From The Advisory Board: Monet Moments and the Necessity of Productive Disruption

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In this issue's "A Semester in the Life," Theresa Tensuan quotes a character in the movie "Clueless" who compares a situation to a painting by the impressionist Claude Monet: "It looks good from far away, but when you get up close, it's all messed up!"

Student-faculty partnerships in the classroom often involve Monet moments. Reflecting back on the experience, we perceive the beauty of the whole and focus on the impressive outcomes. Having gained some critical distance on the experience, we see our way more clearly to sailing a "taut but happy ship," to use a metaphor from Bret Mulligan's meditations. When the partnership is evolving, however, we see the mess. We feel the waves rocking the boat.

Students clearly articulate the instability of navigating new roles and understanding strange perspectives when they partner with faculty. In "Teaching and Learning Insights," for example, one student explains, "Now I am so used to meeting with professors and agreeing respectfully and calmly that it really isn't scary at all." If it is no longer "scary," of course, it once was. Other students echo that sentiment with words like "afraid," "hesitant" and "sensitive."

These students are articulating what Howard M. Glasser and Margaret A. Powers, in their article "Disrupting Traditional Student-Faculty Roles, 140 Characters at a Time**,"** call "productive disruptions." Such moments challenge traditional hierarchies, leading participants to "witness and experience" new roles. For Glasser and Powers, Twitter is the tool that prompts liminality, the feeling of occupying an unfamiliar space between the familiar positions as "faculty" or "student."

Although faculty aim to prompt such productive disruptions for students, we often are less comfortable occupying such a space ourselves in the classroom. Even the language we use reveals our discomfort with the wobbliness of new pedagogical roles. Students tend toward emotional language to describe their partnership experience, while faculty focus on the analytical: "meeting once a week with a student consultant is an intense exercise in self-reflection" (Teaching and Learning Insights). The difference between student and faculty language is no surprise, reflecting differences in disciplinary training, power, and other factors that separate students and faculty in the classroom.

These differences, however, should not mask the common experience of liminality. Both students and faculty experience a "shift in perception" (to use the TLI phrase) when they enter into meaningful partnership. Students do not become faculty, but they begin to understand some of the complexity of pedagogical choices that faculty face daily: "I look at my classes through the perspective of both students and teachers" (Teaching and Learning Insights). Nor do faculty

become students, although they now are able to begin "to see the classroom with a student's eyes" (Teaching and Learning Insights).

Meyer, Land and Baillie (2010) compare this type of perspective shift to a threshold. Crossing that threshold allows previously unseen vistas to come into view and creates opportunities for fundamentally new ways of thinking. However, crossing that threshold also is inherently "troublesome," provoking questions about assumptions and identity that typically go unasked. While these perspective shifts are essential for student and faculty learning, they also are disturbing and disruptive. Up close, they are messy.

The articles and reflections in this volume suggest that these "Monet moments" are a common feature of student-faculty partnerships, even though they often go unexamined as we focus on the more reassuring (and certainly important) outcomes of this work. As scholars and partners, we would be wise to attend to these productive disruptions. Navigating them is essential for students and faculty to become partners. Studying them is an opportunity to deepen our understanding of student and faculty learning. Welcoming them is a step toward students and faculty together doing the messy work of creating and nurturing more democratic classrooms.

Meyer, J.H.F., Land, R., & Baillie, C. (eds.) (2010). *Threshold Concepts and Transformational Learning*. Boston: Sense Publishers.