

SECTION INTRODUCTION

The Way of Partnership

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All around the globe, citizens of higher education embarked on a quest. They did so on the promise of a better future: one where they became fuller versions of themselves, empowered to be authentic, confident, passionate, articulate individuals in meaningful, trusting relationships with each other. And yet the terrain they had to cross was swampy—an uncertain, confusing, risky place that required courage and collaboration to stay their paths. The teachers had to shed their need for authority and control; the students needed to find their voice and agency. It was terrain they could not cross alone but only in the company of the other—for in sharing and listening and being there was the promise of understanding. Not all made it, for some the promise failed; but those that did saw differently and would never be the same again. They came to realise that partnership was a way of being, permeating our souls and changing the ways we learn and teach and relate; a way that lets us fully be.

As I read the chapters in the following section, I lost myself in their stories, conversations, poetry, pictures, and metaphors of growth. These chapters have distinct narrative qualities: they provide us with multiple

actors who face loss and struggle; they portray uncertain situations, which are full of risk and promise; and they tell of a dream of a better future on the horizons of winding paths and tempestuous journeys. Sometimes the travellers reach their destinations; sometimes they fail. And yet, as chapter 14 (Jennifer Fraser et al.) explores, what is success and failure in partnership work? For even where the partnership “fails,” the conversation is one of learning and growth.

The ambiguous/uncertain space which partnership traverses is discussed throughout this section. As Romy Begum (chapter 14) says, “Here, it’s different.” This is a liminal space, full of possibilities as Anne Bruder (chapter 15) found, but also a risky, brave space. It is a place in which a path needs to be found. This may be successful; Romy Begum describes how her partnership team “found our way,” (chapter 14). But there is also the risk that partnership can become the “failed promise” that Alison Cook-Sather describes it being for her Māori colleagues (chapter 10). Sasha Mathrani (chapter 10) tells how she and her partner “seemed to be traveling on completely different paths,” and Anita Ntem says, “I felt as though we were not on the same page” and that as a result, “I felt almost useless” (chapter 13). For them, there was no scarf across the table, offering a delicate path across the brave space, as in Abbi Flint’s poem of chapter 11. And yet, Anita Ntem persevered and, for her, “all the moments of uncertainty, misunderstanding, and confusion, as well as careful attention, patience, and readjustment, had led to this moment of leadership” (chapter 13). Likewise, for Sasha Mathrani (chapter 10) the resistance she faced led to personal resilience and growth.

The relational nature of partnership is also raised across the chapters. Abbi Flint talks of partnership as “a way of being,” “a way of relating” (chapter 11). Jennifer Fraser et al. (chapter 14) investigate the “processes of relationship building that are at the heart of student-staff partnerships,” with Evgeniya Macleod speaking of the longevity of her partnership because “we made a connection,” while Anna Dolidze speaks of the “friendships” created. With this relationship we hear multiple voices and, as Abbi Flint writes, “your voice / changes how I see” (chapter 11). For the voices to have power, we must be like Anne Bruder (chapter 15) and find ourselves listening without an agenda, and like Alison Cook-Sather, who

“learned to listen anew to each voice, to know I would never know once and for all what students experience, think, feel, and know” (chapter 10).

Listening brings new understandings and new perspectives. For Anita Ntem (chapter 13) “partnership taught me to think differently,” while for Fathimath Zuruwath Zareer (chapter 14) partnership work brought “a shift in perspective.” Staff become vulnerable—as in Anne Bruder’s story (chapter 15)—and in need of affirmation, as Anita Ntem (chapter 13) discovered. For Anna Dolidze, during partnership work, “you realize it’s just another human being and we all make mistakes, we all get super excited about something, or super sad, and we all have burning questions” (chapter 14). This vulnerability lies at the heart of Desika Narayanan and Sophia Abbot’s story in chapter 12. Sophia and Desika have both struggled with physics in the past, and Desika fears making mistakes in class. And yet, Sophia notices that when he does, this helps students to learn about common mistakes and creates a community where mistakes are okay. Together, they build a class based on community, trust, and honesty.

Partnership holds the “commitment to dreaming about a better world” for Evgeniya Macleod in chapter 14, and the possibility to “co-create alternative futures” for Abbi Flint (chapter 11). These better futures are both in terms of the education we provide and our own personal future. Partnership offers the chance for staff to be authentic and take off the mask of the expert, the teacher, the one in control and to be what Alison Cook-Sather (chapter 10) terms our “fuller selves,” “a human being in relation to this world at this time.” As I read chapter 15, I became enchanted by the idea that empowerment could come from the loss of control: in that case, Anne Bruder tells how she was freed from the need to act a part by ceding control to her students. She found that she had opened up space for authentically new ideas—she just needed to listen. For students, partnership offers, in addition to the employability skills Anna Dolidze mentions in chapter 14, what Sophia Abbot terms in chapter 12, “a strong sense of agency” and, as Sasha Mathrani writes, “an increased sense of confidence and ability to articulate myself,” as well as “passion, and desire to effect change” (chapter 10).

Partnership can be a transformative journey, as can learning. Desika Narayanan and Sophia Abbot notice that the themes for the course they were improving were the same as those of their partnership: “clarifying expectations, pausing and checking in, and reassuring and acknowledging” (chapter 12). Anne Bruder found that good teaching was “changing the rules” and opening up “unexplored spaces,” where students “worked in partnership with their classmates.” She discovered that “in ceding a measure of authority, my students, in turn, incline toward authorizing themselves to direct their own learning” (chapter 15).

These themes raise the resounding question: is all good teaching a partnership?