The Power of Partnership

Students, Staff, and Faculty Revolutionizing Higher Education

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CONCLUSIONS/OPENINGS

Things that Make Us Go Hmmm

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In our introductory poem defining partnership, the seventh stanza focused on the questions that push us to "stretch ourselves / in which we rely on one another to pull us in new directions, / in which we are all equally twisted up" drawn from Anne Bruder's words in chapter 15. Each of our chapters has ended with a collection of questions that has asked you, our readers, to do just that. Across chapters, our authors have explored the complex, messy, challenging, and wonderful intersections between partnership and our world. They have asked questions that aim to get at the heart of: How do we partner? How do we push on power? How do we facilitate equity, inclusion, belonging, community . . . ? How do we make space for ourselves to learn, to represent, and to be represented? How do we reimagine what exists? These are wide and deep questions, and we hope this book has begun to answer as well as complicate them. We hope this book has helped you find ways to think anew.

There are important implications that have arisen in these chapters. When we tried to split them as they applied to various groups (students, staff, administrators), we happily found that virtually all of our conclusions were appropriate for all readers. We think this says something about

this collection and about partnership more broadly: while differences are important in the way we come together to create a stronger whole, partnership has the power to position us all as *learners*.

Partners as Allies and Advocates

Chapters 7 (Matthews), 10 (Mathrani and Cook-Sather), 11 (Flint), and 15 (Bruder) in particular helped us see the deep value and power in student experiences, in and of themselves. We are reminded that each of us has particular access to places and knowledges that our partners do not. Students have particular access to understanding other students—for example, in chapter 10 where students are more able to tap into honest, meaningful, and deep feedback on teaching from other students. Staff sometimes have more leverage with other staff, as in chapter 2 (Wilson et al.) where staff hold more legitimacy in inaccessible places where students historically do not "belong" like conferences. Partners act as bridges or conduits—making these places more accessible for those traditionally excluded, sharing that burden of justification (chapter 2, Wilson et al.). Partners can see this as a source of empowerment and should grow confident in their experiential expertise. In doing so, partners may need to become advocates for each other. This notion was explored in chapter 1 in the context of faculty needing to advocate for students in broader academic spaces, and further emerged in chapter 9 (Guitman and Marquis) in the context of students advocating for their faculty partners who may hold marginalized identities within higher education (i.e., women, people of color, LGBT, etc.). Through these chapters, we see this mutual support and ally-ship as not only being possible, but imperative.

Diverging from Traditional Texts

From the beginning, we suspected that diverse genres were needed to capture the nuances and messiness of partnership. Our authors confirmed this and played with genre—challenging the traditions of academic texts. Chapter 11 (Flint) is perhaps the most radical of chapters in sharing experiences (personal, evidenced, and anecdotal) through poetry. Chapter 5 (Lenihan-Ikin et al.) did the same. Chapters 7 (Matthews), 8 (Bell, Barahona, and Stanway), 10 (Mathrani and Cook-Sather), and 14 (Fraser

et al.) skipped the text-only approach altogether and integrated incredible illustrations to transform how we engage with their ideas. As editors, we felt a deep connection with every chapter as authors communicated partnership in ways that made the intangible concrete and the messiness clear. We rarely experience this in more traditional academic articles. As Abbi Flint (chapter 11) says: "Poetry itself can be a form of partnership, a dialogue between poet and reader." Indeed, multiple chapters integrated a dialogue among the authors in ways that centered dialogue as core to partnership and invited readers into the conversation more deeply. We feel this applies to all of the diverse genres here—that the bucking of tradition reflects what happens in partnership. The success of these chapters reinforces our argument that alternative genres are appropriate and sometimes necessary for sharing the realities of partnership work.

Centering Power for Ongoing Discussion

Chapter 5 (Lenihan-Ikin et al.) recognizes the reality of the world in which we work, and reminds us:

> A partnership project does not have to ensure *equality* between student and staff partners: that is unachievable (students do not have offices to host meetings in, academics do; students do not always get paid, academics do; research is not always a requirement of undergraduate study, but it is required of academics). Students as partners processes can, however, be *equitable.* This requires deliberate recognition of voice, identity, power, and privilege by all parties.

This differentiation between equality and equity in partnership is a critical one. Aiming for an unrealistic equality in power may risk taking critical conversations about power differentials off the table; if we pretend power can be made equal or has ceased to impact our work, we silence those who are marginalized even more (Eddo-Lodge 2017). Our collection tells us that power isn't going anywhere and perhaps needs even more explicit attention than we currently give it—particularly at the intersection between individual power and privilege, and structural power and privilege. Let's dive in and get comfortable with being

uncomfortable as we dig into questions like: how do structural systems of power and oppression like racism or sexism play out in and impact our partnerships and our discussions about power in partnership? Rather than higher education being "the great equalizer," current systems are actually more likely to amplify differences (Carnevale and Strohl 2013). Instead of erasing our *selves* from our work, partnership calls us to be embodied—embracing our diverse genders, races, ethnicities, and identities. In this way, as Anne articulates in chapter 15, partnership becomes a human knot: "No one can be passive because on the most basic level, every body must move, must count, must be part of the solution."

When we bring our true selves to partnership, then, we must reflect on what histories we bring to our relationships. Chapter 1 (Verwoord and Smith) offers us a timely framework through which we can reflect on our partnerships in this way—explicitly surfacing tensions for thoughtful and reflective discussion. We urge readers not to shy away from these discussions because they are too uncomfortable or awkward or because we don't know how to bring them up. Use the P.O.W.E.R. framework and the other resources shared in this collection to consider the ways in which power asymmetries at individual and structural levels influence our partnerships in ways that hold great potential to either oppress or liberate. As Rachel and Beth emphasize in chapter 9, these constant discussions are particularly important in current times as, in a political and social era in which division is quickly becoming an assumed norm, partnership has the power to connect and progress us.

"Difficult" Emotions Belong Here

Previous work has highlighted the importance but frequent omission of emotions from partnership work (Felten 2017; Hermsen et al. 2017). While it is important to celebrate the joy in this work—and we see a lot of joy in the pages of this collection—it is just as important to acknowledge and learn from the troubling or difficult emotions that surface in partnership, of which there can be many given the complex nature of the work. Chapter 12 (Narayanan and Abbot), for example, highlights the power of shared anxiety within and outside partnership contexts as a potential liberation when explicitly acknowledged by all involved:

"Our shared anxieties helped us focus in our partnership on trying to help students feel welcome in a space that may not have traditionally welcomed them." This reminds us that partnerships, unlike traditional university spaces which demand detachment, are a space where emotions can be surfaced and valued—even (or especially) the difficult ones.

Partnership as a House of Mirrors

Reflect, reflect, reflect. Reading through these pages can feel a bit like wandering through a house of mirrors: authors gaze at their own reflections and peer at how they are reflected in the work of others; readers see themselves reflected in the pages. And more often than not, those reflections are distorted in the pleasurable and disconcerting ways typical of a house of mirrors. The common thread throughout, though, is that reflection is a foundation of partnership.

An echoing call is thus made in this collection for both personal and collaborative reflection at every stage of the partnership process. Chapter 10 (Mathrani and Cook-Sather) pushes us to be open to the non-linear, rhizomatic ways in which we grow through partnership. Sasha and Alison reiterate that reflection is that which makes such invisible growth visible, helping us to fully grasp our own growth over time. Chapter 14 (Fraser et al.) makes a similar call—arguing and enacting the value of dialogic spaces for reflecting collectively on partnership as a method of learning from one another by centering "the lived experiences of partnership." Anita Ntem, in chapter 13, shares her own reflections on partnership—bringing the reader into her journey navigating multiple partnerships to becoming more fully and powerfully herself. How do you see yourself reflected in these pages?

Problematising Partnership "Projects"

Chapters 11 (Flint), 14 (Fraster et al.), and 15 (Bruder) all discuss the ways that different partnerships—with different people or over different contexts or times—have accelerated, scaffolded, and reinforced personal growth and learning. These messages hold important implications for how institutions conceptualize the structuring and scaling of partnership. It is increasingly common for institutions to implement student-staff

partnership programs or schemes as a method of scaling up partnership. These schemes appear to predominantly adopt a "project-based model of partnership" where each partnership is seen and administered as a distinct project (Mercer-Mapstone and Bovill 2019). Indeed, many of our authors discuss their "partnership projects." This model has various advantages—chapter 14 (Fraser et al.) describes a very successful model of project-based partnership—but it also comes with limitations.

If partnership is seen as restricted to a distinct project, what does that say about the confinement of the partnership mindset (as described by Peseta et al. in chapter 6) to that single context? With a project-based language, are we preventing ourselves from fully incorporating that mindset into our way of being? Limiting the learning opportunities afforded when applied outside that singular context? Projects are a familiar language and structure in institutions, and it makes sense we revert to the familiar when developing something new. Doing so makes it manageable. But in bite-sizing our approach, are we precluding the radical nature of partnership by enculturating it into the norm from the outset? Chapter 8 (Bell, Barahona, and Stanway) reminds us of the fluidity of partnership, that our roles/selves can change across time and contexts, and we thus suggest that the labelling of partnerships as discrete projects be approached with caution and further problematised in the future.

Students as Legitimate Author(itie)s

This collection—authored both solely and collaboratively by ~50% students—enacts a direct challenge to those who say, "But what would students know about teaching and learning?" There is still a pervasive fallacy that students' perspectives are valuable as data alone, which perpetuates a problematic trend where staff remain responsible for improving "the student experience." Hooks (1989, 42) states that a dimension of oppression is that

> those who dominate are seen as subjects and those who are dominated objects. As subjects, people have the right to define their own reality, establish their own identities, name their history. As objects, one's reality is defined by others, one's

> identity created by others, one's history named only in ways that define one's relationship to those who are subject.

We are troubled to see that most often, students are positioned as objects in higher education (Felten et al. 2019).

This subject-object dichotomy is one we see reflected in publishing patterns on partnership. For example, recent research found that, of an analyzed set of articles on students as partners, 89% had a staff first author and 99% included staff authors more broadly. Meanwhile only a third included a student co-author—indicating a scarcity of student-led or solely student-authored articles in this space (Mercer-Mapstone et al. 2017). We are not implying that staff should not author work on students' experiences; those perspectives are as valuable as any other, and diverse perspectives on a complex issue—and dialogues among those perspectives as shown in this book—are generative. The issue here is, now that student perspectives are being seen as relevant to enhancing higher education, students face a struggle to make *themselves* heard and staff perspectives remain *the authority* on students' experiences. A resulting issue of this trend is highlighted by Wilson et al. in chapter 2 as students, even when they do author their own voices—such as in conference environments—still bear the burden of justification in terms of legitimizing their own voices and presence.

This collection shows that students can be seen as legitimate authors and authorities on their higher education experiences. We argue that this should increasingly be the case and that, often, students are better qualified than anyone else to speak to and author their own situated experiences. As an implication of this collection, we encourage readers to consider how to support students in taking up their agency to speak for themselves and author their own experiences.

Resourcing for Different Kinds of "Impact" and "Success"

Chapter 5 (Lenihan-Ikin et al.) shares: "Civic engagement *needs adequate resourcing*: / these initiatives require more investment than traditional courses . . . / there was an assumption that / a student would want to do this for free . . ." Resourcing partnership is a constant struggle. In

workshops internationally, we constantly hear the question, "Yes, but where do I get the money?"

There are often (although not always) pots of money around, but equally as often, these pots get channeled toward initiatives that are *seen* to have wider impact. As a community of practitioners, we need to learn to position and communicate partnership in ways that both align with broader discourses and engage senior leaders in reconsidering what counts as impact or success. The question of success is taken up in Chapter 14 (Fraser et al.)—challenging the common outcomes-driven notion of success—and Chapter 12 (Narayanan and Abbot) reminds us to question the scale of impact we consider valuable in partnership contexts: "While this is a small sample in formal terms, it's huge for those four students who were so inspired in that first class they decided to make this their disciplinary home." What makes partnership valuable, then, may not necessarily be at huge scale but can be deeply transformational for individuals—especially those from marginalized backgrounds, as discussed in Chapters 2, 9, 10, and 12—and this is a critical consideration when weighing up how we resource and measure such initiatives. Such considerations become increasingly relevant as the student experience becomes a strategic priority in higher education. Highlighting that the outcomes of partnership (such as employability, transferable skills, engagement in learning, academic success, and metacognitive learning to name a few) align with measures of success which are traditionally valued in higher education will be an important part of positioning partnership as central to these broader discourses. In the risky context of increasing neoliberalism, we walk the fine line of also being clear that partnership challenges *how* those outcomes are achieved. These are discussions we need to be having with our bosses, managers, and senior leaders to make the case that partnership has benefits for individuals, groups, and institutions—but that it takes a new perspective to see (and resource) that value.

Openings

"Conclusions suggests an ending, a linear progression that can be resolved in some neat way. I see no conclusions here, but rather *openings*" (Glesne 1997, 218). We echo this sentiment with a final question for you in

finishing this collection: What new openings do you now see in your life for partnership?

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