**What are the threshold concepts to partnership?**

In Chapter 1 of *Student-Faculty Pedagogical Partnerships in the Classroom and Curriculum: A How-To Guide for Faculty, Students, and Academic Developers in Higher Education*, we list the threshold concepts we have most often experienced or perceived as we have participated in and facilitated pedagogical partnerships. Here we reiterate the explanation of threshold concepts we offer in Chapter 1 and discuss in greater detail the threshold concepts we list there, including:

* Students have valuable knowledge of and important perspectives on teaching and learning
* Student partners are not subject matter experts
* Reciprocity in partnership does not mean exchanging exactly the same thing
* Faculty partners do not have to do whatever students say
* Partnership is not about finding what is wrong and fixing it
* Pedagogical partnership is about exchange, not change for the sake of change
* Partnership is about sharing power, not giving it up or taking it away
* Partnership is a process, not a product (although it can lead to products of various kinds)

As we discuss in Chapter 1, threshold concepts to partnership are notions that, if not addressed, can block or hinder the development of partnership. They need to be made explicit and grappled with if the potential of pedagogical partnership is to be realized. Below we discuss the threshold concepts we have most often experienced or perceived and offer participant perspectives on them.

**Students have valuable knowledge of and important perspectives on teaching and learning**

This is a threshold concept for both faculty and student partners. It often begins in an assumption that students make about themselves, that they don’t know anything about teaching and learning, but it can carry forward into partnership in the minds of both student and faculty partners. Traditional assumptions about who has legitimate knowledge about teaching and learning and who should have a role in conceptualizing, analyzing, and revising curricular and pedagogical practices are deeply entrenched in most institutions of higher education. In one of the first years we facilitated the SaLT program, a faculty member and a student partner offered the reflections in the box below:

|  |
| --- |
| “There’s a need to overcome something that I would have thought had I not heard [the students’] thoughtful comments: What do they know?” -Faculty partner in the SaLT program  “I was hesitant about my ability to do a good job given my lack of background in education, and given that I am just a student.” - Student partner in the SaLT program |

Writing from the perspective of director of the Students Consulting on Teaching (SCOT) program at Brigham Young University, Sorenson (2001, 179) offered one of the earliest arguments in support of students’ knowledge as valuable: “as experienced students, they are experts about sitting in classes, understanding new concepts, and creating their own learning.” Cook-Sather, Bovill, and Felten (2014, 15) have also argued that a student partner’s “experience and expertise typically is in being a student.”

But students are also knowers based on their identities and experiences beyond those of being a student. In a discussion of students of color and faculty working together to create more inclusive and responsive classrooms, Alison and a former student partner, Praise Agu, focused on the important knowledge students of color hold, which should be recognized as such rather than students being forced to seek “counter-spaces”—academic and social spaces on and off campuses “where deficit notions of people of color can be challenged and where a positive collegiate racial climate can be established and maintained” (Solórzano et al. 2000, 70). Alison and Praise wrote that: “When the identities, experiences, and knowledge of students of color are deemed legitimate resources rather than deficits as part of a humanizing effort that affords wide access, the need for counter-spaces outside the classroom is reduced” (Cook-Sather and Agu 2013, 280). Likewise, de Bie, Marquis, Cook-Sather, and Luqueño (2019) have argued that recognizing students as knowers is a form of epistemic justice: countering “the inequities that exist with regard to who counts as a knower, whose knowledge counts, and who gains access to participation in knowledge production.” Regardless of the framing one brings to the notion of students as knowers, if this basic threshold concept is not grasped, the potential of pedagogical partnership cannot be realized.

When faculty cross this threshold, they accept, welcome, and seek student perspectives for the knowledge inherent in them. As one faculty member explained:

There were a number of times when [the student consultant] was bringing positive observations that I wouldn’t necessarily have known—that so-and-so was feeling particularly interested and engaged by a topic or a teaching approach that I wouldn’t have necessarily thought about. I often felt like, “Oh, I didn’t see it that way, and now I do; now I have that perspective” (quoted in Cook-Sather 2014b, 37).

Students also need to cross this threshold. Alison and another student partner, Alia Luz, argue that: “To recognise oneself—and be recognised—as having ‘expertise’ that is ‘just as valid’ as the contributions faculty bring to conversations about pedagogical practice is necessary to move past the troublesome quality of student–faculty partnership” (Cook-Sather and Luz, 2015, 1101). When students cross this threshold, it looks like this:

I am more confident in what I know: I know what I experience and there is value in that. Just because I am not a professor doesn’t mean I don’t know what is going to work for me as a student. … And that’s been really helpful in my relationships with other professors. I get to bring up the conversation. I get to be a part of it. I don’t have to have all the answers, but I do know more than I thought I did. (Student partner quoted in de Bie et al. 2019)

The regular meetings—weekly, in the case of SaLT and many programs like it—in which student partners and program directors engage are one of the most important forums within which to support student partners in crossing this threshold. As we discuss in Chapters 4 and 5, these are spaces within which student partners have the opportunity to articulate and reflect on what they bring to pedagogical partnership, to develop and hone skills of communicating with faculty, and the confidence and conviction to engage in such analysis and dialogue. If program directors meet with faculty partners, that is a forum within which to emphasize that students bring knowledge that is not intended to replace or eclipse faculty knowledge but rather to complement it. And finally, as we discuss in Chapters 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8, the structures created within which faculty and student partners interact can support the shift in mindset and mode of engagement necessary for crossing this threshold.

**Student partners are not subject matter experts**

In most cases, student partners are not teaching assistants or peer tutors, those with subject matter expertise, although students in these roles might be equally qualified to be student partners in some cases. Assuming that a student partner is a TA or peer tutor is one of the most common misperceptions that faculty partners, student partners, and students enrolled in faculty members’ classes have and that can persist if not explicitly addressed. The assumption that student partners are TAs is based on the fact that TAs are a familiar role in most educational contexts. Therefore, people assume that if a student is not enrolled in a course but is involved in curricular or pedagogical conversations with faculty, that person must be a TA.

The key difference between a student partner and a TA role in classroom-focused pedagogical partnerships is that student partners typically do not focus on content. Rather, they focus on classroom environment, pedagogical practice, and learning, and they can ask “naive” questions that students with subject matter knowledge would likely not ask. This difference in knowledge and role necessitates a deep rethinking on the part of the faculty partner, the student partner, and the students enrolled in the course. As one new faculty member reflected: “This is something that I was at first very concerned about (how could a student who has never seen organic chemistry before give me feedback on my organic chemistry class?) but turned out to be wonderful (she was able to take a bird’s-eye view of the class and wasn’t caught up in the minutia)” (quoted in Cook-Sather et al. 2017, 4).

Program directors can clarify this distinction between student partner and TA for faculty and student partners prior to the onset of partnership. Drawing on the insights of student partners from other partnership programs or on their own if they have already piloted or run a program for some time, they can encourage experienced student partners to share their experiences.

Student partners will come at this distinction from another angle. In order to fully understand the difference between being a student partner and being a TA, one must experience the role itself. Experienced student partners can explain to newer student partners that this role focuses on providing extensive support through ongoing conversation in order to affirm and, where appropriate, support the revision of pedagogical practice. Experienced student partners have perceived this role as an atypical, immersive experience where they hold the responsibility of being a liaison between professors and students. Because student partners are first students before anything else, they use their experiences as students as a way to constantly frame suggestions and feedback to their faculty partners that students in the class might or might not necessarily feel comfortable sharing. The student partners’ feedback is conveyed through weekly syntheses and goal check-ins with their faculty partners. Additionally, while TAs assist with the logistics of lesson planning and potentially teaching in the classroom, student partners focus more on how faculty and students are navigating classroom culture and may see possibilities for advocating for unconventional pedagogy that best supports students’ learning. They learn that the initiative in such advocacy is supported by other student partners, who build on their ideas, and by the program director, who helps structure those ideas so that faculty can hear them.

Faculty partners can help the students in their course navigate the distinction between student partner and TA by addressing the difference explicitly when the student partner is introduced to the class. Explaining that the student partner is there to observe the class and support the faculty member’s teaching, but not to offer help to students with course content, can clarify the student partner role for enrolled students. This early clarification may also help students in the course feel that they are not being evaluated or judged by the student partner; the assumption that student partners are surveilling the classroom may be held by students as well as faculty. Faculty and student partners can also use the introduction of the student partner to the students in the class to delineate the ways that enrolled students should (or should not) provide feedback directly to the student partner. (We address the issue of peer relationships and boundaries between student consultants and students enrolled in a course in Chapter 8.) While an initial conversation may head off confusion about the student partner’s role in the course, if enrolled students continue to ask student partners to take on a TA’s responsibilities, the faculty partner might choose to address specific examples of what the student partner does *not* do and provide alternative resources or supports. (For example: “As a student partner, [name of student partner] will not offer review sessions before the midterm, but my office hours are \_\_\_ and I encourage you to review with your classmates.”)

All of this being said, there are cases, such as at Berea College, where student partners are also TAs. This is a necessity due to the nature of the institution, which the director of Berea’s partnership program explains in Chapter 3. But beyond this overlap of student partner and TA, there are reasons why subject matter expertise is not only unnecessary but also sometimes a hindrance. The faculty member in chemistry quoted above makes that clear, as do partners with other institutional roles, such as librarians, as evidenced by the boxed quote below:

|  |
| --- |
| “One of the largest benefits of the program was working with someone who had some distance from my field. My partner is a student, not a librarian, and as such, she could watch me teach and see those places where I was assuming too much about students’ prior knowledge.” - Amanda Peach, librarian, Berea College, in Ferrell & Peach, 2018 |

**Reciprocity in partnership does not mean exchanging exactly the same thing**

A widely cited definition of partnership that Alison developed in collaboration with colleagues is this: “A collaborative, reciprocal process through which all participants have the opportunity to contribute equally, although not necessarily in the same ways, to curricular or pedagogical conceptualization, decision making, implementation, investigation, or analysis” (Cook-Sather, Bovill, and Felten 2014, 6-7). The key idea in this definition that can constitute a threshold is that participants contribute equally. The reason this constitutes a threshold concept is the conflation of “equal” with “same” (See Healey et al., forthcoming, for a discussion of this important distinction).

The premise of pedagogical partnership is that partners can contribute to partnership in equal ways: listening at least as much as talking; trying to understand different perspectives and to not hold too tightly to their own perspective; giving and getting equal amounts of respect; equally sharing responsibility for the process of pedagogical exploration and engagement in learning. This distinction led Cook-Sather and Felten (2017, 181) to assert that partnership is a “process of balanced give-and-take not of commodities but rather of contributions: perspectives, insights, forms of participation.” It is enacted, as they argue, according to “an ethic of reciprocity.” The statements in the box below are two ways of many that faculty and student partners conceptualize this sense of reciprocity:

|  |
| --- |
| “Participating in this project gave me a sense of students being able and wanting to take certain pedagogical responsibility, and the counter of that is me taking a learning responsibility.” - Faculty participant in the SaLT program  “In past discussions I’ve always been talking about what the profs do to us and it’s been a one-way street. And now I am able to look at it as a relationship in the classroom; if we’re complaining about something that is going on it’s also the students’ role to step up and say something about that.” -Student partner in the SaLT program |

This is a particularly challenging concept because, again, most institutional structures militate against its embrace. Not only are faculty and students not understood to be working under an exchange model but also whatever they have to give is not perceived as equally valuable. We encourage all participants in pedagogical partnership to be intentional about identifying and valuing what others in partnership, as well as what they themselves, have to offer. Again, Chapter 4, with its focus on the shared responsibilities of facilitating pedagogical partnerships can help address this particular assumption and expectation.

**Faculty partners do not have to do whatever students say**

This is a threshold for both faculty and student partners, but it is typically one that faculty wrestle with more profoundly, since, if they have crossed the first threshold discussed above—that students have valuable knowledge of and important perspectives on teaching and learning—they can feel compelled to be guided by that knowledge and those perspectives when they are offered. However, the purpose of pedagogical partnership, in the SaLT program anyway, is to put into dialogue the different perspectives that faculty and student partners bring, not to impose student perspectives on faculty. One of the insights student partners gain through pedagogical partnership is that faculty have to teach in ways that work for them (while also being responsive to the diversity of their students), just as students need to learn in ways that work for them (while also recognizing that other students may learn differently).

When faculty cross this threshold, they experience a transformative and irreversible change in their understanding of what pedagogical partnership is—of what it means to be in genuine dialogue not only with their student partners but also with all their students. One faculty member captured this transformation in the terms included in the box below:

|  |
| --- |
| “I think when most faculty hear of a program in which students are involved as commentators and collaborators, they assume that the program is giving the students unfettered authority or equality in the teaching process. Or that the program is imposing the student’s authority into the teaching equation…I think I was assuming that the students were being presented as authoritative in such a way that I was obligated to FOLLOW WHAT THEY SAID, to grant them authority in how I managed the course. But I have been coming to realize that this is a very limited, either/or conception of this relationship — either that they have equality and authority or they don’t; either they are right or they are wrong; either I have to listen to them or I have to ignore them. What I’m just now appreciating is that the [SaLT program] is presenting a very different conception of the role students CAN play, but that the professor isn’t being asked to simply follow student advice, but rather to take them seriously as they INTERPRET student comments. I have to listen to my consultant (and my students more broadly) with a more multi-aural ear, hearing everything they say, generously filtering out the more naïve and unreasonable requests or analyses, but then resisting the temptation to be defensive or dismissive and instead listening AGAIN to what they’ve said in order to get to the core of truth and productiveness underlying their comments. When I took the time to really do this around the midterm, it made me see myself and my course in very different terms and it made it possible to change the way I was approaching things so as to improve and simplify the course in good ways. But I realize now that taking student contributions seriously DOES NOT mean blindly or directly following their opinions and suggestions, but rather taking them seriously, carefully reflecting on and analyzing them, and then addressing the core concerns behind them in a way that is consistent with my overall goals and values.” - Faculty partner in the SaLT program |

When pedagogical partners embrace the notion that faculty partners do not need to do whatever student partners say, the dialogue that partners can have opens up and deepens tremendously. They become trusted interlocutors, willing to share uncertainties, ideas, and possibilities, all with the understanding that the purpose of the exchange is exploration and deeper understanding, not one telling the other what to do.

When student partners cross this threshold, it releases them from the pressure they feel because of the assumption they bring, noted above, that their job is to find something in their faculty partner’s practice to critique and change. This assumption can take the form of the next threshold we discuss.

**Partnership is not about finding what is wrong and fixing it**

We mentioned above that many faculty fear that they are under surveillance (which assumes someone is there to find something wrong or problematic) and many students enter into partnership thinking that their job in pedagogical partnership in particular is to find something wrong with their faculty partners’ pedagogical practice and fix it. This is not surprising. In addition to the increasing surveillance culture, one of the enduring hallmarks of much of higher education is the high value placed on critical thinking. Faculty and students alike are expected to identify what’s wrong with or missing from previous analyses, arguments, and approaches and to correct those errors and omissions. Because this is the mindset of intellectual work in higher education generally, it is often the mindset that both faculty and students bring to partnership. It is not, however, a mindset that is conducive to partnership. There are two key reasons why this threshold concept is important to address.

First, it creates a negative frame for student partners that can adversely affect them and their faculty partners. It exacerbates a fear and uncertainty virtually all student partners have about themselves—that they may not be up to the task of partnership—and it means that they enter partnership looking for pedagogical problems in their faculty partners’ work. The former is a problem because it sets student partners up to feel that if they do not find something “wrong” with their faculty partners’ practice, they are failing at their jobs. The latter is a problem because it sets up an evaluative rather than a collaborative dynamic and threatens to make faculty feel vulnerable and defensive. For these reasons, we recommend that all participants dwell on this threshold concept that partnership is not about finding what is wrong and fixing it and intentionally focus on reframing partnership in positive terms. One of the assertions Alison makes every semester in her meetings with student partners working in classroom-based pedagogical partnerships is that if student partners spend the entire semester noting what is working well in their faculty partners’ classrooms and why, and neither they nor their faculty partners find anything ‘wrong” in need of fixing, they will have done their jobs because the purpose of the partnerships is dialogue to clarify and deepen understanding, not fixing or changing for change’s sake (the next threshold concept we address).

The second reason this threshold is key focuses on faculty experience. If one of the goals of pedagogical partnership is to create spaces within which faculty can explore and experiment, share their in-process thinking as well as well-formulated commitments, then focusing on what is wrong, if indeed there is anything “wrong,” works against those purposes. While there may be aspects of pedagogical practice or curriculum design that would benefit from revision, pedagogical partnerships will be far more productive if faculty and student partners focus first on what is working well and why and then move to what might be improved. The box below captures this point:

|  |
| --- |
| “Student partners’ focus on affirmation and re-affirmation builds trust and confidence. It also gives faculty the opportunity to clarify their pedagogical rationales, perhaps for the first time, to themselves, their student partners, and, in turn, to their own students. Finally, it creates a foundation from which faculty can engage in genuine exploration and productive risk taking in partnership with their student consultants. This exploration also includes discussions of approaches that did not go as well, affording space for the partners to focus on what could be done well next time and making disappointing results of any given effort seems less discouraging.” - Cook-Sather, Schlosser, Sweeney, Peterson, Cassidy, and Colón García 2017, 7 |

Typically, it takes many repetitions on Alison’s part to convince both student and faculty partners that partnership is not about finding what is wrong and fixing it. When faculty and student partners do cross this threshold, accept the empowering potential of affirmation or of deepening understandings of what works well and why, they can relax into their shared exploration. They might well find things to change, but their approach to exploring and deciding about those will be very different from an approach framed as looking for problems from the start.

**Pedagogical partnership is about exchange, not change for the sake of change**

Related to the threshold concept discussed above, this threshold concept also arises from the standard emphases in higher education. In most cases, observations or other forms of structured analyses of the work that faculty do are framed in terms of what needs to change. Some faculty and some students pursue partnership because they want to improve pedagogical practice or curriculum design, but others seek out partnership to affirm or clarify already successful approaches. Reasons for undertaking pedagogical partnership can be as varied as the participants themselves, but it is essential to keep in mind that “the goal of student-faculty partnership work is not change for change’s sake but rather to achieve a deeper understanding of teaching and learning that comes from shared analysis and revision” (Cook-Sather, Bovill, and Felten, 2014, 23).

One of the most powerful outcomes of pedagogical partnership is when the collaboration helps reaffirm and clarify why a particular course design or pedagogical approach works well, and, in turn, the faculty member is able to make her ongoing practices more explicit to the students enrolled in the course. It may also be that a student partner offers a wide range of recommendations that inspire the faculty partner to redesign entirely a course or an approach, and everything in between. In the box below, a faculty member captures this complexity:

|  |
| --- |
| “[My student-consultant] provided plenty of positive reinforcement (which was great, very empowering) and identified a couple of issues to work on/watch out for in the future. It’s funny, it is so easy to think that only negative criticism will suggest change...but that really isn’t true. Having something that works pointed out is just as effective, since it can lead you to think, ‘Oh, I should do that more!’ or, ‘How can I work that into future classes/discussions?’” -Faculty partner in the SaLT program |

**Partnership is about sharing power, not giving it up or taking it away**

Among the fears that some faculty can feel in relation to partnership is that they will have to give up their power and authority to be in partnership with students. The premise of partnership, however, is that power is shared. This threshold concept, like those discussed above, arises in part because of the nature of relationships in higher education, which are typically hierarchical and generally assign clearly defined roles and amounts of power to differently positioned people in the hierarchy. Therefore, a dynamic that calls for working across those roles and positions in unfamiliar ways can prompt participants to fall back on assumptions that power needs to be given or taken away, rather than shared.

When faculty cross this threshold, though, they recognize the potential of partnership to change these dynamics not only within but also beyond partnership. As a team of faculty, staff, and students that worked to re-design a course came to see: “By working together to take full advantage of all of the team’s expertise, we began to understand the true meaning and importance of shared power through collaboration” (Mihans, Long, and Felten 2008, 5). Another faculty member explained: “[I became] more willing to trust student partners by sharing power with them, not exerting it over them” (Delpish et al. 2010, 98).

One last point about power: some faculty fear student empowerment, equating it with protests and attacks on faculty. What research and our own experiences demonstrate repeatedly, however, is that pedagogical partnership actually makes students *more* empathetic with, understanding of, and supportive of faculty (Cook-Sather and Mejia 2018). Having worked in partnership, students become “a lot more understanding of teachers and where they struggled”; they find that they are “more sympathetic toward faculty members”; they become “more compassionate towards [their] professors, more empathetic”; because they gain insight into “how hard [their] faculty partners were working, [they become] a lot less likely to disparage their own teachers and less willing to tolerate that from other people” (student partners quoted in Cook-Sather 2018a) These assertions affirm the close connection between shared power and shared responsibility. The faculty and student quotes in the box below illustrate this connection:

|  |
| --- |
| “I work with students more as colleagues, more as people engaged in similar struggles to learn and grow. I have become even more convinced that students are experts in learning and essential partners in the task of creating and developing new courses and refining existing ones.” - Faculty partner in SaLT  “All of my classrooms feel like a partnership now, instead of the students versus the professor. I’ve started thinking about ways I can help make the discussions better for everyone in the class, including the professor, instead of just for me.” - Student partner in SaLT |

When student and faculty partners embrace partnership, they find that what they co-create is a great deal more than any sum of parts. Such co-creation is not about erasing or eliminating power; it is about being intentional in how you understand and work with power as a shared dynamic.

**Partnership is a process, not a product (although it can lead to products of various kinds)**

All of the threshold concepts we have discussed so far are connected to this final one. Increasingly, so much in higher education needs to be goal directed, measurable, and product focused. But partnership focuses on bringing together differently positioned people in higher education who are all “actively engaged in and stand to gain from the process of learning and working together” (Healey, Flint, and Harrington 2014, 12). Partnership is “a way of doing things, rather than an outcome in itself” (Healey et al. 2014, 7). Thus, “the linchpin of partnership,” as Matthews (2016) has argued, “is a relational process between students and academics/staff underpinned by a mindset.” The mindset recognizes that what unfolds along the way is as if not more important than what comes out at the end.

While everyone is responsible for engaging in and supporting this process, program directors have special responsibility for how programs are framed and facilitated. We discuss that responsibility and how it can be enacted in Chapters 3 and 4, but here we want to make two points. Given all these thresholds that participants in pedagogical partnership need to cross, it is especially important to be empathetic in all directions (in response to the kinds of effort that faculty and students put into their partnerships and that program directors put into support those) and understanding of different kinds of challenges that all participants in partnership experience. As we emphasize in our point about the importance of affirmation, amplifying positive things that each partner brings and that might not otherwise be articulated helps to build trust, adds legitimacy and weight to those positive comments. Every new partnership requires becoming a different version of yourself in response to the demands/needs of a new partner.

The process of partnership—and reflecting on that process—are among the most gratifying experiences faculty and student partners describe. We conclude this chapter with their reflections:

|  |
| --- |
| “Before partnering with faculty, the only self-reflection I’d done in any systematic way was writing end-of-semester self evaluations for the odd class that asked for it. As a [student] consultant, I thought about my responsibility as a student, my learning, my impact on others’ learning, my identity, and how all of these intersected with classroom pedagogy on a weekly basis. I valued this reflection because, through it, I became a better student and a better ally to my peers.” - Student partner quoted in Cook-Sather, Abbot, and Felten 2019  “Being an informal and inductive process, shared reflection allowed for a wide range of experiences and ideas to enter the funnel of refinement. We literally told stories for a while and then began to recognize central elements in the stories, along with emerging themes from the separate examples. […] A more structured form of inquiry, perhaps with standardized prompts, might have missed some of the stories that popped up only because they were interesting or memorable.” - Faculty partner quoted in Cook-Sather, Abbot, amd Felten 2019 |