been worth, I would give them a temporary grade two times between now and the end of the semester—I'll give them a here's how it's going grade. I felt we all came to a consensus.

The collegial process in which this faculty member engaged was impressive to the students in his class. One explains:

He came in and we spent a good 35 minutes. Our main concern was that we didn't have enough student-based discussion, and there wasn't enough feedback on our writing. And so we came up with a system where we do reading response on the last week's reading that will then replace the second paper. It'll actually be more writing. We talked a whole lot about how the feedback would happen. So we figured it out, we arrived at the conclusion as a class.

It is striking that both the faculty member and the student in the course conclude their reflections on this process with similar statements: "I felt we all came to a consensus" and "we arrived at the conclusion as a class."

The language the faculty members use to characterize the result of this process of gathering feedback points to the shared responsibility they feel. One faculty member says: "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 says: "I definitely feel like there 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."

Challenges of the Approach

There are three challenges participants identified regarding this approach to gathering midcourse feedback and three that I discerned upon reflection. The first of those identified by participants has to do with the perennial problem of time, a problem identified by Sherry et al. (1998) as well:

The only drawback that I was aware of during the feedback process from Professor Z and in my opinion was the lack of time I was able to spend with the class, in discussion and for them to answer their questionnaires. If we could establish more ways that we could build in more time somehow, I think it would be helpful. I dealt with this problem by asking people to write their email addresses at the top of their questionnaires if they had more to say, but I still wish there was a better way to address this.

The second challenge identified by participants has to do with defining the responsibilities of the student consultant role, particularly as they support or undermine the goal of positioning students differently and ensuring that their voices are respected. Describing a dilemma she faced when a faculty member asked her to take on the responsibility of making sense of the student responses in a particular way, a student consultant explains: "She wants me to paraphrase what the students said and not write it verbatim. She's thinking that my role in this would be to pick out those themes and give her the general gist of what's happening and what they said." In response, another student consultant states: "I think that would be stealing the students' voice." Yet another student consultant asserts: "You are there to do the analysis and to synthesize, but you can do that and reflect the student voices as much as you can by leaving in quotation snippets." And a fourth states: "The observation is about what we [as student consultants] have to say and what we think about it, our take on it. But I think the feedback from students should be what they have to say—in their voices, not filtered by us but framed by us." The issue of how to invite and then represent student voices is a perennial challenge addressed repeatedly by those who undertake student voice work (see chapters in Thiessen & Cook-Sather, 2007).

The third, and related, issue raised by participants has to do with which student voices in a class get heard and responded to. One faculty member reflects: "It's hard to know whether this was unanimous or a few people took charge and were outspoken in the discussion [the student consultant] led." Another muses: "There are students who are less inclined to speak up, and I would have to assume that they would be less likely to speak up with an outside interviewer." And one student, who was a student consultant for some classes and also a student enrolled in another class in which the faculty member gathered midcourse feedback, offers the following reflection:

> I think the midcourse feedback is really more challenging than I thought it would be, just in terms of what you are going to do with the ideas and opinion that you get. One thing is are we going to change things by majority opinions or is it the people who are the exceptions who might be needing the most help. And also maybe the students really don't know what's best for them, so even if it's the majority opinion, maybe it's only what the students think they want, and it wouldn't be best for them.

Concerns about whose voices get heard and acted upon echo feminist theorists' cautions about eliciting student voice: Orner (1992) cites Spivak when she asks: "Does the demand for student voice 'welcome selective inhabitants of the margin in order to better exclude the margin?'" (p. 87). And Maher (2001) suggests: "To simply encourage the expression of everyone's experiences, or voices, is in fact to encourage the more privileged voices, and often to contain the marginalized voices within the terms set by the most privileged (Maher and Tetreault 1997)" (p. 20).

The last student quote above also raises the problematic idea that students might not know what is best for them—a challenge highlighted for me through reflection on this process. This idea raises questions regarding the very basis of student voice work. Even if we feel fairly comfortable in authorizing student voices, the idea that no one is always in possession of knowledge of what is best bears further consideration. The project discussed here has promise in that it offers a process for co-constructing and revising knowledge of what is best.

A related challenge that I discerned upon reflection has to do with the degree to which students and faculty believe it is right to share responsibility for a course and for one another's success. Given that beliefs and expectations about the value of interdependence and collaboration vary, competing ideas could come into play around this issue. Finally, the last issue I discerned is that this approach requires that the participants be both strong and open, clear and flexible. Assuming such a stance on teaching and learning might be challenging, depending on where one finds oneself in one's career trajectory.

Conclusion

The structure of this approach to gathering midcourse feedback invites reconsideration of traditional roles and responsibilities for analyzing and revising courses. The "collection of expectations that others have for a person occupying a particular status" (Anderson & Taylor, 2000, p. 120)—in this case, the status of student—changes when the student assumes as well the

role of consultant. The "set of rights and duties as defined and sanctioned by the system in which the person acts" (Skidmore, 1975, p. 12) shifts as that person is placed in a new role—even while drawing on the qualities of her ongoing role as student. This project alters the "traditional roles and power structures that are deeply embedded in the educational system and to which we are accustomed" (Szuminiski, Zath, & Benton, 1999, p. 293)—specifically, that within which faculty are "accustomed to being the most dominant and oftentimes the only voice" (Szuminiski, Zath, & Benton, 1999, p. 298) and students are unaccustomed to providing input regarding their own learning (Szuminiski, Zath, & Benton, 1999, p. 304).

Although perennial issues, particularly whose voices are heard, are not entirely resolved by this approach, with this project we are taking steps toward creating a more "radical collegiality" between college students and professors, challenging the accountability model according to which faculty members can engage in a perfunctory performance required by the institution or even a well-intentioned effort to gather student feedback, and moving toward a model within which college courses are the shared responsibility—in their revision as well as enactment—of students and faculty members.

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