

Implementing A Student Consultant Program at Lingnan University

Elizabeth Ho, Associate Professor of English (Lingnan)

James Pounder, Director of the Teaching and Learning
Center (Lingnan)

[Meredith Goldsmith, Director of the Teaching and Learning
Initiative (Ursinus College, USA)]

The Context: The Spotlight on University Teaching

- Global Focus on the Quality of University Teaching
- Why? Increased private funding of higher education primarily through tuition fees (2003-2013 in USA College tuition rose by 79.5% as opposed to a 26.7% rise in CPI)
- A general dissatisfaction with university teaching e.g. in USA students make near non-existent gains in critical thinking etc, calls for more innovative approaches to teaching with employability in mind (UK), students rarely 'pushed' (Australia).

The Measurement of Teaching Performance with Enhancement in Mind

- SET scores consistently fail to give misleading readings of actual teaching performance and fail to demonstrate a link between teaching performance and student achievement
- Peer Observation more promising and linked with improvements in teaching practice, developments of teaching confidence, reflections on teaching practice etc.
- Peer Observation not universally accepted with fears for academic freedom etc but it seems that criticisms can be addressed through training
- Student consultants initiative may be viewed as an extension of the peer observation approach

“Student Voice” movement:

- Jean Rudduck et al. Practices in K-12 education that position students as “agents in the process of transformative learning” (Fielding)
- “radical collegiality” (Fielding)

In higher education:

- SaLT: Students as Learners and Teachers (Alison Cook-Sather)
- Goal: “fosters the development of students who are more engaged, critically aware, and able to speak and take action within their schools and lives” (Cook-Sather, 2006)
- Teaching and learning = a shared responsibility between faculty and students
- Reflective practices; active learning etc.

The Student Consultant Program

- Create faculty-student partnerships in the form of pedagogical Student Consultants.
- Through regular classroom observations, consultation, dialogue, discussion, and critical reflection, student consultants provide faculty across disciplines with feedback from the perspective of trained students who are *not* enrolled in their courses.
- This program is 100% confidential and non-evaluative.

How consultants are selected:

- Students are invited to apply
- High GPA; highly effective communication skills in English (and Chinese); empathetic; curious about how s/he is being taught
- “the best consultants are not always the most academically gifted; they are those who are gifted at seeing things from another person’s point of view”
- Majors will vary: consultants are not necessarily paired with faculty from the same discipline
- Consultants are paid an hourly wage for observations, meetings with faculty and weekly seminar

The process:

- **Pre-observation discussion:** trained Student Consultant discusses goals, aims, teaching challenges to be observed.
- **Observation:** Student Consultant observes the class of your choice on a regular basis (1/2 term; full term)
- Student Consultant takes detailed “field notes” that break down the class moment by moment.
- **Post-observation:** Student Consultant offers her reflection on the notes.
- Partners meet to discuss notes; reflect, affirm what works and offer revision and suggestions for what does not work
- **Post-partnership:** Student Consultant writes a final “reflective letter” to her faculty partner concluding the partnership.

What faculty gain from the program

A trained Student Consultant can:

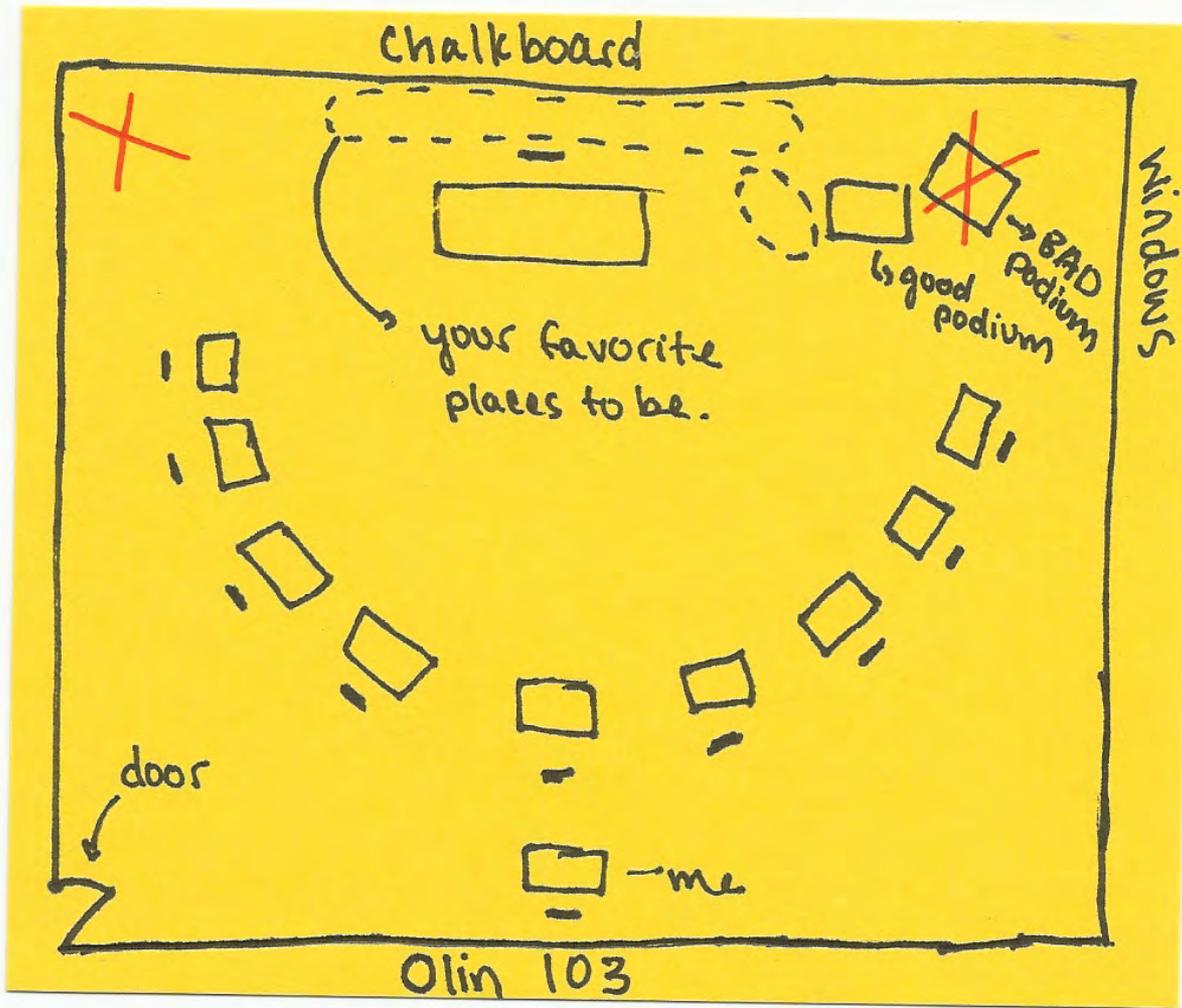
- Offer faculty a unique student perspective on general and/or specific teaching practices
- Provide feedback on how students receive/perceive information: lectures, assignments, outcomes and assessment etc from the teacher
- Provide faculty with insight into how students interact with each other, with the teacher, and the classroom itself
- Help seek solutions to perennial teaching challenges
- Help faculty take pedagogical risks; seek solutions and reflect on issues that arise
- Gain insight into “intangible” classroom dynamics: gender; cultural difference; furniture placement; body language etc
- Help faculty empower other students to take ownership of their learning

Time

Activity

Reflection

Time	Activity	Reflection
1:51	"Any other thoughts?" Dr. Ho calls on another female student.	A bit over twenty minutes into class and none of the male students have responded. Do the male students often have limited rates in class?
1:53	A male student nods in agreement. Dr. Ho recognizes this and he responds.	Again, vigilance is a key way to continue generating conversation. Given that many of the students are not openly forthcoming with commentary, being aware of students' body language as another form of communication is important. Well done!
1:55	"Any other themes?" A male student responds voluntarily about the status of young people in society. After his response, Dr. Ho asks, "any more ideas?" When there is no response, Dr. Ho offers a story regarding the "They can't kill us all" banner on campus and inquires whether students are hopeful.	Doing this brings the discussion to a more personal space.
1:59	A female student responds about the lack of political inclinations of university students in Korea. Dr. Ho asks about the political activity of students in Hong Kong. There is a pause. "This is not a trick question; I genuinely want to know." A female student	You did an excellent job of being honest about your disconnection with the status of political activity of students in Hong Kong as a transitional point into being able to tie the current situations for students to the literary texts.



A Student Consultant:

- Gains insight into and reflects on how she is taught
- Takes ownership of her education
- Collaborates and communicates with her faculty partner in new ways
- Acts as a bridge between students and faculty
- Enhanced confidence and engagement in the classroom and in her role(s) in the academic community
- “not just for me, but for all”

What the University gains:

- Democratic classrooms that center on diversity of viewpoints and partnerships
- Enriched campus environment and culture: happier, more engaged students and teachers
- Feedback on policy (3-3-4 reforms); core curriculum, assessment, outcomes
- Simply identifying principles of good practice
- **Challenges:** rethinking traditional relationships and structures of power and authority

Student Consultant Program for Lingnan, March 2014:

- Seminar by Dr. Meredith Goldsmith (Director of the Teaching and Learning Initiative, Ursinus College)
- Workshops and training for 4 Lingnan students conducted by 2 Ursinus College Student Consultants
- 3 days of observations and partnerships between Lingnan faculty and Lingnan trainee Student Consultants
- Final discussion: Adapting the Student Consultant Program for Lingnan University



Adaptations: the Lingnan context

- HK students and critique: scripted reminders; “two stars and a wish”
- Relationships with other students: requests for faculty clarification
- Aware of their limitations: tiered, practical observations goals established for future Consultants
- “a different way of talking to faculty”

Lingnan challenges:

- The myth of the “Hong Kong student” v. the myth of the “Hong Kong faculty member”
- Faculty perception of “observation”
- Persistent cultural attitudes towards teaching and learning
- Gender, language, cultural differences and power dynamics between Consultant and faculty partner
- Logistics: faculty and student time and scheduling etc

What's working for Lingnan:

- Student Consultants are positively changed by their experiences: “new ways of communicating with faculty” serves to dispel “HK student” myth and create new climate for learning
- Faculty feedback = positive
- Supportive TLC
- By 2015, current Consultants will have returned from Study Abroad: exposed to different teaching methods and classroom experiences

Student Consultant Program: goals for 2014-15

- Our Consultants will begin long-term partnerships in Term 1
- Weekly workshops for consistent support, mentorship and troubleshooting
- Consultants will train 2 or more new Consultants
- Promotion of Student Consultant Program across the campus
- Pilot bilingual observations
- Funding!

Current research questions:

- Student voice work and student consultant programs in an international context
- “How can we invite and support multivoicedness in diverse cultural settings?”
- What research tools, methods or analytical frames are critiqued in student voice work when we take cultural sensitivity into consideration?
- How can we/to what extent can we develop student voice in contexts and countries not conducive or unfamiliar to it?