

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

©2020 by Lucy Mercer-Mapstone and Sophia Abbot. This work is made available under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/) license.

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.0a2>

Subjects: LCSH: Teacher-student relationships | College teaching

INTRODUCTION

(Re)Envisioning Partnership

Lucy Mercer-Mapstone

Lecturer

University of Sydney
Australia

Sophia Abbot

Master's student

Elon University
United States

In short, we have many questions.

What do we do when we use the same terms without realizing we are talking past each other?

We re-examine?

The single story of partnership could be a barrier to growth.

What *is* partnership?

Scholars use many names.

Our space is probably most familiar to you as “students as partners” or “student-staff partnership.”

The language startles:

it invites dialogue, as metaphors do.

It asks us to *unlearn* what we think we know.

Machinations of higher education are always governed by politics.

The -isms are well documented and hard to ignore.

Partnership is a political process, questioning taken-for-granted ways, working against the grain.

Here, it's different.

Partnership opens up new spaces—
spaces in the margin,
counter-spaces that challenge;
collaborative
equitable
relationships
in teaching and learning.

Aspirational, values-based,
highlighting the collocations
academic selves / student selves,
past selves / future selves,
we've all *been* students.

Partnership provokes us,
destabilizing neat categorizations
that abstract us.

Partnership makes us human again.

The ambiguity of partnership opens our eyes:

pushes us to accept discomfort,
offers a new language, a new lens to explore,
writes new rules for the classroom

exercise patience

be open-minded

fully understand

be playful in academic spaces

be joyful.

You choose who you're going to be in partnership.

A way of being in the academy: *We are no longer acting.*

We must take seriously multiple sites of power;
we navigate difficult terrain.

This requires careful attention by all.

I was not always met with understanding,

I developed resilience through these resistances.

This resilience allowed me to push back.

But how do we engage in partnership *meaningfully*?

We have to be ready for unexpected, sudden branchings:

“Can students truly be equal

when power, privilege, and status are inscribed?”

“Are we unintentionally reinforcing exclusive beliefs?”

“I wonder about the missionary, civilizing tones

of bringing ‘resistant’ students into the fold.”

Does this sound familiar to you?

Why do you think that is?

We persist nevertheless,

the urgency, weariness, hope, and hesitation.

Some of us turned inside out,

all of us disheveled and disoriented.

This is a place in which we stretch ourselves,

in which we rely on one another to pull us in new directions,

in which we are all equally twisted up.

“*Ako*” [Māori]:

both to teach and to learn;

this was our understanding of partnership.

Students astonished that staff seek their perspectives,

staff re-energized by the thoughtfulness of students,

we became cohesive:

transformed by authentic encounters.

Partnerships allow us to aspire:

We listen anew to each voice

to know we would never know once and for all.

Our wonderful series editors, Jessie Moore and Peter Felten, suggested in early feedback that we offer an “updated definition of partnership and context for partnership work—what do readers who are coming to partnership for the first time need to know?”

We struggled with this for a while—how could we define partnership in new ways that didn't step on the toes of all the wonderful ways it has been defined before? There have been so many fantastic overviews and recounts of partnership in previous works that inspire and resonate, many of which are drawn on in the following chapters, providing a foundation for this book.

We decided to offer, instead of an updated definition, the (re)envisioning which we shared with you above. Keeping in the (non)tradition of this collection in inviting creative genres, this (re)envisioning was created through poetic transcription. Poetic transcription is a process of re-presenting data in the form of poetry where the words of a dataset are reshaped into poems with minor textual changes (for example, changes in tense). We learned of this practice through and were inspired by the powerful poetic transcription by Isabella Lenihan-Ikin, Brad Olsen, Kathryn Sutherland, Emma Tennent, and Marc Wilson in chapter 5. This form of re-presenting results makes room for “the shapes of inter-subjectivity, and examining issues of power and authority . . . inclusive of emotional reactions as well as analytical descriptions” (Glesne 1997, 204). Appropriate, given the topic, don't you think?

The “dataset” we used to create the above (re)envisioning were the words of our authors in this edited collection—drawing on and riffing off their insightfulness. In this way, we incorporated the voices and wisdom of not only the fifty authors writing here, but also of the authors who came before us whose voices powerfully shaped our partnership thinking, writing, and practices.

This poetic transcription of partnership touches on many of the current themes and contexts of partnership work and scholarship. The first and second stanzas raise the multitude of questions which seems to be a facet of the field—what is partnership, what do we call it, and how do we talk about it? Having a shared language is critical for individuals to feel that they belong to a community as well as for movements to have a common point of reference (Palmer 1992). Sometimes, that language raises further questions—as in the fifth line of stanza one where Sasha Mathrani, drawn from chapter 10, articulates the limitations we self-impose when we hold too dearly to a “single story of partnership.” Indeed,

it is in the iterative reflection on how language shapes our partnerships that we come to learn more deeply about ourselves, our assumptions, and our field—as is discussed in numerous chapters (3, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, and 13) of this collection.

The third stanza broadens to consider the sectorial context within which partnerships happen. Partnership scholars often position the practice of partnership as radical in the ways it “works against the grain” (as described by Kelly Matthews in chapter 7) in an environment which increasingly is embracing neoliberalism, managerialism, and academic capitalism. Rachel Guitman and Beth Marquis in chapter 9, in describing that context, argue that partnership thus can become a political process which, in risk-averse environments of higher education, ironically, can bring more significant risks for practitioners and practices—such as the risk of false expectations established in empty partnership rhetoric described by Rachel Guitman, Anita Acai, and Lucy Mercer-Mapstone in chapter 3.

Stanza four conceptualizes partnership, where “Here, it’s different” (poignantly articulated by Romy Begum in chapter 14). As Abbi Flint calls it in chapter 11, this “space in the margins” lets in all sorts of rich juxtapositions between (our/other) selves—illustrated in chapter 8 by Amani Bell, Steph Barahona, and Bonnie Stanway. Tai Peseta, Jenny Pizzica, Ashley Beathe, Chinnu Jose, Racquel Lynch, Marisse Manthos, Kathy Nguyen, and Hassan Raza in chapter 6 recount how, as we rehumanize within these spaces, the “literature is flooded with case after case from around the world of students, staff, practices, and institutions being transformed by authentic encounters of pedagogical partnership.” The body of evidence seems to be swelling into an unequivocal peak.

This swell flows into the fifth stanza, into the personal parts of partnership—what we, as individuals, gain when our eyes are opened to the generative “ambiguity of partnership,” as described by Anita Ntem in chapter 13. Iteratively challenging and reconstituting our roles and identities (Amani Bell, Steph Barahona, and Bonnie Stanway, chapter 8), partnership experiences present a troublesome but potentially transformational threshold which, as we step, leap, bound (or trip) over, gives us

a new “way of being in the academy” (Abbi Flint, chapter 11) meaning that, perhaps, we are no longer acting (Anne Bruder, chapter 15).

Stanza six dives into the turbulent issues of power where Roselynn Verwoord and Heather Smith (chapter 1) urge us to consider how our multiple social locations—and the intersections between different locations—inscribe us and our partnerships with potentially insurmountable asymmetries. As Isabella Lenihan-Ikin and colleagues discuss in chapter 5, this omnipresent power raises tensions between equality and equity, which play out in partnership. These tensions are met with calls to *unlearn* in chapters 3 and 7—asking us to question what we know, hang our assumptions out for examination in the light of a plurality of knowledges. Critical engagement with, and dialogue about, such differences may be the most challenging aspect of partnership work but also the facet that potentially offers the highest rewards.

The seventh stanza speaks powerfully to the very real and messy realities of what it means to engage in partnership *meaningfully*. This and other gritty questions are posed here by Roselyn and Heather, and Sean Wilson, Julie Phillips, Helen Meskhidze, Claire Lockard, Peter Felten, Susannah McGowan, and Stephen Bloch-Schulman (in chapters 1 and 2, respectively). These questions won’t go away as the partnership field progresses—there are no simple (re)solutions. But perhaps that insolvable nature of partnership is what keeps us coming back for more, continuously tying ourselves into human knots which, as Anne so eloquently describes in chapter 15, pull us, stretch us, turn us inside out.

Our final stanza speaks to the sense of cohesion we have all felt when a partnership bears fruit: when we pluck the benefits in and of the process and aspire to continue to learn in the liminal partnership space of, as Alison Cook-Sather puts it in chapter 10, never knowing once and for all.

References

- Glesne, Corrine. 1997. “That Rare Feeling: Re-presenting Research Through Poetic Transcription.” *Qualitative Inquiry* 3, no. 2 (June): 202-21. <https://doi.org/10.1177/107780049700300204>.

Palmer, Parker J. 1992. "Divided No More." *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning* 24, no. 2 (March/April): 10-17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00091383.1992.9937103>.