Alison Cook-Sather
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Engaging Students as Partners in Learning and Teaching

A GUIDE FOR FACULTY

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Preface

Faculty think a lot about teaching. We regularly create new courses or revise existing ones. We talk with colleagues about our classes and our students, perhaps even inviting other faculty to observe and give us feedback on our teaching. We reflect on our course ratings. We read articles and books about teaching. We participate in workshops and consult with our campus learning and teaching centers. However, in all of this, how often and how carefully do we listen to students and respond to their ideas? How often do we collaborate and work alongside students to enhance learning?

These simple questions are the foundation of this book. Faculty talk with students frequently, of course, but what we advocate here is something distinct and different. Many of the good practices faculty use to gather responses from students, such as asking questions and gathering mid-semester feedback, are helpful, but they typically do not lead to authentic partnership between students and faculty. In most of these cases, faculty frame the questions, students provide answers, and then faculty alone decide whether, and how, to respond to that information. This process often resembles a customer-service relationship. How satisfied were you with the teaching in this course? What did you like best, and least, about the class? Partnership, on the other hand, is based upon the principles of respect, reciprocity, and shared responsibility. This changes the types of questions we ask in student-faculty partnerships to be more like this: How can we, together, deepen student learning in this course?

Our commitment to student-faculty partnerships is rooted in three foundational beliefs:

- Students have insights into teaching and learning that can make our and their practice more engaging, effective, and rigorous.
- Faculty can draw on student insights not only through collecting student responses but also through collaborating with students to study and design teaching and learning together.
- Partnerships between students and faculty change the understandings and capacities of both sets of partners—making us all better teachers and learners.

In this book we explore how and why faculty and students can engage as partners in learning and teaching in higher education. This collaborative process may not come naturally to students or faculty. Students often come to higher education from schools that emphasize high-stakes testing, not shared inquiry. Faculty have spent years developing disciplinary expertise, sometimes in rigidly hierarchical graduate programs, creating intellectual and cultural distance between our students and ourselves. Despite these and many other barriers, which we will explore more fully later, many of us have cultivated pedagogical habits that treat students as active contributors to learning and in some cases practices that invite students to be active contributors to teaching. As we will show, student-faculty partnerships—through which participants engage reciprocally, although not necessarily in the same ways—have transformational potential for individuals, courses, curricula, and institutions.

This book was born of the collaborative spirit it advocates. As coauthors, we come from three different higher education contexts: a small liberal arts college in the northeastern United States, a large ‘research intensive' university in Scotland, and a medium-sized liberal arts

university in the southeastern United States. We each take a different approach to working in partnership with students and to facilitating partnerships between faculty and students, and we each have walked a different path to the institutional and research programs we have developed. Yet we share a commitment to deep and extended collaboration among faculty and students as a primary mode of exploring, affirming, and transforming teaching and learning in higher education. In this book we share what we have learned about developing and supporting student-faculty partnerships, on our own campuses and in our work together.

Like the individuals in any partnership, we came to this common work with different histories and goals. We will introduce ourselves briefly here so that what unites and what distinguishes the three of us will be clearer.

Alison's Story

One of the most vivid memories I have of researching graduate schools is of plopping down in one professor's office and stating, without context or explanation, “I want to study student voice!” As a former secondary English teacher, I had worked closely with students to understand their perspectives on their learning, and I wanted to carry that commitment into graduate school. Although I didn't end up working with that professor, I did end up keeping the question of student voice at the forefront of my work.

After completing my doctoral work, I took on the job of directing and teaching in the Bryn Mawr/Haverford Education Program in 1994. Bryn Mawr and Haverford are two selective liberal arts colleges that share a close collaborative relationship, both emphasizing deep disciplinary study. The Education Program that the colleges also share offers secondary teaching certification, as well

as a minor in educational studies to undergraduates and recent graduates who wish to integrate work in education with their major courses of study. During my first year working with secondary certification candidates, I remember talking with a close friend and high school teacher, Ondrea Reisinger, about a problem in secondary teacher preparation: the absence of student voices. She and I designed a project I maintained for 15 years (and that is sustained to this day) that positioned her (and subsequently other teachers') secondary students as teacher educators.

For the full semester prior to the student teaching experience, the high school students work in partnership with the college undergraduates seeking certification to teach at the secondary level. They maintain a weekly email exchange and meet several times. Over the course of the semester, the secondary students become true collaborators in preparing the college students to teach; they and their college partners learn about one another's experiences and perspectives, question and revise their assumptions about one another, and learn to communicate across and grow from their differences (see Cook-Sather 2002a for a description of the secondary teacher preparation program and Cook-Sather 2010 for a comparison between that and the college program I now direct).

The program I currently run as part of Bryn Mawr College's Teaching and Learning Institute, called Students as Learners and Teachers (SaLT), builds on and extends this model at the college level. Piloted in 2006 with support from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, this program pairs undergraduate students with faculty members who wish to analyze and, perhaps, revise their pedagogical approaches over the course of a semester. The undergraduate students who assume the role of pedagogical consultant to faculty

members are not enrolled in the courses within which the partnerships unfold, and often they are unfamiliar with the subject matter being taught. The focus of their partnerships is teaching rather than content; the student consultants explore with faculty members classroom dynamics, pedagogical approaches, and the learning experiences of students enrolled in the course. (This program is discussed further in Chapter 1 and in detail in Chapter 4.) My role is to provide the forums for the partners, facilitate same-constituency (student consultant-student consultant, faculty-faculty) dialogue, and support cross-constituency (faculty-student) dialogue (see Cook-Sather 2008, 2009b, 2010, 2011b, 2011c, 2012, 2013b).

Both these projects put into practice my strong conviction that students have essential perspectives that, when brought into dialogue with teachers' perspectives, can raise awareness, deepen engagement, improve teaching and learning for all involved, and foster a culture on campus that embraces more open communication about, and shared responsibility for, education. The generous support the SaLT program has received from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and the Provosts of Bryn Mawr and Haverford colleges affirms these convictions. The ways in which faculty with whom I have worked for the past seven years have taken up partnership with students are truly inspiring: they partner with students to plan new courses (Jiang and Wang, 2012; Shore, 2012), assess and revise existing courses (Battat, 2012; Conner, 2012; Nath, 2012; Walker, 2012), and develop, teach, and assess innovative new programs (Cohen, Donnay, & Hein, 2012; Francl, 2012; Lesnick, 2012).

Cathy's Story

I grew up with a strong sense of the importance of social justice, the value of cultural diversity, and the key role of critical education in developing individual and community potential. This was certainly in some part due to the influence of my mother and grandmother, who were both activists in the women's peace movement. After graduation, my work in health promotion, community, and international development introduced me to the literature, practices, and experiences of participatory approaches in a range of development, educational, and research settings. These influences have informed my teaching practice over the last 20 years, particularly my approach to teaching in higher education. In my role as a faculty developer, previously at Queen Margaret University in Edinburgh, and since 2007 at the University of Glasgow, I have used a range of approaches that aim to enhance the participatory possibilities of higher education teaching and learning practices. I have invited faculty participants to design and carry out their own assessment of the courses that they are studying and to collaboratively write up these experiences for publication and presentation; reconsider the role of both faculty and students in the assessment process; co-create grading criteria; and collaborate in making decisions about curricular design, content, and processes (Bovill et al., 2010; Bovill, 2011). I have also worked alongside, advised, and supported colleagues at the University of Glasgow and at many other universities to pursue their goal of engaging students as partners in teaching and learning.

These experiences led me to seek out the work of others in co-creating learning and teaching processes and to consider some of the difficult questions raised by engaging students as partners, such as what kind of engagement we are aiming for and how we ensure that we meet the needs of our increasingly diverse groups of students. Since 2005,

I have undertaken research into the motivations, methodologies, outcomes, and lessons from a range of examples of students and faculty working as partners in curricula design processes (Bovill et al., 2011; Bovill, 2013a). This work has been thrilling. Faculty and students who have collaborated in learning and teaching partnerships are almost entirely enthusiastic and positive about their learning experiences, and it has made the research fascinating, stimulating, and enjoyable. I believe that engaging students as partners in teaching and learning leads to a range of compelling outcomes with particularly interesting impacts upon enhancement of metacognitive understanding of learning and teaching processes for both faculty and students. However, I also believe that engaging students meaningfully in making decisions about their learning poses a challenge to existing assumptions, practices, and structures within universities about how the aims, content, and processes of learning and teaching are conceptualized and decided. We explore this challenge to existing ways of thinking and practicing in Chapter 1.

Peter's Story

I began thinking about student voice the first time I taught a graduate course, shortly after finishing my PhD in 1995. I wanted my students to dig deeply into their discipline and their own learning, so I asked them to co-construct with me some portions of the course, including the rubric to assess their final research papers. I more-or-less made this up as I went along, inspired by theoretical writings from people like Freire (1970) and Brookfield (1995) but without a blueprint. The process worked better than I had expected. Students engaged seriously in the process, and the final

rubric turned out to be clearer and more rigorous than I would have been able to create on my own.

Having done this once with graduate students, I began taking cautious steps in a similar direction with my undergraduates. Over the next several years I experimented by regularly engaging students in the development of rubrics and study guides, all the while reading whatever I could find on the topic. Colleagues at Vanderbilt University's Center for Teaching, particularly Allison Pingree, further shaped my thinking by emphasizing the relational nature of teaching, drawing on Carol Gilligan (1993) and Parker Palmer (1997), among others. I had been trained as an historian to think about what I wanted to teach, when I thought about teaching at all; now I was beginning to focus less on my teaching and more on my students' learning, what Barr and Tagg (1995) describe as a shift from an instructional to a learning paradigm.

My engagement with this work took off in the fall of 2005 when two colleagues at Elon University, Deborah Long and Richard Mihans, consulted with me about a “broken” course in their department. As the new-to-campus director of a new teaching and learning center at a liberal arts university, I raised several possibilities with them, ranging from cautious to innovative. They jumped at the boldest of my options, the idea of working in partnership with students to redesign the course. Together we decided to adapt the center's effective and popular course-design process to integrate students. This work went considerably further toward full partnership than I had gone before, creating a ten-person team (seven undergraduates, my two faculty colleagues, and me) that met a dozen times over two months to reinvent the course. We deliberately included more students than faculty as one way to shape the power dynamics in the group (in 2013 an article by Carey highlighted the perils of planning partnerships

where students are in the minority and therefore extra vulnerable). This process led to a much-improved course, meeting our primary goal (Mihans et al., 2008). It also solidified my commitment to engaging students in teaching and learning. Since that winter in 2006, Elon's teaching center has been supporting faculty and student partnerships to design new courses or to reimagine existing courses, and I marvel at the impressive work my faculty and student colleagues have done together (for example, Delpish et al., 2010; Moore et al., 2010; Pope-Ruark, 2012).

Our Intended Audience and Approach

Over the years we have talked with many faculty who have developed diverse ways of establishing partnerships with students. Our aim with this book is to invite you to join us in this work, not by copying off a script or reproducing what we or others have done, but rather by adapting and extending the principles and models we offer here. Partnerships are always contextual. A simple set of prescriptions or a one-size-fits-all model is unlikely to be helpful; however, working in partnership with students need not be overly complex, nor do you need a sophisticated theoretical framework to do this work. Indeed, we believe that many faculty and students are already poised to take a step toward one another.

We have written this book for faculty colleagues who wish to take this step, or to continue with subsequent steps in partnership with students. Whether you are an isolated faculty member just beginning to think about partnership, one of several colleagues on your campus who want to develop more extensive student-faculty collaborations, or an experienced practitioner who is leading other teachers in this work, our practical advice and theoretical

perspectives aim to help you feel prepared and confident as you start or deepen your partnerships with students. The evidence we present of positive outcomes for both students and faculty will, we hope, give you a sense of what is possible. The examples of student-faculty partnership included in this book are drawn from programs we run or that we have studied as part of our research and also from examples colleagues have shared, both formally in print and more informally in conversation. Because we do not intend or claim to offer an exhaustive set of examples, we have chosen those that we feel effectively introduce a range of possibilities for partnership.

In many of the following chapters we include the voices of faculty and student partners. We have several reasons for including these voices. First, we believe that stories and insights offered by those who have direct experiences of partnership are often more powerful than someone else's summary or analysis. Second, in the spirit of partnership within which this book is written, we are committed to sharing some of its pages with the voices of those who have undertaken partnership work. Finally, we hope that hearing directly from participants in student-faculty partnerships will enable you to discern resonances or contrasts with your own efforts or aspirations. We cite the names of many of the students and faculty we quote throughout the book; however, some of these quotations were gathered while conducting research, and therefore we must preserve the anonymity of participants in those particular inquiries.

Some of what participants say reiterates the arguments we are making, but from a different angle. We also occasionally repeat ourselves across the chapters. We are quite intentional in this. We have learned from our own experiences and from many conversations with colleagues that true partnership requires significant shifts for many of us, and therefore, revisiting some key concepts and

challenges at different points across the book is intended to be helpful. Partnership is something of what Meyer and Land (2005) have called a threshold concept—both for faculty and for students (Cook-Sather, 2013a; King and Felten, 2012; Werder et al., 2012). As such, working through the complexities of partnership can be troublesome and often takes patience, requiring careful thinking, planning, experimentation, and reflection. As you will see in the examples we provide, partnership is iterative—it is work that requires revisiting and revising throughout the process.

Structure of the Book

We recognize that some people like to start with theory and then see practical examples, while others prefer to see examples first and then move to a consideration of the underlying theory. Because the partnership approach we advocate in this book requires such a significant rethinking of current notions and practices, we have chosen to present some practical examples early in the book to enable you to envisage what student-faculty partnerships might look like in practice. We share the principles that guide us and our definition of partnership up front, but we move quickly to the examples before stepping back from these to discuss benefits, cautions, and practical approaches that can help you develop your own version of student-faculty partnerships. So if you read the chapters in order, this is what you will find:

- Our guiding principles and definition of partnership
- Responses to preliminary questions you may have about student-faculty partnerships
- Examples of individual, program-level, and institutional-level student-faculty partnerships

- Research into the outcomes of partnerships
- Cautions to prepare you for challenges you may face in adopting a partnership approach
- Practical strategies for developing partnerships
- Discussion of further questions you may have
- An outline of approaches to assessing the processes and outcomes of student-faculty partnerships
- Some reflections on next steps in and toward a partnership movement

You may choose to read the chapters in the order they are presented, or you may jump around, creating your own order or focusing first on where you have greatest interest or the most questions. In many chapters we refer you to other places in the book that you might find helpful.

In Chapter 1 we open with a discussion of the three principles that we believe are the essential foundation of any student-faculty partnership, regardless of the particulars of individual practice: respect, reciprocity, and responsibility. Building on these principles, we detail what we mean by student-faculty partnerships and how they are different from the feedback exchanges faculty typically have with students. We identify norms in higher education that need to be revised in order for student-faculty partnerships to develop and flourish, we touch on precedents for student-faculty partnership, and we present a glimpse into the kinds of engagement and active learning that are possible through more collaborative forms of relationship. Our intention is not to present student-faculty partnerships as a panacea; indeed, concerns about power and culture, for example, underscore the need for careful and intentional steps in the process. However, the potential for significant learning, development, and even

transformation that arises from these practices should prompt everyone in higher education to consider the possibilities of student-faculty collaboration.

In Chapter 2 we address some preliminary questions you might have about developing student-faculty partnerships. These are the kinds of questions we have been asked repeatedly by many faculty colleagues, questions such as: How can students possibly help me explore or design learning and teaching, given that they are not experts in either subject matter or pedagogy? I have enough to do already without having to set up all these meetings with students; wouldn't it be quicker to do this on my own? And, why change my practice if I'm currently an effective teacher and my students are learning a lot? If you also have such questions, we hope our responses reassure you that you are not alone in raising them and prepare you for the subsequent two chapters, which offer you examples of student-faculty partnerships across a variety of contexts.

In Chapter 3 we outline numerous examples of partnerships that individual faculty have developed with students in a wide range of settings, whether or not they have support from colleagues or their institutions. We take as a starting point faculty-driven and faculty-developed approaches and present many varieties of student-faculty partnership involving different types of students, a focus on different elements of learning and teaching, and different levels of partnership. The examples we provide cannot and do not extend to every possible approach to this work. Instead, this chapter aims to give you some ideas of what might be possible for individual faculty who wish to engage students in meaningful partnerships. We have arranged our examples under three headings: (1) designing a course or elements of a course; (2) responding to students' experiences during a course; and (3) assessing student work. These are not, however, intended to be fixed

categories; some examples from each could easily fit into one or more of the others.

In Chapter 4 we present different program-level student-faculty partnerships. We outline examples of programs that support (1) designing or redesigning a course before or after it is taught; (2) analyzing classroom practice within the context of a course while it is being taught; and (3) developing research partnerships that catalyze institutional change. Under each heading we offer several short examples and one extended example of student-faculty partnerships. We feature, as case studies, programs with different purposes and in various contexts.

In Chapter 5 we synthesize the research on outcomes of student-faculty partnerships. We explore mutual benefits for students and faculty, including enhancing engagement, motivation, and learning; developing metacognitive awareness (awareness of one's own thinking and action) and a stronger sense of identity; and improving teaching and the overall classroom experience. We also discuss the ways in which student-faculty partnerships can benefit programs and institutions by creating a more collaborative culture in higher education contexts.

In Chapter 6 we focus on some of the challenges inherent in this work and some cautions should you choose to adopt a partnership approach. These include the necessity of working to find a balance of participation, power, and perspective; the imperative to consider perspectives from underrepresented students and faculty; the necessity of being careful and intentional regarding the language we use to describe this work; the wisdom of starting small rather than taking on too much too quickly; the danger of adopting processes and programs uncritically and embracing a one-size-fits-all model; and the risk of assuming that all students and faculty will be receptive to

the idea of partnership. Like Chapter 2, this chapter aims to address explicitly potential problems and pitfalls with the goal of helping you avoid common difficulties where possible and thoughtfully manage them where they are an inevitable dimension of this work.

In Chapter 7 we offer a set of practical strategies intended to guide you as you create or further develop student-faculty partnerships across different contexts. We offer three sections of concrete strategies: (1) getting started with student-faculty partnerships; (2) sustaining and deepening student-faculty partnership practices; and (3) negotiating roles and power within partnerships. This chapter should help you understand the big picture, the overarching ideas that unite the many forms of partnership, while also providing some broad yet concrete recommendations for practice. We outline approaches that can be used to develop a continuum of possible partnerships and that can be adapted to suit particular teaching and learning contexts.

In Chapter 8 we pose and address a further set of questions that may arise after you have deeply explored the notion of student-faculty partnership or have tried out some partnership activities. We offer responses in this chapter to questions about how to pursue partnerships in an institution that might not have a culture conducive to doing so, how to think about the role of change in student-faculty partnerships, and how to return to “regular” teaching and learning after having been in partnership. We also address other questions, including: How can I be in partnership with students if I am grading them? How do I engage disengaged students? Do I have to do everything my student partner recommends?

In Chapter 9 we present diverse approaches to assessing the outcomes of student-faculty partnerships. Consistent

with the repositioning of students as partners throughout the book, we critique the role that students currently play in assessment as well as explore the potential roles they could play in assessing teaching and learning in higher education contexts. We then offer guiding principles for, and examples of good practice in, capturing and assessing the outcomes of student-faculty partnerships in different contexts.

In Chapter 10 we provide a short summary of the main insights and arguments we have offered throughout the book. We also propose several areas for further consideration, including expanding student-faculty partnership work into new contexts both to support and to create new faculty roles; connecting with more diverse students; and preparing the next generation of faculty for a new kind of higher education. Finally, we posit that student-faculty partnerships might be understood—and embraced—as a movement.

A Note on Terminology

Educational terminology varies in different parts of the world, sometimes producing confusion or outright misunderstanding. We have adopted the common North American definition of words throughout this book but have noted below some of the terms that may perplex people in other parts of the world where meanings may differ.

Assessment: Stepping back from and analyzing progress in any educational endeavor—learning, teaching, research, pedagogical partnership—either in a formative way (during the process with the goal of using what is gathered to revise approaches) or in a summative way (with the goal of measuring and making judgments about what has been learned, taught, or accomplished after the process is completed). In some contexts "assessment" and "evaluation" are used interchangeably; in others, the way we define "assessment" here is more frequently called "evaluation."

College: A two- or four-year institution of higher education.

Faculty: Those responsible for teaching in higher education. In the United Kingdom, faculty are often called "academic staff."

Faculty development: The common U.S. term for academic or educational development.

Major: The main course of study undergraduate students pursue.

Minor: A smaller constellation of courses students often complete in addition to a major.

Service learning: An approach to teaching and learning that integrates meaningful community service with teaching and that supports regular, ongoing reflection to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities.

Students of color: Students who claim or are assigned racial or cultural characteristics that distinguish them from "white" students or those from European backgrounds (e.g., African American). This term

replaces “minority” and “non-white,” and is intended to be inclusive of all those who have experienced racism.

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