

The Power of Partnership

Students, Staff, and Faculty
Revolutionizing Higher Education

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CHAPTER 3

Unlearning Hierarchies and Striving for Relational Diversity

A Feminist Manifesto for Student-Staff Partnerships

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We are three women who have been thinking and practicing in the partnership space for several years. At the time of writing this chapter, we were also students: two postgraduate and one undergraduate. We hail from opposite sides of the globe: Australia and Canada. We bring a deep complexity of identity to this space, which we want to acknowledge and celebrate with our use of the collective “we.” Drawing on this complexity, we have something to say.

We are writing this manifesto and stepping out of the “safe space” of traditional scholarly writing. We are removing the caveats, the footnotes, the sections on limitations. Scholarly articles on higher education pedagogy and practice often require acknowledgments that bound, contextualize, warn against, and childproof what authors really want to

say. Perhaps that is apt in our risk-averse environment. Here, though, we do not seek safety. We step into those “brave spaces” (Arao and Clemens 2013, 135) that require honesty and vulnerability. We share with you our hopes, fears, and aspirations for partnership.

This manifesto was deeply informed by the words and ideas of bell hooks and Chandra Mohanty. These two influential feminists and education activists have been with us in thought and spirit as we have developed as scholars and as humans. Drawing on their words, we argue the need for two important changes within academic institutions. The first is to acknowledge, critique, and re-conceptualize traditional power asymmetries through a process of “**unlearning hierarchy.**” The second is to broaden conceptions of academic relationships in a shift toward “**relational diversity.**” We propose the field and practice of partnership is a catalyst, source, and site for these changes.

Partnership: What’s in a Name?

Scholars use many names when writing about collaborative and equitable relationships focused on matters of teaching and learning in higher education. Our space of expertise is probably most familiar to you as “students as partners” or “student-staff partnership” (which includes faculty in the North American context). As we have done thus far, however, we choose to call this “partnership,” explicitly focusing on the equitable relationship rather than on labeling the groups partaking in it. Partnership need not only be between students and staff. As this manifesto demonstrates, students can also partner with other students to make their voices heard. Thus, we seek to use the term “partnership” in the most inclusive sense.

Pedagogical partnerships can occur in many contexts, including learning, teaching, and assessment; subject-based research and inquiry; scholarship of teaching and learning; and curriculum design and pedagogic consultancy (Healey, Flint, and Harrington 2014). Drawing on its ethos as an aspirational and values-based practice, Cook-Sather (2016, 2) has argued that partnerships can create “counter-spaces” that challenge hegemonic discourses. It is on this aspect of partnership—power—that we focus in this manifesto. Partnerships in higher education allow us to

aspire toward more equitable institutions—institutions where existing power structures and patriarchal norms are challenged.

Toward Change: Unlearning Hierarchies and Striving for Relational Diversity

In her efforts to unsettle patriarchal, racially inequitable systems at her institution, bell hooks writes that she found that “almost everyone, especially the old guard, were more disturbed by the overt recognition of the role our political perspectives play in shaping pedagogy than by their passive acceptance of ways of teaching and learning that reflect biases” (hooks 1994, 37). What change demands of us, then, is an overt effort to counteract the implicit norms that are broadly and passively accepted in institutions.

Such change brings significant resistance and discomfort because it inherently requires the unseating of traditional power-holders. In discussing the espoused rhetoric of institutional shifts toward cultural diversity, hooks describes an unsettling scene:

Many of our colleagues were initially reluctant participants in this change. Many folks found that as they tried to respect “cultural diversity” they had to confront the limitations of their training and knowledge, as well as a possible loss of “authority.” Indeed, exposing certain truths and biases in the classroom often created chaos and confusion. The idea that the classroom should always be a “safe,” harmonious place was challenged. (1994, 32)

Does this sound familiar to you? For us, this tension reminds us of many discussions with staff about sharing responsibility for teaching and learning with their students. This was particularly apparent for us within our positions as students speaking to those in positions of power. Perhaps, then, what we are experiencing in this trend toward partnership is akin to the movement for cultural diversity, but instead, we are pushing for a new type of “**relational diversity**” in our universities. And just as hooks talks about individuals needing to “unlearn racism” in moving

toward cultural diversity, we need to urge ourselves, our colleagues, and our institutions to create spaces in which we can “**unlearn hierarchies.**”

In early discussions about this manifesto, we referred to the notion of “unlearning power” as opposed to “unlearning hierarchies.” We later rethought this idea. Some partnership work describes partnership as a space where we can overcome or transcend power. We don’t believe this is possible given that power will always exist as an inherent aspect of social organization. As a (perhaps imperfect) metaphor, we instead liken power to energy: the first law of thermodynamics states that energy can be neither created nor destroyed but only transferred or transformed from one form to another. Power, in the same way, is rarely overcome or ceases to exist. To suggest power can be overcome or erased, or for that to be an aim, ignores structures and histories that have shaped current systems and practices, and risks advocating empty, meaningless forms of diversity. This suggestion silences rather than opens up conversations about critically engaging with issues of power. Chandra Mohanty, for instance, writes:

The central issue, then, is not one of merely *acknowledging* difference; rather the more difficult question concerns the kind of difference that is acknowledged and engaged. Difference seen as benign variation (diversity), for instance, rather than as conflict . . . or the threat of disruption, bypasses power as well as history to suggest a harmonious, empty pluralism. (1989, 181)

Although hierarchical ways of working will likely not cease to exist in institutions, we envision an institutional sphere that has room for more diverse forms of relationships, where predefined roles are not the only options. The goal then is to create *space* for relational diversity: for heterogeneity, variation, and self-determination in relationships within institutions. Rather than try to unlearn power, we need partnership practices and scholarship that acknowledge and critique existing power structures—practices that aspire toward social change which, as with energy, dynamically transfer and share power throughout the relationship. In a hierarchical setup, power is concentrated at the top; if partnership is

genuinely embraced as a mode of functioning, however, it can move us in the direction of sharing power more equitably among different institutional stakeholders. Partnership can drive such change by offering a counter-space for individuals to critically examine and redistribute power, sharing voice and centrality among those who may previously have been silent and marginalized. As students, for example, we have encountered multiple, empowering partnerships where our expertise and leadership were recognized and valued. This has been liberating. Part of this value comes from the fact that partnerships present a way of working that is in stark contrast to the hierarchies we routinely come up against in other areas of the academy.

Mohanty, in her work, discusses the example of race, arguing for a “fundamental reconceptualization of our categories of analysis so that differences can be historically specified and understood as part of larger political processes and systems” (1989, 181). Indeed, marginalized groups must be explicitly centered when unlearning hierarchies situated in this historical and systemic context. We thus call for scholarly ways of working that overtly seek to not only include but center epistemologies, experiences, and knowledges of historically marginalized groups. Partnerships have the potential to accomplish this when members of and scholarship by historically marginalized groups are core to their projects.

Unlearning hierarchies is no small feat, but in this manifesto, we have chosen to be aspirational, setting agendas for future action. Partnership as a movement challenges classic, hierarchical notions of staff as experts and students as receptacles for knowledge. Such spaces allow for the recognition that partners do not necessarily contribute to partnership in the same ways; yet, each contribution brings something unique and should be equally welcomed, valued, and respected (Bovill, Cook-Sather, and Felten 2011). This applies equally to student or staff status and to other axes of social identity such as gender, race, class, or (dis)ability.

In this effort, we are reminded by Peter McLaren that the goal of this movement is not to eliminate conflict and challenge but rather to embrace it as part of necessary criticality:

Diversity that . . . constitutes itself as a harmonious ensemble of benign cultural spheres is a conservative and liberal model of multiculturalism that, in my mind, deserves to be jettisoned because, when we try to make culture an undisturbed space of harmony and agreement where social relations exist within cultural forms of uninterrupted accords we subscribe to a form of social amnesia in which we forget that all knowledge is forged in histories that are played out in the field of social antagonisms. (Quoted in Steinberg 1992, 399)

As we operate in a political moment that seems averse to healthy conflict, we feel it is important to note that our call for relational diversity is not a call for an “undisturbed space of harmony and agreement.” Similarly, to Mohanty’s insistence on a historical, power-involved grounding for change, we must openly embrace the struggle, difficulties, and contradictions involved in employing partnership within institutions. The importance of constructive conflict in partnership is increasingly being acknowledged (Abbot and Cook-Sather, under review; Mercer-Mapstone et al. 2017). It would not be helpful, for example, to enact partnership with the underlying assumption that students and staff are in equal positions when staff traditionally have held (and do hold) more power in institutions. We must face past and present hierarchies head-on, honestly, and with our eyes wide open. Otherwise, we risk arriving at an endpoint of the kind of false multiculturalism McLaren describes—one where we forget the inherent and necessary struggle towards equity, born from “social antagonisms” grounded in unequal power relations.

Beware of Neoliberal Seduction

If we continue to look to feminist thought for insight, we are reminded of a cautionary tale. We can draw a parallel between the commodification of gender and the ways in which students are frequently commodified in higher education. Each of these examples shows how the kind of inequalities we seek to redress are actually sustained. For example, constructing gender as a binary has put a greater focus on the things that make women different from men, thereby allowing for the commodification

of femininity. A case in point is the production of items targeted at girls and women, which actively produce and police standards of femininity.

Similarly, focusing on the distinction between students and staff often creates situations in which students are commodified. The label of “student” can mean more grant funding for a project or initiative, a ticked inclusivity box, or improved institutional performance indicators. We have each experienced such situations. It serves the system well to perpetuate the distinction between students and staff. That distinction allows universities to market themselves more attractively to the consumer: students.

In seeking change, we must be aware that we do so in a climate of commodification and consider how such an environment risks negating our efforts. For example, actions that break down barriers and remove labels threaten those in power who stand to benefit from differentiation, but the rhetoric of leveling hierarchy benefits universities because it fits the current zeitgeist. Here again, we see powerful resonance with feminist action, which has been commodified in efforts to make it unthreatening. An example is major corporations that maintain male-dominated power structures and working environments while producing ads with strong women to profit off of our desire for social change without actually changing. In partnership, too, there is the risk of its adoption in lip service only: buying into the neoliberal seduction of institutional rhetoric to curry favor with student “clients,” without the authentic enactment of partnership (Bell and Peseta 2016). In such cases, students act merely as figureheads and not as true partners. As women and as student partnership practitioners, we have felt this kind of commodification both in relation to our gender and our involvement in partnership, and thus caution against it.

Collective Agency

Intentional partnership can be an act of resistance against the consumerist model of neoliberal higher education which reinforces the passivity (rather than agency) of students (as written about more extensively by colleagues such as Bryson 2016). We have previously written about such spaces as “sites of resistance” against patriarchal power (Acai,

Mercer-Mapstone, and Guitman, 2019). We have personally felt the potential of these spaces and relationships in empowering us as women and as students. The process of writing this manifesto, for example, has given each of us a deep sense of comradeship and empowerment. Following our Skype meetings, as we close our browsers from opposite hemispheres and rise up from our chairs, we do so with a sense of vibrating energy. Hyped up on the excitement of subversive ideas and collective pushback against the powers-that-be, we take this energy into our own respective worlds where it flows into all aspects of our lives and across our networks. When it comes to building effective resistance, it is vital to seek out and connect such spaces for collective action. As Mohanty reminds us:

Resistance lies in self-conscious engagement with dominant, normative discourses and representations and in the active creation of oppositional analytic and cultural spaces. Resistance that is random and isolated is clearly not as effective as that which is mobilized through systemic politicized practices of teaching and learning. Uncovering and reclaiming subjugated knowledge is one way to lay claims to alternative histories. But these knowledges need to be understood and defined pedagogically, as questions of strategy and practices as well as of scholarship, in order to transform educational institutions radically. (1989, 185)

If striving for relational diversity in universities through partnership is an act of resistance against power hegemonies, then it is not enough for those sites of resistance to be happening in isolation. Rather, as Mohanty insists, we need to work with collective agency as activists and advocates—systematically and politically—if we are to see the kind of change toward which we aspire. To ensure that change remains authentic, we must also be open to partnership in its many forms. We must bear in mind that it is values and behaviors that define a partnership, and not where it comes from or how it is labeled (Matthews 2017; Mercer-Mapstone and Mercer 2017).

Nothing we have mentioned here is easy or comfortable! But if we follow hooks' lead and look to previous movements for social change—for example, civil rights and feminist liberation—we learn that:

To create a culturally diverse academy we must commit ourselves fully. . . . We must accept the protracted nature of our struggle and be willing to remain both patient and vigilant. To commit ourselves to the work of transforming the academy . . . we must embrace struggle and sacrifice. We cannot easily be discouraged. We cannot despair where there is conflict. Our solidarity must be affirmed by the shared belief in a spirit of intellectual openness that celebrates diversity, welcomes dissent, and rejoices in the collective dedication to truth. (hooks 1994, 33)

The “we” of which hooks talks here must be conceptualized in the broadest sense. In the same way that feminism is not just a “women’s issue,” it is critical that those already within the partnership community increasingly look outward. It is important that the current “we” reach out and extend the boundaries of our practices, our discussions, and our networks to welcome newcomers with an ethos of absolute inclusivity. Knowing the kinds of considerate, open, and radical people in the partnership community, we have faith that it is within our capacity to engage in such an effort. As interest in and enactment of partnership grows in the academy, it is important to remember the lessons we can learn from feminist theorists. Together, as a community, we can work to unlearn hierarchy and broaden relational diversity in our own institutions and beyond.

Reflection Questions for Readers

- What practices have you found to contribute to the more equitable distribution of power in higher education relationships? How might these practices contribute to enhancing relational diversity in your context?
- Do you have relationships which give you nourishment? How might you grow or develop those to support relational diversity?

- What emotions does the notion of “unlearning hierarchy” evoke for you, and why?
- What first steps could you take to ensure that power dynamics and histories are critically examined in your new or existing partnerships?

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