REFLECTIVE ESSAY

Partnership Working: Opening Doors—Crossing Thresholds

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> Any situation in which some men prevent others from engaging in the process of inquiry is one of violence; . . . to alienate humans from their own decision making is to change them into objects. (Freire, 1970, p. 85).

This reflective essay is an opportunity for five academics who have played various and complex roles in each other's lives and careers to explore some of the meanings of those collaborations. It highlights the way such collaborative efforts can push back on the corporatist and exclusivist pressures in higher education.

We, the authors of this essay, have been (and are) located in the United Kingdom in what is called a widening participation institution; that is, we reach out to and recruit those that do not normally experience a university education. We have heavy teaching loads with little or no time for collaborative endeavours even in our own institution, let alone collaborations that bridge those disciplinary and international borders across which we operate.

In this pressurised context, the five of us have worked together variously over time, and our relationships have changed and developed as we have interacted as students and lecturers, as students of lecturers and as colleagues. We now work together cross-institutionally and cross-continentally. Fundamental to all of our working relationships is the notion of a pedagogy that treats the learner as a co-creator of knowledge and the tutor as a co-learner.

We used the method of "writing as inquiry" (Gale & Bowstead, 2013) to collaborate on, research, and surface the relationship between partnership, pedagogy, and practice in the academy. In this essay we outline the way that we have worked together as staff and students to create a partnership model in education that crosses traditional thresholds and allows for more authentic collaboration and more engaging teaching and learning.

WHO WE ARE: THE POWER OF WORKING AND WRITING TOGETHER

We, the authors of this reflective essay, are academics with very different, yet very similar histories. Our trajectories in and through academia have not been straightforward in that none of us has envisioned a career in academia: we have worked on building sites (Tom), been nurses (Maja and Sandra A.), Lab technicians (Sandra S.), and in care and support work

(Orion). We are educational nomads wandering through (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987/2005) already colonised academic space (Freire, 1970), not just encountering closed doors but having them shut in our faces. In this essay, we would like to unravel how our paths have crossed and what has emerged out of this. This section therefore lays out how we connect to each other before exploring in more depth what the collaborations have enabled and how the partnership model that we developed may be used by others.

Sandra S. and Tom work together at the Centre for Professional and Educational Development and teach on the Postgraduate Certificate (PGCert) and the Masters in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education (MALTHE) courses for academic staff, with a special focus on praxes that ignite curiosity, harness creativity, and develop power and voice. At different points Sandra A., Orion, and Maja have all been students on that programme.

Sandra S. and Tom have also worked and taught together with Sandra A. in Education Studies where they developed an innovative partnership project: Peer Mentoring in Practice (PMiP) and Becoming an Educationist (Becoming) whereby students on PMiP were partnered in a mentoring relationship with Becoming students. Together they have reflected and published on this. Sandra A. left London Metropolitan University in 2018 and is now based at the University of Calgary (Canada) where she works on research projects that look at design studio practice and online teaching.

Sandra S. and Tom also worked with Orion and Maja when they were students working as success coaches, recruiting them to undertake qualitative research into student perceptions of university with Orion and Maja driving the creative process and disseminating their findings harnessing an innovative graphic novel format. When Maja and Orion took the PGCert programme, they simultaneously became students, associate lecturers, and colleagues, eventually becoming full time members of staff, who were recruited to be "change agents" in their schools with the grand task of improving the student experience of learning.

Together we navigate an education system that is elitist and hierarchical—entry to the academy is policed by various door keepers. Identity and "habitus" (a sense of feeling like you belong) are important, and the "outsider" academic and student do not feel automatically welcomed into these exclusionary spaces. Individualism and personal success is emphasised both in the classroom and in the valorised single-author text. However, the five of us together opened new doors, negotiating the academy through our varying partnerships and our evolving identities, our writing, and our pedagogic and academic practices developed and evolved.

With the COVID-19 pandemic, work and teaching has changed significantly for all of us, making it difficult to connect beyond the affordances of web conferencing. Yet, the call for papers for this journal brought the five of us together, providing an opportunity to reflect on what partnership means for us and our students while also working—and writing—together in a new configuration.

PARTNERSHIP, SPACE AND POWER

In hostile academic environments, we argue that it is the connection to others, staff, and students, that sustains us both as human beings and as ethical practitioners; these relationships keep us grounded, dialogic, and open. As Orion describes when he returned to

university as a mature learner and first entered Sandra S. and Tom's office, being "invited in" forged a connection and built a positive identity:

> Like a lighthouse beacon through the mist, unseen by other ships, it was the most inconspicuous doorway which led me to working with Sandra S. and Tom. Upon the stairwell door a laminated sign stated "staff only." I still remember vividly traversing through the university library past the cafe and its flumes of coffee drinkers and unwitting bystanders to that doorway. Like Alice looking down the rabbit hole, I was unaware of the journey ahead. I think I remember it well because I was purposeful and anxious, whereas previously, my return to university education as a mature student had been markedly aimless and disengaged. Eight years away from higher education had left me little more than a severed appendage - disconnected, sore, and jaded. The lift to the third floor (the location of Tom and Sandra's office), was arguably the beginning of my regeneration, of becoming whole again as a constituent part of an academic institution. Their door was open. I was welcomed into the conscious lifelong pursuit of understanding and discovery, the quintessence of higher education. By inviting me behind the scenes, through sharing of their physical and intellectual space and bestowing me with faith in my competency and knowledge through dialogue, Tom and Sandra S. opened up a terrain of possibilities which has led me to become a lecturer and an academic (albeit green) myself.

Similarly, Maja, when embarking on further/higher study, experienced the power of being allowed in, and, through that, was able to connect and grow:

> I was dipping my feet into my doctoral studies on undocumented migrants access to healthcare when I was introduced to Tom and Sandra S. I had some experience already under my belt in qualitative nursing research but saw the opportunity to develop this further into the academic sphere. We started working together on our project looking into student experiences of their first year of study. We got invited into the realm of those who once only represented our tutors—they were now colleagues. To be invited in the hidden corridors of staff offices was exciting and empowering to me. It is something that crosses my mind often when I see students in my own office now. I am cognisant of the power dynamics between students and myself, as I have recently experienced both sides of that coin.

> Partnership, or being able to connect with the other, allows for a re-constituting of (educational) space where even the academic and "staff-only" places can be turned into connective opportunities, rather than being excluding and dividing barriers. It is important that the educator, rather than acting as a gatekeeper, actively invites students to cross the academic threshold with power and agency—in reality and metaphorically. As Orion states,

> Working with you both [Sandra S. and Tom] in the past was like being invited into a community of practice which had immediate and long-term impacts on my own

academic and professional practice. I was a constituent part of the institution rather than a disengaged appendage.

Orion's experience shows that our identities are malleable and reciprocative, especially where power relations are in balance. If partnership is fostered, it upends the traditional power dynamic in education. The student re-conceptualises their sense of self, their journey, and their involvement in the university's processes and practices.

Our partnerships have enabled us to teach, research, and write together about our own practice and about practices that enable students to succeed. Authentic partnership can construct powerful action within the university setting. Our goal is that neither we nor our students lose ourselves to become "academic." This influences, informs, and shapes our pedagogy and practice—and thus in turn serves the humane and human interests of those we work with and our students.

CROSSING THE THRESHOLD

Partnerships, true partnerships, are always novel and powerfully emerging; they are always being constituted and reconstituted. They can alter (our experience of) space itself—and place us differently within space. They create cracks and fissures pregnant with potential: the nomadic street fighting space of the academic outsider (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987/2005). We have found that our encounters in the "backstage" space, literally the corridors, lifts, and stairs of the university—and metaphorically in true partnerships between staff and staff and staff and students—create opportunities where we can enter dialogue. They can result in barriers being broken down in the creation of something more open and transparent. As Orion explained: "It felt powerful to be in that space."

If we approach partnership as something that happens in the classroom as well as alongside the curriculum, we can offer students the opportunity to conceptualise themselves as active constructors of education. As Orion says,

> I do not teach students; I work with them as equal partners. Partnership working taught me the importance of the lecturer and student dynamic and how this can be harnessed to encourage student self-efficacy. As a lecturer teaching a social science subject, Health and Social Care BSc, I consciously use language to empower students and undercut the traditional power dynamics in higher education. As I begin to develop my own content and curriculum design, I am doing so by interrogating the traditional didactic model, attempting to reorientate my seminars away from the didactic towards the workshop. My workshops are akin to traditional design and technology lessons, where we all start from an equal footing (in regards to material and content) and begin to pick apart, probe, sculpt, and redesign health and social care issues through problematising and problem solving. This also informs my ideas around curriculum and assessment design as I attempt to find ways to welcome students over the threshold.

This brings true partnership into academia through dialogic pedagogy. In our teaching, we set challenging projects that ask students to build, create, and explore—and eventually to take over the running of the course itself. This is an approach designed to free the colonized

(Freire, 1970): a dialogic and powerful approach to learning and teaching through cooperation, collaboration, and cultural diversity.

THE PARTNERSHIP MODEL

As Freire (1970) argues, it is not enough for people to come together in dialogue in order to gain knowledge of their social reality; they must act together upon their environment in order to critically reflect upon their reality, and so transform it through further action and critical reflection: "Education must begin with the solution of the student-teacher contradiction, by reconciling the poles of the contradiction so that both are simultaneously teachers and students" (p. 53).

Our experience of partnership working achieved that as we came together to research and write together over time and across our differing identities and relationships. Partnership, as posited in this reflective essay, is an authentic activity that enables a more empowered engagement in academia by those that would normally be sidelined or silenced (potentially all the authors of this paper—and their students). Partnership as research and pedagogic practice opens the door to the "in-between spaces"—the "third spaces" (Bhabha, 2004; Gutiérrez, 2008)—that enhance trust and foster a sustainable ecology of collaboration and co-creation.

For all of us, partnership working has impacted our academic work and our classroom practice. It has meant creating spaces that allow us and our students to explore, to wrestle with emergent thoughts, and to play with ideas. What we attempt in the classroom is a de-schooling (Illich, 1970) and unschooling (Holt, 1977, 1981): shaking up notions of what counts as teaching, learning and assessment, not to further confuse or alienate students, but to conjure the very collaborative adventure that education can and should be. Orion summarized this well when he said: "Partnership gave me a well-spring of confidence in my own ability; more importantly, it began to provide me with a mechanism for self-efficacy. The process reorientated my perspective on the world around me; challenges became exciting opportunities."

COLLABORATIVE SPACES FOR ACTION: WHAT WE RECOMMEND

In education there must be mutual respect, care, and commitment for learning to happen. All parties must cross thresholds together: "tutor and student . . . should not be seen as separate but as two halves of one dynamic system, each informing the other, ideally at every stage, with common understanding being shaped and constantly evolving within a community of practice" (Rust et al., 2005, p. 236).

We have worked together as staff and students and as staff and staff. We have researched and written together, including for this journal. Our collaborative practices have catalysed thought and enabled action: we have created open doors and crossed thresholds. We have seen what empowerment does—enabling the outsider student and academic to "be" (Nancy, 2000) more powerfully, act more powerfully, and to teach and write in more empowering ways. This is what our collaborative approach in its broader sense attempts to achieve: a more inclusive and collaborative academia.

We recommend that lecturers explore what a partnership model of research and pedagogy might afford them and what powerful positions such a model would enable them to create for—but importantly with—their own students.

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