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FINDING A LANGUAGE FOR MAKING MEANING: NAMING TURNING POINTS IN PARTNERSHIP

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As I reflect on my experience learning about and embracing pedagogical partnership, I see the clear role that finding language to name the work played in shaping my narrative. For me, 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. In this essay, I map out my evolving relationship with the notion of partnership as it extended from the early time that I learned about the concept to the present day, which marks my recent graduation and the end of an independent study in which I explored the theory and practice of pedagogical partnership. In looking back, I see the turning points at which I moved from slight discomfort to interest and appreciation and from those points to internalization and implementation beyond specific contexts. Each of these was facilitated through finding the language, both in word and meaning, to name the work at different and increasingly deep levels.

Prior to delving into my personal narrative in relation to the notion of pedagogical partnership, I want to note the formal definition of "partnership" I am using. Pedagogical partnership is formally defined by Cook-Sather, Bovill, and Felten (2014) as a "collaborative, reciprocal process through which all participants have the opportunity to contribute equally, although not necessarily in the same ways, to curricular or pedagogical conceptualization, decision making, implementation, investigation, or analysis" (pp. 6-7). This definition, with its emphasis on profound collaboration and equitable contribution, has been a key underpinning of my understanding of both more formal partnership between perhaps a student consultant and a professor (as in the Students as Learners and Teachers program at Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges) and other partnerships that educators form every day in their classes.

An Early Encounter with the Concept of Partnership

I had an early encounter with the concept of partnership in the classroom when I enrolled in a course titled *Advocating Diversity in Higher Education*. The course, taught at Bryn Mawr College, was co-created by all the participants and co-taught by a professor, Alison Cook-Sather and an undergraduate student attending the college, Crystal Des-Ogugua (see Cook-Sather, Des-Ogugua, & Bahti, 2018). Several aspects of the course were grounded in building trust, inviting individuals to be themselves, and creating an intentionally shared environment, which all mark crucial aspects of partnership (Cook-Sather, Bahti, & Ntem, forthcoming).

Still, if I reflect on early in this course, I can recall moments of slight discomfort. This type of classroom was radically new to me. It took me time to move away from the feeling that I needed to perform in an academic setting for a professor. At first, it left me confused, unsure, and at times frustrated. I wanted to engage with the class and the material, but first I needed to let go of some of my more traditional understandings about the role of a teacher and of students.

Several things, no doubt, contributed to my shift from this discomfort to a real interest in, and appreciation for, partnership in this classroom. Still, on the whole, what stands out to me as the driving force for this shift was gaining the language, both in words and meaning, to think about and process this new experience.

To be specific, a term that I learned from this course, both in word and meaning, was “co-creation.” I can recall signing up for the course and hearing this term for the first time. When I signed up for the course, and at the beginning of the semester, I thought I understood it. I took it to mean collaboration. However, the prior collaboration I had experienced in the classroom had been so minimal and surface level that at this point, I was far from understanding the true meaning of co-creation.

Throughout the course, I began to bear witness to and participate in co-creation, gaining a better understanding of the term. Indeed, in this course there were several layers of co-creation at play. In a structural sense, the course was co-created in that student interests in part determined assigned readings. This exemplified to me that co-creation refers to radical collaboration where facilitators share power through inviting all participants to shape the larger trajectory of the course.

Furthermore, a specific moment in the course that was not only extremely powerful, but that also deepened my understanding of co-creation was a class period where we were invited to share a personal poem we had written about a time when we felt as though we were the only one like us in a particular context (see Cook-Sather, Kenealy, Rippel, et al., 2018). It was not mandatory that we share our poems, but the space was made, and the co-facilitators too took part in this activity, bringing themselves in a somewhat vulnerable way into our class space. In this moment it clicked for me that co-creation also involves radical collaboration to the point of working against power dynamics in the classroom. In the example above, this was done through not just inviting vulnerability from students, but also partaking in this vulnerability to cultivate a classroom ethos grounded in equity.

Although I had yet to fully be introduced to the concept of formal partnership, this turning point is fundamental in mapping my relationship to the idea of pedagogical partnership. Indeed, learning the language of co-creation, with its emphasis on equitable contribution and shared power, laid the foundation for engaging with many of the aims central to pedagogical partnership.

I see with clarity now that gaining this language, in words and meaning, throughout the semester helped me grow. As I moved through the course, I felt a real shift in my relationship to co-creation in the classroom. In the work I did for that course, I felt empowered by the freedom fundamental in co-creative atmospheres and enjoyed learning from all participants in an environment that felt truly student-centered. I was interested, motivated, and deeply appreciative of this co-created class where I began to find the language for the work of pedagogical partnerships. At the time, the growth felt quite dramatic, but I see now that my growth and my ability to engage in and invite co-creation and versions of partnership was largely confined to spaces where I felt comfortable—ones where there was not necessarily risk, where I was either in the position of power, or where the professor provided structures in the class to support this

collaboration.

An Experience of Formal Pedagogical Partnership

During my final semester of college, I participated in an independent study through which I explored the theory and practice of pedagogical partnership. The course involved exploring literature about partnership, including *Engaging Students as Partners in Learning and Teaching*, by Alison Cook-Sather, Catherine Bovill, and Peter Felten, as well as several reflections written by faculty and students who had participated in partnerships. It also included participating in a student-faculty partnership through the Students as Learners and Teachers program. I was supported in my learning by meetings with Professor Alison Cook-Sather and other students participating in independent studies in education, meetings with my faculty partner, and meetings with other student consultants.

This independent study allowed me to further develop the language, in both word and meaning, to name the work of pedagogical partnerships in a new way, engendering a turning point in how I related to the concept of partnership. Throughout this semester, I learned countless terms that deepened my understanding of partnership. This ranged from learning more formal definitions of terms to describe iterations of partnership, as well as re-learning how to use familiar words in the context of pedagogical partnership.

Upon reflection, what surfaces as the most meaningful additional to my partnership vocabulary is the term “trust.” A familiar word that I was pushed to see in a new way, learning or perhaps re-learning this term, both in word and meaning, played a profound role in strengthening my relationship with the concept of pedagogical partnership. In reading the “Guidelines for Student and Faculty Partners” throughout the semester, which were crafted by Alison Cook-Sather and student and faculty SaLT participants at Haverford and Bryn Mawr, I was struck by the emphasis on building trust in pedagogical partnerships. I had never been in a circumstance where I would be working so closely, in profound collaboration with, rather than for, a professor. For this reason, I had never strongly associated the word trust with relationships between professor and students. In that sense, I was re-learning this term, in a new context.

The guidelines aforementioned proposed strategies for building trust between student and faculty, but what truly deepened my understanding of this term in this context was working in partnership with a professor myself. Indeed, in the partnership I was a part of, this trust manifested in check-ins about my post-graduation plans, questions about pedagogical choices, openness about mistakes and challenges, and deep, consistent listening. I found that participating in a student-faculty partnership allowed me to add meaning to the term trust in this new context.

Gaining this language, in particular, fostered evolution in my relationship with the concept of pedagogical partnership because it made me see the humanness of this work, providing me with the understanding that partnership ought to exist in a variety of added settings. For this reason, continuing to find the language, in both word and meaning, in this new way, helped me to more deeply internalize and grow into this notion of partnership. I found myself empowered to invite

partnership and co-creation in different, more vulnerable settings—ones where I wasn't in any formal position of power or where leaders and I didn't necessarily see completely eye to eye.

Conclusion

On the whole, I am left with the understanding that for me, finding the language, in both word and meaning, at different times at a variety of levels, facilitated growth in the way I was relating to the concept to pedagogical partnership. I am left with gratitude for those who have helped me find the language, the words and the understandings, and the newfound empowerment, which has helped me grow into a committed advocate for partnership in new spaces.

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