The Power of Partnership

Students, Staff, and Faculty
Revolutionizing Higher Education

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CHAPTER 10

Discerning Growth

*Tracing Rhizomatic Development through
Pedagogical Partnerships*

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As a recent undergraduate student of biology and a current faculty member in education, our interests in the concept of rhizomatic development have different origins. We both find the concept particularly generative, however, in mapping our experiences of growth through participating in and facilitating pedagogical partnership. In this chapter, we describe our use of "rhizomatic" and share our experiences of partnership using three rhizomatic themes.

Orientation: Rhizomatic Development

The term "rhizome" is derived from Ancient Greek (*rhízōma* or "mass of roots"), and in biology, it is used to describe a horizontal underground stem that can send out both shoots and roots. Deleuze and Guatarri (1987) use the term "rhizomatic" to describe theory, research, and culture that allow for multiple, non-hierarchical entry and exit points, resist any kind of organization, move toward and fill available spaces but do not leave clear traceable paths, yet can constitute powerful and enduring growth.

Drawing loosely on both biological and philosophical understandings of rhizomes, and imitating these concepts in form, we write in associative, roaming ways about our experiences of pedagogical partnership. Although our experiences have unfolded in and through time, we do not aim to provide linear-sequential, cause-and-effect steps but rather to map a small number of the multiple branchings and connections that nurture forms of flourishing. The flourishing we discern in ourselves and others includes deeper understanding, increased confidence, greater clarity, and stronger convictions, all of which develop in different directions and at different rates.

We offer three rhizomatic themes that we call Upward-Growing Shoots, Nodal Relationships, and Barriers and Branchings. These reveal just a few of the forms of growth that make up larger non-hierarchical patterns of development—multiple, always spreading rhizomes that link across contexts and times, creating a largely invisible but deeply connected network of meanings and practices.
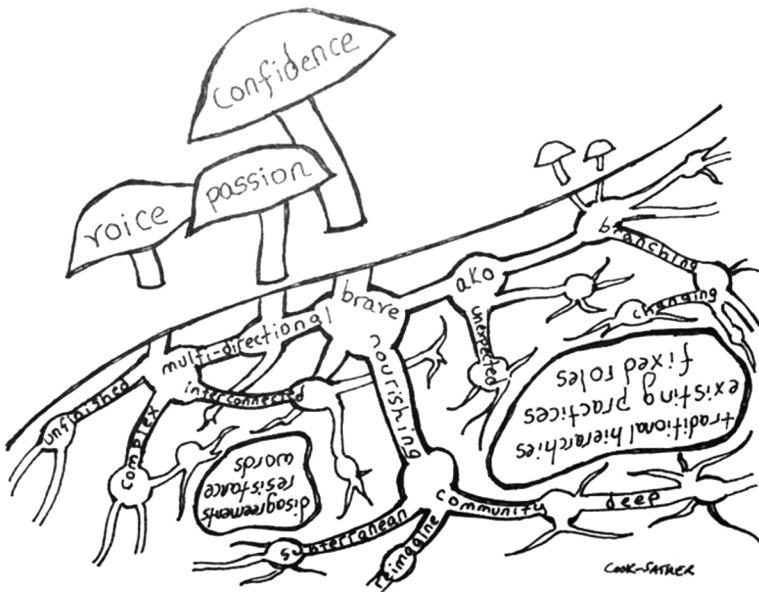

Illustration by Scott Cook-Sather

Upward-Growing Shoots

As the visual map of rhizomatic development above suggests, while most rhizomatic activity takes place under ground, invisible, some upward-growing shoots emerge above ground and become discernible. The shoots depicted in our map include voice, passion, and confidence, three of the most common we have discerned, but they also include the partnership program we developed itself and the way our work through it has informed other programs. Our stories below offer glimpses of how both these qualities and entities emerged for us.

Alison: The Students as Learners and Teachers (SaLT) program at Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges emerged out of multiple conversations born of ongoing, collaborative teaching and learning relationships. These conversations included questions, responses, possibilities, and rethinkings through dialogue among differently positioned people (students, staff, faculty) at the colleges (Cook-Sather 2018b). In the fall of 2006, administrators at Bryn Mawr College called for some sort of support for educational development for faculty but did not specify what kind. Several faculty members expressed a desire to make their classrooms more inclusive and responsive but did not have any set ideas about how to do that. Students articulated, neither for the first time nor for the last time, that there were multiple ways in which the institution did not see, recognize, or value their identities and knowledge. These multiple entry points into the conversation about what kind of program we might create yielded the growth of the student-faculty pedagogical partnership program that became SaLT as well as recommendations we regularly revisit and revise for how to make classrooms inclusive (Cook-Sather and Des-Ogugua 2018).

The students' words, in particular, have resonated with me ever since and inspire me always to keep listening. The details of what they had to say and the urgency, weariness, hope, and hesitation to trust that I heard in their tone still echo in my head. Listening to them then and perpetually, I learned to listen anew to each voice, to know I would never know once and for all what students experience, think, feel, and

know and so would always want to make spaces to learn and to grow through that learning.

Sasha: Through my student-faculty partnerships, I developed an increased sense of confidence and ability to articulate myself (Mathrani 2018). These aspects of my growth have allowed me to engage in partnership outside the realm of my structured student-faculty partnerships. For me, partnership is engagement between student and faculty that pushes the boundaries of traditional hierarchies (Cook-Sather and Alter 2011; Crawford 2012; Mercer-Mapstone, Marquis, and McConnell 2018).

Throughout my time at Haverford, I engaged with a program working with local middle and high school students from backgrounds underrepresented in science. As a student coordinator for the program, I worked with various faculty and staff members who oversaw the program. Since these faculty and staff members served as my supervisors in this position, my relationship with them was different from the relationships I formed through pedagogical partnerships. The hierarchical relationship that I had with my supervisors in this position made it difficult to always be open and honest. However, over time I was able to use my position as student coordinator to push back against some of the fundamental structures of the program that existed because of a lack of thoughtful consideration of students' backgrounds and identities.

Although I was not always met with understanding and equal engagement, I developed resilience through the resistances I encountered, and other resistances in my traditional pedagogical partnerships (Ntem and Cook-Sather 2018). This resilience allowed me to continue to push back until I felt like my voice was heard. In my third year as a student coordinator for the program, the resistance I faced from the faculty and staff with traditional roles of power made it difficult to feel like my voice was heard. However, around the same time, a task force was convened to look at the program and evaluate its goals and structure. My passion for the program, increased confidence, and ability to articulate my views helped me to take on the role of a student representative on the task force. With a new avenue to voice my perspectives and space where I could continue to speak up, I stepped down as student coordinator and

stepped into my role as a student representative. In this new space, I was no longer working within the traditional hierarchies of the program. Instead, I was in a space where my voice was emphasized. I received this personal communication from a faculty member who had initially resisted pushing the boundaries of traditional hierarchies.

> Hi Sasha,
>
> I just wanted to let you know how valuable I felt your contributions were to our task force discussion today. I know I was pretty quiet in the beginning, and that was deliberate. I was focusing on listening and taking notes, while also leaving room for you to share your ideas before jumping in (you know, the whole power dynamic thing). Sometimes, I think faculty don't give students enough time to develop their thoughts. I admire how comfortable you are in expressing yourself in a mixed setting like this committee.
>
> You are not afraid to engage deeply and with passion, which is so important! I hope that you will continue to be a role model for other students in this regard.

In reflecting on this experience, I found unexpected connections between my pedagogical partnerships and my work as a student coordinator. Through my pedagogical partnerships, I developed a sense of confidence, passion, and desire to effect change, and all of that growth transferred over to my experiences with this program. I was able to effect change in a way that I could not have foreseen. I am certain that through some pathway, my personal development through pedagogical partnerships grew beyond the traditional structures of partnership.

Nodal Relationships

In rhizomatic terms, a node is the part of the underground plant system from which roots and shoots grow. Represented in our map above by the knobby protrusions where multiple roots intersect, nodes are both connecting points and crossings. They are convergences of the qualities of

pedagogical partnership nurtured through relationships, such as community and change. They are the sites of and a metaphor for growth.

Alison: The weekly meetings of student consultants that I facilitate in my role as director of SaLT provide nourishing conditions and nurture deep, multidirectional forms of relationship and growth. Over the last twelve years, I have convened more than a thousand such meetings. In these hours, student consultants and I meet as fuller selves than most of us feel we can be in other academic relationships. Under these conditions, we are at once teachers, students, and people with uniquely complex, intersecting dimensions of identity, all striving to multiply perspectives (Cook-Sather 2014) and to turn resistances into resiliencies (Ntem and Cook-Sather 2018). Together, we generate sustenance and imagine ways around impediments.

In turn, the relationships student consultants develop with their faculty partners are informed and guided by deep critical insight and the equally deep generosity of spirit student partners display as they work tirelessly to engage in meaningful ways, even when they express their exhaustion in those meetings. In the process of analyzing how best to develop classrooms that are productively challenging and inclusive of a diversity of students, we talk about what it means not only to be a pedagogical partner but also to be a human being in relation to this world at this time (Cook-Sather and Porte 2017). Perpetually mapping what can't be quite known, we try to complicate any either/or until it is a both/and. We strive to name what we experience as intersecting in any given node and work to find ways of holding the complexity, even as it sends shoots in new directions.

Sasha: After being in partnership with various faculty members, I have found that the course of each partnership is unique and unpredictable. The relationships that grew out of my partnerships were each special in different ways, but one stands out the most. In this partnership, my faculty partner and I reached a point in the semester where we seemed to disagree on different pedagogical practices. Our disagreements made our weekly meetings abrupt and uncomfortable.

During one of the weekly meetings, my faculty partner shared an idea he had for a class he was planning to teach the following semester: he wanted to start the class with a very difficult assignment to show the students they had a lot to learn. However, he said he did not want to tell the students the assignment was intentionally difficult. I felt uncomfortable with this idea, but our meeting ended with neither of us really seeing where the other was coming from. We seemed to be traveling on completely different paths. This meeting to me was a point in our partnership where I felt my partner and I might not be able to engage in difficult discussions—a sort of unexpected stopping point where we both felt too far from meeting at a common node.

After talking about this uncomfortable conversation in my weekly student consultant meeting, I had the chance to clarify for myself why I had not liked my faculty partner's idea. I was able to articulate that assigning intentionally difficult problems in class would deter students who were already doubting their place in the classroom—students from traditionally underrepresented backgrounds. I was nervous about bringing this up in my next meeting with him, but I gathered the courage to do so and shared my thoughts with him. When I clearly articulated the reasons behind my beliefs, my faculty partner seemed to become more receptive. I took a leap and ended up being affirmed in an unexpected way. This leap allowed my partner and me to create a "brave space" (Arao and Clemens 2013) in our meetings where we could have difficult discussions, disagree productively, and really engage with each other (Abbott 2016). This partnership ended in a strong relationship that grew out of a lot of uncertainty and discomfort. Although we had branched away from each other earlier in the relationship, we were able to converge at a common node that served as a site for growth.

Barriers and Branchings

The final phenomenon we represent in our map of rhizomatic development through pedagogical partnership is the barriers that roots and shoots may encounter, such as rocks in the soil, and how the roots and shoots must find their way around them, branching in new directions rather than continuing the way they were going. As we indicate in the

upside-down text in the image, the kinds of phenomena that constitute barriers to partnership include resistances and disagreements, traditional hierarchies, existing practices, and fixed roles, and even words that we might think signal the same thing to different people but do not.

Sasha: In the spring of 2018, I accompanied Alison and a former student consultant to Muhlenberg College, where we engaged with students, staff, and faculty to imagine the possibilities of partnership within the culture and context of Muhlenberg. I entered the space with my conceptions of what partnership meant and how to enact effective partnerships. However, over my two days at Muhlenberg, I began to re-examine my understanding of partnership. In my experiences, partnerships were one-on-one relationships between student and faculty focused on re-examining a particular class or syllabus. The single story of partnership could have been a barrier to my growth. However, in conversations with students and faculty, I began to understand the culture of Muhlenberg, and I could see potential for partnerships in ways I had never conceived of. In a conversation with students, I heard the need for students' voices to be elevated in the community. Together we came up with an idea for students to run focus groups to document and share students' experiences, especially those of students with marginalized identities. Before going to Muhlenberg, I would never have conceptualized that idea as partnership. However, my conversations and interactions at Muhlenberg informed my changing definition of partnership, allowing it to branch around what could have been a barrier that stopped such growth.

Alison: I visit numerous institutions of higher education in many places in the United States and around the world. I am invited to share the pedagogical partnership approaches we have developed at Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges, and what I learn from people in these other contexts about their hopes, fears, goals, and plans prompts me to rethink my own. None so much as a visit to Aotearoa New Zealand in March 2018. I was excited about this trip because, two years before and leading up my visit, my host had begun to educate me about key principles of Māori teaching-learning, including *ako*, which means to learn and to teach through a process that is relational and social.

I heard so much resonance with pedagogical partnership principles colleagues and I (Cook-Sather, Bovill, and Felten 2014) had developed based on work done in the United States and the United Kingdom—respect, reciprocity, shared responsibility—that I was especially eager to be in dialogue with people in Aotearoa New Zealand higher education institutions. I was surprised when I learned that the word "partnership" evoked for some Māori colleagues failed promises made by the Crown traced back to the Treaty of Waitangi—the founding document of the country. It signaled the failures in the inequitable workings of an educational system that is more welcoming of and responsive to Pākehā (a Māori language term for New Zealanders who are of European descent) than to Māori and Pacific Islanders, the indigenous peoples of the country (Berryman and Eley 2017) (see Cook-Sather 2018a for more detail).

What do we do when sets of values share the same spirit, but the words that signal affirmation and empowerment in one context signal failed promises and disenfranchisement in the other? What do we do when we use the same terms without realizing we are talking past each other? That our cultural sets of values do not share the same spirit of intent? This is an exploration in which I am currently engaged with two colleagues in Aotearoa New Zealand, one Māori, one Pākehā (Berryman, Bourke, and Cook-Sather, in preparation). The growth I experienced in dialogue with these new colleagues extended in many directions, alongside and at branching angles to the directions in which I have been growing for years.

Un-ending

Rhizomes don't have beginnings and endings, they are always in the middle, in between things, interbeings. Each of the sprouts of growth we describe, some visible, mostly invisible, captures how pedagogical partnership recognizes the "radical unfinishedness of the human condition" and develops "our consciousness of this unfinished state" (Freire 1998, 100; see also Brunson 2018 and Cook-Sather 2006). To engage in and grow through pedagogical partnership, one has to be ready for unexpected, sudden branchings, knowing, as Anita Ntem, one of our student partner colleagues, has said, that there is no "right way" to go. Direction

emerges from how we combine extending ourselves and being recep-tive to what comes toward us and how we work around the obstacles we encounter. The growth and change that come through pedagogical partnership are not always apparent at the time, but through reflection, they can be mapped backward, continuing that ever-branching rhizom-atic growth.

Reflection Questions for Readers

- In what ways does the concept of rhizomatic development capture your experiences of pedagogical partnership and in what ways does it not work to characterize the kind of development through partnership you have experienced?
- Are there other concepts or metaphors that capture for you the experience of pedagogical partnership? What are they and what do they surface or highlight?
- What barriers have you faced in partnership, and how have you branched in new ways to grow around them?

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