

# The Power of Partnership

Students, Staff, and Faculty  
Revolutionizing Higher Education

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Elon, North Carolina  
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## CHAPTER 7

# The Experience of Partnerships in Learning and Teaching

*A Visual Metaphor*

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I like the idea of messing with assumptions about what it means to be a *student* and a *teacher*; questioning taken-for-granted ways of thinking, being, and relating in education. I prefer to work *against the grain* (Bad Religion circa 1990). So, the versions of engaging in pedagogical partnership that enable an *unlearning* of neatly defined student-teacher boundaries resonate with me.

But what is partnership?

The language of “student as partners” startles most people when they first come across it. It invites further dialogue as productive metaphors do. It asks us to unlearn what we think we know. It provokes us into self-reflection that destabilizes neat “student/teacher” categorizations that tend to dehumanize through abstraction.

The stories to name and describe what I am *unlearning* through pedagogical partnerships come easily. Naming what I am *learning*, experiencing, feeling, understanding by aspiring to be and relate with others through partnership in my teaching and learning praxis stretches my

capacity to communicate. My words to communicate this partnership thing read like:

*Engaging in learner-teacher partnerships in hierarchical educational structures is messy work fundamentally about human relationships in a particular socio-cultural context. Power and identity always come into the story of pedagogical partnerships. It is a way of thinking, being, and relating in higher education as human beings who care about other human beings.*



*Used with permission from the artist, the always thought-provoking Alex Iktan Ponce-Matthews*

Sometimes I just say:

*It is messy. Messy like this picture. An artwork to communicate what my words struggle to communicate about pedagogical partnership—the beautiful, chaotic, and colorful messiness that is my experience of this thing I call teaching and learning partnerships.*

What I am currently appreciating about the whole partnership thing is that it is messing with what we do in higher education. By messing with what we do, the idea—the language itself—is creating space to think

together. Importantly, this space includes a group of people—students—typically excluded from the learning and teaching conversations that carry the weight of making decisions, guiding action, and shaping policy.

In the spirit of this book's intention to "break the mold" of "traditional academic formats," I offer my insights into partnership through a visual metaphor. An image I present regularly to enrich my inadequate words. An image that is messy: untidy, confused, and difficult to name or describe. An image that makes some people uncomfortable, while others react with relief and some express confusion because a hard-to-name thing is captured. An image to capture a different imagination of being in a learner-teacher partnership. An image to *create space* for a different kind of conversation about what it means to embrace the version of partnership that appeals to me. An invitation to hear other versions of partnership.

Revolutionizing higher education is the intimate, personal act of dialogue embracing difference. Thinking differently about partnership, as more than words—as art—can open up different forms of dialogue. This particular visual metaphor is about the messiness of human relationships that, for me at the moment, define how I am making sense of pedagogical partnership. An image, I contend, that offers space to affirm the messiness of an idea, an aspiration, a practice, a pedagogical praxis, and a commitment. So, I ask you:

*How is your partnership messy?*