

The Power of Partnership

Students, Staff, and Faculty
Revolutionizing Higher Education

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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.0a2>

Subjects: LCSH: Teacher-student relationships | College teaching

CHAPTER 1

The P.O.W.E.R. Framework

Power Dimensions Shaping Students as Partners Processes

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We have explored the ways various dimensions of power play through our partnerships over several projects. With each partnership the process can take different shapes, and as such, we navigate various dimensions of power. Building on our work with Angela Kehler (Kehler, Verwoord, and Smith 2017), we present a conceptual framework using the word P.O.W.E.R. to foster reflection on some of the power dimensions that can shape partnerships. We engage in a dialogue about the P.O.W.E.R. framework and use auto-ethnography and narrative dialogue as a method to give expression to our reflections. We want to introduce ourselves before we discuss the framework because positionality is central to our analysis.

Roselynn: I come to the partnership field wearing many “hats.” These hats include a student “hat” (as a PhD candidate), an instructor “hat” (in various teacher and adult education programs), and a curriculum consultant “hat” (as a staff person situated in a university teaching and learning center). My experiences wearing these hats shape how I view and

understand student-staff partnership. To use Britzman’s (1997) words, through my multiple hats, I experience the “tangles of implication” (32).

My interest in partnership is grounded in my commitment to education as a tool for social change. Often, I explore questions such as: What does it mean to engage students as equal partners in activities to improve teaching and learning? Can students *truly* be equal when issues of power, privilege, and status are inscribed in the terms “student” and “faculty”—terms that necessarily shape the ways we interact with and understand relationships and activities within education? I operate from the standpoint that partnership can be a positive experience. But how do we engage in partnership *meaningfully*? What are some of the challenges of creating authentic partnerships? How do we navigate these barriers while being mindful of power, privilege, and social location?

Heather: I’m a critical feminist with a PhD in political science, and a professor of global and international studies at the University of Northern British Columbia (UNBC). My area of expertise is gender and Canadian foreign policy. I’m also the former director of the Centre for Teaching, Learning, and Technology at UNBC. I too wear many hats.

Synthesizing my critical feminist approach and the students as partners model has resulted in questions that center on power in everyday practices and processes. We must take seriously the multiple sites of power in partnerships and interrogate how power manifests. Like Rose-lynn, I wonder about claims to equality in a system built on hierarchies, the power of labeling “student” and “faculty” in the model itself, and the sometimes missionary and civilizing tones of bringing “resistant” students into the fold. In short, I have many questions.

How we define/understand partnership

There are varying definitions and interpretations of partnership given the increasing interest in the field and corresponding growth in published literature. Drawing on Healey, Flint, and Harrington (2014, 2016), we define partnership as “a specific form of student engagement . . . a way of doing things, rather than an outcome in itself” (2014, 2). Partnership

requires that we navigate the difficult terrain of power hierarchies. This necessitates careful thought and attention by all partners.

Current literature on power and partnership

There is existing scholarship that raises important questions related to power and partnership (see Bovill et al. 2016; Cook-Sather 2007; Cook-Sather and Alter 2011; Felten et al. 2013; Mihans, Long, and Felten 2008). There is acknowledgment within the literature of the power inherent in the creation of students as partners practices (Bovill et al. 2016; Seale et al. 2015) and the impact of “power differentials in terms of authority, institutional status, and expertise” (Weller et al. 2013, 11). The power related to the socially constructed roles of student, faculty, or staff and how those roles are dynamic, fluid, often overlapping, and context specific is another central theme (Kehler, Verwoord, and Smith 2017; Weller et al. 2013).

The power of non-action (or what is often called resistance), misrepresentation (Weller et al. 2013), and silences (Smith 2017) are themes that arise in some literature, often in relation to students. We believe resistance or withholding by students is an act of power and agency. We need to pay attention to silence, be mindful of how we interpret silence, and respect students “for their astuteness in appreciating the reality of the relationship they have with lecturers—a relationship in which they, as students, are perhaps minor rather than major stakeholders” (Seale et al. 2015, 548). We do not underestimate the ability of those labeled “student” to appreciate and navigate power (Cates, Madigan, and Reitenauer 2018; Dwyer 2018; Silvers 2016; van Dam 2016).

As Kelly Matthews (2017, 3) has recently observed “power, whether discussed or left unspoken, is always a factor in [students as partners] interactions” and we must be attentive to both conscious and unconscious habits and behaviors. One way to ensure attentiveness to partnership practices and to remain mindful of our conscious and unconscious habits and behaviors is through ongoing reflective practice as individuals and teams. Relationship building, conversation, and dialogue are all practices central to the partnership literature (see Allin 2014).

The P.O.W.E.R. Framework

Our framework seeks to prompt reflection on some of the dimensions shaping power relations in partnership. We emphasize the role of the individual within partnership to help others develop or enhance their awareness of power hierarchies. We believe that, with awareness, individuals can make an informed choice to challenge the reproduction of power hierarchies.

Critical educational theorists (Freire 2002; Giroux 1997; Shor 1992), feminist scholars (Enloe 1996, 2004; Sylvester 2009; Zalewski 1996, 2006), and Indigenous scholars (Battiste 2000; Denzin, Lincoln, and Tuhiwai Smith 2008; Tuhiwai Smith 1999) inform our understanding of power hierarchies as gendered, racialized, heteronormative, class-based, and ableist. As white, settler, Canadian, cis-gendered women, we acknowledge the biases in our scholarly gaze based on our positionality. Given the centrality of context, we take seriously the calls from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015, 7) to engage in “education for reconciliation,” which, for us, means engaging in decolonization through our work to the extent possible given our positionality. Thus, our framework takes an intersectional approach to theorizing power.

Positionality is the ability to consider one’s position and social location and to view these aspects as relational where context and aspects of our identities (gender, race, class, etc.) are fluid and changing (Alcoff 1988). Positionality involves individuals taking up a position within a context and constructing meaning from this position (Alcoff 1988). Positionality in partnership involves individuals asking themselves questions including: What subject position (position shaped by discourse or ways of thinking) am I taking up? Based on the position and social locations we occupy, how much power do I have in this partnership? How much power do others have?

Openness is the desire to explore what might be possible. In partnership, openness involves asking questions about the purpose, goals, visions, and desires that partners have for partnership. Openness requires all partners to reflect on being open to others’ ideological assumptions, to learn from multiple perspectives, to be vulnerable,

and to say, “I don’t know.” Openness involves embracing the diverse, messy, and exhilarating processes of partnership. Openness is demonstrated by asking questions such as: What are my goals for participating in this partnership? What are my partners’ goals? To what extent am I open to the process of partnership and all that it could entail in terms of my own learning and vulnerability? To what extent are my partners open to the process of partnership? How will I know if I and others are being open throughout the partnership?

Willingness to invest time involves the concept of temporality, which can be understood as past, present, and future, as well as space, place, and being. It involves: determining how much time one has to participate in partnership or to engage in relationship building; reflecting on one’s past and present experiences with partnership; and determining to what extent participating is a priority. Determining one’s willingness to invest time in the process involves asking questions like: Am I/will I be an important stakeholder in this partnership? Does the partnership process attend to aspects that are important to me? How might participating in this partnership attend to my hopes? Am I/will I make the time to build the relationships that are essential to this process?

Ethnocentricity is having the attitude that one’s own group is superior. In partnership, ethnocentricity can take the form of partners making assumptions about each other. Whether intentional or not, making assumptions about various groups can limit what is possible. Developing an awareness of ethnocentricity involves individuals asking questions like: Does this partnership imply that anyone who disagrees with what is proposed is wrong? Does the partnership acknowledge that there are multiple ways of looking at the same issue? Am I making assumptions about certain groups of people or individuals, based on a homogenized label such as “faculty,” “student,” or “staff”?

Reflexivity is the ability to recognize how individuals are shaped by and can shape their environment; how the self and other exist in relation. Reflexivity supports individuals to “open new

ways of addressing . . . long-standing questions of how and what we can legitimately take ourselves to know and what the limitations of our knowledge are” (Davies et al. 2004, 364). Reflexivity in partnerships involves individuals asking questions like: How are my interests and actions being shaped, supported, or limited by the interests and actions of others? How are my actions or inactions shaping the experience of myself or others? How are my actions or inactions shaping or being shaped by the environment within which we are situated?

This framework provides a tool for ongoing reflective practice as individuals involved in students as partners practice. It also provides prompts for conversations that can be held between partners.

Dialogue about the Framework

To breathe life into our P.O.W.E.R. framework, this next section is a conversation about how aspects of the framework connect to our experiences navigating power in partnerships.

Heather: Ros, how has *positionality* played a role in your partnership experiences?

Roselynn: Conversations about positionality often don’t happen, and so we don’t unpack our positionality. For example, I recall a situation where someone made assumptions about levels of knowledge and positioned my knowledge as superior, given my status as a PhD candidate. A discussion about levels of privilege hadn’t occurred before this situation. We could have used this opportunity to consciously talk about how positionality influences all aspects of our partnerships.

Heather: Your response raises questions about the subject position and how partnerships are often created around roles. Our experience shows that partnership requires attentiveness to assumptions about what is known and assumptions about scholarly practice. You engage in a conversation and are used to ways of acting and being, and you might not always take the time to explain your assumptions. If we are not mindful of that, we can silence people.

Silencing can happen through our everyday practice. In a world full of acronyms, for example, we need to ensure everyone is aware of what the acronyms mean because, otherwise, our conversational shorthand becomes exclusive. Similarly, in the desire to “get things done,” we can overlook the vital need to check in. Checking in brings our voices back to the process.

Roselynn: Yes, focusing on roles reinforces subject positions. Perhaps our more fluid and contextual definition of positionality sheds light on the importance of having conversations about power and privilege from the start of a partnership. What has *openness* meant in your partnership experiences?

Heather: Two elements come to mind: wonder and harm. Wonder can occur when we are open to and focused on the process, not just the product. I had an experience where I was ready to work with a student on a project, and her insights totally flipped the project on its head in the most amazing way. That moment of wonder wouldn’t have happened if I hadn’t been open to the process.

Reciprocal openness must involve recognition by partners that in openness we can be harmed. Honestly, it’s hard to discuss harm in any detail because I feel an ethical obligation to keep private the depth of some of our experiences. Let me just say, in my efforts to challenge my roles and be open, I’ve sometimes felt more vulnerable and exposed.

Roselynn: For sure . . . openness requires shifting away from the social, cultural, and institutional norms that individuals operate within and exploring new ways of doing things. We need to be open to thinking about positionality and willing to invest *time* in the process. We also need to ask ourselves questions about these aspects up front because, as you mention, the potential for harm is significant.

Heather: It seems as though there is a tension between the possibility that openness can provide and the potential for harm that can occur in the process of being open. That’s tricky. So, Ros, how has a *willingness to invest time* in the process been a consideration in your partnerships?

Roselynn: In a new partnership, this has to do with who is asking me to invest in the process and what kinds of approaches they are taking to partnership. For example, is it a collaborative approach or a more traditional, roles-based approach? It also involves thinking about who I am and how I might contribute to the partnership, which connects to relationality. In an existing partnership, my willingness to invest time in the process is fluid and can change depending on how the partnership is unfolding. This reinforces the notion of power and links to the concept of individual agency—where individuals can use their power and agency to make choices about their participation.

Heather: When I think about time, I think about it in a neoliberal sense where time is seen as a commodity. Although I don't like thinking of time in this way, the reality is that post-secondary institutions have finite resources, and we are socialized to view resources like that. It's clear to me that, because partnership is relational, it takes dedicated time; however, how is one's time valued? Are all partners being rewarded for their time?

Roselynn: It's interesting that we touched on different aspects of time. Perhaps that's because we occupy different positions and social locations. What are your thoughts on *ethnocentricity* in partnership?

Heather: I've often had moments of surprise in my partnerships where I realized how deeply embedded I am in Western, masculinist norms and values. Working with Indigenous students and elders always provides me with moments of surprise about how colonial my practices can be. But these moments are valuable because they remind me that we need to be deeply mindful in partnership of how race and gender are normalized and how these social demographics are linked to power. We need to see power hierarchies as socially constructed roles that come with histories. Those histories are given expression through, for example, pictures of Queen Elizabeth in our public spaces—pictures which represent a colonial history to Canada's Indigenous peoples.

Roselynn: I think about how post-secondary institutions operate based on a Eurocentric model of education where we privilege Western knowledges and practices. What might it look like to decolonize partnership

given that it is a practice and ethos currently situated within a Eurocentric system of education?

Heather: We both emphasize the importance of shifting away from ways of being where the privileged often possess more power. How has *reflexivity* been important in your partnerships?

Roselynn: Reflexivity invites me to explore questions that connect to positionality, such as: Who am I? Who am I in relation to others? What insights/learnings am I gleaning from my relationality to others? What am I going to do differently based on my insights from my partners? These questions are complex: everything that we say or don't say or do or don't do contributes to partners' experiences in the partnership.

Heather: As someone who can overthink things, I feel my own reflexivity needs to be balanced with mechanisms for feedback in partnership. And this feedback needs to be coupled with action. I believe partnerships can be transformative, but we need to take our collective reflections and manifest them in our actions.

Roselynn: Your point about the need for feedback and dialogue to work through the messiness of partnership is important. In a recent partnership, one partner was engaging in more work than others and was feeling frustrated. We engaged in some heartfelt conversations about expectations and the importance of creating space to share our frustrations. Feedback and dialogue were important. I also think it's great that the two of us just engaged in a reflective dialogue about the components of the P.O.W.E.R. framework as a way of working through the messiness of our own experiences of partnership.

Concluding Reflections

Power is central to students as partners relationships and practices. We need to move beyond acknowledging power and begin to unpack it—to work collaboratively to identify contextual sites and sources of power. The P.O.W.E.R. framework is a starting point. As in our own dialogue, partners can use the framework to foster rich conversations and to help explore the micro (everyday) and sometimes hidden aspects of power

in partnership practices. Our conversations have shown us that reflection about the dimensions of power helps us navigate partnerships in ways that are thoughtful and respectful while simultaneously building trust. We continue to learn from each other because “we are the process” (Kehler, Verwoord, and Smith 2017, 1).

Reflection Questions for Readers

- How do you currently address sites of power in your partnerships?
- How might the P.O.W.E.R. framework be helpful in your partnerships? How might you introduce it?
- How would you expand the P.O.W.E.R. framework?

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