
**Categories:** Student-Centered Learning; Student Partnerships; Institutional Reform.

**Summary**

The author provides a detailed examination of the Students as Teachers and Learners (SaLT) program at Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges. SaLT creates student partnerships between participating students and faculty members, in which the students serve as consultants who observe classes and share their notes with their faculty partners in the hopes of providing professors greater insight into how their courses are functioning. The article focuses on the impact of the program and its benefits for faculty, but it also discusses how it affects the overall educational experience of the student participants.

The SaLT program is open to undergraduates ranging from sophomore to senior years. Selection is not based on grade point average or other academic criteria, however, students are required to provide a written statement detailing their qualifications and two letters of recommendation (one each from a faculty member and a fellow student). Once selected, students are put into partnerships with faculty members largely on the basis on scheduling availability, although style and personality are also considered when possible. These partnerships range in duration from one week to an entire semester [in a subsequent article, Cook-Sather seems to have suggested that the program has been standardized to operate solely as semester-long partnerships]. The partnerships receive support in the form of a set of guidelines for participation and regular meetings with both faculty and student consultants. Once paired, the student consultant and faculty member meet to establish a schedule for class observations and/or student interviews. On the scheduled observation dates, consultants take detailed notes on a preselected focal topic. Later, they meet with their faculty partners to share their notes, and engage in dialogue that allows both consultants and faculty members to discuss both partners experience of the class session, the consultants findings, and what they feel are the implications for teaching and learning in the class. Finally, at the end of the semester, both partners submit answers to a series of reflective questions: e.g., what did the student note about the class; what did the faculty member learn about the course; how did the experience shape the student or faculty member’s notions of teaching and learning?

In assess the benefits of the program, the author discusses the utility of reflective practice on the part of teachers. By examine how classes operated, professors gain insight into their own strengths and weaknesses, how certain aspects of a course did or did not work, and what changes might be beneficial. Unfortunately, as the author notes, teachers at the university level face several challenges in engaging in reflective practice, not least of which is time and the perception that teaching in higher education is an exercise in ‘pedagogical solitude.’ Given these obstacles, SaLT offers an opportunity to facilitate reflective practice. Further, by engaging the student as a partner in this process, the program makes academic reflection more dynamic, collaborative, and innovative. Perhaps most importantly, SaLT allows for reflection that surpasses more traditional practices because it recognizes and utilizes students’
expertise as observers/participant in classroom learning. In doing so, it adds a whole new dimension to reflective practice that offers a range of insights into teaching and learning unavailable to professors engaging in the practice alone. It also spurs a radical shift in the nature of the relationship between faculty and students and furthers the goal of developing students as researchers.

In discussing the expectations and outcomes of the program from the faculty members’ perspective, the author notes that most faculty participants entered the program in the hopes of finding someone to help them gain insight into their teaching and the learning that was occurring in their classrooms. In this regard, they were not disappointed. Overall, faculty participants found that they not only received the help that they sought, but also gained perspectives that they could not have gotten from their fellow faculty members. In particular, student consultants helped them gain a fuller sense of how the students in their classes perceived of them and the manner in which teaching/learning was conducted. As a result, faculty participants felt that they not only learned a great deal about what had/had not worked in the classroom, but also got them to refocus both the goals of their courses and the means by which they were achieved. This result was achieved, in general, because having a student consultant provided a fundamentally different perspective, and because the program provided the opportunity to engage in a dialogue centering on both what faculty members wanted to happen in their classes and what was happening.

Conclusions

In examining the experiences of both faculty participants and student consultants, the author suggests that SaLT has had an important positive and transformative impact on teaching and learning at Bryn Mawr and Haverford. From the faculty perspective, the program has served to help them gain greater insight into their practice of teaching and learning, and allowed them to use these insights to improve their course offerings. In a more radical sense, the program has also altered their perception of the class environment itself from one of separate spheres of responsibility (professor as teacher and students as learners) to one in which students play a prominent role in informing and shaping the manner in which teaching and learning occur. Thus, SaLT has helped create a new paradigm in which both faculty and students simultaneously occupy the roles of teachers and learners. Perhaps not surprisingly, this has led to the formation of very different relationships between faculty members and students. From the student perspective, the program has helped students, particularly those who have served as consultants, gain a new found respect for the work of their professors and an appreciation for the work that goes into teaching. Further, the program has altered students perception of their role in the teaching and learning process and articulated a means by which they can help improve their classes. Finally, the article identifies several challenges that remain: finding time to effectuate the program given both faculty and students schedules; establishing effective norms/standards for partnerships; and effectively defining and measuring the changes that flow from the program.
Applications

The program discussed in this article, as well as others by the author, offers a provocative, yet practical way to accomplish several goals closely aligned with the objectives outlined in Vision 2022. First, the primary purpose of the program is to assess teaching and learning styles as they operate in real time, and to do so in a manner that makes students central to the process. Thus, it involves students in the effort to assess the efficacy of classes and offer opportunities to improve them. In doing so, it also creates a highly student-centered approach to both teach and learning and institutional reform. Finally, the program easily lends itself, after successful application, to the production of research-driven publication within the scholarly field of teaching and learning. Equally important, such research, like the program itself, could involve student participants as co-inquirers and co-publishers. Finally, this article offers a number of practical guidelines for developing and running a similar program, should we desire one, at U.D.C.

Citations of Interest


