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HOW DO YOU TELL A TRUE PARTNERSHIP STORY? FOUR REFLECTIONS

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Humans are storytellers. Stories are a fundamental way we make sense and meaning of our experiences, our work, our identities, our lives. Some scholars have even argued that telling stories is what makes us human (Gottschall, 2012).

Pedagogical partnerships are rooted in storytelling, too. A defining aspect of this work is that partners share their distinct perspectives in order to gain insight into a question or dilemma or experience about learning and teaching in higher education. These partnership stories are told during the process of partnership—perhaps most often in conversations among partners—and also in published forms including research articles and reflective essays. Regardless of form, all of these acts of self-authorship (Matthews et al., 2018) are at their core acts of storytelling.

As partnership practice and research spreads through institutions and across global contexts, colleagues within this broad movement continue to raise questions about what precisely is meant by partnership, who is (or is not) included in this work, and words used to describe what is happening itself (e.g., Bovill, 2017; Cook-Sather et al., 2018; Healey et al., 2019). These critiques of partnership definitions, terminology, and practices are important and worthy.

In this essay, I will suggest we also could learn from looking at this work through the lens of storytelling. The literature on storytelling is broad and deep, and I will only skim the surface by making four observations about the nature of stories:

1. **Stories condense and simplify.** Lewis Carroll (1895) playfully relates the experience of a map maker who aspires to create a map that is as richly detailed as the country it depicts. The folly of this effort becomes clear after a map is made to the exact scale of the country itself. “The farmers objected” to unfurling the map because “it would cover the whole country and shut out the sunlight!” Stories by necessity are like maps, they must condense and simplify if they are to have any value. This is not a fatal flaw in storytelling, but it is a reminder that we should approach every story we tell, hear, or read—whether about partnership or anything else—with caution and humility. Our stories never completely cover the territory.
2. **Stories tend to portray actions and experiences as coherent and purposeful.** Tim O’Brien (1990) writes critically about the stories Americans tell about military conflicts. He notes that these stories often are clear, understandable, and heroic. Yet, O’Brien insists, “A true war story is never moral, it does not instruct, nor encourage virtue...in the end, really, there’s nothing much to say about a true war story, except maybe ‘Oh.’” O’Brien does not suggest we stop telling coherent stories about war—or anything else—but that we recognize our human tendency to iron out the wrinkles in and to make ourselves the heroes of every tale we tell.

3. **Stories tend to be told by those with the most power.** Virginia Woolf (1929) marvels at her experience combing the shelves of the British Museum to research her questions about women and fiction. She first finds countless books about women written by men, only to realize that apparently “women do not write books about men.” This leads her to wonder: “Why are women, judging from this catalogue, so much more interesting to men than men are to women?” Woolf’s observation underscores the power of men over women in her culture, and illuminates the broader point that those in power typically create and dominate the narrative about any topic.
4. **Stories obscure some perspectives even as they reveal other ones.** Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2014) reminds us of the perils of a making meaning from any one story. The problem with a “single story” is not that it is necessarily false, “but it is always incomplete.” Adichie laments how some narratives become “the only story” about a place or an event or a culture. Such a single story “robs people of dignity. It makes our recognition of our equal humanity difficult.” To understand anything, Adichie explains, we need multiple stories that open up multiple perspectives.

I offer these four observations as an invitation to those of us working in and on partnerships to be self-conscious and self-critical about the stories we tell. Indeed, a follower of Virginia Woolf today might browse the shelves of research about partnership (or, to save time, she might read Mercer-Mapstone et al.’s 2017 literature review) to ask: “Why are student partners so much more interesting to faculty than faculty are to students?”

By recognizing some of the constraints and limitations of storytelling, we might intentionally seek out stories that explore complex and even contrary experiences and perspectives. This journal’s personal essays always have been a rich vein of these multiple stories. Partnership scholars and practitioners have begun to more systematically address these issues, moving away from the “single story” of successful partnership experiences to consider complex and messy questions of risk (Woolmer, 2018), bravery (Abbott, 2016; Perez, 2016), resistance (Healey et al., 2019), cultural context (Green, 2019; Bilous et al., 2018; Mulya, 2018), and emotion (Felten, 2017).

Extending this effort toward more nuanced and varied analysis and reflection on partnerships, Cook-Sather (2019) recently made the case for writing on and about “becoming...creation, emergence, development [and] unfinishedness.” As she contends, we will benefit from a deepened focus on stories about partnership that bring in differing perspectives and experiences. These stories not only enlighten us, but they also create space for other voices to be heard.

Yet these emerging stories, of course, will not be any more “true” or complete than the many stories that already have been written about partnerships. Like partnerships, our individual and collective stories about this work always are—and always will be—unfinished.

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