

Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education

Volume 1
Issue 24 *Spring 2018*

Article 5

June 2018

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Recommended Citation

Hancock, Juliet and Lubicz-Nawrocka, Tanya "Creating Spaces: Embracing Risk and Partnership in Higher Education," *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education*: Iss. 24 (2018), <https://repository.brynmawr.edu/tlthe/vol1/iss24/5>

CREATING SPACES: EMBRACING RISK AND PARTNERSHIP IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Introduction

In this essay, we reflect on risk in partnerships in learning in higher education, including initial teacher education and teachers' continued lifelong professional learning. We explore risk within the themes of the ethos and values of partnership; sustaining our commitments; vulnerabilities in trying new things; negotiation of learning; and rapport and relationships. As staff leading Professional Learning at Moray House School of Education, the University of Edinburgh, we feel we bring a broad and diverse array of experiences in terms of our backgrounds and the contexts within which our own understandings of partnership continue to develop. Within this context, professional learning focuses on courses or events that contribute to the development of knowledge and skills across the education sector, to aid reflection, learning and career long development. This embraces a wide audience, spanning early career to late career classroom teachers, deputy heads and headteachers, employees of educational charities, as well as others who have had a career break or who have taught abroad and now aim to teach in Scotland.

We each have roles as both teachers and learners in a variety of educational contexts. Juliet's background brings experience in early childhood and primary school teaching, national and local government, and teacher education at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. She is currently completing a Doctorate of Education program, focusing on a deep interest in young children's perspectives on their own learning, alongside her work as Director of Professional Learning at the Moray House School of Education. Tanya has prior experience supporting professional learning for primary and secondary teachers as well as undergraduate and postgraduate student representatives. She is the Partnerships and Professional Learning Coordinator at Moray House School of Education, and her part-time PhD focusing on co-creation of the curriculum opportunities for students and teachers in higher education also informs this reflective essay. We are both passionate about learner voice and exploring ways of creating opportunities for deep and meaningful partnerships. This includes considering ways of overcoming potential risks that working in partnership with learners may surface for all concerned in learning and teaching. It also includes considering how best to model and enact the ethos and values of partnership work that others might wish to take forward and further develop in their own practice.

Ethos and values of partnership

We believe that creating an ethos of partnership based on the values of respect, reciprocity, and shared responsibility—as suggested by Cook-Sather, Bovill, and Felten (2014)—there are important building blocks to create relationships that support these shared attitudes and ways of working. These include values that underpin not only the language that we use, but also our behavior and ways of engaging. We believe that if we ask learners for their input or their feedback, it is important to take the time to listen (beyond a simplistic or one-dimensional definition of listening), to seek to understand, to value feedback and to see this as a collaborative means of improving our thinking and practice (Hancock, 2006). It is

important also that we continue to deepen our understanding of the complexities of this stance.

We have found that the reciprocal and respectful approaches to partnership that underpin our conversations around learning and teaching are vitally important, especially when not all learner perspectives can or should be acted upon. There are many possible explanations as to why this may be the case. For some, not acting upon learner views can undoubtedly be connected to an unwillingness to take on board learner perspectives, or a lack of understanding of the value of these views. Other explanations may be due to a lack of flexibility within university structures, such as timetabling contingencies, which are frequently employed as an excuse for rigidity and serve as a very real barrier to change.

There may also exist a willingness to listen, but an unwillingness to then act upon what has been shared. For example, staff/student liaison committees purport to seek student views. They are chaired usually by staff members, and frequently student views may be collated in more palatable and less pointed forms than they have been expressed, particularly where concerns over individual teaching staff have been shared. Sometimes, learners may express doubts over elements of a program or learning event, which those who have developed the event believe are integral to learner understanding. This can be a challenging, and yet not insurmountable issue, often open to resolution where discussion, joint event planning and collaborative program development has involved learners from the outset, as we go on to explore.

There are occasions where learner perspectives are not acted upon, for example, where this could impact adversely other learners within the group. Recently, a request was made for optional further reading not to be included in an online program for parents and carers, as it was felt by several participants to be overly academic and unrealistic. Other participants (the majority) disagreed and wanted these readings to be available, without any pressure to access them. What was clear from this situation was that treating any group of learners as a homogenous group is not only unwise, but also ineffective and disrespectful. It also served to underline that improved collaboration in program design can circumvent these issues or at least allow them to be discussed and collective solutions found, together with learners. What appears to be key is that any known parameters in learning and teaching are shared and understood, that learners feel their perspectives have been valued and respected, and that there is a strong sense of shared responsibility to ensure ongoing and sustained dialogue regarding the learning and teaching experience. Our commitment to working in partnership supports this but comes with many issues for consideration.

Sustaining a commitment to partnership

Sustaining a commitment to partnership within any learning and teaching experience can require constant reflection, not just at points of challenge. It can be hard to truly listen, or even want to listen, when in a situation where views seem to differ dramatically or priorities are not shared. On a surface level, the essence of partnership appears to lie in shared aspirations and goals, joint working and mutual respect. However, these are established over time, often through the very process of working together. The experience we have gained through our professional learning roles and previous work indicates that there are occasions where final decisions need to be taken by ourselves—for example, the inclusion of particular theory (Bourdieu, in this instance) as part of setting the learning context. This was not seen as

important by learners but felt to be fundamental to those developing the learning program. In this sense, the ‘final say’ was given to the authority on the subject matter, and learner perspectives—although listened to—did not alter the learning content.

This leaves us with further questions. We feel that we need to take additional aspects of agency and issues relating to power into consideration, if we are to avoid simplifying these aspects or overlooking them. Their importance within the context of any work on partnership is clear to us, and includes structures, processes, and ethos of educational environments, all of which influence and affect these issues of power. How we recognise and act upon these, though, is a matter for ongoing thought. Supporting this ongoing reflection is working alongside colleagues with whom we can have honest conversations. Of course, having the time in our schedules and spaces conducive to such conversations can help to facilitate collegiality and trusting relationships. If learners give us feedback that is particularly tricky or challenging to deal with, if we can actually admit that we don’t think we did something very well, or if we’re worrying about how to tackle something, that can be a risk since we are potentially sharing our vulnerabilities. However, it is important that we can share with colleagues and ask, “What does this mean?” and “How can I interpret this?” or “How can I improve my practice?” We also need to model that we do not know all the answers by asking, “What do you think this means?” or “How could we have done this better?”

Creating the space to have honest conversations is essential so that we can nourish a collaborative ethos of mutual engagement and learning. We feel that this helps us to continue to be thoughtful, to question our assumptions, and also to be creative in our work. This is not always straightforward, of course. Helpful approaches we have experienced include asking some of the above questions, not just as an evaluation at the end of a piece of work or a course, but at the start, at regular points throughout any joint work, and also when issues arise. Time factors sometimes seem to get in the way of operating in the manner that we would like to and trying to embed these approaches fully in to our work is a continuing challenge. However, we are recognizing that our own vulnerability is an important, and unavoidable, part of the journey.

Vulnerabilities in trying new things

In an age in which universities are squeezed and pressured to demonstrate productivity and financial sustainability while also maintaining high quality teaching and research, it can be easy to focus on ‘what works’ rather than embracing new types of professional learning offerings as part of the journey we are on. It can be hard to protect unallocated time and spaces for creative partnership work to contribute to this innovation. It can be equally challenging to protect those attitudes and values that we highlighted above as key to partnership work, since partnerships take time to develop, including their reciprocal relationships and an ethos of trust when sharing responsibility. We have found it can be helpful to seek out like-minded colleagues (including both staff and learners) who support our endeavours to learn together and develop our work in creative and meaningful ways. This gives a more collaborative feel to the work that we do, reduces the sense of vulnerability, and serves to develop partner relationships, which in themselves lead to more creative opportunities. For example, setting up planning groups to support any learning events, comprised of those who will be teaching and participant representatives, is helping us to fine tune events and to develop new and different ways of working.

We feel it is our responsibility to facilitate environments where learners feel comfortable to engage and engender a sense of belonging. However, what do we do if no one responds? Perhaps no one feels that they have enough responsibility; possibly they simply don't have the time or the headspace to think of what they need, or what they can contribute; there may be a sense of 'belonging uncertainty' present (Walton & Cohen, 2011). All of these factors can provoke feelings of vulnerability and raise important questions around how we can take the risk of thinking creatively, within pressurised time, to carve out the space to promote genuine engagement. However, we believe that these factors are essential and can help individuals to experience feelings of excitement about and enjoyment of learning (Bovill, 2017; Lubicz-Nawrocka, 2018), and it is those feelings and meaningful experiences that help us mediate risks and motivate our work.

This year we have explored new partnerships through running a series of *In Conversation* events. At the first event, we partnered with the University of Edinburgh's ENGAGE Network run by the Institute for Academic Development to offer a joint event on learner engagement and partnership. Rather than inviting speakers to give a keynote speech, we felt the ethos and values of the theme called for a collaborative keynote conversation that took into account both the participants' and organizers' interests relating to this theme. Following the keynote conversation, we organized two subsequent sets of discussion groups to help participants reflect and explore specific aspects of learner engagement and partnership. These were led by discussion leaders with various forms of expertise to engage participants with roles in different educational settings ranging from primary through to higher education. We did not know whether this approach would benefit all participants, especially if individuals expected a more traditional, 'expert led' event. Although this was a risk, the feedback on this non-traditional professional development event was ultimately extremely positive. This encouraged us to see our feelings of vulnerability not only as an important part of the creative process, but also key to negotiating learning opportunities rather than simply delivering them.

Negotiation of learning rather than delivery

The *In Conversation* event series is a good example of negotiation of learning, in addition to illustrating how we model our values and attitudes through language and behavior. Furthermore, we are deepening our understandings through this. We find ourselves gravitating towards people who think in collaborative ways and not towards those who use language and behavior that reflect a hierarchical, power-laden approach of teachers holding the knowledge and learners being there to absorb information. When teachers say, "We can use students to..." or when students say, "What do I need to do to get a good mark?" this language can highlight the instrumental nature of *using* each other as stepping stones to achieve an aim, rather than focusing on drawing on the collective expertise of the group.

Modelling a negotiated approach to learning and teaching is therefore key to our work, whilst also recognizing attitudinal barriers as challenges to engagement and to furthering a climate of ongoing professional learning. In this way, recognizing that our values and attitudes towards teaching and learning have a strong influence on our pedagogy and practice can be a key to developing professional learning as a shared, relationship-based, mutually respectful process of engagement. Again, this is in danger of seeming a straightforward process, if we do not pause and reflect on the challenges that have arisen for us in striving to work in these ways. Even pausing to revisit our values and making sure that we articulate these to others in order to find common ground can be difficult. One approach that we are finding is currently

working for us is to ensure that we foreground all of our interactions within the context of ourselves as learners, emphasising the negotiated nature of all professional learning offerings.

However, it can be difficult working at a scale that can sometimes present a diffusion of responsibility (Lubicz-Nawrocka, 2017; Merriam & Caffarella, 1991). We feel it is important that we not only present professional learning as a process of negotiation, but also that this is reflected in the reality of what is offered, as indicated above in relation to our examples of our co-constructed *In Conversation* events. This feels very important, as a means of reacting against more traditional transmission modes of learning and teaching based upon delivery of set learning outcomes or curricular goals. For example, within lectures and workshops, do we ask students how they would like to approach certain learning? We do ask whether learners would like to work in small groups?; whether they want to nominate someone to feedback or have us choose?; if they want to continue to pursue a line of enquiry or whether they feel ready to move on?; if they would like to finish early and start earlier in the following session? These may seem fairly risk-free areas to consult upon, and yet responses can prove to be challenging nonetheless, particularly when met with learner resistance or unworkable suggestions. For example, what happens when students wish to finish early but start at the usual time? When we want to pursue a line of enquiry, or dismiss it, is this when we give the choice, thereby rendering it devoid of options? It is essential that learners see their feedback reflected in what takes place and any actions resulting from their participation, but this is not the same as suggesting that their perspectives will always determine what happens as a result. That would not be a process of negotiation either.

We can, and do, ask learners about what professional learning they feel is most critical for their current needs so that our work becomes more authentic, beneficial, and representative. However, how we contribute to this in terms of our own perspectives on what may be meaningful requires sensitivity and also the commitment to negotiation rather than a delivery of learning model, as already mentioned. Boomer (1992) suggests that curriculum negotiation should be seen as an active journey and a process of ‘curriculuming.’ Furthermore, Breen and Littlejohn (2000) suggest that “the broader concept of negotiation is rather like a river, arising from a variety of small streams and gathering the momentum eventually to pour in quite different directions over floodplain” (p. 5). By looking at our work as a journey along a river we hope that partnership work and negotiation can help us gather ideas and momentum, create inclusive processes of engagement, and develop opportunities for meaningful learning and teaching.

Rapport and relationships

As we build personal relationships with like-minded individuals who share our values to begin to have honest discussions about choices, their implications, subsequent decisions, and who makes these, it can increase the complexity of our work as well as making it easier by virtue of our rapport with others. The developmental nature of our work has enabled us to invite collaboration from those we know to be interested and of a like mind. This in turn has led to new connections being made, and in this manner new relationships are created. However, these relationships in and of themselves could pose a risk since they are so individual; for example, when individuals change roles or move on—although experience is showing us that some of these relationships have in fact been sustained over many years despite this, as we gravitate back towards those with shared values. However, we still need to ask ourselves whether we are perhaps avoiding those who have opposing or slightly different

attitudes and values? Is it good enough to begin with the like-minded? How have we made these choices, and who are we overlooking? As two individuals who are each new to our roles in the Professional Learning team, we are trying to gather as much information as possible about what initiatives and what relationships worked well in the past. Even if it takes more time, can we build new, creative partnerships and initiatives that will create an ethos of shared learning? And in what ways should we go about this?

By creating rapport with individuals—especially within the context of Professional Learning and working with diverse adult learners—we hope to better acknowledge and reflect their interests, their priorities, and their aims. This means relinquishing some of our control and having an open mind in order that we are not just reflecting our own interests. While we could explore technological gimmicks, education fads, and catchy ways of engaging others in our work, we need to balance this with our core purposes and aims. Play, creativity, and fun can be seen as dumbing down and frivolous. We hope those connotations do not pose a risk for partnerships since we feel we should be able to bounce ideas off each other and play with new initiatives, even while acknowledging that learning is not always fun but can be extremely rewarding. We feel that this in itself can create an ethos of shared learning. In turn, this can be balanced with our objectives, while helping everyone engage by feeling respected as they try to incorporate new ideas into their practice. Rather than ticking student engagement boxes by focusing on the products of education, a collaborative ethos offers a focus on the process that may help us promote self-reflection and shared professional learning for all involved to build capacity that surpasses our individual aims.

Concluding thoughts

There is great value in reflecting on the risks, as well as the benefits, of partnerships. However, we have been asking how we build these types of reflective spaces into our own work in the Professional Learning team, especially within the constraints that present themselves. By not shying away from challenges, we feel we are learning in an authentic manner from a wide variety of partners. Since we are each professionals as well as learners ourselves who are both pursuing doctoral study, we approach our work with the view that partners have much to offer and we have much to benefit by learning from others. This experience undoubtedly influences our approach and gives us ever fresh insights into being a learner. We seek a similar conviction in others in order to further develop an ethos of ongoing learning and a spirit of enquiry. By understanding and embedding our work within the principles and values that are key to partnership, we increasingly feel that we ourselves gain the freedom to question our own work, including how we can link research with continually changing educational practices while remaining true to those values inherent to co-creating spaces for reflection and trying new things.

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