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Wrestling with the Languages and Practices of Pedagogical Partnership

Alison Cook-Sather
Bryn Mawr College

WRESTLING WITH THE LANGUAGES AND PRACTICES OF PEDAGOGICAL PARTNERSHIP

Alison Cook-Sather, Mary Katharine Woodworth Professor of Education, Bryn Mawr College, and Director, Teaching and Learning Institute, Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges

Writing about the ontological power of naming, Max van Manen, Jerry McClelland, and Jane Plihal (2007) offer a series of assertions about the relationships among calling and being: "Naming is recognition. We are able to recognize aspects of our world by naming them. Not only do we make things recognizable by naming them, but also we make them real somehow" (p. 85). These assertions frame an exploration through which van Manen and his colleagues strive to access both how students experiencing naming—being recognized or misnamed—and how they name or describe their experiences of such recognition or its absence. These are not stories of simple correspondences: a single name linked simply to a single person. Rather, they reveal how naming is always a complex, relational phenomenon—a linking of, or a failure to connect, people, their identities, and their experiences through terms that may have multiple meanings.

If, as van Manen and his colleagues (2007) also suggest, "Things that fall outside of our linguistic reach…stay more indeterminate" (p. 85), then finding, choosing, and using names can move us toward clearer definition, understanding, and engagement—toward greater clarity and deeper connection. At the same time, if we are being thoughtful, every use of a term as it relates to people and practices moves us toward the further recognition that such naming must be perpetually revisited, reconsidered, and, perhaps, revised—a commitment and process I have written about in relation to student voice and pedagogical partnership as perpetual translation (Cook-Sather, 2018). The essays in this issue of *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education (TLTHE)* wrestle in thoughtful ways with what it means to recognize, name, make real, and reconsider the practices of pedagogical partnership and how those practices affect and are affected by who participates and where they are located.

The theme of this issue of *TLTHE*—wrestling with the languages and practices of pedagogical partnership—was inspired by a set of conversations that followed a workshop several colleagues and I co-facilitated at the 2018 conference of the International Consortium for Educational Development (ICED). Our session was called "Valuing Different Voices: Strategies for Enacting Pedagogical Partnerships in Diverse Contexts" (Cook-Sather, Woolmer, Gläser, & Felten, 2018). In the session, each of us offered brief vignettes that illustrated how we name and navigate national politics and policies, institutional cultures, and practices of pedagogical partnership in our respective contexts. We then invited session participants to engage in reflection on and dialogue about their struggles with naming and enacting pedagogical partnership in their contexts.

Conversations begun during the session spilled out into the hallways and the email exchanges that followed the session and led to the conceptualization of this issue of *TLTHE* and the composition of essays by people in different countries, institutions, and positions. The essays by faculty and staff members were authored by participants in the ICED session and include perspectives from the United States, Singapore, and Canada. Each addresses the theme of this issue in a different way: as a meditation on telling true partnership stories informed by insights

across time and context; as an exploration of the potential of an embrace of partnership in an Eastern context; and as a personal and professional narrative of coming to realizations about positions, identities, and ways of naming in a Western context. The students who authored essays were not at the ICED session, but they too have wrestled with the languages and practices of pedagogical partnership in their own contexts and experiences. Two student essays focus on the barriers to and steps toward partnership they have experienced and recommend in Singapore, and the third student essay focuses on turning points in the experience of finding a language for and enacting partnership in the United States.

There is no simple, single correspondence between the people who wrote these essays, the language they used to name their experiences, the partnership practices in which they engaged, and the places in which their work has unfolded. These are not intended as "single stories" (Adichie, 2014) that preclude all others. Rather, each is an individual story meant as one of many, and taken together the collection surfaces cross-cutting themes. These include the importance of: attending to multiple experiences and perspectives; continuing to wrestle with terms even once one discovers, chooses, or embraces them; recognizing that complex intersections of dimensions of identity always inform both terms and practices; and remembering that, as Healey and Healey (2018) recently argued, context matters in relation to partnership practices. These are perennial themes in relation to pedagogical partnership, and the six explorations included in this issue offer us opportunities to revisit them.

In "**HOW DO YOU TELL A TRUE PARTNERSHIP STORY? FOUR REFLECTIONS**," Peter Felten, Executive Director of the Center for Engaged Learning, Assistant Provost for Teaching and Learning, and Professor of History at Elon University, meditates on the centrality to the human experience of stories and storytelling and reminds us that partnership offers a particular form of this human experience: "partners share their distinct perspectives in order to gain insight into a question or dilemma or experience about learning and teaching in higher education." Felten offers and elaborates on four observations about the nature of stories—that they condense and simplify, tend to portray actions and experiences as coherent and purposeful, tend to be told by those with the most power, and obscure some perspectives even as they reveal other ones. He invites "those of us working in and on partnerships to be self-conscious and self-critical about the stories we tell."

In "**THE POSSIBILITIES OF STUDENTS AS PARTNERS – A PERSPECTIVE FROM SINGAPORE**," Huang Hoon Chng, Associate Provost at the National University of Singapore, writes both in dialogue with Felten's ideas and in deep reflection on her own context. She writes about how she "started out among the skeptics in the room who believed that long-entrenched power differentials between student and teacher and deep-seated cultural practices in specific contexts could not be so easily overcome to enable such partnerships." But, she continues, she has shifted her perspective and has found herself "increasingly entertaining the possibilities of students as partners, aided in part by a shift in the usage and meaning of the idea of 'partnership.'" Noting that the metaphors we use to name students and how we conceptualize them (and how they conceptualize themselves), such as customers, clients, or partners, makes a difference, Chng works through the challenges and possibilities of embracing the name and practice of "students as partners" in Singapore.

In "**THE 'FACE' BARRIERS TO PARTNERSHIP,"** Jonathan Y. H. Sim, a Teaching Assistant at the National University of Singapore, writes from his dual position as a post-graduate student and a teacher—a position that has allowed him, as he explains, "to question some of my own assumptions as a teacher." Such questioning has, in turn, afforded Sim the opportunity to gain insight into why students in Singapore universities behave as they do, particularly in relation to participating in class. Sim explores the possibility of roleplaying as one approach to creating a kind of liminal space for students to "perform without fear of judgement or embarrassment." As he explains, roleplaying allows students "to be fully engaged in teacher-student partnerships under the cover of anonymity." This approach to addressing the intersection of identity, context, and partnership practice offers an intriguing alternative to the approaches where personal naming is linked to engagement.

In "**TAKING A SMALL STEP TOWARDS PARTNERSHIP**," Yvette Seow, a Teaching Assistant at the National University of Singapore, writes from her position as a student pursuing graduate studies in Elementary Education. She explores barriers to partnership she discerns in the context of her university: socio-cultural barriers, a lack of trust, and a perceived lack of 'democracy' in the classroom, as well as deep-rooted pedagogical practices. Like other scholars of partnership, Seow highlights the importance of creating a culture focused on "growth and learning," a focus that sometimes seems as countercultural as partnership itself. Seow also offers recommendations for those wishing to take "small steps toward partnership"—steps that might be particularly appropriate in Eastern contexts but are also, arguably, important across contexts.

In "**YOU SAY, THEY SAY, I SAY: THE WEAVING OF POSITIONS, IDENTITIES, AND NARRATIVES IN PARTNERSHIP WORK**," Cherie Woolmer, a Postdoctoral Fellow at McMaster University in Canada, offers a story that refuses the separation of personal from professional narratives. Woolmer poses and explores questions such as: "How does language help distance or draw near my position as 'expert' or 'non-expert'?"; "How do I reconcile the conflicts that arise when navigating positions of power and expertise?"; and "How does my choice of language affect the way others position, view, and judge my various expertise?" She offers several stories within her story through which she explores, from multiple angles, "the language of partnership and how it interweaves with aspects of my position and identity—as a scholar, practitioner, and advocate of this approach in higher education" across different institutional (and international) contexts. Her insistence on drawing on different dimensions of her identity and how each positions her is a particularly powerful example of what it means to recognize, name, make real, and reconsider.

In "**FINDING A LANGUAGE FOR MAKING MEANING: NAMING TURNING POINTS IN PARTNERSHIP**," Katie Safter, Haverford College Class of 2019, reflects on both her experience learning about and embracing pedagogical partnership and the role that finding language to name that work played in shaping her narrative. She explains that, for her, "finding the language didn't just mean learning the words to name the practices in which I was engaged, but also understanding the meaning of what I was doing." Safter narrates her entry into the world of partnership in the context of a course and a pedagogical partnership program in the United States, her efforts to name and navigate that entry, and her subsequent commitment to carry both the spirit and the practices of partnership work into other contexts—as an integral part of who she has become through participating in pedagogical partnership.

This collection of stories offers us layered and complex representations of what it means to wrestle with the languages and practices of pedagogical partnership. Such stories can resonate or they can reveal differences among us. In both cases they can serve to connect. As Healey, Matthews, and Cook-Sather (forthcoming) argue, "stories capture how we *become* and *are being* in the world. Stories connect people, and communities grow around shared stories and sharing stories together." The language we use to name who we are, what we do, and what we experience, like the language we use to name student partners, while essential to employ, will never be as complex as the practices of partnership they describe (Cook-Sather, Matthews, Ntem, et al., 2018). We will always, therefore, need to wrestle with both languages and practices, offer multiple stories, and recognize our own multiplicity and unending evolution in pedagogical partnership.

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