You Say, They Say, I Say: The Weaving of Positions, Identities, and Narratives in Partnership Work

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In a conversation with colleagues after a co-delivered workshop on voice and agency in partnership work (Cook-Sather et al., 2018) at the International Consortium for Educational Development (ICED) conference, I had a realization about myself—about my identity and position in the academy and how it relates to the work I lead on pedagogical partnerships. It wasn't necessarily an 'ah-ha' moment. It was more like a slow realization of multiple thoughts and conversations coming into view for me for the first time. I realized the long-standing dilemma I have to articulate my place in the Academy comes from a double standard I was holding myself to—a sort of cognitive dissonance that felt fraught with contradictions. In my attempts as an emerging scholar to develop and conform with expectations of what a 'coherent academic' identity was, I realized I was, subconsciously at least, resisting naming the ways my various knowledges and experiences from my personal and professional life inform my partnership work, consequently fragmenting and privileging some over others.

This realization caused an uncomfortable sense of hypocrisy for me. How could the very values I espouse and cherish about partnership—the ability for it to create spaces of being and becoming that value multiple expertise and experience—feel so difficult for me to name and enact? How had I not realized this before? How can I invite others to bring themselves fully to partnership work when I struggle to do this myself? During that reflection with colleagues at ICED I realized that I did not give (or at least had not previously given) myself permission to articulate, or legitimize, the various types of expertise, experiences, and knowledges I bring to my partnership work and my place in the academy. The unintended consequence of this has been a compartmentalization of my expertise and experience. I realized that perhaps my desire to create a traditional academic identity, that often places privilege on scholarship, was not only unnecessary but also a limiting place for me to inhabit, given that at any one time I occupy many identities and roles in my work on partnership: I am an emerging scholar in the field of pedagogical partnerships; I am an educational developer, supporting others in their practice of co-creation and partnership in teaching and learning; and I am an advocate of dialogic and democratic education. This essay is part of my own ongoing reflections of being and becoming in partnership spaces.

Prior to the workshop I mention above, I hadn't voiced (as in literally voiced!) these distinct yet connected parts of my life in tandem. By not intentionally articulating my different roles and locations I was dismissing the important ways in which these multiple identities influence the positions I take, the expertise I want to demonstrate, and the language I use throughout to do so. In being invited to think explicitly about the connections between language and my experiences of partnership, I found myself pondering questions like "How does language help distance or draw near my position as 'expert' or 'non-expert'?"; "How do I reconcile the conflicts that arise when navigating positions of power and expertise?"; and "How does my choice of language affect the way others position, view, and judge my various expertise?"

I seek here to unpack these ideas, exploring how the language of partnership changes depending on the position and identity I am occupying—scholar, developer, advocate. I take each of these in turn, for clarity, but it is important to acknowledge that my lived experiences of these positions are, in reality, messy and, at times, give rise to complementarity and contention in equal measure!

My context

I have worked in higher education for almost 20 years, both in the UK and, more recently, in Canada (as elected Students' Union sabbatical officer, strategic project manager, educational developer and, most recently, postdoctoral researcher in a Teaching and Learning Centre). I attained my PhD in my 30s, slightly later than most, after starting a family, with the aspiration to move into a role that allowed me to conduct research on teaching and learning. My desire to make sense of the diverse yet connected aspects of my career has become increasingly important with each career move I've made particularly because higher education still, as a rule, prizes specialism and depth over breadth and diversity in career trajectories. I often fear that the multiple roles I have occupied, and the experiences I have gained, are perceived as diffuse rather than comprehensive and 'specialist' amongst my peers. There is a feeling of vulnerability and risk for me when trying to articulate the value of diverse roles in higher education and how these inform my partnership work, and these feelings are intrinsically linked to my feelings of being 'other' as a first-generation woman in the academy. However, in keeping with the theme of this special issue, what follows is an exploration of the language of partnership and how it interweaves with aspects of my position and identity—as a scholar, practitioner, and advocate of this approach in higher education. I hope to demonstrate that the variety of ways I talk about partnership is not only influenced by audience and role but is also linked with my story of how and why I arrived at pedagogical partnerships in the first place.

In the position of developer

Much of my work as an educational developer over the years has focused on working with faculty on thematic issues related to student engagement. Like many others, I 'fell' into educational development work. When I took my first job working for what was then the Centre for Academic Practice and Learning Enhancement at University of Strathclyde, I didn't quite realize what I was joining but quickly discovered the profession of educational development. I experienced a distinct feeling of de-schooling at that time, shifting from a background of project management of teaching initiatives to a more 'on the ground,' micro-level, critical way of working with others to enhance learning. Engaging with the scholarship of the field that critiqued techno-rational approaches to enhancing teaching and learning, I quickly came to realize my naïveté about my 'what works' assumptions and the language I was using around 'hot spots, cold-spots, roll out' and so forth. I learned quickly the need to temper my language and 'tune in' to meet people I was working with 'where they were at' by using the language they were familiar with and prepared to engage with. In my developer work, these people have varied from individual faculty members, to students, to Heads of Department, to Associate-Vice Principals, to funding agencies.

Fast forward to the present time, I navigate a terrain where I have to convey ideas of partnership in a practical and accessible way—a necessity that raises a number of distinct challenges for me. As a developer, I need to find a way of communicating that clearly articulates the ideas and values of partnership to someone who might be hearing them for the very first time. I often encounter a range of responses, covering the spectrum of excited to hostile! Yet, in all of them, I find I often have to work around the idea of partnership as a fixed definition of practice. I have to mediate, explore, problem solve with faculty and students what partnership might look like *for them in their context*. I often find myself frequently inviting people to focus on expressions about the values of partnership rather than the term itself to help them imagine possibilities of what education and learning could look like and how they might want to embody those values in their teaching or scholarly practice—an imagining of what might be rather than feeling stuck on what might feel as a definition of partnership that might feel alien to them. I introduce models that present the idea of Students as Partners (such as Healey et al., 2014; Bovill et al., 2016), suggesting they use such models as a 'leaping off point,' as a heuristic, to explore ideas rather than a prescription, or 'how to,' of practice.

The challenge for me here as a developer is to balance encouraging and supporting others into the language and practice of partnership in a way that is accessible and fluid whilst ensuring I retain the fidelity to the ideas underpinning partnership, which are grounded in scholarship. My role often involves defining some parameters but recognizing the enactment of them can be achieved in various ways. The language I use in my role as an educational developer traverses the tensions between being accessible for those wanting to learn about and practice partnership, whilst retaining fidelity to the conceptual underpinnings of this work. Whilst appreciating this approach allows people to make-meaning of the ideas of partnership in their contexts, I continue to be concerned about the potential for reductive understandings of important critical concepts, and misappropriation of partnership practice that reduces nuance. I find myself wanting to be relaxed and enabling in the language faculty, staff and students use to describe this work, for them to develop an understanding of partnership through language and practice that is meaningful to them, yet I'm concerned about the possibilities of appropriation or the language not enabling the intended practice.

Tensions notwithstanding, time and again I find the benefit of this fluid use of language brings faculty and students to the table. Engaging in a process of mutual exploration and sense-making with them means I also gain new insights into the ways others (not immersed in scholarship on partnership) discuss pedagogical partnerships, which, in turn, further refines my own conceptualizations of the work in my scholarship.

In the position of advocate

My commitment to working in and supporting pedagogical partnership did not happen over night. My engagement with the ideas of collaboration and partnership, with dialogic and democratic forms of education were experienced before I had the language to describe them.

I'm the first person in my family to progress with education beyond the age of 16. I abandoned my idea to join the Royal Navy, which felt like one of only a handful of options available to me in the working-class community I grew up in, when my English teacher encouraged me to consider applying to university. I eventually got there but my transition into higher education was a painful one. I was elated to be there but felt very isolated and had an acute sense of not belonging. I couldn't see anyone like me. Everyone I spoke to had been traveling during their gap year whereas I had worked in a factory trying to save funds for university and help my family. At the time my first assignment was due I had the feeling that most first-year students have: I had no idea what was expected of me! I visited one of my tutors to discuss it with him and to ask for some guidance. As a student of Linguistics I was fascinated by the significance of language and discourse. Exploring my sense of alienation as a first-generation student, I chose to write my essay on accents of English. My tutor and I started a conversation about accents as a signifier of class in the UK, which led to a conversation about the phenomenon of linguistic assimilation and loss of accents when moving environments. We shared stories about our lived experiences of being perceived and sometimes dismissed because of the way we spoke. I took a chance and started to ask my tutor about his story of how he got into academia, and, to this day, I remember his words of encouragement and support and how they were a significant reason for me staying at university. His words, his language, and his respect for my experience made me feel a student like me had a place and a legitimacy in the academy.

I think this is where my interest in dialogic spaces for faculty and students started. My focus on pedagogical partnerships came much later, but my belief in the need to create opportunities to connect, share, and be agentic in one's learning has been an anchor throughout my working life. This plays out in my role as an advocate for partnerships and my deep belief in the value of bringing multiple experiences and knowledges together to discuss teaching and learning.

My position as advocate manifests in two ways. The first is through my commitment to highlighting the voices not represented in partnership spaces and to work with others to challenge some of the unproblematized and normative claims made about partnership values (de Bie & Raaper, 2019). My role here is one of allyship, with a commitment to work with others who want to take the values and ideas of partnership into different spheres of the academy.

The second way my position as advocate manifests is through my own partnerships with students. The language of partnership and my advocacy for it in these spaces feels wholly different. It is affective in nature as it is where I articulate and embody the values that I see as core to this work. These spaces require me to be open, honest, and brave about my own commitments and hesitations, to talk about when partnership fails, is painful, or disappointing as well as when it is joyful, enlightening, and stimulating. The language of partnership in this arena is about emotions and relationships (Felten, 2017), hopes and expectations, fear and risk (Woolmer, 2018). Emotion is central to my work as a partnership advocate.

In the position of scholar

My role as a postdoctoral fellow provides a space I have been working hard to create in my career as it provides particular opportunities to explore and critique my own practice and scholarship as well as join an international conversation about pedagogical partnerships.

As the language and practice of partnership spread throughout educational development circles (being referred to in places as a 'movement'), I feel increasingly cautious about some of the normative assumptions made about partnership as well as the ways in which the language of partnership is being appropriated.

I described earlier how, in my role as a developer, the language I use relating to defining partnership is necessarily fluid and responsive, as this, I find, is an important way to engage students and faculty who might be new to the idea and need space to make sense of it in their contexts. However, in my role as scholar, it is essential to adopt a more critically reflexive stance to my development work. This is necessary because it provides opportunity to examine the multiple ways in which language is taken up in practice and policy, caught between often competing ideologies. Of particular interest to me is the way in which prevailing neoliberal and managerialist practices often seek to reduce nuance regarding the ways in which partnership is promoted, taken up, and understood. It also impacts on the way the value of this work is measured and the guidance provided on how to enact partnership. My scholarly work provides an intersection for my identities of developer and advocate. It gives me a new positionality (and legitimacy) from which I can critique the language I see myself and others using in development work, which, in turn, further informs my advocacy for this form of education. It gives me space to develop my own voice and contribution, which argues for a healthy skepticism of claims about cultural change in institutions, challenging me to continually reflect on the way the language of partnership advances the values of more democratic, collegial, and socially-just forms of education and for this to be framed and be informed by theoretical constructs and empirical insights.

However, these insights also lead me to places of conflict and discomfort with my development work. For example, whilst I understand the ease of using a catch all phrase such as Students as Partners (SaP) as a shorthand for this field of practice and research, I am increasingly concerned by the reductive ways this phrase can be taken up. Debates that seek to continually investigate, explore, and problematize the use of terms such as these are welcomed (see, for example, Cook-Sather et al., 2018) and are essential spaces that help me 'speak back' to, make sense of, and further refine my development work.

My scholarly work intersects with my identity as an advocate, too. While I enjoy (and feel it is necessary) to have the space to critique the language and meaning of partnership, I feel I have a responsibility in and through my research to explore and uncover the nuances and complexity of partnership. This includes understanding the ways in which partnership opportunities might, for example, include and exclude individuals or how partnership may be perceived as risky Marquis, 2018; Bryson & Furlonger, 2018; Ahmad & Cook-Sather, 2018). This, in a small and perhaps limited way, helps me speak truth to power – the power in this context being the forces of ever-increasing managerialism in the work of educational development (Roxå & Mårtensson, 2017).

Conclusion

Bringing our full selves to partnership

My starting point for this essay was an exploration of the cognitive dissonance I experience from the ways I speak about partnership in the multiple positions I occupy in the academy. Acknowledging and identifying the ways in which I might dismiss or downplay my own knowledge and experiences in my work whilst advocating for others to feel able to do this has been a revealing and uncomfortable process. It reveals that while my personal and professional core is committed to the radical potential of partnership, I am not immune to the systemic issues in higher education that, in turn, sometimes make me feel I cannot bring my full self into some of the roles I perform. However, I believe there is power in noticing and naming this challenge. It is an important reminder that the being and becoming in partnership work is ever evolving.

The importance of language in partnership

I believe there is merit in further debate about the language of partnership, ensuring it is sufficiently enabling and inclusive but also cognizant of the ways it can be used to take over and even corrupt the idea of partnership. This is especially true in the ways we use shorthand terms that, when abstracted from context, risk losing and even undermining meaning.

I also believe we need to be very engaged with the way language and terminology needs to change over time to reflect the way practice, scholarship, and our understanding develops in this field, personally and collectively as a community of scholars, practitioners, and advocates. This requires particular attention to words and reflexivity in how we use them. This links closely to the multiple ways we seek to advance the ideas and practice of partnership, through our conversations, through traditional scholarship, and through social media. In doing so, I think there is great potential for us to use different discourses to influence and enable, to critically engage, and to advocate and claim new spaces for ourselves and others.

Reflexively examining our positions and identities in partnership spaces.

Thinking specifically and purposefully about the ways in which I use language in my different roles has helped shine a light on points of connection and contradiction in my work as an advocate, scholar, and developer of pedagogical partnership. The variety of positions I occupy can complement or conflict with one another in multifaceted ways. I hope by sharing my own reflections I might prompt readers to explore the ways in which their own positions, roles, and identities influence partnership, engaging with the complexity of language, position, and identity as part of our reflexive practice.

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