

The Power of Partnership

Students, Staff, and Faculty
Revolutionizing Higher Education

Edited by Lucy Mercer-Mapstone and Sophia Abbot



Elon University Center for Engaged Learning
Elon, North Carolina
www.CenterforEngagedLearning.org

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Series editors: Jessie L. Moore and Peter Felten
Copyeditor and designer: Jennie Goforth
Graphic illustrator: Sam Hester

Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Mercer-Mapstone, Lucy | Abbot, Sophia

Title: The Power of Partnership: Students, Staff, and Faculty Revolutionizing Higher Education / Lucy Mercer-Mapstone and Sophia Abbot

Description: Elon, North Carolina : Elon University Center for Engaged Learning, [2020] | Series: Center for engaged learning open access book series | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2019956342 | ISBN (PDF) 978-1-951414-02-3 | ISBN (pbk.) 978-1-951414-03-0 | DOI <https://doi.org/10.36284/celelon.oa2>

Subjects: LCSH: Teacher-student relationships | College teaching

CHAPTER 8

On the Edge

The Spaces Between Student-Staff Partnerships

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This chapter is a collaboration between an academic (Amani), a PhD student who is also a member of staff (Bonnie), and a recent alumna (Stephanie) who all have been involved in student-staff partnerships at our institution. We met in one of the university's iconic and historic spaces—the Tudor Gothic style Quadrangle building constructed in the nineteenth century—to have a conversation about our involvement in student-staff partnerships. It was hot day, and the high-ceilinged, white-walled room was crowded with chairs and desks. We found a little corner where we could chat. This chapter captures our conversation and is illustrated by Stephanie.

Amani: When I looked at Alison Cook-Sather's book (2006, 135-36), she talked about spaces of imagination created by educational practices. I thought it'd be good to use some of her ideas as prompts for our

conversation. I'll just go through them, and then we can decide where we want to start. Alison outlines: creating new spaces of imagination and action between and among participants; between and among disciplines; between what is considered personal and what is considered academic; outside of the spaces and the flow of time to which participants were accustomed; and that challenge participants to address differences of language and how those differences constitute and open up spaces between and among them.

With this last one, I was thinking about the language of academia and how students encounter that but also language in Bonnie's WeChat project.

Steph: They're very interesting things—yeah.

Amani: Another one of the prompts is highlighting juxtapositions between academic selves and student selves—between past and future selves. We've all been students. Bonnie currently is a student. Steph has very recently been a student and is now moving on to other roles. So, it's talking about our past and future selves. Can we talk about those prompts? Is there a particular one that you think would be good to start with?

Bonnie: How about we start with that last prompt, which is about identity. What I find interesting here is that different people play different roles in student-staff partnership projects. Often this is determined by the intersection of *how* and *when* people are coming together to collaborate. I technically wasn't a student at the beginning of our project last year. I'd finished my masters, and I hadn't yet started my PhD, so in the eyes of our student partners, I was very much a member of staff. But during the project, I became a PhD student as well. So our "official" roles or identities change over time.

That's what I struggle with a bit with regards to the students as partners concept. The concept includes these predetermined roles—students and non-students—but those can change over time. Partnership is a very fluid relationship, and it can change based on what projects you're working on and who you're working with. I think this is an important

thing to call out at the beginning of our conversation because there are different times and spaces where you choose what role you're going to play and who you're going to be in the partnership. Or perhaps those roles choose you.

Amani: For me, there's something between the present and past self. It always brings up a lot of memories and emotions of being a student when I work with students as partners. But I also try to be cautious not to superimpose those experiences on what students are experiencing now because my experiences were a long time ago. It pulls me into an in-between space, between being student and staff.

Steph: As a student, I felt as though I was living in some sort of purgatory—in the sense that I was experiencing academia between two worlds. I was a student assisting an academic who was trying to help student partners develop modules for their fellow students. It was quite an interesting experience simply because I was looking in from the outside (Leung, Barahona, and McDonnell 2017). In those moments, I didn't feel like I was a student *per se*. It was a weird space to be in, but a very rewarding one in the end because you're contributing to the future of these partnerships between students and academics. Going to university can be a very isolating and uncomfortable experience, and when you have an academic who is willing to hear all your concerns, it can be a really heartwarming thing. I often think back about the projects we did, and I feel so lucky to have had these experiences.

Amani: Can we come back to that? You mentioned it was kind of uncomfortable being in that in-between space.

Steph: I did feel a little uncomfortable because I was the only student taken to a conference and I didn't really know what to expect. I was taken through a portal into the academics' universe. So, naturally, I did feel intellectually and socially insecure because of the inherent power dynamics at play. However, over time, I saw how vital my role was in constructing this project because, by the end of it all, the student partners all expressed a universal feeling of like *"oh, I'm so glad I did that. I learned so much. I can apply all the skills that I've learned here for my career."*

Bonnie: The best of both worlds. This intersection is something that could be interesting to share our stories about because, in that in-between space, you can access both worlds. This does mean, though, that you often have to go through an awkwardness of crossing an uncomfortable or challenging threshold to grow from the experience (Cook-Sather 2014; Marquis et al. 2016).

Amani: It reminds me of that film *Arrival* (Levy et al. 2016), where the aliens arrive on Earth, and the main character is a linguist. She has to work out the alien language, and the aliens are working out human communication.

Bonnie: Which ones are the students?

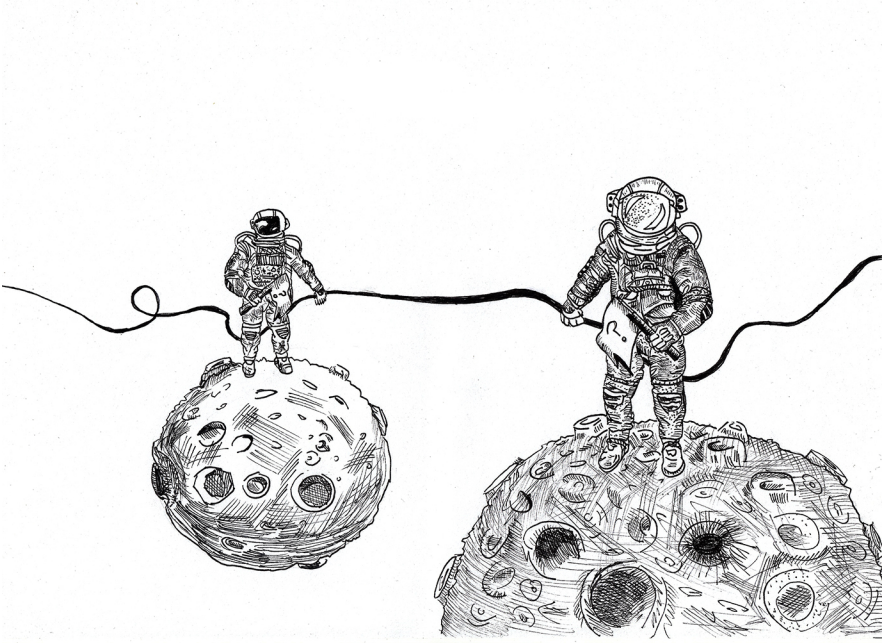
[Laughter]

Amani: They have that in-between space where they meet in the spaceship. The humans go up into this environment where there's a translucent screen between the humans and the aliens. That's where the communication happens: in the in-between world. But the humans don't understand the aliens fully until they go right up to and eventually past the screen. There's a point where the linguist just takes off all her protective gear and says, "*They need to see me.*" She looks up and sees that the aliens are much bigger than she realized. Before they just looked like these tentacular legs, but now she sees they're actually these huge beings, and she has a more genuine communication. Now, I'm not saying that academics are aliens . . .

[Laughter]

. . . or that students are aliens in this situation either. But I did like that imagery of the in-between space of meeting, but then you have to go beyond your comfort zone to really understand each other.

Steph: You mentioned translation and comfort zones which reminded me of Sofia Coppola's *Lost in Translation* (2003) where two strangers meet in a foreign city in a short amount of time, and they just happen to get along so well. That's what I felt actually. In the partnership team, we



developed a shared language, and we intuitively understood the importance of our project, much like Charlotte and Bob interacting with each other within the landscape of a foreign city.

Amani: That idea of the languages of academia and students must have been even more extreme for you, Bonnie, in your WeChat project (Stanway et al. 2019). Could you say a bit more about language and the in-between spaces of that project?

Bonnie: Yes! Language was important on many levels. There was the aspect of translation between students' and academics' worlds, but then we were working with international students, so there was also a whole set of other linguistic, cultural, institutional, and hierarchical norms that we were navigating through and around. On a practical level, we were also enhancing the international student partners' English language skills through working on these projects. And, of course, students were teaching us about a completely different WeChat language that we didn't know much about.

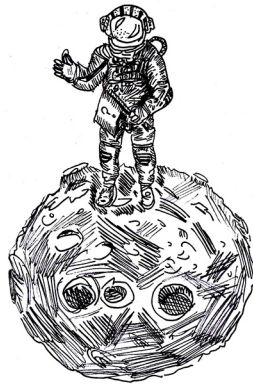
Language was also interesting because we were working in an in-between space where we were looking at Chinese literature for the project, which only the student partner could tell us about because she spoke Chinese and the academics didn't. So, there was this whole layered translation effort going on and many different spaces that we were playing in.

Amani: So, there were several different spaces in-between—between the various languages, between students and staff, between generations, between cultures, and between hierarchies. Did you go through different stages of working through discomfort together—how did it all play out?

Bonnie: Everyone was coming across something new or different all the time. Instead of being in the dark about it, and not knowing what to do, we'd established these relationships where we could ask each other. Student insights meant we didn't need to go through a trial and error process. We had advisors on this unknown world, and they guided us until we knew more and felt more comfortable in that space.

Amani: For students, the language of academia can be uncomfortable. The language academics use does not invite students into that space. For example, we had the annual teaching colloquium [an internal learning and teaching conference] (Peseta et al. 2016), and some of the student partners said, *"What's a colloquium? That doesn't sound like somewhere that students are welcome to go."* Academics need to think more about the way they make the spaces inviting. I think the partnership project was that in-between space where the student partners became more comfortable entering what was initially an academic space, and that space became co-created and co-owned.

Steph: Student-staff partnerships are the gateway to creating a common language between academics and students, which is something that Cook-Sather and Abbot have also found (2016). With you and Tai [Peseta], I felt really comfortable because you were both accommodating and supportive, so I didn't feel like I was completely alone or like an "alien." Semantics are important, and we can develop a language that we both understand—that we can both work with.



Amani: Something you did at the beginning, Bonnie, which I think helped create that productive in-between space was to have an explicit conversation about the values of partnerships. What do you feel that achieved?

Bonnie: I think the explicit conversation about partnership values was crucial to the success of our project. At our first project meeting, we had a session with Amani where we ran through what a student-staff partnership is like when it comes to research and practice.

As part of that, we had a discussion around the Higher Education Academy (2016) partnership values. Having that conversation right at the start and deliberating on a couple of the values was crucial. It set the partnership framework from which we were going to operate. The values were always there in the back of everyone's minds.

The project team talked about that session a lot. Having that session right at the beginning was good because we were able to foresee where the tensions might arise in the partnership. For example, how do you give authority to students in a university situation where staff are supposed to be the authority? We were able to explore and address these tensions

from the beginning, and it meant that when challenges came up later, we navigated through them more easily. We knew that we were aiming to operate with these values, and we would try really hard to stick to them.

Amani: What about between and among disciplines? That's another kind of space that we've been working in. Do you have any thoughts about how that played out in the projects?

Bonnie: It reminds me of the edge effect concept, where if you're so deep into an idea or a discipline it can be hard to question and challenge it because you might just be in too deep. Being on the edge allows you to reflect back on your own practices—on the practices of colleagues and peers. Being in a student-staff partnership allows you to be on the edge, and to work with other people who are on the edge, and to have that productive self-reflection.

Amani: [Reading out a quote] “Many species seek out edges because they offer simultaneous access to multiple environments and a greater richness in habitat” (Digitally Engaged Learning 2018). It's richer at the edge.

Steph: What an image!

Bonnie: I really like that.

Amani: Another prompt was between what is considered personal and what is considered academic. Do you think these kinds of spaces had that quality?

Steph: I think they did. We brought our own personal stories (University of Sydney 2015), and I think in retrospect they were quite necessary to the research because we all came from different backgrounds, like me being a low socioeconomic status student. We have all faced our own sorts of struggles. So those stories were necessary to analyze the diverse student experience because the university can be a very tough place to navigate, especially if you're not from the North Shore [a wealthy area of Sydney], if you don't have rich parents, and so whenever we had our meetings I felt like I could talk about my experience. Personal stories are very important in developing this language and this space.



Amani: There was a prompt about outside of the spaces and the flow of time to which we are accustomed. These initiatives do take time—time to develop the relationships and understandings. But there’s a paradox between the idea of a project which ultimately is short-term and has an end date—whether that’s through a time frame or through funding or whatever—yet student-staff partnerships are about relationships, and those relationships transcend a finite date of a project.

Those initial projects have finished, but Steph and I are still in contact. We’re working on this chapter now, which is great. Ideally, it’s an ongoing relationship. The other thing that’s outside the normal flow of student time is publications. Publications can take a long time, and in some cases, it’s after the students have graduated.

Bonnie: Also, student partners are given the opportunity to become experts while being engaged in the student-staff partnership. They build up a great knowledge base, but if they want to continue working in that area—either on research or for professional development—this can often extend well beyond what is initially stated in a project proposal. We’re in regular contact with our students post-project. This week we had

positive feedback from reviewers on our co-written article, so of course, I reached out to them. One of them is working in industry now, but they are still offering to help and be a part of it, and that's well beyond the life of the project.

Steph: I feel that way too. The skills that I've gained from these projects are very transferable. I'm interning at an art gallery at the moment, and they are trying to dismantle the structures that prevent young people from accessing art. It's something close to my heart because when I was a teenager, I wanted to be an artist. Looking at it from the "edge," it's interesting to see that there are people out there who are willing to create these spaces where we can meet eye-to-eye about these issues revolving around socioeconomic access to culture and art.

Bonnie: I'm just thinking about the space concept, and I feel like we've talked about how the people creating that space are important, but the physical space is important too. I remember when we brought students in for our first team meeting. It was in a meeting room behind closed doors, accessible only by using a staff swipe card. They had to knock on the door. Staff had to let them in. This is so different from the physical meeting space being an accessible open environment, such as a café. As the students walked through the security door into this meeting room, I think that alongside the potentially unwelcoming impression, they realized that entering into this space they were now in a position to be able to learn more about the institution and how it works, behind the scenes. In this way, the physical space that a partnership plays out in can have multiple and unintended impacts on student and staff partners. This is true of the historical, traditional education space where we are having this conversation right now—we're challenging the traditional space by talking about innovations and intersections.

Steph: I appreciated the discomfort, the awkwardness of being in-between and being on the "edge" because I knew that ultimately it would be worth going through it all to push through to get to the other side.

Amani: It's a brave space. It's getting away from the idea of a safe space. You can never create a truly safe space for everyone. But you can create a

brave space (Arao and Clemens 2013). So I think we're saying that working in this way is not all roses—it's not always positive and amazing. It is risky, but in the end, it is more fruitful than if you didn't work in this way.

Bonnie: Risky and rewarding. R&R . . . It's the opposite of the other R&R . . . rest and relaxation [smiling].

[Laughter]

Reflection Questions for Readers

- We have found it valuable to use pop culture references and metaphors to describe student-staff partnerships. What other pop culture references and metaphors came to mind as you were reading? If you wish, please share your observations on Twitter using the hashtag #studentsaspartners.
- We have included illustrations in this chapter. If you sketched your experiences with, or feelings about, student-staff partnerships, what would that look like?
- In our conversation, we discuss several interstices—spaces between—in partnership where new possibilities emerge and traditional barriers are overcome, for example, language, time, identities, and disciplines. What are some other in-between spaces in student-staff partnerships?

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