Dialogue in Partnership: Relaxing into Receptivity

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For the past five-plus years, I have co-facilitated a robust student-faculty partnership program, and this work has prompted me to think more deeply about the role of dialogue in partnership. Prior to attending the "Teaching and Learning Together: The Opportunities and Challenges of Pedagogy Partnerships" workshop in June, 2023, at Grinnell College, I had begun exploring the application of theory and philosophy of dialogue to partnership. This process has heightened my interest in how genuine dialogue is more than "discussion" or "conversation" and can significantly impact the relationship between a student and faculty member who are in partnership with one another. In addition, I believe that relationships among those who facilitate partnership work and the faculty and students with whom they collaborate may be enriched through authentic dialogue. Specifically, I've been reflecting on whether greater intentionality about dialogic processes and practices on the part of partnership program facilitators might result in deeper student-faculty partner relationships, thereby enhancing program outcomes for faculty and students. Thus, when I arrived at Grinnell, I was primed both to observe dialogic processes in action among the participants and to participate in what I hoped would be a deep and meaningful dialogue on partnership that would contribute to my work as a program facilitator.

The concept of dialogue appeared as a key partnership process or practice in the literature on students as partners (SaP) almost as soon as scholars began publishing about their SaP work. For example, Bovill, Cook-Sather, and Felten (2011), three of the original practitioners and promoters of SaP, wrote that the Students as Learners and Teachers (SaLT) program at Bryn Mawr College "invites faculty and students to engage in reflective dialogue about what is happening and what could be happening in higher education classrooms" (p. 3). Later, Matthews (2017) examined dialogue in partnership through a critical theory lens and wrote, "The significance of partnership is in the process, because through ongoing dialogue participants build the human relationships essential to engagement in learning and teaching, and traditional power hierarchies can be shifted and shared" (p. 6). More recently, Cook-Sather (personal communication; January 3, 2023) confirmed that "dialogue is a key *practice* in all partnership programs." Finally, to the extent that SaP work has frequently been described as transformational for both students and faculty alike, Matthews (2017) places dialogue as a core process in that transformation: "Thus, transformation begins through our own active reflection and ongoing dialogue with others about who engages and why in partnership, what it means for higher education, and how we advocate for SaP more widely" (p. 6).

My experiences facilitating a partnership program in which nearly 200 students and faculty members have participated affirm what Cook-Sather, Matthews, and others have written about the significance of dialogue to the development and sustainment of partnership relationships. In addition, while at the Grinnell workshop, which included current and former student partners, faculty new to partnership, and experienced practitioners and facilitators, I observed and experienced the powerful intellectual and emotional impact of participating in a committed, genuine dialogue on partnership. However, since returning from Iowa and reviewing what the SaP literature has to say about dialogue, I've found there to be relatively little information about

1) what exactly it means to be deeply engaged in dialogue with another (or others), 2) what actions facilitators and participants might take to cultivate genuine dialogue, and 3) whether there are cautions that one must consider—especially those of us who facilitate SaP programs in which dialogue is prioritized—when promoting dialogue between and among faculty and students. In the remainder of this paper I will share some ideas I've encountered in my reading that are relevant to my experience at Grinnell, with the hope of inviting others into dialogue about the meaning of dialogue in partnership.

What Does It Mean to Be Deeply Engaged in Dialogue?

William Isaacs (1999) has written extensively about the theory and practice of dialogue, and his ideas are highly relevant to dialogic processes within partnership. He writes that "Dialogue…is about a shared inquiry, a way of thinking and reflecting together. It is not something you do *to* another person. It is something you do *with* people" (p. 9). This view situates dialogue as a reciprocal process, placing it firmly within the foundational partnership principles of respect, reciprocity, and responsibility (Cook-Sather, Bovill, & Felten, 2014). Further solidifying the connection between his conception of dialogue and SaP work, Isaacs (1999) writes, "Dialogue has promise in education because it challenges traditional, hierarchical models and proposes a method for sustaining 'partnership'—between teachers and staff, teachers and students, and students with each other. Dialogue can empower people to learn with and from each other" (p. 12). Finally, Isaacs deconstructs the process of dialogue, identifying four essential behaviors required to bring about genuine dialogue: "listening, respecting, suspending, and speaking our voice (voicing)" (p. 36). The concepts of respect, reciprocity, and student voice (Cook-Sather, 2014) are deeply embedded in the foundational ideals and principles of partnership, as they are in the philosophy and processes of dialogue described by Isaacs.

Thinking and reflecting together in dialogue (Isaacs, 1999) can entail greater empathy, tolerance, and respect (Burbules, 2022), all of which are components of caring for the other. Dialogue is a component of the ethic of care, as conceptualized by Nel Noddings (2005), and the interplay between care and dialogue was a significant element of my experience at the Grinnell workshop. "[Dialogue] connects us to each other and helps to maintain caring relations. It also provides us with the knowledge of each other that forms a foundation for response in caring…We respond most effectively as carers when we understand what the other needs and the history of this need" (Noddings, 2005, p. 23).

What Actions Might Facilitators and Participants Take to Cultivate Genuine Dialogue?

Delving further into Isaacs' view of dialogue is beyond the scope of this essay, but even this brief summary of some key ideas captures significant features of my experience of the Grinnell workshop. The structure and content of the workshop were organized so that we were all "thinking and reflecting together" (Isaacs, 1999, p. 9) throughout the weekend. All sessions were highly interactive, and they were interspersed with breaks during which we were encouraged to continue the dialogue in smaller groups or take time for quiet reflection. Facilitators posed questions rather than presenting material, and we had ample opportunity to speak with one

another in small groups and to engage in full-group discussion. Perhaps most noteworthy was the fact that the voices of current and former student-partners were featured prominently throughout the workshop, even more so (in my recollection) than the voices of workshop organizers and experienced SaP facilitators. Evident in the students' contributions to the workshop dialogue was a point made by Cook-Sather, Bahti, and Ntem (2019): "The insights [students] gain, the empowerment they experience, the empathy they develop, and the capacity they build change them irreversibly. So even the most basic purpose of this work—to support dialogue across differences of position and perspective—is, to our minds, revolutionary" (pp. 29-30). Faculty participants who were new to partnership clearly recognized that the student participants had achieved these capacities, and before the workshop ended some had made plans for current and former student-partners to consult with them in the development of new SaP programs, indicating their respect for the student participants and the value they placed on student voice.

The relationship between dialogue and care was illustrated throughout our time together at Grinnell. Several former student partners of experienced faculty workshop participants made the trip to Iowa to reconnect with their former partners and support faculty who are new to partnership. According to Noddings (2005), "…the basic caring relation is an encounter…Mature relationships are characterized by mutuality. They are made up of strings of encounters in which the parties exchange places; both members are carers and cared-fors as opportunities arise" (pp. 16-17). It was evident in the stories shared by several students that they had experienced care in the context of their partnership programs. In fact, partnership participation, for some, was one of their few experiences of care within the context of their undergraduate experiences. In turn, participation in the Grinnell workshop gave the former student partners, many of whom are currently in graduate school or working in academe, the opportunity to assume the role of carer, both for their SaP faculty collaborators (i.e., out of care for you I will attend this workshop and share my experiences) and for the attendees who were new to partnership. I, too, experienced the "mutuality" noted by Noddings, assuming the role of carer for those who were new to partnership and being cared for by the workshop hosts, who created an experience in which all participants felt valued and affirmed. These relationships of mutual caring endure beyond the bounds of the workshop, as many participants remain in dialogue with each other and have commenced collaborative partnerships.

Are There Cautions to Consider When Facilitating Dialogue-based SaP Programs?

The idea of an ethic of care in partnership leads to my final point, which is about the potential for unintended consequences of promoting dialogue in partnership. In a caring, dialogic partnership each partner is able to express themselves with an authentic voice that is affirmed by the other. "'Voice' can be understood as the actual practice of each person speaking as and for herself or himself, but also as the valuing of what is said by students collectively as an essential contribution to dialogue that informs action" (Cook-Sather, 2015, p. 12). Voice is directly related to the concept of agency, which has also been recognized as an outcome of SaP participation (Cook-Sather, 2020; Cook-Sather et al., 2021; Cook-Sather & Reynolds, 2021) and which can be defined as the ability to translate one's intentions into actions (Wahl, 2022). While enhanced agency is generally regarded as a positive occurrence that can emerge within and from a genuine dialogue, Wahl (2022) notes that "…a popular modern understanding of agency, while typically

viewed as liberating, can in certain circumstances be experienced as burdensome and constraining due to the control it presumes possible over one's life and circumstances and the responsibility it attaches to exercising that control" (p. 506). Wahl's point is relevant to the college experience of some students who participated in the Grinnell workshop and has implications for those of us who facilitate partnership programs.

As I noted earlier, some student participants in the Grinnell workshop suggested that they experienced agency and validation within the context of their partnership programs but less so in other aspects of their college experience. Student partners are often positioned as consultants to faculty, a role in which their knowledge and expertise of what it means to be a student is recognized as having significant value, and their insights about teaching and learning are validated through the actions taken by their faculty partners in response to their observations and feedback. In many programs student and faculty partners engage in an ongoing dialogue about teaching and learning for an entire semester (and sometimes longer), and through the enactment of the principles of respect, reciprocity, and shared responsibility students frequently gain confidence, improve communication skills, and experience greater empathy for faculty as they develop a deeper understanding of their partners' commitment to their students and the complexities of pedagogical practice. All of these benefits are related to agency, in that the students regularly participate in collaborative actions with their faculty partners that result from an intentional dialogic process and have an observable impact on teaching and learning.

If, however, the experience of the Grinnell workshop students is in any way similar to that of some students in the program I facilitate, they may have encountered the psychological dissonance that results from experiencing agency in one context but not another. For example, students may, as Wahl (2022) suggests, attempt to assert some control over circumstances outside of their partnership, perhaps offering feedback or suggestions to a (non-partnership) professor, a boss, or someone else who adheres to more traditional hierarchical power dynamics. In an article about student voice and empowerment Freeman (2016) notes, "Students do not necessarily see that the formal mechanisms for student voice allow them much in the way of power. They recognise that academics and managers deploy these mechanisms in ways that maintain control and, while this does not always lead to dissatisfaction, their views suggested that the experience was not altogether empowering" (pp. 860-861). Thus, encounters within the academic context in which the developing voice of students is not appreciated can challenge students' confidence and developing agency. Though I didn't have the opportunity to learn details of all the Grinnell workshop students' undergraduate experiences, I am curious whether, for some, a contrast between their partnership relationships and their encounters with other individuals and entities at their institutions may be responsible for an underlying lack of satisfaction with the undergraduate experience they expressed.

Even with the potential for constraints on students' evolving agency, there is certainly a case to be made for the benefits of an intentional approach to promoting dialogue in partnership. In fact, one might argue that the deepest impacts of partnership are the result of the student experience of dialogue with their partners, peers, and program facilitators. Perhaps one of our roles as facilitators, then, is to help students cultivate an appreciation for dialogue qua dialogue rather than for any instrumental purpose it may have in changing something or someone. In her paper on student agency Wahl (2022) notes that "if students' goals require the direct satisfaction of

concrete ends, such as a changed mind…resulting from the dialogue, then the speaker is likely to leave frustrated and the listener unchanged" (p. 520). This point is occasionally evident when experienced student partners enter a new partnership with fixed assumptions and goals related to prior partnership experiences that don't correspond to the needs and wishes of new faculty partners. However, perhaps the outcome can be different and the partnership relationship stronger when we ask students to

> relax into receptivity, which entails a softening of one's defences and a temporary relinquishing of the attempt to persuade the other side…To be changed by what we hear suggests that something more fundamental about our view of either persons or issues might shift. Yet engaging in receptive learning means that one must be willing to proceed without knowing whether or how it will do any good—a stance that makes one potentially ineffective and even irresponsible within the modern moral order (Wahl, 2022, p. 510).

From this perspective, we facilitators must find ways to help students transform a mindset that says that if they are not providing substantive feedback and suggestions (i.e., acting persuasively) to their partners then they are not effectively fulfilling their role as partner.

Conclusion

I want to conclude with the provocative and enchanting idea of "relaxing into receptivity" because I think it beautifully captures the spirit of my experience at Grinnell and describes a condition that I hope I am cultivating in my own partnership program (see reflections that a student partner and I offer on our experience). Through their intentional selection of workshop participants; the design of each day's sessions, breaks, transitions, and meals; and their consistent follow up and support for the partnership work being done by the attendees, the Grinnell organizers created an experience that enabled all of us to relax into receptivity. Highly experienced faculty members demonstrated care by being receptive and attentive (Noddings, 2012) to the experiences and standpoints of the student participants. Those who were new to partnership seemed to approach the experience with a spirit of curiosity and openness, and in the end, they contributed as much to sustaining and advancing the dialogue as anyone. No one was an expert; everyone was an expert, and we spent our time listening for understanding and thinking together.

Having facilitated a partnership program for several years, I was one of the "experienced" participants at Grinnell, and I may initially have approached the workshop feeling as if my role was to teach others or somehow persuade them of the merits of partnership. It became quickly apparent, though, that organizers and participants alike were interested in creating the conditions for a genuine dialogue, one in which gentle and adept facilitation and common purpose enabled "learning from, with, and about one another…[creating] trust in both directions in order that things can be said, and heard, and believed, that make meaningful learning possible" (Burbules, 2022, p. 51). In writing about dialogue and the good, Wahl (2023) evocatively captures the space in which I find myself in my approach to partnership and dialogue since Grinnell: "Beyond moving us to see, affirm, and love those intuitions that spring from our constitutive ideas about the good, dialogue may also help us to recognize the intuitions that arise when ideas are quieted. These insights may contradict previously held ideas, and therefore it is through articulation after

their arising in the quiet that we may come to affirm and love them… I suggest that quiet is crucial to sensing not only others' ideas but also our own response" (p. 579). And this, to me, is the magic of dialogue–that it continues to resonate and expand even in the quiet moments, deepening and transforming our ideas until we love them enough to share with others.

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