Trends in Student Consulting: International Collaborations
Maren Voss

I once watched a child complain about his Happy Meal toy and ask to trade it. Then another child came over, admired the toy, and suddenly it became precious. We may be witnessing a ‘now that you want it, I want it’ trend coming into the area of faculty development. United States education systems pioneered student-led teaching in the 1970s. A groundbreaking method where students coach faculty how to improve their teaching began decades ago, but didn’t really catch on in American Universities. Now that the movement is heading overseas, in Europe, Japan, and China, American universities are playing catch-up.

Shifting Paradigm

Though end of semester evaluations have become ubiquitous in American universities, the new model of faculty improvement is more than a simple thumbs up or thumbs down afterthought. The new approach involves students working with professors at point-of-need, which occurs during the classroom experience. One reason for international attention, according to Gary Tsuchimochi, Center for Teaching and Learning Director at Teikyo University in Tokyo, is that teaching has not yet adopted a student-driven model in places like Japan. Education is more top-down, he says, focusing on the expertise of the faculty. As a country focused on innovation and success, he sums it up saying, “We need a paradigm shift.”

This paradigm change, a bottom-up approach, started during the 1970s cultural shift that knocked down establishment and authoritarian views in America. Carleton College launched a “student observer” program in 1970, which then spurred a modified approach at nearby St. Olaf College in 1976. These teaching improvement initiatives were funded by grants from the Eli Lilly Foundation with the St. Olaf program using the funds to train students in teaching pedagogy and observation skills. Then faculty members were invited to request a trained student consultant on teaching (SCOT) to observe and give feedback on their classroom teaching.

Almost 40 years later, that paradigm shift still needs some work, according to education experts. Anton Tolman, Director of the Faculty Center on Learning at Utah Valley University (UVU) in Orem can often be heard telling faculty that “our students are not us.” He says, “Too often as faculty we think, ‘I should teach the students the way I was taught.’” Tolman argues that traditional teaching techniques like lectures don’t work well, and probably never did.

As evidence, Tolman points to a picture by medieval painter Laurentius de Voltolina. The illustration depicts troubles in the classroom dating back to 1233 AD. Invited to Tokyo to share the SCOT approach, this picture transcends the language barrier and brings chuckles from the Japanese and English educators alike. It shows front row students alert and attentive, but the back row students are shown chatting and even falling asleep. Trying to engage student learning was as hard then as it is now and Tolman says being expert in your field just isn’t enough for quality teaching. “It’s about using the professor’s knowledge in new ways to help students learn.”
This illustration from a fourteenth-century manuscript shows Henry of Germany delivering a lecture to university students in Bologna. 
Artist: Laurentius de Voltolina; Liber ethicorum des Henricus de Alemannia; Kupferstichkabinett SMPK, Berlin/Staatliche Museen Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Min. 1233

Spreading Influence

Gary Tsuchimochi has been the man behind the movement for bringing SCOT methods to Japan. Dr. Tsuchimochi first came across the student consultancy program at an international education conference in 2010. Brigham Young University (BYU) has been refining the student consultancy method for more than 20 years, with a SCOT program that started in 1992 by D. Lynn Sorenson. BYU joined with nearby UVU in a presentation so engaging that Dr. Tsuchimochi spent 30 minutes just asking follow-up questions. Dr. Tsuchimochi immediately began working on a program to bring back to Tokyo.

US educators have shown interest in the program as well, Sorenson states that she can’t count the number of information packets she has sent out over the years on student consulting methods. “North American Universities and European Universities are very focused on the student as a person and helping every student learn,” she explains. But only a handful of universities created ongoing student consultancy programs. Sorenson attributes this in part to a lack of financial support when funding initiatives, like the Lilly grants, shifted focus. And she also notes that keeping the program going has required ongoing effort. “It requires quite a sales job to get faculty interested in it,” she says. But once they try it out most see the value.

When Gary first presented the SCOT idea to Teikyo University President Okinaga, he immediately saw the value. “He said, let’s start it next year!” Tsuchimochi states with a big smile. The president’s support of the program allowed an immediate implementation, and within the year Teikyo had 10 trained student consultants. There was so much success in that first year, the Ministry of Education threw its support behind the idea. This sparked the interest of higher education professionals across the country, leading to the 2014 Tokyo symposium on student engagement where Japanese educators were broadly introduced to the students consulting on teaching methods.
Tetsuo Goda, Director for Scientific Research at the Ministry of Education in Japan, spoke at the event. Goda cited the need for more engaged students as his reason for supporting the student consultancy approach. “This (SCOT) program is very, very important to improve Japanese education, to have more important impact.” More engaged students can boost the level of education that occurs in Japanese universities, he says. Goda isn’t just expecting change—but big change that will lead to maximizing education’s role in capturing the global market share and making higher education an engine for growth.

Other Asian countries are also getting onboard. A student consulting group from Ursinus College in Pennsylvania was using their spring break to travel to Hong Kong, just one week prior to the Tokyo training by the Utah delegation. Ursinus faculty Meredith Goldsmith, Ph.D., directed the Hong Kong trip and commented that immediate changes were evident in the student consultants overseas. “Students got the opportunity to give feedback to their professors, which really isn’t typical in the Hong Kong education system.” According to Goldsmith, by the end of the training students were sitting up straighter portraying confidence, were more engaged and attentive, and were more willing to ask questions—key factors in student engagement.

Photo from the Lignan University, Hong Kong training trip by Ursinus College students and faculty: Codey Young (Ursinus), Tiffany Yung (Lignan), Christine Saraco (Ursinus), Vivian Lam
(Lingnan), Meredith Goldsmith (UC faculty) and Liz Ho (Lingnan faculty), provided by Meredith Goldsmith

Who Benefits?

Goldsmith’s observations seem to indicate that a major benefit comes to the student consultants, who get a paycheck at the same time they are learning how to engage in the process of learning. Alison Cook-Sather, Ph.D., is a director of the 2006 student consulting pilot program at Bryn Mawr College and has written extensively on the topic. She notes that the mutual benefit to student and professors is a strength of the approach. “There are many levels of awareness (that) develop, especially agency, that they can affect their own education,” and the take away for students she says is, “they can influence the kind of learning they experience.”

The idea that student involvement in pedagogical methods can position students as agents of change is perhaps a game changer in the area of student engagement. According to Mr. Goda, it is this strength of the program that has caught the attention of the Japanese Ministry of Education. The Higher Education Academy in the UK has also shown interest, funding a pilot SCOT program in 2012-2013 at the University of Huddersfield following on the heels of a similar program at the University of Lincoln. The UK Teaching and Learning Institute has blogged repeatedly about the program with titles such as, “The Student Consultants are Coming,” indicating the trending of the SCOT approach.

Cook-Sather is assisting Reed College in Oregon and Oberlin College in Ohio in developing similar programs this year, based on Bryn Mawr’s semester long collaboration approach. The Ursinus and BYU programs include semester long collaborations as an option, but also offer simpler services with perhaps just 3-7 meetings. BYU, with long experience inducing faculty involvement, has tended to offer more of a menu approach. Faculty can elect something as simple as feedback from a syllabus review to a more thorough consulting with multiple meetings. A key component in these programs is that they are voluntary for faculty, and completely confidential, and remain separate from personnel and faculty evaluation measures.

So while teacher improvement is an old idea, the twist here is the student as consultant—having real students in real classrooms work directly with instructors to give feedback and assistance at the point-of-need, improving the classroom learning experience. This US movement has hit foreign shores and is growing at home along with the international wave.

Multi-Media Links:

Website for the Teikyo University, Tokyo Conference:

Link to the UK’s Higher Education Academy blog:
http://theinstituteblog.co.uk/blog/
Four minute video presentation, faculty discussing the experience of using SCOT programs:

http://youtu.be/OMkXH-v5xKI, produced by UVU Faculty Center, Edited by Dustin Tolman, SCOT student coordinator