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TAKING ROADS LESS TRAVELED: EMBRACING RISKS AND RESPONSIBILITIES ALONG THE WAY TO LEADERSHIP

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The first time the two of us shared more than a few passing pleasantries was over dinner with colleagues the night before the 2017 Research on Teaching & Learning Conference at McMaster University. In conversation at a buzzing restaurant in Hamilton, Ontario, we each told versions of the stories of our journeys: how we got to where we are today and the seemingly serendipitous as well as intentional choices we made along the way. We were struck by the differences in our points of origin and in the particular paths we had taken that led us to our current roles as directors of teaching and learning institutes that have at their heart a commitment to pedagogical partnership. We were equally struck by the similar qualities of risk and sense of responsibility that attended and defined the choices we made along our respective journeys. When we decided to write this essay, we identified three kinds of risks and responsibilities we have embraced. One kind of risk attended our choices as students to pursue advanced degrees that led us in different directions from our undergraduate work—choices we made out of a sense of responsibility to and for ourselves. As professors, inspired by a sense of responsibility for our students, we risked claiming agency in redefining the education we were facilitating. And finally, our insistence as educational developers that “radical collegiality” (Fielding, 1999) has a place alongside top-down leadership constitutes a perpetual risk in the context of the largely hierarchical structures of higher education and embodies our sense of responsibility as directors of teaching and learning institutes.

Driving home from that dinner in Hamilton, Arshad thought of Robert Frost’s poem, “The Road Not Taken,” and we decided to take the governing metaphor—and the multiple readings—of the poem as both title and conceptual frame for this reflective essay. Frost’s poem is often read as a celebration of the individual’s intentional, informed choice to strike out on under-traversed paths and to have that renegade choice proven legitimate: “I took the road less travelled” and “that has made all the difference.” But Frost’s language actually suggests that the roads that “diverged in a yellow wood” were roughly equally traversed: “the passing there / Had worn them really about the same.” For these reasons, Orr (2015) asserts that “the poem isn’t a salute to can-do individualism; it’s a commentary on the self-deception we practice when constructing the story of our own lives.” Frost himself is reported to have said that the poem was a comment on indecision and our tendency to assign meaning to inconsequential decisions. But Orr (2015) also points out that poems are not arguments: “they are to be interpreted, not proven, and that process of interpretation admits a range of possibilities.”

We evoke the terms of Frost’s poem to highlight several divergences that each of us has encountered in the metaphorical “yellow wood” of our educational and professional lives and the combination of avoidance and intentionality that informed our choices. Because the taking of

the road less travelled often seemed like a risk inspired by what we did not want to do as much as by a clear vision of what we did want to do or where we wanted to go, we use the metaphor to capture the complex combination of embracing risks whose outcomes we could not fully calculate and embracing responsibilities whose import became increasingly clear as we endeavored to assume them. We suggest that the retrospective accounts we offer of how our early and ongoing choices have led us to partnership are neither narratives of can-do individualism nor self-deceptive stories we have constructed. Rather, they are reflections that seek to trace and reveal the development of our commitment to pedagogical partnership as a way of engaging and becoming that is always part plan and part unpredictable process. Like pedagogical partnership itself, the experiences we have and the meaning we make of them are contextual, co-created, and always evolving.

To evoke the context within which we work, we begin with a brief retrospective look at the advent of educational development (ED) as an arena of professional practice—the one to which our respective roads have led us. We then offer two very different disciplinary perspectives—from the humanities (Alison) and business (Arshad)—reflecting our educational backgrounds and training in literature in the United States and finance in Canada, respectively. These defined our intellectual points of departure and informed the choices we made early in our careers. Next we offer two glimpses of ways we endeavored to take agency in redefining what education might look like for the students for whom we were responsible as professors within an undergraduate teacher preparation program at a small, liberal arts college and within a finance department in a school of business at a large, comprehensive university, respectively. Finally we focus on the sense of responsibility that prompted us to risk embracing leadership of teaching and learning institutes committed to pedagogical partnerships among students, faculty, and staff—work that encompasses education more broadly and brings us back full circle to another set of converging perspectives that guide our work today. We hope our stories reveal a deeper understanding of risk and uncertainty as they intersect with responsibility in relation to the professional choices we have made to help us better navigate in forging new and more widespread pedagogical partnerships.

The Advent of Educational Development as an Arena of Professional Practice

The advent of educational development (ED) some four decades ago can be seen as the result of small groups of kindred spirits taking the less travelled road not so much to engage in risky behavior, but often redirected by what they did not wish to do. For some, disciplinary research wasn't enough; others sought theoretical or empirical grounding to improve their teaching; and for yet others administrative tasks did not seem compelling enough for a career in academia (Centra, 1976; Diamond, 1988; Evers et. al.; Wilson, 2012). Could those engaged in student-faculty partnership programs similarly be choosing roads less travelled?

A few trail blazers (e.g., Sorenson, 2001) developed student consultant programs as early as the 1990s, but the majority of such programs have developed over the last ten years or so, and these programs have already begun to differentiate teaching and learning institutes and centers in small liberal arts colleges such as Bryn Mawr and Haverford (Cook-Sather, 2010), Oberlin (Rose & Taylor, 2016), Reed (Oleson, 2016), Smith, and Ursinus (Goldsmith et al., 2017) and at larger,

research universities such as McMaster (Marquis, et al., 2016) and University of Virginia. They are also growing in England, where Gibson et al. (2017) have highlighted how engaging students as both participants and co-researchers can provide “rich insights into the world and lives of our students” (p. 117)—insights that are necessary if we are to meet the educational needs of students and best prepare them for the workforce. In Australia, leaders at the University of Queensland have threaded together a network of over 400 students, staff and academics (faculty) across the country to develop the possibilities of partnership (Matthews, 2017). Partnership approaches are evolving in Italy, New Zealand, and Sweden as well.

How did we get to a place at which pedagogical partnership is crossing disciplinary and role boundaries? The disciplinary perspectives from the humanities (Alison) and business (Arshad) we revisit below informed the choices we made early in our careers. We can read these now, in retrospect, as choices for partnership over particular content, for processes of engagement over particular products or transactional/didactic approaches, for more affirming ways of making meaning and doing meaningful work than our respective disciplines seemed to offer.

Coming from a Literary Studies Perspective (Alison)

The main risks that pervaded my scholarly work as an undergraduate studying English Literature, as a Master’s student in English Education, and as high school English teacher, all in California, were risks of interpretation. As a student and a teacher, I focused on words and the worlds they could open up: arguments they could create, possibilities they could conjure, relationships they could forge. It is both an intellectual and emotional risk to enter into these activities, and the work they entail is of marshalling textual evidence, building interpretive structures, and making human meaning.

I didn’t frame the work I did at that time in these terms, but I see now that it was even then enacting a form of partnership. Readers transacting with texts (Rosenblatt, 1978) enact reciprocal interactions, and students engaged in collective as well as individual interpretations are also enacting a form of partnership. I was (and remain) enamored of the beauty of language, its capacity to reach into hearts and represent lives. And yet when it came to choosing an area of study for graduate school, I chose Education over English Literature.

This was a risk in a whole new way. It was a choice for the less prestigious, less focused, less predictable path, one that would entail more work with people than with texts. The collaborative efforts of exploring texts I undertook with my students were the first iterations of partnership in which I engaged, but at this crossroads in my education, I took the road toward a PhD in Education over the road toward a PhD in English more because of what I didn’t want to do than what I had in mind as my ultimate destination and practice. For all my love of language, I did not want to stay focused only on texts.

When I looked ahead, down each of the roads these two options offered, the one leading toward English Literature seemed to narrow and the one leading toward Education seemed to open up. I actually had this visual and visceral sense as I peered, metaphorically, down each road. I didn’t

know where the more open-feeling road would lead, but I knew I did not want to travel down a road that seemed so narrow.

Coming from a Financial Perspective (Arshad)

Bound by a somewhat Faustian bargain with my father (mom had no say in these matters), despite my love for Art and History nourished during my A-levels in Karachi, I found myself taking business courses in Montreal. One of us was to become a Chartered Accountant and since I had no idea what this meant, the bigger risk was to stay home in a country that had already been broken into two, after three bloody wars. My first fork was all about travel, discovery and western values. Business courses were just a small part of a bigger deal, a part that broadened my perspective but at the time felt like oil in water.

During those formative years, I so hated Accounting but went through it, did an MBA which was more fun because it's general, reluctantly got an accounting designation (to please dad?), and arrived at my second fork. Here, my then mentor/teacher got sick and asked if I would teach her class. I was terrified and exhilarated, ignorant and clever, introverted and extroverted, all at the same time. It was in the act of teaching, I found passion and even got excited about the subject (Finance). The craft sustained me, even though the earlier years were machine like. Moonlighting in several different Montreal institutions in the downtown core, I once taught a marathon of nine courses in a term! Students loved me for my commitment, and I loved them for their curiosity. While I wandered the hallways from classes to institutions, I was building a profound relationship with learners, who gave me courage, immense joy and privilege. Interacting with students has always been my well, and teaching is a way of giving back, with mutual respect forging a lifelong partnership. Teaching awards marked my path like medals and decorations tacked on an ill-fitting jacket except for a lifetime prestigious national teaching fellowship, which brought me to a dangerously risky third fork.

For all of the awards I won, the fellowship raised expectations to demanding levels as I took on a variety of leadership roles. I felt as apparently many have, an imposter, not deserving the laurels perhaps because I didn't see myself doing anything extraordinary but more so because I knew so little about learning. I had no tools, taxonomies nor theoretical frameworks to share, nor a language that could explain my craft. I was ill informed and I knew it, driving hard on intuition and imitation. Facing precarious employment, to gain tenure and permanence a safer bet was a PhD in Finance. But at this fork, I chose a PhD in Education even though my peers confirmed this choice to be a kiss of death in the Department of Finance. This leap offered a new identity connecting me to what I felt I could excel in even though my new qualifications would isolate me within my department.

Taking Agency in Education and Teacher Preparation (Alison)

The courses that constitute teacher preparation in higher education in the United States must meet the needs of prospective teachers and the requirements imposed by the state in which the program is situated. While those requirements are extensive, none of them focuses on forging

partnerships between prospective teachers and the students they are preparing to teach. When in 1994 I began as director of the Bryn Mawr/Haverford Education Program, situated in two liberal arts colleges in Pennsylvania, and instructor of the curriculum and pedagogy course required as the penultimate class prior to student teaching, I designed a project called Teaching and Learning Together. This program enacted student-teacher partnership and formed the basis for how I have conceptualized pedagogical partnership since.

Teaching and Learning Together paired secondary students at a local school in one-on-one, semester-long partnerships with college students seeking state certification prior to those prospective teachers' semester of practice teaching. The program positioned the secondary students as teacher educators, disrupting the standard power dynamics and expected transfer of knowledge between teachers and students. Each week the secondary students and prospective teacher pairs exchanged letters (and subsequently emails) about all dimensions of teaching and learning. In addition, the secondary students met weekly at their school with a school-based educator to discuss the topics being explored in the college class (e.g., how to plan an engaging lesson), and these sessions were audirecorded and made required reading for the prospective teachers. At the end of the semester, the prospective teachers wrote analyses of what they had learned through this partnership, quoting student voices and scholarly texts side by side, and articulating the ways they had experienced and might plan for partnership. (See Cook-Sather, 2002, and Cook-Sather and Curl, 2014, for more detail).

By integrating partnership into teacher preparation, I was not only meeting the requirements of preparing teachers according to Pennsylvania's guidelines, I was acting in students' and prospective teachers' best interest in ways that had not been imagined or structured within institutions of higher education. The prospective teachers did not always see it that way, however. They often doubted the legitimacy and usefulness of this partnership program when they first embarked upon it, assuming they had something to teach the high school students rather than the other way around. Only through genuinely engaging in these partnerships for a full semester and then reflecting on them once they were concluded did these prospective teachers come to see how much the high school students had to teach and how many problematic assumptions they had made about those students' capacities, insights, and roles.

In insisting on positioning secondary students as partners to prospective teachers, I risked that the prospective teachers enrolled in my course would fail to learn or reject the lessons the high school students could help them learn about, among other things, responsibility and accountability in education (Cook-Sather, 2010) and become teachers who listened less, not more, to their students. The risk, then, was in the face of uncertainty regarding prospective teachers' receptivity—their own willingness to risk engagement in the face of their own uncertainty, reinforced by the traditional, hierarchical, top-down distribution of knowledge. I risked entrenching and ossifying perceptions rather than transforming them. I was and am relieved that the partnerships proved not only educative but also transformative for almost every prospective teacher, as well as the high school students.

Beyond the confines of my classroom, I risked the judgment and dismissal of colleagues and the accrediting bodies responsible for approving our program. No teacher preparation program positioned students as teacher educators; no conception of students' capacities, programmatic

structures, or reaccreditation criteria existed for such a positioning. I persisted in the face of these risks because I saw how partnership could achieve what nothing else in teacher preparation could: the building of actual, ongoing relationships through which both teachers and students gained insights into and empathy for one another's worlds, experiences, values, commitments, fears, struggles, joys, achievements—in short, everything that made them human and either engaged, agentic, and effective or, the opposite, alienated and ineffectual. My taking agency modeled and made way for their taking agency.

Taking Agency as a Finance Professor (Arshad)

Finance literature is rife with the principal-agent problem, which explores whether individuals do what others are depending on them to do, through conditions that encourage that alignment. In finance, that alignment looks at incentives among the parties involved so that self-interest equals the common interest (Desai, A., M., 2012; Fama, 1980; Jensen & Meckling, 1976). Will managers (agents) act in the best interest of owners (principals)? What types of contracts and conditions motivate workers to act in the best interest of the larger communities they serve? Do professionals including doctors, lawyers, contractors, teachers, and others act in ways their professional codes of conduct and reputations uphold them to serve their principals?

Incentives can provide powerful answers to minimize the principal-agent problem; however, it can become complex as other relationships are implicated where principals become agents for another set of principals! As a finance professor, I was hired to serve my department, which in turn served the institution and students who serve society at large. As an agent serving several principals I quickly learned about the cultural norms that governed performance evaluation. For example, critical incentives in my department were driven almost exclusively by research intensity. Teaching awards were regarded with suspicion and as populism. My own prosperity was at risk since my focus on the Scholarship of Teaching & Learning as well as best seller textbooks I had co-authored (Ahmad, 2000; Kapoor, et. al., 2015; Petty et. al., 1995) didn't count in the eyes of my peers evaluating my performance. And yet I believed, albeit naively, that I was serving higher order principals—my students, institution and society which purported to value teaching and SoTL equally.

As I found myself isolated within my own department, I looked outward to other colleagues, groups and organizations who had similar dispositions, and encountered networks that gave new meaning to my academic work. As I spent more time within these networks and served in different capacities as coordinator of Canada's national teaching fellowships, board member of Academics Without Borders, President for the Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, I found an identity that my department could not grant. And ironically, I thank them for their dispositions since I otherwise I would not have travelled in different directions!

These pathways within and tangential to my discipline offer another important insight about risk. That while my disciplinary peers thought my identity to be at risk, other organizations I served were more closely aligned to partnerships with students. In some cases, students were at the table, demonstrating their unbounded capacity to learn and changed our capacities as leaders.

Risking Pedagogical Partnership in Educational Development (Alison)

A little over a decade into my work as director of the secondary teacher preparation program at Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges, I had the opportunity to create a new faculty development option for professors at those colleges. Building on the partnership program I had facilitated in the context of the secondary teacher preparation program, I put student-faculty pedagogical partnership at the center of the teaching and learning institute I developed in a program called Student as Learners and Teachers (SaLT). Through this program, undergraduate students are paired with college faculty members in one-on-one, semester-long pedagogical partnerships through which the students conduct weekly classroom observations, meet weekly with their faculty partners, and meet weekly with me and other student partners, all with the goal of supporting the faculty in creating classrooms that are at once welcoming, challenging, and supportive to a diversity of students (Cook-Sather, 2015).

This was an even greater risk than putting high school students at the center of secondary teacher preparation. There are long and strong traditions of institutional hierarchies within which faculty and students occupy very different positions, and many faculty do not consider students among those with pedagogical expertise. However, my experience of the pedagogical partnership project situated in the secondary teacher preparation program had convinced me that such partnership was not only generative but also essential to fostering understanding between teachers and students and developing the most productive pedagogies. Therefore, insisting that student-faculty pedagogical partnership be the premise and set of practices in our teaching and learning institute has always felt and still feels to me to be an enactment of what Welch (1990) calls a feminist ethic of risk: “an ethic that begins with the recognition that we cannot guarantee decisive changes in the near future or even in our lifetime” and that “responsible action does not mean the certain achievement of desired ends but the creation of a matrix in which further actions are possible, the creation of the conditions of possibility for desired changes” (p. 20).

As my leadership path continues to unfold, I shift more and more toward and into partnership in all areas of practice, striving to create that matrix, those conditions. The road toward Education that appeared to widen before me has been made up at every turn, it has seemed to me, of passages through the possible: liminal roles and spaces that support what might be (see Cook-Sather & Felten, 2017). Guided by a feminist ethic of risk and always working to make spaces of possibility along the road, I strive to collaborate with students to “make the road by walking” (Horton & Freire, 1990). Not only is the SaLT program co-designed with students, often co-facilitated with students, and most certainly co-experienced with students, much of my research is conducted in partnership with students, focused, for instance, on exploring liminality in partnership (Cook-Sather & Alter, 2011), developing culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogical practices (Cook-Sather & Agu, 2013), analyzing pedagogical partnership as a threshold concept (Cook-Sather & Luz, 2015), and interpreting partnership within the conceptual framework of translation (Cook-Sather & Abbot, 2016). These leadership experiences have prompted me to reshape all my teaching as “radical collegiality” (Fielding, 1999)—as courses co-created with students (Cook-Sather & Des-Ogugua, 2016; Cook-Sather, Des-Ogugua, & Bahti, 2018).

Risking partnership in educational leadership at my institution means always being subject to both institutional and individual suspicion and sometimes challenges to the legitimacy of this

approach at my home institution. These experiences are largely mitigated by the vast majority of colleagues at my home institution and by the international recognition of the pedagogical partnership approach I have developed, but they are nevertheless risks that lead to occasional ruptures, such as a faculty partner rejecting the entire premise of partnership with students as conceptualized through the SaLT program. When a single person challenges the premise of partnership, even when hundreds embrace it, the responsibility I feel to enact radical collegiality comes face to face again with the hierarchical structures of higher education. It's a sobering reminder of the precarity and perpetual vulnerability of pedagogical partnership work.

Risking Pedagogical Partnership (Arshad)

In Alison's deep exploration of the multifaceted nature of the matrix that pedagogical partnerships represent, seen from a business perspective, when agency is shared and aligned amongst partners then mutual benefits for both increase, relationships are strengthened by trust and respect, and the partnership grows—nourished by a culture of productive encounters. Situating work in an organizational setting, sole proprietorships are considered the norm to start a new business. As a proprietorship expands, the partnership form is often suggested where “two or more heads are better than one” is considered to better tackle the complexities of growth.

While these sole and partnership organizational forms had proliferated, the early 1600's saw an extraordinary first “joint stock” company where investors received an “actie” or action, or what we might refer to as “a piece of the action” in the form of shares in the company's future profits – which of course may or may not be realized. If they weren't, the investor's risk or liability was limited to the amount they had invested. The inherent risk of ownership has been distributed but so has the opportunity of reward. This was enacted in the Dutch East India Company engaged in a lucrative spice trade between Europe and the Indian Subcontinent. Given its unimaginable success, this company was further granted exceptional powers by the Dutch government to wage war, issue currency, establish colonies and even execute prisoners.

Risk has since been measured alongside reward relationships inherent in all types of organizational structures and settings and have been studied extensively (Fama & Jensen, 1985; March & Simon, 1958; Mayer & Rowen, 1977; Mintzberg, 1989, 1993). Hierarchical organizations like universities mimic these for-profit structures driven by value for money accountability and fit for purpose measures to suit a variety of stakeholders seeking to improve the common good (Arrow, K., J., 1970, 1974; Werker & Ahmed, 2008). Academic risks are mainly reputational and are distributed in departments, programs, centers and communities of practice. The latter is a very attractive organizational frontier where “groups of people are informally bound together by shared expertise and passion for a joint enterprise” (Wenger & Synder, 2000, p.139).

As mentioned, having failed to find pedagogical partnerships within my discipline, I participated and brokered pedagogical partnerships in whatever organizational forms they appeared in, and more recently, into a newly created role of Vice-Provost, Teaching and Learning at McMaster. Being hired into this senior role surprised me just as teaching accolades had done earlier in my career. Again, an imposter syndrome loomed large, since I had never held any administrative

positions in my previous institution. Unlike my counterparts in Canada, the UK and Australia with the same VP title and responsible for a number of disparate units, my focus was on a singular unit and I embraced a dual role as Director of the MacPherson Institute – McMaster’s Teaching and Learning Centre.

This was an exceptionally risky move as I was violating a basic financial principle—diversification—by putting all my eggs in one basket. My performance would be tied to MacPherson’s success rather than to a portfolio of unrelated units that I could have otherwise led where the success or non-performance of one unit can be mitigated by another. However, partnership opportunities within the Institute were irresistible. First, this role offered the chance to transform a service centre into a quasi institute with a focus on SoTL research. Second, pedagogical partnerships could become a vehicle for SoTL research to be enacted. And third, strong ties with colleagues from previous networks (Healey, Flint, & Harrington, 2014) provided frameworks and pathways for pedagogical partnerships that enabled our talented staff to realize the potential for the Institute (Marquis, et al., 2016). Most of all, this fork gave birth to a daisy-chain series of pedagogical activity where we could measure large scale institutional impact.

Finally, a cautionary note. When new academic leaders are entrusted to lead our complex, multifaceted institutions, Teaching and Learning Centers, where the locus of partnership work tends to reside, remain vulnerable. We have seen Centers of Teaching and Learning reimagined, hollowed out and sometimes shut down despite their visible impact on the quality of the students’ learning experiences. True partnerships are sometimes dismantled and subsumed into Student Success or Career Centres. This underlines Alison’s point of radical collegiality coming face to face with the hierarchical structures of higher education. Until a time when pedagogical partnerships become ubiquitous, there is lots more to do!

Conclusions

These glimpses of divergences along our respective paths illustrate how risk both attends and informs; it is a noun and a verb—a characterization and an action—and it is always in force at moments of decision. Likewise, responsibility can be understood as noun and verb: the quality of being and an active response. Rather than romanticizing and valorizing the choices we made in taking roads less travelled, our goal has been to share our stories as braided results of deliberate choices and serendipitous steps toward engagement in risky and responsible action that does not guarantee success but does wear the ways for future travelers. In the paths we travelled, we took, or hoped to be taking, steps away from what did not compel us and toward a sometimes defined, sometimes opaque, sense of possibility. Embracing risk and failure included periods of uncertainty where we were unable to assess outcomes because they were unprecedented. In other words, there were times when risk could be related to potential reward, but also instances when risk stood still. There were also times when risk and opportunity appeared simultaneously, and while the former seemed omnipresent, one might embrace opportunity by assuming yet another whole new set of risks. Partnership, the path we both travel now as leaders of teaching and learning institutes, itself is like that: the taking of steps along a path whose destination we cannot know until we travel toward it.

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