

The Power of Partnership

Students, Staff, and Faculty
Revolutionizing Higher Education

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Elon University Center for Engaged Learning
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CHAPTER 11

Space in the Margin

The Poetry of Partnership

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On opening the book

I find the pages are filled
with paragraph after paragraph
of dense text, passive voice.
A reference list that spills
from covers to devour days.
Look here, you say, under *hegemony*
a spidery line tracks left
to pencilled notes, aslant.
There is space in the margin.

This hanging indent an invitation
to prise the words apart
shake loose the strokes of letters
remake the text. All we must do
is smooth down the paper and begin.

*Change begins
with the first question,
but who will ask it?*

Division

The student guide
at the university museum
tells me sponges
are just collections of cells
held together by bridges.

*Press two through a sieve,
mix them up. It might look
a mess but they know
who they are. In the end
they return to their selves.*

Is that how it is
when I try to see, to hear,
to learn as you?
The tidal pull of the self.
The impossibility of other.

Or is there a point
of unsettled balance,
a brackish suspension
free from shape's certainty
where all forms are possible?

*To be another
for one swirling moment
and changed forever*

Between us

Her e-mail suggests we meet
in the not-quite space
of the university cafeteria
to talk over coffee and cake.

Here, supervisions and group-work
rub tables with dissections of nights out.

She stands and waves.
I know her by the scarf
she often wears in class.
Blue and green geometric silk.

We sit down to our uncertain task.
A dance of asking, listening,
carefully offering slivers of self
between us
a brave space.

She pulls the scarf through her fingers.

Our work is built on words
and small actions:
a name remembered
a door held open
a palm outstretched
food shared.
Tiny significant kindnesses.

She lays her scarf across the table
between us
an intricate path.

*Student or teacher
when creating the future
labels matter less*

Growth

The seeds of these ideas
are planted but do not yet grow

They require water
and light
earth to hold

I am no nursery
I am greening too
supple as a sapling
under this bark

The path of my roots
not yet set

We are both green shoots
and gardeners

*Like a flash of sun
cast through trees, your voice
changes how I see*

Where Next?

I hope that you enjoyed reading these poems and that they spoke to and with your experiences and ideas about partnership in some way.

*How to start
this uncertain task? Open doors
may lead anywhere*

Before I close this chapter with my own reflections, I offer some questions which I hope will encourage you to consider how these (and your own poems) may open up new conversations around partnership.

Reflection Questions for Readers

- When reading these poems, was it a staff or student voice you imagined speaking? Does your reading of the poem change if you imagine the other voice as the “I”? What assumptions or ideas might this surface?
 - How do the poems relate to your own understandings and experiences of partnership?
 - How could you use poetry or other arts-based approaches in your partnership practice? For example: as a means of exploring the nature of partnership; as a way of sharing learning from partnership; as a research or evaluation method?
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*A question’s power
lies in the risk of asking and
courage to listen*

Poetry itself can be a form of partnership, a dialogue between poet and reader (Keplinger 2016). I invite you to reflect on, respond to, and build

on these poems in your own voice—perhaps by writing your own poems or another form of creative response.

Reflections on the Poetry of Partnership

I came to write this chapter as a student, writer, and reader of poetry, and as a scholar and practitioner of partnerships. I use the terms “student” and “scholar” here not to denote a specific status within higher education, but as spaces and roles I find myself inhabiting (often simultaneously) through my practice.

There are many reasons why I chose poetry as a way of writing about staff-student partnerships. Research poetry can be multi-voiced (Babcock 2017); it can weave together the voices of research participants, literature, and researcher. As an educational developer and researcher, I am interested in both the theory and practice of partnership. As a researcher, I am fascinated by how we understand partnership, and the interplay between these understandings, our beliefs about the purpose of higher education, and the nature of learning and working in the academy. As an educational developer, I’m interested in how we can create learning and teaching environments where partnerships flourish and how we support people to explore this way of working and learning together. Cultures and communities are shaped by the people who are part of them. This requires us to attend to the way partnership plays out in practice; how do individuals understand and embody this in the way they learn, teach, and work? Poetry can connect the conceptual and experiential aspects of partnership and may be a way of capturing and speaking across these multiple voices of theories, practices, and partners.

I understand partnership as a way of being in the academy; as a way of relating to one another and our experiences of learning and working in higher education. It describes a different mode of staff and students relating to one another than the traditional (often hierarchical) teacher-student relationship. In this way, it offers us a new language and lens to explore our experiences. Through this exploration, we can surface assumptions, challenge practices and policies that may restrict the nature of learning and teaching that is possible, and co-create alternative futures (Healey, Flint, and Harrington 2014). This enables different kinds of

conversations about learning and teaching to emerge, and these conversations may benefit from being expressed through other forms than the traditional (if there is such a thing?) academic journal paper. Abegglen, Burns, and Sinfeld (2015) describe how new forms of writing (in their example, blogs) enabled student partners to “re-territorialize” and be playful within quasi-academic spaces. I am exploring poetry as a new space for my own scholarship, alongside other arts-based methods (Flint 2018).

Recently there have been calls to consider and write about the emotional aspects of partnerships (Felten 2017). Poetry may offer a way into this, through its capacity to share, engage, and connect through emotional experiences (Faulkner 2009).

Poetry often attends to the ambiguous and liminal. Similarly, some staff-student partnerships are located in the edgelands of academia, the betwixt-and-between spaces (Flint 2016). Outside formal teacher-student relationships, the roles and identities of partners can become opaque and less fixed (Jensen and Bennett 2016). It is perhaps here where the light that a partnership lens shines on higher education may be felt more keenly.

*Morning birdsong
assembles many voices
to make music*

The ideas explored in these poems are inspired by conversations with staff and students. They draw on my research collaborations and the work of others whose writing has enlightened and challenged my thinking. I appreciate the generosity and curiosity of these peers and scholars. Faulkner (2009) stresses the need for attention to form, craft, and effectiveness in research poetry. Each of the poems has been workshopped with other poets (for whose time and care I am also grateful).

My approach draws on: my experience as a poet; on research poetry (Babcock 2017; Faulkner 2009); and on how examples of poetry have been used to shed light on experiences of higher education and as a way of exploring and drawing together multiple research and historical strands (Carpenter 2017; Quinlan 2016). I am excited by the possibilities poetry offers for exploring and acknowledging the interweaving of the intellectual, practical, and emotional aspects of working and learning in partnership. Writing poetry is a method of inquiry into as well as writing about partnerships. For me, it is the beginning of an experiment.

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