

The Power of Partnership

Students, Staff, and Faculty
Revolutionizing Higher Education

Edited by Lucy Mercer-Mapstone and Sophia Abbot



Elon University Center for Engaged Learning
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PREFACE

A Partnership Origin [E-]Story

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Dear Sophia,

I woke up at 4am last night with feelings of frustration and anger vibrating around my brain. I have been working on a thought piece on the importance of writing and publishing in non-academic genres that are accessible (and god forbid, enjoyable!) to staff and students. It's been a fun project—writing in a dialogue format which is new for me. It's incredibly liberating to be able to discuss ideas without the *blah blah blah* of “formal scholarship.”

The irony of the situation though is that now that we have written this piece, it's been hard to find a journal that will accept such an outlandish genre. So, it was at 4am this morning (when all my most important fretting happens) that the lightbulb pinged. If it's so damn difficult to get this stuff published in mainstream formats, why don't I publish it myself? How amazing would it be to have a space for sharing our work together on partnership that isn't bogged down in the corset-like structures of academic “rigor”? A place where the emotion, joy, frustration, messiness—the *freedom*—of partnership doesn't need to be erased.

So, how about it? Want to write a book with me?

Talk soon.

-Lucy

Dear Lucy,

Yes, YES! You know, I've been feeling that frustration with scholarly writing for a while now. Every time I've thought about partnership lately, I think about the joy we've felt working together, the vulnerability, the frustration, the celebration, the radical energy (the fight-the-power excitement!) and I know that an empirical article just can't hold that.

I took a class on listening several years ago where the facilitators described our capacity to listen as bowls that adjust depending on our circumstances. Sometimes they're small but deep, and able to hold space for someone's very specific thoughts and emotions. Other times they're wide and shallow, and we can hold space for many different conversations and topics, but not with much depth. I think partnership makes space for both wide and deep listening and sharing, but most publishing venues are small and deep. We're forced to sieve away all of those beautiful emotions and ignore the little hiccups until we've got a few drops of partnership that we share out with the world barely resembling the vastness that really existed.

This is all to say, our book could be that bowl! Let's make space for experimenting with form and subject! Let's make sure this is accessible! Let's do it!

How should we get started?

~Sophia

Sophia,

Wow—a class on listening? How fantastic! I love that imagery of vessels that hold the breadth and depth of our practice. And you're so

right—the places we publish either want that narrow depth or wide shallowness but rarely create space for both.

I'm so excited you'll collaborate on this. How should we start? Good question. Perhaps one place to dip our toe in would be to discuss the ideas that drive us to create this book?

I'll start us off. I guess for me it all started with genre. When I read the wide range of work on partnership certain words really jump out and resonate with me:

empowering

radical

inclusive

transformational

egalitarian

Sometimes as I read, I feel as if I have been punched in the gut, tears coming to my eyes when I see the powerful ways in which partnership work has impacted people. It connects to the deep sense of liberation I feel through my own partnerships. These instances are rare, though. Mostly, I am left wondering. Full of questions that I wish I could discuss with the authors—perhaps over coffee—where we could really delve down into the intricacies of the practices and ideas they have shared.

So, a recurring question I have is, *what genres lend themselves to sharing the intricate, complex, and relational realities of partnership?*

I don't believe it's the traditional, academic genres. I likened these in an earlier letter to a corset. Bone rigid, structured, tight, restrictive, and symbolically representative of certain power structures: exclusivity and enforced conformity. I frequently lament the sense of loss I feel when I try to fit/bind the complex nature of partnership within the boundaries of traditional academic formats. In the same way as wearing a corset, conforming to journal publishing standards often feels as if I have to erase my own shape, my embodied subjectivity, from my work—removing the bumps, the curves, the perfect imperfections.

I suppose I want this book to be a place where those bumps, curves, and imperfections are embraced and celebrated.

What about you?

-Lucy

Lucy,

Absolutely, yes—this is the place for “those bumps, curves, and imperfections”: genre is a wonderful place to start. It’s in those more dialogic moments with classmates, colleagues, and mentors that I’ve been brought to tears, reflecting on our vulnerability, expressing how empowered I’ve felt when working with a professor who truly saw and heard me. So, for me, genres that can really hold partnership are reflective, dialogic, open, expressive, and absolutely first-person. And I imagine there are other qualities and forms that I can’t even imagine right now!

Another space I’m interested in that I think overlaps significantly is *language*. I’m thinking about how we talk about partnership to each other and to others, and I’m reminded of a small and wonderful partnership conference I was at last May in which we described partnership as “radical,” “revolutionary,” “transgressive”—words you highlighted as jumping out in the works you’ve read. Then I think about how I frame this to potential participants, as promoting engagement, building agency, encouraging reflection, improving learning. There are different levels to the language we use, and I’d love for this book to make space for the small-scale and short-term language alongside some of our lofty goals!

I’m also thinking about how we’ve just been referring to this as “partnership” with no subjects or objects, which would probably read as pretty vague to anyone outside of this! I should clarify: the partnership I’ve done has been an intensive, one-on-one, months- or year-long relationship between a professor and myself when I was an undergraduate. We came together to examine the shared space of the classroom and bring our different expertise (theirs in their content area, mine in being a student) to bear on making the classroom a more equitable and engaging learning

environment. Other language I've heard used to describe this has been "student-faculty partnership" or "student-staff partnership" (that's a linguistic difference based on geography so to be clear, anyone employed in higher education could be considered "staff" and likewise, anyone studying, a "student"), as well as "students as partners," which I personally avoid using but acknowledge its value in being widely recognized.

What have your partnerships looked like? How do you talk about them?

~Sophia

Sophia,

Those are such important questions. And thank you for the timely reminder. Sometimes I get so *inside* my partnership bubble that I forget to be explicit about what I mean by "partnership." Perhaps because, even after many years, my understanding and "definition" is still evolving. That's a point that many have troubled in the partnership literature—that, as Healey, Flint, and Harrington (2014) discuss, a clear definition is often elusive because the work is so very personal and contextual.

Like you, my predominant forms of partnership have been small-scale: one-to-one or in small groups. These partnerships have continued over years though, rather than being short-term, and often span multiple projects rather than a single semester or course. Unlike you, mine have always taken place outside of the classroom, working on co-research projects focusing on partnership itself—a bit of a mind-bending meta-process at times! So, I think together the two of us bring real complementarity—covering a broad cross-section of spaces, places, and roles.

Many of my partnerships have actually been about introducing others to the idea or supporting others in developing their own practices through workshop facilitation. So, I have thought a lot about language and, as you rightly say, the absolute centrality of language in sharing and shaping our practices.

It's tricky. I agree with you in that having "students as partners" as an increasingly recognized term is useful for practitioners developing a shared language. I love that now on twitter I can search #studentsaspartners and get a whole stream of thoughts and resources from all over the world.

For many years I accepted and adopted that term without a second thought. It places students at the heart of this movement, and maybe that's as it should be?

Recently though I spent some time thinking on that language—at a time when I was also immersing myself in various feminist works of literature. I discussed parallels between partnership and feminism with my mum, and we began to chew over the idea that perhaps that language is more troubling than we had initially thought. We **wrote about it in 2017**:

Perhaps the student-centric focus [of "students as partners"] is a manifestation of the traditional power hierarchies of the institutions within which this movement is unfolding. Some of the feminist readings I have been devouring propose that there is intrinsic power in not being named—particularly within binaries. Wittig (1981) argues that there is only one gender: the feminine; that the "masculine" is not a gender, but the general or the norm and . . . does not need to be named but rather, assumed.

Do you see the parallel? That "academics" go predominantly unnamed in [students as partners] terminology infers an implicit assumption that those academics do not need to be named because they are the general, the dominant, the norm against which the Other is defined. The way most of our labels begin with the word "student" might be argued to potentially mirror the fundamental power imbalance between those who are (implicitly) "allowing" such changes.

So, I suppose I have been opting more recently for "student-staff partnership" instead. I still don't feel particularly comfortable with that though because it reinforces the student/staff binary in a way that, for me, counters the aim of partnership: to break down divisions. And, as with all binaries, it also excludes the range of potential practitioners

who do not feel they sit within either of those categories. That said, I don't actually have an alternative to offer other than to say that using simply "partnership" is what feels most right to me at the moment.

How do you think that this book might contribute to those complexities?

-Lucy

Lucy,

I've also been opting for "student-staff partnership" for clarity (though agree that the binarizing nature of it can be frustrating—obscuring the real messiness of roles we all inhabit!). In addition to your highlighting the absence of academics in "students as partners," I spoke with Alison Cook-Sather this summer (one of my partners and mentors!), and she mentioned hearing someone speak recently about "students as consultants." I immediately bristled at the term, and I couldn't quite figure out why at first. Then we realized: it reminded me of when children play pretend. It was as though I had been temporarily and maybe not fully *acting as* a consultant but not actually *being* a consultant. Students as partners echoes in a similar way to me: that students are temporarily acting in this role, without actually *being partners*.

And of course, that's not the intention, nor is it how we live it. There's amazing value—as you say—with having a broadly shared language. But I do believe deeply that words matter. I think it was Lacan who wrote about language speaking subjects into existence? This book can be a rich space for folks to use their preferred language, and perhaps grow our language to speak partnership into existence more richly and fully. I'd love for us to be able to share a range of ways of speaking.

Speaking of which, what exactly should our book be *about*?

~Sophia

Dear Sophia,

I had to pause numerous times when reading your last letter—so many powerful ideas that resonated with me. Especially that temporary nature of students *as* partners rather than *being* partners. It reminds me of recent discussions I have had with friends and colleagues Rachel Guitman and Anita Acai (another partnership of strong women from whom I find much inspiration!). We reflected on the way that institutions of learning often see students as transient rather than solid beings who establish foundations and remain part of the university community.

I have felt this sense of transience often in my university and, at times, that seems to get reflected into some partnerships. Not intentionally, perhaps, but the way we try to fit our partnership into existing structures makes it hard for those partnership spaces not to accidentally mimic the old ways of knowing and doing: where staff have a permanent seat at the table and students are invited in and then ushered out as useful. That all comes down to power, doesn't it?

I suppose that answers your question. I want this book to be about power. As [Seale, Gibson, Haynes, and Potter](#) wrote regarding student engagement, voice, and partnership, "if we continue to ignore issues of power and resistance, we will fall far short of the vision." I wholeheartedly agree. So, I imagine this book to focus on the examination and destabilization of traditional power hierarchies in higher education, not only through the content we include but through a book that is itself a deliberate act of disruption.

What about you? What do you think our book should be about?

-Lucy

Lucy,

Power should absolutely be a core theme. I find it's so present in all my interactions but especially when I'm negotiating a partnership—I constantly think about the different assumptions and expectations we're bringing. Deeply related to this is the intersecting identities we all bring

to partnership. I'm thinking about how you and I have talked together about our shared identities: white, queer, cis-women. I'm thinking about the different ways we've negotiated spaces as a result of those identities, facing patriarchy and heterosexism while also acknowledging our privileges. Identity is key. And actually, when I wrote a [review in 2017](#) of bell hooks' *Teaching to Transgress*, I noted something that I still think about constantly:

Partnership has always been complicated by these politics of domination, but higher education's increasing diversification continues to raise new and different tensions. What is exciting—what I have begun to see in each of my partnerships and what hooks helps us to imagine—is that partnership also opens the possibility of radical transformation through these connections across difference.

Perhaps rather than focus solely on identity, though it is so present, we might focus on that radically transformative space: the intersections and connections made possible through partnership.

Am I missing anything?

~Sophia

Sophia,

I know we have talked a lot about the transformative potential of partnership and the personal growth we have each been through as a result. I wonder whether that might be a theme that opens up the book to some more context-specific discussions?

[Ruth and Mick Healey recently wrote](#) that when it comes to questions about partnership, the answer is most often, "it depends." They say that "there is a need to identify the structural, temporal, and personal dimensions that define the context. . . . We cannot begin to understand the processes and outcomes of specific partnerships without taking account of the context in which they operate."

Perhaps we can honor that necessary context by inviting people to share their stories of individual or institutional growth through

partnership? I find those sorts of reflection so powerful. For example, in 2018, Paul Wynkoop, a student partner at Haverford College in the United States, *wrote*:

Given my identity as a white male, I felt as though I came to understand more deeply [through partnership] just how crucial giving space to people of other, often marginalized identities is. I had long considered myself someone who understood when it was appropriate for me to talk and when it wasn't, but hearing just how important it was to other students . . . that there be space for all identities made inclusion an even more important principle I aimed to enact and achieve. This led me to be even more conscious of my presence within my own classrooms and how I interacted with other students.

It is this kind of deep reflection on personal awareness and transformation that I would love to see shared on these pages.

-Lucy

Lucy,

Yes! I totally agree. So where to now? While I think we could fill a whole book with *our* thoughts on partnership, there are so many phenomenal people thinking and working in this space! Let's include as many of those voices as we can. We could invite those potential authors to play with genre as much as they like and just see what happens!

What do you think?

~Sophia

Dear Sophia,

Let's get started!

-Lucy

Dear Readers,

We hope that, as you've read through these letters, you've gained a sense of the organic symbioses that birthed this book. We also hope to have shared our aspirations, joy, and excitement in putting together this collection, especially with such an invigorating melting-pot of authors.

We are thrilled the following chapters contain works from fifty-one authors—twenty-three students, twenty-six staff and faculty, and two academic researchers—hailing from twenty-one institutions across six countries. Chapters are organized to address three themes:

Power and Politics

how power and politics influence and shape partnerships
from inside and out

Intersections

the overlaps and interplay between partnership and its intersections with different theories, pedagogies, cultures, and identities

Growing Partnership

growth through and of partnership in different contexts at
personal, classroom, and institutional levels

Authors truly embraced our call to bend or break traditional academic molds and have shared their thoughts through essays, poetry, dialogue, manifesto, art, and . . . Each section has been depicted using glorious graphic illustration by the talented Sam Hester.

We hope this collection will provide you with as much inspiration, provocation, and nourishment as it has done us.

On that note, we dedicate this book to you—our fellow radical partnership practitioners alongside whom we find such liberation.

Yours,

Lucy & Sophia

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