

# The Power of Partnership

Students, Staff, and Faculty  
Revolutionizing Higher Education

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## CHAPTER 13

# Personal Growth through Traditional and Radical Partnerships

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Given my initial lack of knowledge in the field of partnerships, the ambiguity and uncertainty of my role throughout my partnerships fostered several different key opportunities for challenging traditional pedagogy. I exercised patience and strove to fully understand the context of a situation. This essay explores my experience in three distinct partnerships. My first partnership inspired me to learn about the contextual factors that play a role in classroom pedagogy. My second partnership pushed me to accept my discomfort with ambiguity. And my last partnership encouraged me to explore what kind of leader I was becoming. These three partnerships crafted my role and understanding of what it meant to be an effective and meaningful student partner.

### **The Power of Affirmations: Understanding Contextual Factors in Partnership**

During the second year of my undergraduate career, the director of the Students as Learners and Teachers program, Alison Cook-Sather, invited me to participate in a partnership with a faculty member who co-taught

a course as part of an immersive, cluster experience. This partnership presented my first moments of uncertainty and helped me understand the importance of learning the full context of a situation and the effects it has on classroom pedagogy. I joined the partnership thinking to myself, *what will I be doing or bringing to this partnership?* I knew that I would be taking notes and observing the professor's class, but I was not entirely sure about how useful I would be. I felt nervous and uncertain. Then, I thought to myself that perhaps all I could do is be a "problem solver." This meant that if my faculty partner informed me of a problem, we would work through the problem together. Yet, when I remembered that my faculty partner had many years of teaching experience, I questioned my effectiveness in troubleshooting any possible issues that would arise.

After my first meeting with my faculty partner, I realized how challenging my role would be. I had to be present in a course that was co-taught by another professor, and I quickly learned that any such co-teaching is always situated in a complex institutional dynamic. I needed to think through how I could provide support for my faculty partner and create a connection with the students. But beyond that, part of growing in this role was understanding that I had to be a malleable person who wore many hats. I made suggestions on how to improve connections with her class, including inviting opinions on ice breakers, taking ownership of team bonding activities, and creating space for whole group reflections. And I also became the support system any time students needed a space to process the complexity of the program. When participating in partnership, it is not always ideal to be an active student in the class and a student consultant simultaneously, because the lines of the roles can be blurred. Being in both roles felt exciting yet exhausting! I reflected on the amount of time, energy, and work students are accountable for outside of class, and it motivated me to be a supporter of both my partner and the students of the course. The dynamics of this partnership propelled me to make sure everyone felt secure, and I did this by ensuring both student and staff confidentiality. I wanted to build and sustain trust with my faculty partner and her students.

When my faculty partner and I met, she opened up to me. She spoke to me about herself, her working relationship with the students, as well

as the institutional dynamics within which the course unfolded. It was in this intimate moment that I realized that what she needed most were affirmations. She could not share her thoughts about the realities and limitations of institutional work if she did not feel comfortable. However, understanding these contextual elements affected the way that I reflected on aspects of her pedagogy that I might not have paid attention to during the start of our partnership. Quite frankly, this conversation opened my eyes to not take everything I observed at face value but to always consider the external influences on a decision that is made by a faculty member. I had already admired her sense of confidence in the way that she carried herself, the way she demonstrated respect through her body language, and the way she was able to create a harmonious relationship with her co-teacher. When I saw her vulnerability, there was a shift in my initial assumptions. It became apparent how easy it could be to fall into a mode of self-deprecation and self-judgments when caught up in the technicality of institutional expectations. I felt that she needed acknowledgment and recognition of the impact she had on all her students.

At first, as a student, I did not think professors needed affirmation as much as students. This partnership taught me to think differently. When I expressed my true admiration for how she provided a space for her students to take the initiative, and how her confidence made students feel assured in themselves, she was astonished. She knew she was a great professor, but she did not realize how impactful she was in her relationships with her students and the particular strengths she brought to her pedagogy. Even in my role as a participating student, I felt motivated and energized to continue this academic work. I wanted her to be aware of her strengths, so I made sure to share how her students appreciated her presence, her body language, and the balance she brought to her co-instructional partnership. As Cook-Sather notes: "The student consultant is uniquely positioned as neither student in nor a teacher of the class, yet still a student and focused on supporting the teaching" (2015, 15). My unique position as a student consultant provided me the opportunity to support my faculty partner's teaching, both directly and indirectly. Being able to name the things that students appreciated (and what I appreciated as a student myself) positively reinforced what my

faculty partner was already doing well and what she should continue to do. She is an autonomy-supportive professor (Jang, Reeve, and Deci 2010) who creates a warm and welcoming space by encouraging students to finish their sentences before she comments and allows students to take the initiative and ownership of the course materials by allowing students to create content and lead team sessions for the day. She fostered moments of reassurance students could rely on. Had my faculty partner not expressed her own feelings of vulnerability and uncertainty, I would not have known how important it was to affirm her strengths in the class.

### **Accepting Discomfort and Ambiguity**

I brought the growing skill of seeking contextual understanding into my second partnership. I understood that since my partner was a new faculty member, there were many challenges to her feeling welcome and secure in her role. When we first met, I was delighted to learn about how she fell in love with her subject matter and what her goals for the course were. In the first few weeks of our partnership, my method was to acknowledge all the things that seemed to be working well for students, then, if need be, to provide constructive feedback on what needed more attention. However, after the first few weekly check-ins, my faculty partner did not seem as receptive to receiving my feedback as I thought she would be. I experienced what felt to me like resistance and apathy (Ntem and Cook-Sather 2018). I started to feel as though she didn't value my feedback as much because there were more affirmations than constructive criticism. This was reflected in the decrease of our weekly check-ins, her body language, which seemed guarded, and her tone, which displayed moments of inattentiveness. This feeling was unsettling and, from my perspective, decreased the overall consistency of our communication. I felt as though we were not on the same page—like she did not see the benefit of my being physically present in the classroom. During my weekly meetings with other student consultants, which provided us with a space for active reflections and brainstorming action steps for partner work, I shared with the group that my partner did not seem as responsive or receptive to my contributions as she had seemed to be in the very

beginning. At that moment, I was not only confused, but I also started to question whether this partnership was worth the time and energy.

During this time, I focused on just thinking through this situation with my fellow cohort of student consultants and weighing the possibilities and ways to move forward. Having a group that was supportive and there for me to help me sort through the ambiguity of partnership was useful (Cook-Sather 2015). One thing I learned from that experience was not only to be patient in not knowing what was next but also to understand that everyone has their own timing and needs space to decipher their own emotions. Not everyone is ready to be fully committed to being in partnership, so I should not take the outcome personally or be self-critical when things do not go as planned.

When my faculty partner was ready to be in communication with me again, we had an honest conversation about ways we could move forward. Part of the process of moving forward was being honest about how we could both be productive in our partnership. We ended up deciding it would be most useful for us to focus on her upcoming course for the next semester.

In this partnership, for us to move forward and maximize productivity, we took a step back to think through what made the most sense to focus our energy on. We agreed to disagree on her approach to fostering student-faculty relationships. This experience of not knowing what to do because of the lack of communication between me and my faculty partner was when I felt almost useless. These feelings have also been shared by other student partners about their partnerships. When my faculty partner and I reconnected, I felt that we started to work toward a common goal, and there was a shift in attitude and approach. We were not perfect by any means, but we were productive in reaching a point of consensus to move forward.

### **Co-creational Partnership: Becoming a Leader**

I carried the lessons I learned from my previous partnerships with me as I approached my last partnership. Acknowledging contextual factors and learning to be okay with not always knowing what was ahead was and still is critical in making the most out of partnership. During my

last semester as a student consultant, Alison invited me to participate in an immersive, co-teaching experience with a visiting professor. This experience was excitingly different from my other partnerships because my role evolved as the partnership unfolded. In this partnership, because of our schedules, my faculty partner and I did not have the opportunity to meet in person to fully discuss classroom structures and dynamics before the beginning of the semester. When we finally met after I had the opportunity to sit and observe the course, we had to learn to trust that things would be clearer once we followed the flow of the course.

Not only did we get to know more about each other's lives, but we also had the opportunity to learn about how we each felt about classroom spaces and students' presence. We found that we shared similarities in our ability to deeply reflect on pedagogy and learning spaces. Part of being fruitful in partnership was learning about our differing backgrounds and why we were so passionate about particular elements that shaped learning spaces. When my faculty partner and I thought about how our partnership would be defined for the rest of the semester, we didn't really know what made the most sense. We had a lot of questions regarding what might be most effective. Should my faculty partner teach the first half of the class and I teach the second half? Or should I just take notes on the class dynamics and share feedback with her? I thought to myself that I could also teach a few classes and she could help fill in the gaps. Another alternative that came to mind was continuing to participate in the class half the time and the other half I could take notes. All the emotions of uncertainty about my role were exciting, and clarity started to emerge when we started to have more frequent check-ins.

The possibilities of my new role were endless, which made it bittersweet. I knew that I had the opportunity to try out an abundance of innovative strategies; at the same time, due to the natural time constraints of the course, I had to be strategic about how to optimize my time. We came to the conclusion that I should be in the class and use personal judgment to make appropriate contributions to class content, activities, and discussions. My faculty partner trusted my judgment and initiative, which made me feel honored and excited to work with her. I would feel free to bring up common themes and issues that I noticed in class, and



we would clarify and discuss them. I really appreciated how open and flexible she was in figuring out what made sense for us. This flexibility motivated me to have faith in not always having a clear answer but engaging deeply with the process of co-creation.

As our partnership developed, we learned a lot about each other regarding our pedagogical style, personal values, and goals. As a student consultant, I had never had a partnership in which my partner gave me advice and tried to support me in my academic goals. Instead of only advocating for my partner, I also felt advocated for. There were moments where she would remind me that I did not need to take on so many roles. Of course, given who I am, I would say, “No, it is totally fine, really.” If I said I was going to do something, I wanted to make sure that I would do it and do it well. I appreciated my role in asking questions, challenging assumptions, and facilitating conversations. I really appreciated that she was always so caring and wanted me to make the most of my experiences by not overworking myself. This partnership brought me a sense of agency and encouraged me to carefully consider what decisions made the most sense. The ability to share my honest feedback on how to encourage students to get out of their comfort zone was priceless.

Looking at my personal growth from my first to last partnerships, I noticed that I always had some form of nervousness and uncertainty, but most importantly, I needed to acknowledge the realities that surrounded the present circumstances. These themes of uncertainty were a motivating factor for me to think thoroughly about what role I wanted to play and the expectations I developed for myself and for the partnership. The moments of uncertainty allowed me to understand what it means to be patient and come to terms with the fact that not everyone will always be ready to be in a fully, committed partnership. Moments of uncertainty gave me a better understanding of contextual factors and afforded me the opportunity to be a leader who recognizes these barriers. I learned to make the most out of a situation and leverage moments of ambiguity as spaces for deep reflection. My last partnership, where I co-taught with my faculty partner, really showed me my growth and maturity. This was a moment when I was seen in a different role. I was one of the holders of subject knowledge. Students trusted me to clarify, explain, and open

up. All the moments of uncertainty, misunderstanding, and confusion, as well as careful attention, patience, and readjustment, had led to this moment of leadership. These were the moments I carried with me as I went on to conferences, workshops, and panels discussing the work and energy of what it felt like and meant to be in partnership.

### Reflection Questions for Readers

- Must you experience some form of resistance to truly understand the value of partnership?
- Can you fully understand what it means to foster “productiveness” in partnerships when your role in partnership is ambiguous and uncertain?
- What are the ways you can encourage the same effects of agency and empowerment in partnership when you have a partner who is not receptive to your partnership practice?

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