

# The Power of Partnership

Students, Staff, and Faculty  
Revolutionizing Higher Education

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## CHAPTER 15

# **Sitting on Rocks, Human Knots, and Other Lessons I Learned in Partnership**

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In 2009, during the first few weeks of my postdoctoral fellowship, I ran into two students on the path in front of Bryn Mawr College's library. In the customary way, we stopped and chatted. I casually asked, "So what are you guys into?" I was thinking about those puffy pretzels that had become a staple of my Philadelphia diet. Jen grinned and chirped, "Mostly Marianne Moore's juvenilia." I laughed nervously. She was serious and twenty. Sam looked a bit baffled by the lightness of my question but followed up nonetheless: "Images of Joan of Arc, but really only in French." She was serious too. I was in trouble.

I had arrived at Bryn Mawr thankful to have an academic job but insecure about my identity as a professor. While I had been teaching steadily since I was twenty-two, I had always felt a bit like a character actress, mimicking the role that I had watched as a student for decades: the rigorous interlocutor. The contours of this role are simple. You enter the classroom smiling but serious. You regale the students, your audience,

with what appears to be insider knowledge about the material for the day. You prepare a few ingenious formulations, a couple borrowed from a recent article and another from an incisive bit of New Criticism from 1964. You give credit, of course, to these sources, and that, in turn, gives you more credibility with your audience. You seem to have read it all. Then you pivot to the students and begin the “dialogue.” Only, you know that it isn’t really a dialogue because you have “the answers” and they do not. Nonetheless, you pretend that your increasingly abstruse questions are leading them to some sort of truth that you alone know. All the while, you maintain control.

By the time that I stepped on to that neo-Gothic campus, I had mastered this role. My students, in turn, *liked* me. They gave me rave reviews. Occasionally, it even seemed that they wrote a bit better, and perhaps, even thought a bit more carefully at the end of term. Mostly, though, I think they enjoyed the performance. It didn’t ask much of them because they had mastered their own passive role long ago and my sporadic, animated rants kept the room feeling light, fun. We had inside jokes and relished them.

But this outward success masked a more complicated story about what was actually happening in my classroom. I began to doubt that my students grew meaningfully in my courses. I came to believe, in fact, that the work we did together had little resonance for them outside of our shared space. Together we might create what seemed a riveting conversation about a single line in an Emily Dickinson poem, the room pulsing with excited speculation, but then the hour would be over, the students putting away their books. All of that excitement seemed nothing more than a transient glimmer of clarity, a flash in the pan.

There was no reason, I recognized, that Dickinson’s poem alone should catalyze students’ growth or transformation, but I believed nonetheless that, in the space of the classroom, we could together trouble through her lines and in that struggle, find ways to speak across difference and leverage critique as a way to be better citizens in democracy. I could imagine, in other words, what I wanted my classroom to become, but I had no idea how to get there.

In the midst of this vocational crisis, I was fortunate to enroll in a pedagogy course with Alison Cook-Sather. On the first day of the seminar, Alison initiated seated introductions, but then immediately we were all up at the chalkboard, dust on our hands, having a “silent discussion” or “chalk talk” about learning. Silent board discussions focus on the communal possibilities of writing in the classroom. They also allow students to quietly generate their own perspectives about the topic at hand and then begin to put them in conversation with other students in the class. The instructor identifies a key concept for the day and writes that on the board. She then invites all students to gather near the board and begin to populate it with a written discussion. In my classroom, I enforce total silence during this activity so that all students can “listen” to the conversation unfolding on the board. In many classes, it makes sense to ask all students to contribute to the conversation a particular number of times (3-4 works well). After several minutes, I ask students to pause, step back from the board, absorb what they see happening and then contribute again. Following this activity, I have students write about the process itself or extend some of the thinking in a full paragraph of their own.

I watched as the “conversation” spread across the black plane, feeling both exhilarated and confused. Why was it that this simple gesture of translating spoken discussion to the physical realm of standing, writing, reading, and moving seemed to open up a hungry space in all of us? No one hung back. At one point, I stood on my tiptoes and stretched my arm long to respond to a classmate’s claim in the upper right corner. Occasionally, we’d all momentarily retreat and read around the dialogue before we leapt back to the board and scribbled out one more response.

I remember the whole seminar as a series of moments like this one. At each meeting, we moved our bodies, stitching our ideas to physical gestures or bits of quick writing, solidifying in memory new ideas about what was possible in the classroom when we liberate ourselves from its conventions. As a student in this seminar, I had the uneasy sense that I was finally learning something that would adhere in my brain over the long run. I say “uneasy” because this also signified just how much of my previous learning had disappeared. Alison’s course woke me up by asking

me to be a student once again, and I wanted to provide a similar experience for my own students, but I doubted that I would be able to pull it off as a teacher. I knew that it meant performing a new role in the drama around the seminar table and I wasn't quite sure that I had the chops.

That's where partnership came in. Alison encouraged me to give it a try during the next semester. The Teaching and Learning Institute's (TLI) pedagogical partnership program, Students as Learners and Teachers, provided me the opportunity to work on my teaching with a trained student partner for one semester. She attended my course once each week and provided me detailed observations of my classroom. In turn, we met over coffee each Friday and talked through her feedback.

My first student partner was a Bryn Mawr senior about to graduate that spring. She was confident, organized, and most importantly, experienced in TLI's pedagogical partnership program. I knew that she had previously worked successfully in other partnerships and I immediately trusted her instincts. We agreed that she would begin attending my literature course. I knew the material very well but could not help but feel the same old flatness of the class coupled with a now-familiar sense that every day was another flash in the pan, all of this brought into sharp relief by the dimensionality of Alison's seminar the previous term. The other challenge shaping the course was a Bi-College rift between two student cohorts within in it; a group of Bryn Mawr students populated the right and center of the room, and a small, but no less vocal, group of Haverford women took up their position on the left side of the room. The Bi-College Consortium, or Bi-Co, allows Bryn Mawr and Haverford students to take courses and select majors, amongst other opportunities, at either college. The sides resisted engaging one another. Each group regularly responded to me, but I could not figure out how to get them to communicate across the institutional barrier. I described these challenges to my partner before she came into the class for the first time in the third week of the term. Later, when we sat down to meet about her initial observation, she let me indulge in my self-doubt about how the class was going before coolly diagnosing the problem, and in turn, providing the solution: "You're right. The classroom culture isn't working. You need to do the human knot."

“The human *what?*” I asked, incredulous.

“The human knot. You know, where you all hold hands, get all tangled up, and have to work together to undo the knot without breaking the chain.”

I laughed, nervously. I hoped she was kidding.

“You can choose to do it silently or not,” she added, as if that stipulation would make the prospect of it any brighter. “Either way, you need to do the knot.”

“I’m not doing the human knot. No way.” I looked her straight in the eye.

By the next week, I was standing in the middle of our classroom, desks pushed to the sides, my palms sweating into two students’ hands. I was doing the human knot. This wasn’t the performance that I had practiced for so many years in graduate school. But we were all laughing. Several of the women fell on the floor; there were at least two acrobatic feats of bodily contortion, and this was the closest the cohorts had come to something like a shared dialogue (we had chosen the non-silent option after all). I was part of the knot myself, tangled up in undergraduate bodies and quickly losing all sense that I was supposed to be exerting something like control. Only later did I learn that the human knot is nearly impossible with as many participants as we had, but we persisted nevertheless, and eventually, unwound into a catawampus oval, some of us turned inside out, all of us disheveled and disoriented.

I brought cookies that day, too, and after the unexpected aerobics, we munched on buttery confections and processed the activity. At the time, we were studying early American literacy, and in particular we were looking at hornbooks and the *New England Primer*. Without my guiding them, my students made the leap and began talking about how the human knot seemed like a twenty-first-century model of embodied learning, not wholly dissimilar from the rather foreign seventeenth-century notion of tying a hornbook to one’s waist and carrying around the possibility of learning. It seemed a stretch to me, but then, I found myself just listening. I had no agenda because I hadn’t imagined the connection. After all, I had taken my partner’s advice because I wanted to improve the “classroom culture.” Rather naively, I didn’t realize that doing so would

open up spaces for authentically new ideas to emerge. The human knot, I then realized, wasn't *about* the human knot; it was about changing the rules of the classroom. This made it either my craziest performance in the role of "professor" or, perhaps, the entire performance had ended, and we were all just humans learning together. It was hard to tell.

Whenever I tell colleagues the story of doing the human knot for first time, I'm usually met with blank stares. This inevitably turns into leading *that* group through the activity, a hilarious foray into embodied learning with often-reluctant, late-middle-aged professors. I've been twisted up so many times since that first day that I no longer bristle at the first touch. I shouldn't be surprised, but always am, by how that knot again performs its magic and the group's conversations deepen, reaching new understandings.

I can tell with certainty, though, that the human knot works because it makes learning an embodied practice. It says to students that this is a place in which we all stretch ourselves, in which we rely on one another to pull us in new directions, in which we are all equally twisted up. The human knot, of course, is also a metaphor for collective liberation, as the group patiently works together until every member has been freed. Any individual break sends the whole group back to the beginning. No one can be passive because on the most basic level, every *body* must move, must count, must be part of the solution. The metaphor illuminates a new paradigm for class discussions. If a conversation is dominated by a single student's confusion, I can ask a classmate to "untangle" what she hears him saying. When a student is hanging back and letting his peers do all of the discussion work, with a little prompting, I watch as his classmates work to create spaces for him to move into and through.

When I moved to Berea College in Kentucky, I brought the knot with me, and yet, nearly a decade later and now twenty years into teaching, I was becoming cynical again about what was possible in the space of my classroom. In a world that felt ever more urgent and changing, especially in the era of Donald Trump, my courses had started to seem like antique relics. I even found myself slipping into something like a lecture mode, so impatient had I grown at the pace of most student learning. To make matters worse, I stubbornly persisted in marching my students through

tepid essay assignments that rewarded traditional forms of excellence in prose: concision, clarity, consistency. All of these have real value in a world in which written and oral communication is fundamental, of course, but in training my focus on these alone, I was strangling my students, or at least turning them into generic writing machines. Fortunately, I didn't like the professor I had become and I certainly didn't like the way that I justified my behavior. I entered partnership again.

With Alison's advice and guidance, I worked with Leslie Orquist-Ahrens, the director of the Center for Teaching and Learning and the director of faculty development at Berea, to implement a program like Bryn Mawr and Haverford's TLI. We called it Berea College's Student-Faculty Partnership Program. While facilitating the program with Leslie in its first year, I became increasingly aware that I, myself, needed partnership and so I stepped away from my leadership role and became a participant once again.

When Riley Lanham and I first met in January 2018, I told her that I wanted to work on my assignments for a literature course that I was teaching for the second time. I wanted the assignments to matter, to prompt real thinking, to stay with students. But I also told her that I was torn between two conflicting aims: needing my students to be traditionally "effective" writers and wanting them to think creatively, imaginatively, and to solve real problems presented in the texts under consideration. I felt up against a wall. Much like my Bryn Mawr partner had years earlier, Riley generously listened to my concerns and then patiently read through my first essay assignment. With equal measures confidence and polite hesitation, she suggested that she wouldn't really want to do *any* of the options that I gave. When I was honest with myself, I didn't want to either.

What Riley saw immediately, and to which I was unaccountably blind, was that this particular literature—canonical essays by Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau—practically insisted on more engaging, embodied kinds of learning. Thus, she encouraged me to transform my first assignment from a rather dusty question about theoretical connections between the writers into an experiential project that took students to the woods in an unseasonably cold January to sit

and read Thoreau outside. They then had to return indoors, contribute to a digitally crowdsourced reading of *Walden*, and finally, integrate the source text, their physical experience, and their online participation into an exploratory examination of Thoreau's claims in his *Walden* chapter "Sounds." By creating a "course group," my students were able to contribute to the **Reader's Thoreau** where they annotated "Sounds" and engaged the ongoing discussion of other students and scholars on that chapter. Given the physical demands of the assignment, I told students they could elect to write one of the more conventional prompts if they, for whatever reason, could not do the new option. As luck would have it, about half of the course selected each option. I had unwittingly created a pedagogical experiment.

The results surprised me. Before I opened the assignment files, I anticipated that the students selecting the traditional assignment would score higher and write better because, as college students, they should have had years practicing this kind of project, a thesis-driven analytical essay. But the opposite was true. It was that very familiarity that doomed these essays to being conventional, comparatively trite, constrained by the rigidity of the form itself. The new assignment, on the other hand, opened up unexplored spaces, both in terms of form and in terms of connected thinking. Neither I nor the students had any idea of where the projects would end up, making the learning process more authentic. There was no "right" or "smart" answer lurking behind the prompt. The writing, in turn, was better by leaps and bounds. On average, they scored twenty percent higher than their peers. More importantly, they talked about how difficult the new essay was and also about how much they loved it. And perhaps the most unexpected outcome for a literature professor was that I found myself authentically enjoying their submissions, a pedagogical win for everyone.

This kind of assignment became the norm as the semester unfolded. Riley encouraged me to trust my instincts and integrate my idea of experimental "side hustles" into analytical assignments in the middle of the term. After drafting close-readings essays, students completed projects that extended their thinking beyond analytical prose. For instance, students choosing to write about home-keeping in Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*

or Elizabeth Oaks Smith's *Western Captive* built 3D models of imagined, radical twenty-first century homes. Several students created musical playlists to capture a particular character's investment in the natural world and in self-invention; still others collected nineteenth-century images of "savages" and contemporaneous portraits of Native American leaders in a small digital archive and then considered the ways in which visual propaganda both supported and contested expulsion. In these projects, students departed from the relatively safe terrain of the academic essay. In turn, they translated their investment in the literature into a form that was at once unfamiliar and generative.

At the close of the term, with Riley's support, I developed a final exploratory project connecting *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to a local community and its claims of inspiring Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel. Students drove into the hills, combed the county's archives, kept a late-night vigil at an eighteenth-century cemetery, came to class bragging about what they'd turned up, and worked in partnership with their classmates. Following all of these new assignments, it would have felt regressive to give a conventional final exam. So Riley and I built a final "experience" (as opposed to a final "exam") with the explicit goal of making it a place for students to consolidate and extend their semester-long learning. In advance of the exam, they recorded their thinking while on a series of walks and then during the exam, they worked through a series of guided prompts to connect the course's readings to their own concerns and experiences.

Just as the human knot worked because I trusted my first partner's suggestion and ceded control to an unknown outcome, these new assignments worked because I again trusted my partner and decided to move the course into an unknown terrain. Both of my experiences in partnership share this quality: ceding control and leaping into a space with an unpredictable outcome. At a glance, these risks may seem insignificant, but they are no less important for the tone they lend the classroom. With each group, I spoke openly about why I was trying these unusual things. I didn't belabor the point, but I wanted them to see me as someone very much in the mix with them, willing to take chances and grow as a teacher.

This kind of pedagogical transparency, of course, relies on a kind of humility or vulnerability that may, at first, seem at odds with a more

traditional, authoritative stance in the classroom. A trusting partnership, though, makes this kind of vulnerability far less unnerving because there is an established relationship in which to process the peaks and valleys of any given event, assignment, or day in the course. More important still is the realization that in ceding a measure of authority, my students, in turn, incline toward authorizing themselves to direct their own learning. When, through partnership, I feel confident enough to loosen the reins of control, I've watched my students become empowered enough to follow their own curiosity and to engage one another in finding answers to their questions and concerns. By disposition, I'm comfortable pivoting in and out of the role as the "expert," but it has been partnership that allowed me to reside all semester long in the stance that believes my students to be the essential creators of their own knowledge and experience.

### **Reflection Questions for Readers**

- As a faculty member, what are your impediments to transparency with your students? How does it *feel* to dwell in a space of experimentation with your students?
- How do external pressures limit your vision of the possible for partnership?
- For student partners: Riley was able to see my material in ways that I overlooked; with what frame of mind do you think she was able to draw the conclusions that she did? How might "reading for class" be different than "reading for partnership"?