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## **EMBRACING AND/OR AVOIDING THE RISKS OF PARTNERSHIP: A FACULTY PERSPECTIVE**

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What can surveillance technologies and medical monitoring devices tell us about navigating the risks involved in pedagogical partnership? This is a strange question, to be sure, but it was one that was very much in my mind as I thought about writing this essay. For the past three years, I've taught a course focusing on the intersections between technology and society, in which we read and discuss a number of scholarly sources that take up the notion of risk. While many of these consider the potential threats to individuals, groups, and/or social structures posed by particular technological developments, some also explore the extent to which technologies participate in shoring up risk cultures that can themselves be seen as problematic. In *Liquid Surveillance* (2013), for example, Zygmunt Bauman and David Lyon unpack the extent to which fears of terrorism and supposed 'suspicious others' have led us to develop and endorse surveillance and security technologies that paradoxically make us *less* secure. Similarly, in an article exploring the use and resistance of medical monitoring technologies, Kellie Owens draws on Giddens' notion of 'the risk society' to point out that the possibility of illness is often positioned as comparable to illness itself in the contemporary moment, with the result that treatments are developed which "can also lead to unnecessary medical intervention and possible harm" (2017, p. 851). In both of these pieces, then, the authors illustrate that growing concern about risk and its mitigation can lead to actions and outcomes that have a range of detrimental social consequences.

Hence the question which precipitated this essay. As someone who both engages in and facilitates and advocates for student-faculty partnership, I often experience or describe partnership activities as unsettling or productively disorienting. I have also navigated a number of issues in my own partnerships with students that felt risky to me personally, but I had never systematically named them and rarely reflected on them as such. Might this approach be read as in some ways comparable to the kind of productive ignorance that Owens positions as countering the problematic surveillance and risk-avoidance of the risk society? Alternatively, might it be an example of what Langdon Winner (1986), in another piece we read in that technology and society class, describes critically as a kind of somnambulism—a process of sleepwalking through choices and interactions without considering their potential outcomes and effects? In light of these possibilities, I attempt in this piece to unpack some of my own experiences of risk as a faculty member participating in student-faculty partnerships. Provoked by Winner, Bauman & Lyon, and Owens, I want to consider the kinds of risk I take on or encourage when I engage in and advocate student-faculty partnership, and when and how those risks might be seen as productive and/or problematic.

## **The Risks of Co-Inquiry for a Junior Faculty Member**

Most of my formal experiences of student-faculty partnership have taken place via McMaster University's Student Partners Program (SPP)—a centrally supported partnership program which I also oversee in my capacity as Associate Director (Research) for McMaster's central teaching and learning institute. This program seeks to create opportunities for faculty/staff and students to collaborate meaningfully on a range of teaching and learning projects or initiatives, from course design and delivery to curriculum assessment and review. To date, however, the majority of the projects included in the program have involved student-faculty co-inquiry on Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) research. Three times a year, faculty, staff, and students are encouraged to submit projects to be considered for inclusion in the program. These submissions are vetted and ranked by a committee of students and staff, and selected projects are advertised to potential student partners in a university-wide call. Ultimately, students apply for projects of interest and project teams select student partners from amongst the applicants. Students typically work approximately five hours per week on activities determined in partnership with other team members, and they are paid for their time. (For further detail about the Student Partners Program, see Marquis et al., 2016; Marquis et al., 2017; Marquis, 2017).

Since the SPP began in 2013, I have partnered with students on a wide range of research projects, collaboratively developing and exploring questions about topics ranging from students' experiences of global justice education (Marquis, Redda, & Twells, 2018) to representations of faculty, students, and the university in popular film (Johnstone, Marquis, & Puri, 2018). While each of these experiences has been unique, I've found that they all demonstrated some of the many benefits and challenges commonly attributed to student-faculty partnership in the literature (e.g., Bovill, Cook-Sather, & Felten, 2011; Cook-Sather, 2015; McKinney et al., 2010; Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017). For example, I've seen projects enhanced by students bringing their perspectives, experiences, and social locations to bear on our shared work, as in cases in which my co-inquirers offered rich interpretations of research data that diverged considerably from my own readings, or led focus groups or interviews that generated different kinds of information than I suspect participants would have shared with a faculty researcher. I've also learned from my student partners, as they draw from research they've conducted and expose me to new theoretical framings or bodies of literature in the process. Perhaps most notably, I've experienced the enhanced motivation and development of meaningful relationships that many attribute to engaging in partnership processes. At the same time, like others writing about partnership (e.g., Cook-Sather, 2014; Bovill et al. 2016; Delpish et al., 2010; Levy, Little, & Whelan, 2011; Seale et al., 2015), I've also struggled with navigating traditional roles and expectations in partnerships, with knowing when to lead and when to step back so students can claim ownership of a project, and with the additional time required to develop effective collaborations. While, to some extent, these challenges have become easier to navigate over time, I still experience the process of co-inquiry as simultaneously difficult, unsettling, and rewarding.

So how do these experiences connect to the notion of risk? Of course, there's always a danger that the uncertainties and challenges noted above might lead to the stalling or failure of a research project conducted in partnership. Certainly, this would be disappointing and discouraging to everyone involved, and could have problematic outcomes for both students and faculty partners. From my perspective as a tenure track faculty member at a research-intensive university, for example, such a failure might have immediate impacts on my career progression. Given that I have a requirement to produce a certain number of research outputs per year, if I spend my available research time working on co-inquiry projects and those projects do not pan out, I need to find a way to make up for missing publications and presentations or to explain this gap on my record of activities and in my tenure assessment.

As my tenure evaluation draws nearer, I've also increasingly felt that the expectations for research faculty on my campus don't fit neatly with the destabilization of hierarchies and openness to multiple forms of expertise at the centre of partnership work. While the research related components of the University's tenure and promotion policies simply suggest that candidates will be assessed on the quality of their research contributions, this often feels to me like an expectation to establish and demonstrate a kind of individual scholarly expertise that doesn't leave much space for the notion of co-developing knowledge with students. This past fall, for instance, the university launched a branding campaign that saw banners put up across campus featuring images of individual faculty along with taglines describing their research foci and achievements. This was accompanied by the development of an online 'Experts' database designed to showcase the university's "world-renowned researchers and ... their ground-breaking work" (McMaster University, Brighter World). This celebration of the scholarly activities of McMaster's many accomplished faculty is understandable and not atypical, and it serves to recognize what is undoubtedly some meaningful and important work. At the same time, though, it also works to reproduce the notion of the faculty member as star researcher, fortifying a standard that I experience as inspiring and intimidating in equal measures.

Though it's a bit uncomfortable to admit, this sense that I'm expected to develop a particular kind of scholarly authority has made me cautious about engaging in student-faculty co-inquiry too extensively at this point in my career. While I still partner frequently with students, I will often take a leadership role on projects and make additional contributions to publications and presentations to ensure I can ethically claim first author status on what seems like a sufficient number of research outputs for my annual review. These strategies feel like ways of reasonably mitigating the risks (whether real or perceived) partnership might be understood to pose to my career progression, given the context described above. At the same time, however, they also mean that my partnerships often overlap with traditional expectations that faculty will lead research, and create fewer opportunities for students and other collaborators to make first author-level contributions. As a result of such attempts to shield myself from risk, then, the radical potential of my research partnerships is undercut, despite the fact that everyone involved has opportunities to make meaningful contributions to the work.

## **Impostor Syndrome and the Risks of Moving toward Partnership in Teaching**

While the bulk of my student-faculty partnership experiences have taken place in a research context, I also attempt to foster a partnership ethos in my teaching wherever possible. Students in the courses I lead have opportunities to select and shape their own assignment topics and questions, for example, and—in smaller classes—they are also asked to choose issues for discussion and lead select class sessions. Although I wouldn't describe these courses as partnerships per se, they nonetheless constitute attempts to increase student ownership of and participation in their learning and to create space in the classroom for perspectives and interests outside of my own.

By and large, I've had relatively good success with these methods, as indicated in student teaching evaluations and in my assessment of the work students contribute. Nevertheless, as is the case with the research partnerships in which I've participated, I often experience this approach as somewhat risky. On one hand, it has sometimes been uncomfortable for me to relinquish control over course content and discussions, and I've struggled to balance the need to make space for additional perspectives with a responsibility to ensure students learn key material. I've also experienced some resistance from students who want more lecturing and less discussion, or who suggest they'd prefer to hear more from me and less from their peers. These concerns are indicative of the ways in which a partnership-informed approach, at least in the way I have conceived and enacted it, might be seen to pose risks both to the potential quality and coherence of the course in question and to my student evaluation scores.

Perhaps more disquietingly, I've become increasingly conscious lately of the extent to which my wavering confidence as an instructor makes relinquishing control of the classroom feel simultaneously liberating and unsettling. Like many young faculty (e.g., Douglas et al., 2016), I often feel like a bit of an impostor while teaching, despite the fact that I've taught at the university level for more than ten years, and simultaneously occupied educational development positions for much of that time. This is exacerbated by the fact that I'm currently appointed to an interdisciplinary program, which has required me to lead courses outside of or only tangentially related to the areas in which I was trained. I thus feel compelled to prepare extensively for courses before I take them on, and I'm sometimes concerned about the extent to which I am credible and effective as an instructor. The practice of having students contribute to shaping course activities thus takes some of the pressure off of me to be the authoritative voice leading class discussion and creates opportunities for students and me to co-learn and explore together.

Nevertheless, I do worry at times that some might see this approach largely as evidence of the limits of my knowledge, and I have sometimes found myself inadvertently reasserting a particular version of authority by claiming too much space in class discussions or referring to research in a way that underscores my understanding of the topics at hand. Again, this seems to connect to the way in which I experience my role (correctly or not) as demanding a certain amount of knowledge and scholarly expertise. Despite the fact that a partnership-informed approach might overlap with principles of

good pedagogy, I nonetheless often experience it as at odds with the vision of the professor against which I imagine I'm being evaluated by students and colleagues.

### **To Risk or Not to Risk**

As suggested by my comments above, participating in student-faculty partnerships—both in research and in teaching—often feels risky to me as a junior faculty member, even though these dangers and uncertainties are typically overshadowed by the clear benefits of partnership (including enhanced relationships, better work, and opportunities for learning and growth). This is perhaps unsurprising, as many approaches to partnership take as one of their central goals destabilizing the established roles and systems of power on which the university is built. As Judith Butler (2006) has demonstrated in relation to gender, stepping outside of traditional and expected patterns of behaviour means risking unintelligibility or ridicule; similarly, embracing a partnership ethos in a higher education system still frequently structured around norms of faculty authority and expertise comes with the potential for being misread or discounted. Though I wish I could claim this doesn't affect me, I've found myself responding to the felt risks of partnership in ways that reflect my difficulty moving beyond established or imagined faculty roles while I'm being explicitly assessed in terms of my capacity to meet them. Although I don't know if other faculty on the tenure track feel this way (indeed, I've rarely talked about these issues with others), it seems to me a clear possibility.

Considering this situation in relation to the arguments about the risk society mentioned earlier in this essay, I find myself wondering how my own attempts to mitigate risk within my partnerships might similarly be read as actions that serve to shore up existing systems of power and lead to negative social outcomes. Just as Owens (2017) points out that monitoring technologies designed to avoid risks during childbirth reproduce gender scripts that disadvantage women, and the surveillance technologies described by Bauman and Lyon (2013) disproportionately endanger racialized people, do my attempts to shield myself from threat in partnership put others at greater risk or reproduce existing hierarchies? Insofar as my concerns about meeting the established or imagined faculty role reproduce that position even as my partnership activities push against it to some degree, I do contribute to some extent to perpetuating university systems that are structured hierarchically and often fail to make space for other voices. Indeed, doing this as part of the process of getting tenure itself serves to shore up my own privilege relative to students and to those in contingent positions in the university. With this in mind, my attempts to minimize the risks of partnership as a tenure-track faculty member might be seen as helping to reproduce the system that itself makes partnership risky.

At the same time, I also find myself wondering about how potential calls for faculty to embrace the risks of partnership, which might follow from the above line of reasoning, relate to a growing body of work that considers the impact of factors like race, gender, and age on presumptions of expertise and authority in the academy. Scholars have increasingly demonstrated how faculty who don't meet the normative image of the white male professor are frequently not afforded the same sense of knowledge and authority as

their white male counterparts (Douglas et al., 2016; Pittman, 2010). As a middle-class, cis-gender, white woman, I certainly haven't experienced the full extent of this discounting, though I have received course evaluations that focused as much on my hair and clothing as on my facility with teaching or command of the course material. I've also been cautioned by a senior colleague about the potential dangers of being underestimated due to my age and gender, and thus discouraged, for example, from inviting students to call me by my first name. As even these comparatively moderate examples suggest, the different identities we bring to faculty roles and to partnership work mean the risks of partnership are different for each of us (and this is assuredly true for students as well). It might be much easier for a white faculty member to meaningfully engage in less hierarchical approaches to interacting with students, for instance, without experiencing compelling risks to the authority and expertise expected of them as a faculty member. By encouraging *all* faculty to embrace the risks of partnership without considering how these risks are differently shaped by identity, we thus also run the risk of reproducing or extending inequities that already affect faculty roles and experiences.

So where does this leave us in terms of the question that started this essay? What kinds of risk are we taking on or encouraging when we engage in and advocate student-faculty partnership work, and when and how might those risks be seen as productive and/or problematic? It seems to me that my own experiences of partnership as a white, female, tenure-track faculty member point toward both the potential value of encouraging risk taking and the need to exercise caution before advocating risk uniformly. In order to better understand the politics and possibilities of risk for faculty engaged in student-faculty partnerships, we need to consider further the varying kinds and levels of threat for a wider variety of partnership practitioners, and to acknowledge that these risks might shift and play out differently in different moments and contexts. If my upcoming tenure application is successful, for instance, many of the risks discussed here will likely feel less pronounced, though others will persist, and my ongoing experiences will vary from those of others with identities and affiliations that are different from my own. So too do we need to consider broader strategies for addressing the structural considerations that produce and perpetuate these risks, rather than simply encouraging individuals to embrace them. Thinking about partnership in relation to risk brings these important considerations to the fore.

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