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An Evolution of Learning to Support Partnership Readiness

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By coincidence and by design, I have been involved in pedagogical partnership work involving individual projects and larger program development efforts. Much of this work has been in three different postsecondary contexts—McMaster University in Canada, a college in Grenada, West Indies, and recently at Lahore University of Management Sciences (LUMS University) in Pakistan. I have been a partnership participant, working with students, and I have acted as a leader, collaborating with faculty, staff, administrators, and students to support and develop partnership programs. My involvement in partnership work is a story of learning, and in this essay, I reflect on my experiences and the questions they have raised for me about participating in and leading pedagogical partnership work.

Experiences of Partnership at McMaster University

My introduction to student-faculty partnership has only been recently, as an educational developer and manager at the MacPherson Institute (MI) at McMaster University in Canada. MI is well known for their Student Partnership Program (SPP), which engages students at all levels—undergraduate and graduate—to partner with faculty and/or staff on various projects related to teaching, learning, and research.

In my first week as an educational developer, I read everything I could about the SPP at MI–the program guidebook, various research publications, project proposals—and met with several staff who were involved in coordinating student partners at MI and across campus. MI typically employed several students within and across its numerous program areas. Some students were hired in work-study placements and others as research assistants; however, many were hired specifically as *student partners*. I was struck by how student partners were involved in the array of teaching and learning service and research work that MI is known for. Student partners worked with MI staff on joint projects and program initiatives where they co-developed, co-led, and promoted or disseminated their work.

In one of the MI programs in which I worked, I had the enjoyable opportunity to collaborate with a group of student partners to co-develop a program impact evaluation with staff. Although I was a newbie to partnerships with students, I knew enough from my prior conversations with colleagues that our student partners were not mere research assistants; however, until this point, I did not know what it meant to work with students in true partnership. When our group initially met, I was impressed by how student partners spoke with confidence and a sense of ownership about our project. They were not simply waiting for a set of directives from the program leads; rather, they led the conversation about the directions of the program. Collectively, we all participated in drafting future plans for the program. I felt our collaborations and shared responsibility for all aspects of the project was a major difference from the roles that other student assistants with whom I have worked have had. The confidence and ownership with

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which our student partners spoke signaled that they were true collaborators, not simply serving in support roles.

Expanding Partnership from McMaster to a College in Grenada, West Indies

While I was at McMaster, I assumed a role as manager of an international collaboration with a college in Grenada in the West Indies—a partnership that was well into its second year at the time. I inherited a robust, and well-designed partnership implementation plan that involved helping to start a student partnership program at the College. By Year 2, a small cohort of faculty and administrator colleagues at the College had already launched a program and had two students who had been working in partnership with them for about six months. By the end of that year, they were left with one student who partnered with several faculty as a pedagogical consultant, offering feedback on their courses and their teaching. A significant challenge they faced as they moved into the third year of the project was recruiting additional students and faculty to participate in partnership initiatives. The efforts of a few dedicated partnership champions—faculty, students, and a key administrator—were critical to the success of the small group who had participated in the young program. Yet, keeping the program alive and flourishing was a whole other challenge for them.

The ideas for including partnership across different areas of the College were innumerable. Some people could envision partnership as a fabric of the college; others were skeptical about enacting a college-wide partnership program. At McMaster, we had significant funding and program infrastructures in place including the administrative supports, communities of practice, and the individual and group development opportunities needed for partnerships to flourish. Importantly, we had a dedicated senior administrator who took deliberate steps to support and participate in partnership work, which helped to chart the way for a successful future program (Ahmad & Cook-Sather, 2018). While funding was not scarce for the College during the tenure of the international partnership[1], developing a cohort of partnership champions at higher administrative levels who would continue to advocate for partnership as part of the vision for pedagogical transformation across the college was an insurmountable challenge in the end.

Making Sense of Partnership as a Mindset

Through these early involvements in partnership projects and programs, my understanding of what it means to work in partnership with students and with other colleagues has evolved. In a recent research initiative, my colleagues and I discuss that how we act in partnership with others has a lot to do with the mindsets we bring to our work with them (Cook-Sather, Gauthier, & Foster, forthcoming). We draw on the notions of growth mindsets, coined by Carol Dweck (2008; 2015) who uses the term to describe her findings about the beliefs that individuals hold about our abilities, intelligence, and learning. When partners hold growth mindsets about partnership it means we bring beliefs that we can develop and continue to learn from each other. Working in partnership requires a growth mindset and that each of us remains open to

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[1] The partnership between McMaster and the College has since ended.

possibilities of learning with and from others. True partnership also requires us also to act in ways where there can be respect, reciprocity, and shared responsibility between all partners (Cook-Sather, Bovill, & Felten, 2014). When I reflect on my evolving story of learning about partnership, this developing concept of mindset toward working with students is a salient theme.

There is a fantastic quote from Carol Dweck (2015) that speaks to my early learning about partnership with students. It reads: "Someone once asked me what the essence of a growth mindset teacher was. I said it was the belief that 'Every student has something to teach me'" (p.10). This quote speaks to the attitudes and mindsets towards working with students that were certainly demonstrated for me by colleagues and students in the past. Working in partnership with students required that I approach my work with them as a learner myself. As a staff member, I learned that my outward attitude toward students and the work they do *with me* as opposed to *for me* is a true enactment of a growth mindset toward partnership, one that I brought forward with me to model for others into future leadership roles.

In my early work at MI, I witnessed and enacted the growth mindset required of partnership with students and with other colleagues. When I started working at MI, partnership was part of the ethos and a lot of the early ground work had been laid and learning curves associated with developing their program had been endured by the early adaptors and program developers. Conversely, the College in Grenada had a lot of growing pains to bear with the development of its program. Encouraging buy-in from more people for a partnership program meant helping them to shift mindsets about what it meant to work with students as partners instead of seeing students as a commodity or as working *for* faculty. It meant not only disrupting current ways of being with students and each other as colleagues, but also acting differently towards each other as well.

I think this was tough for many people at the College in Grenada to enact a partnership philosophy—working with respect, reciprocity and shared responsibility, even for those who bought into such a philosophy. For instance, some administrators who seemed to be the most supportive of working in partnership with students still had a very autocratic style when it came to working on developing the program. When I reflect on these behaviours, it appears that they were holding fixed mindsets, disguised as growth mindsets—they bought in partially to the idea of having students involved across the college but wanted to limit that involvement and still have authority over the projects and interactions with faculty. While at the time I was taken aback by such behaviours of I can now see the issue as one that has to do with mindset and readiness for disrupting traditional "expert/novice" power dynamic associated with faculty and student roles.

Partnership Readiness

We need to see teachers as learners. In a brilliant book on leadership called, *Leading for Powerful Learning,* Breidenstein, Fahey, and Glickman (2012) bring this point to light regarding supporting teacher learning and professional development in schools. They draw on Robert Keagan's (1998) theory of constructive development to provide a helpful conception of people's readiness to learn. At a high level, Kegan theorized that making sense of experience is an ongoing process for adults and our strategies for meaning making grow more complex and

change regularly over time (Breidenstein, Fahey & Glickman, 2012). What I found most transferable to conceptualizing partnership and learning are the explanations of instrumental, socializing, and self-authoring ways of knowing common in adults. In the table I reproduce below, I highlight the descriptors of ways of knowing because they apply to my conceptions people's readiness to work in partnership with students and other colleagues.

Table 1.1. Ways of Knowing

Instrumental Knowers	Socializing Knowers	Self-Authoring Knowers
• have concrete needs • believe that rules are important and search for the "right way" • are most comfortable with concrete, specific processes • have limited interest in reflection or collaboration when their own needs are not met	• focus on others • believe that group needs are important • can put a group's needs before their own • can be collaborative and reflective • are uncomfortable with conflicting opinions, values, and behaviors	• are reflective about themselves and their context • can live with ambiguity • evaluate their own actions according to internal standards; expect and accept conflict • consider their personal goals and ideas very important • are able to stand in opposition to a group

 Ways of Knowing, as presented in Breidenstein, Fahey, and Glickman (2012, p. 6)

As outlined in the table above, instrumental knowers prefer specific direction and advice about what constitutes best practices so they can enact these in their own contexts, be it classrooms or in their individual roles in partnership programs. They want "an answer" (Breidenstein, Fahey, & Glickman, 2012, p. 27) offered by someone with expertise to help them to improve their personal practice. There are also socializing knowers who are more focused on the perspectives of others and can "think more abstractly about their own practice" (p. 115). Socializing knowers also and work well in teams toward adjusting best practices and establishing a joint vision of practice for the broader context in which they all work. Finally, self-authoring knowers often demonstrate a capacity for reflection on and connection between themselves and the contexts in which they work and learn. Breidenstein, Fahey, and Glickman (2012) note that self-authoring knowers are more likely than socializing knowers to question deeply set beliefs and values that educators bring to their practice. They challenge conceptions of context and challenges that influence the purposes behind both individual and institutional practices.

The task for leaders who are in support roles in partnership programs is to recognize the different "knowers" who may be involved in early stages of partnership, including the mindsets they bring to their work. As leaders, we need to create opportunities for everyone to develop and to move toward deeper ways of knowing so they can participate in enacting partnership at broader institutional levels. A readiness to disrupt traditional student and faculty/staff roles and to work in partnership requires that people have opportunities to evolve, through learning about partnership and experiencing partnership firsthand. Partners must have opportunities to enact growth mindsets that promote the beliefs that students and faculty both have equal contributions

to teaching and learning initiatives to make, yet perhaps in different ways (Cook-Sather, Bovill, & Felten, 2014).

I have learned that readiness to be in partnership is not an all or nothing expectation we can have of others, or of ourselves for that matter. With the partnership program in Grenada, we had people who were different "knowers" and were approaching partnership with particular needs for their learning. We had clashes between those who wanted to know how to enact partnership at a basic level in their classrooms and those who were ready to ask deeper questions about the purposes and integrity of the partnership program, including the implications that partnership might have across the College. I also saw that working with different a spectrum of individuals with different mindsets about partnership meant that these ways of knowing can all be present in the same room, at the same time! This has been the leadership challenge that I have been facing for the past 5 months since my tenure at LUMS University in Pakistan began.

Supporting Partnership Readiness through Learning & Development

In August 2019, I was invited to join LUMS University to develop and pilot a faculty development program to help improve teaching across the institution. I was also asked to help start pedagogical partnership program. I had envisioned my role as a resource person and liaison for a program that was in the early stages of development, but it ended up that I assumed more of a leadership role in the initial stages of setting up a brand-new program.

The Vice Chancellor (VC) had done a great job before my arrival of publicizing his desire to have a school-wide partnership program; however, lessons learned from previous work at McMaster and Grenada taught me that I would meet people who had different goals, desires, and mindsets about pedagogical partnership. I was not naïve to the fact that I would be working with groups of individuals who, when it came to approaches to partnership, would have different ways of knowing and readiness for engaging in partnership. For instance, early on I had colleagues who were already working in partnership with students—co-creating courses and seeking student feedback on their teaching. They expressed a desire to write about their partnership and reflect on the impact of their work on their development as teachers, and I supported them in getting this work published (Waqar & Asad, forthcoming). On the other hand, there were faculty who were interested in partnership but who did not believe that students could ever be first authors on papers! I encountered the leadership challenge of respecting different ways of knowing and purposefully helping my colleagues to design opportunities for people to experience approaches to partnership that challenge instrumental notions of partnership. At LUMS University today, we aspire to create a culture where that partnership is not just something people *do* but it will be a *philosophy* for the joint project of education between students, staff, faculty, and administrators.

Another key learning point has come from navigating the amount and the type of support that I offer my colleagues who are co-leading the partnership program development. I am fortunate to work with a faculty member who has taken ownership of her role to develop pedagogical partnership at the University. Given that partnership has been a new venture for most people (including her), many of our colleagues sought an instrumental approach to learning about partnerships in the early visioning stages of our work. Our group had a lot of questions which led

to healthy skepticism about developing a program and I saw (and still see) a need to start building deeper conceptions of partnership and to see future possibilities of how partnership could be expanded across campus. We learned early on that the instrumental approach of sharing best practices and advice, often through examples of other programs and how to guides like the one recently developed by Cook-Sather, Bahti, and Ntem (2019), was a critical step in getting buy in and creating ownership for a future pedagogical partnership program.

I want my colleague and the core group of faculty, staff, and students who are interested in building a new program to have a sense of ownership for the program. After I leave, the program needs to have roots somewhere and be championed by a group of advocates who can continue to question the partnership process, evaluate its implications, effectiveness, and challenges across campus, and learn about how to support others. As a leader, I aim to support people's readiness for partnership and help to build capacity needed to move to deeper levels of knowing and approaching partnership. This work is crucial to the sustainability of pedagogical partnership at LUMS University and other institutions as well.

Recently I have been trying to help build capacity for leading partnerships with my colleagues who have been a part of a core group of program planners at the University. This effort has largely consisted of lessening my colleagues' dependency on my role as a leader for the program and helping them to increase their capacities for other ways of knowing and approaching partnership. In brief, I share the following points about how I have been working towards building capacity with others, in partnership:

- Ensuring that communications coming from the Faculty Lead of our program so she can feel ownership over the role but also so others see her assuming the responsibilities of this role
- Co-facilitating our program visioning sessions with the Faculty Lead
- Not micromanaging the program development process but checking in and offering to provide feedback at key points in the development process
- Staying connected with other experts in the field to ask for advice and feedback on my own approaches to leading and building capacity with others
- Scheduling regular check-in meetings to discuss progress and challenges
- Being an advocate for faculty at the administrative level
- Offering resources from other programs that serve as exemplar, best practices which are needed for developing partnership and from which we can build a unique, context specific program.

In several conversations I have had since moving to Pakistan, it has been reiterated to me that the university community—especially faculty—are used to having people parachute in and offer talks, workshops, advice and so on. It is an instrumental approach to learning that is desired by many and is often needed to help people build foundation skills or learn new techniques to do their jobs. Experts provide examples of best practices of how to change a program, develop teaching, or design new supports and services but then they leave. Too often, experts have limited time and often leave without investing in building capacity in the community and individuals for developing deeper ways of knowing an engaging in areas of their work they are trying to develop. Transformation and change occur when people can move into self-authoring ways of knowing and are able to look at practice in much deeper ways that are reflective,

evaluative, and often ambiguous (Breidenstein, Fahey, & Glickman, 2012). We can learn new skills, or techniques for doing our jobs; yet, the best lesson I have learned so far is that change that involves a shift in culture comes through a longer-term investment in people and in their individual capacities, motivations, and the work that feeds their souls.

Where Are We at Now?

As tempting as it was to quickly gather a group of keen people to start piloting a new partnership initiative based on what other institutions may have been doing, we took a step back and looked at the broader picture and asked ourselves: How can we make something from what already exists? We chose to reshape a broader group of partnership initiatives that already exists, rather than beginning a whole new program that, by its very nature, could run the risk of being exclusive and only supporting the work of a few. We do not know if our approach will work. But we are trying to foster a form of continuity in and across existing partnerships, affirming and building on rather than starting (seemingly) anew.

In January 2020, our core partnership group launched a school-wide inventory of the types of partnerships that exist already at LUMS University. From this inventory, we hope to ascertain how different forms of partnership could fit within a larger umbrella of a pedagogical partnership program. Breidenstein, Fahey, and Glickman (2012) offer the insights that socializing ways of knowing and approaches to change involves groups establishing a joint vision about practice (partnership in our case) and working towards adjusting best practices to fit their context. Upon reflection, I see our efforts in looking at exemplar programs and proceeding to explore existing partnerships at LUMS as a way to build our program upon what works and more importantly what will work for us. We certainly have individuals who have self-authoring ways of knowing and approaches to partnership that are important to transformation and sustainability—they are asking questions about underlying assumptions and deeply set beliefs and values about the roles that students and faculty play at our institution. I have continuously worked to encourage these individuals to share their ideas and to continue to explore future possibilities for partnership as a way of being with students and colleagues.

Going Forward

When I assumed the roles of supporting and developing partnership programs at MI and now at LUMS University, I held assumptions from previous experiences about how partnerships worked and what it looks like for students to be co-learners, co-developers, and co-enactors of partnership. I understand now that people's readiness to be in partnership varies and not everyone may choose to participate. Recently, my perspective of learning readiness or what I now think of as "partnership readiness" has deepened. I attribute this to my own learning and development but also to having to lead others and support them in developing programs, introducing newcomers to the very idea of partnership, helping people to deconstruct their experiences of partnership and oftentimes, "unlearning" certain ways of knowing and being in partnership with students and other colleagues.

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