

Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education

Issue 24 Spring 2018

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Recommended Citation

Woolmer, Cherie "Exploring Dimensions of Risk in Pedagogical Partnerships in Higher Education," *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education*: Iss. 24 (2018), <https://repository.brynmawr.edu/tlthe/vol1/iss24/1>

Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education Special Issue: Risk and Partnerships

EXPLORING DIMENSIONS OF RISK IN PEDAGOGICAL PARTNERSHIPS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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What do practitioners of pedagogical partnership write about when invited to address risk?

“...my initial question and fear was: considering the fact that student-faculty partnership on teaching and learning [is not common], how vulnerable will I be when I try to experiment with it?” [Ketevan Kupatadze](#), Elon University, US

“...giving over the reins of the class to the students seemed to be the most appropriate thing to do, and also, the scariest thing I had ever done as a university instructor.” [Lillian Nave with student partners](#), Appalachian State university, US

“... it was less about the risk of vulnerability created within the partnership, but about the risk outside of the partnership that I worried about.” [Shannon Audley](#), Smith College, US

“... if we can actually admit [to others] that we don't think we did something very well, or if we're worrying about how to tackle something, that can be a risk since we are potentially sharing our vulnerabilities.” [Juliet Hancock & Tanya Lubicz-Nawrocka](#), University of Edinburgh, UK

“... risks manifest in moments where an institution must trust the other institution to be responsible, authentic and honest.” [Cassie Shaw & Tali Atvars](#), University of Winchester and Winchester Student Union, UK

“...risk both attends and informs; it is a noun and a verb—a characterization and an action—and it is always in force at moments of decision.” [Arshad Ahmad & Alison Cook-Sather](#), McMaster University, Canada, and Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges, US

“We rarely talk about risks in the way we have here, it forces us to enter a ‘brave space’...” [Colin Bryson & Ruth Furlonger](#), Newcastle University, UK

“...we need to consider further the varying kinds and levels of threat for a wider variety of partnership practitioners, and to acknowledge that these risks might shift and play out differently in different moments and contexts.” [Elizabeth Marquis](#), McMaster University, Canada

The idea for this special issue developed out of discussions relating to ongoing research with faculty in Canada and the UK about the ways their conversations with students in pedagogical partnerships influence the conversations they have about teaching with other colleagues (Woolmer, Marquis, & Bovill, 2017). Adapting Roxå and Mårtensson's (2009) study on Significant Networks, this research is examining how and where individuals have meaningful conversations about teaching and the extent to which conversations in partnerships with students might influence one's Significant Network. Early analysis of data from this research suggests that talking about teaching, and particularly pedagogical partnerships, can sometimes be a 'risky business' and that these risks can be experienced and negotiated differently within and outside of partnerships.

In addition to my research, I am an advocate and practitioner of partnerships in teaching and learning, having participated in partnerships as a student and staff member at various points over the last decade and managing the *International Journal for Students as Partners*, a journal focused on such partnership work. My own experiences of working in partnership have always involved an element of risk as entering into collaborations that are intentionally negotiable necessitates some uncertainty. Where there is uncertainty, there is risk.

Considering the preliminary data from the research and reflecting on my own practice I realized there was an important gap in the ongoing debate about partnerships in teaching and learning. Much of the current research on student-faculty partnerships focuses on what happens 'inside' the partnership experience (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017). There are models and processes available to help us think about the principles and values that should underpin this work (Cook-Sather et al., 2014; Healey et al., 2014; Bovill et al., 2016; Bovill, 2017) and others have explored the role of bravery in partnership for both students (e.g., Abbott, 2016) and faculty (e.g., Perez, 2016). In addition, there is a growing body of literature that theorizes and critiques this practice (e.g., Cates et al., 2018; Kehler et al., 2017). However, there is less written specifically about risk involved with engaging in pedagogical partnerships and how these risks are felt (and mitigated) not only *within* the partnership but also *elsewhere* in the academy.

This relative inattention to risk raises a number of important questions, which include but are not limited to:

- What happens when we consider the risk of partnership in the context of the academy in a broader sense?
- How do issues of increasing precarity of roles, the need for junior faculty to establish particular forms of credibility and scholarly authority, and the vulnerability from admitting one 'doesn't know best' interact with opportunities to collaborate and partner with students?
- How do partners with a diversity of identities and experiences bring their full selves to partnership?
- How do students dare to claim their knowledge as learners and people and risk the blurring of boundaries and complicating of power dynamics necessary to engage in partnership?

The selected essays contained in this issue of *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education (TLTHE)* begin to respond to some of these questions by drawing explicit attention to,

and reflecting upon, dimensions of risk in pedagogical partnerships in a variety of contexts, ranging from the micro (classroom level within the university) to the mega level (national and international policy contexts). Issues of choice and agency, positionality, identity, precarity, and prioritization are discussed, revealing some of the fears and tensions within partnership work that are often under-explored (or under-reported) in current literature. The contributions are by no means fatalistic accounts. By discussing risk within partnerships, as well as the broader context of the academy and personal lives, authors offer examples of vulnerability and bravery ([Marquis; Kupatadze; Bryson & Furlonger](#)), of risk-taking and trust-building ([Nave & student partners; Shaw & Atvars; Audley](#)), and of choice-taking and ally-making ([Ahmad & Cook-Sather; Hancock & Lubicz-Nawrocka](#)).

Authors explore risks encountered in activities including course redesign ([Kupatadze](#)), co-creation of curriculum ([Nave and partners; Hancock & Lubicz-Nawrocka](#)), teaching observations ([Audley](#)), co-inquiry in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) research ([Marquis; Bryson & Furlonger](#)), and leadership of partnership programs and Centers for Teaching and Learning ([Shaw & Atvars; Ahmad & Cook-Sather](#)). These accounts intersect with issues of identity and positionality, and age and experience, within a variety of institutional and policy contexts, highlighting the risks associated with pressures to conform to traditional and hierarchical notions of expertise ([Marquis; Kupatadze; Bryson & Furlonger; Audley](#)) and navigating changing priorities in policy ([Shaw & Atvars](#)) and leadership ([Ahmad & Cook-Sather](#)).

Taken together, these essays raise some interesting challenges for us as advocates, practitioners, and scholars in the field of pedagogical partnerships. Perhaps the most important of these is a call for us to think deeply about how we can better support and foster conversations about the vulnerabilities and risks as well as the joy and transformation that occur within partnerships and to do so in a more holistic way that acknowledges contexts outside of the partnership experiences. For us to be able to discuss our hesitations and vulnerabilities in a way that is suitably public requires an approach that may feel counter to the traditional forms of academic debate. I believe we have a responsibility to have these discussions, and we start by role modelling what such discussions might look like. Forums such as *TLTHE* provide essential spaces to support this kind of tentative yet public exploration, and the authors who contribute serve as our role models. I hope the reflections shared here about risk and partnerships provide impetus for this important and necessary ongoing line of enquiry.

Acknowledgements

I believe it is a real privilege to walk with others through their reflective process, and this has been particularly true for me in the curation of this issue of *TLTHE*. Writing a reflective essay is inherently personal and thus exposing. In my editorial communication with authors, it has been apparent that producing the stories and reflections for this special issue has itself been a risky act for some, and aspects of our dialogue have felt too exposing at times to include in print. It is more comfortable for us to write about our hopes and successes than our fears and struggles. I appreciate that some types of reflective writing are perhaps riskier than others, and I'm grateful for the honesty and openness with which the authors have engaged with this topic.

I would like to acknowledge and thank Drs. Beth Marquis and Catherine Bovill, who are co-investigators for the research referred to in this editorial, and Drs. Torgny Roxå and Katarina Mårtensson, who serve as critical friends to the project.

A final thanks to Alison Cook-Sather who provided support and encouragement to pursue this special issue and for her sound counsel throughout.

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