

### The role of growth mindsets in developing pedagogical partnership programs: findings from a cross-institutional study

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#### Abstract

As interest in pedagogical partnership programs expands around the globe, questions arise about what it takes to launch and sustain such programs. The role of growth mindsets in developing and sustaining partnership emerged as a prominent theme through our analysis of responses to a survey sent to the directors of and participants in partnership programs at thirty-eight institutions in nine countries. We offer an overview of the survey responses, explain how growth mindsets emerged as a theme and then focus our discussion on how drawing on and developing growth mindsets constitute a generative way of thinking about partnership work.

#### Introduction

Pedagogical partnership seeks to “engage students as co-learners, co-researchers, co-inquirers, co-developers, and co-designers” (Healey *et al.*, 2016, p.2) with faculty, administrators and other students. Such partnership work is often defined as “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 *et al.*, 2014, pp. 6-7). The last decade has seen the development of programs devoted to supporting this work at a variety of post-secondary institutions worldwide. This proliferation across contexts and types of institutions reflects the growing enthusiasm about research findings on the potential of partnership to deepen engagement and enhance learning and teaching (Cook-Sather *et al.*, 2014; Mercer-Mapstone *et al.*, 2017) and to foster more equitable and inclusive practices (Cook-Sather *et al.*, 2019; de Bie *et al.*, 2019).

In an effort to learn from institutions that have launched pedagogical partnership programs about the influence of institutional conditions on, barriers and challenges to and dreams for such programs, we sent a survey to program directors at thirty-eight institutions in nine countries.<sup>1</sup> In this discussion, we offer an overview of our findings. We then explain how growth mindsets (Dweck, 2015) emerged as a theme through our interpretations of the survey responses. Finally, we focus our discussion on how drawing on and developing growth mindsets constitute a generative way of thinking about partnership work.

#### Background

Pedagogical partnership can unfold in four broad and often overlapping arenas (Healey *et al.*, 2014). Student and faculty partners might co-create criteria for course assignments (Deeley and Brown, 2014) – an example of the first arena: learning, teaching, and assessment. They might work together in a lab over a summer (Laursen *et al.*, 2010) – an

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example of the second arena: subject-based research. They might investigate the teaching and learning experiences of a group of students enrolled in a course (Sandover *et al.*, 2012) – an example of the third arena: scholarship of teaching and learning. Or they might work together for a semester to create a module (Goff and Knorr, 2018) or to improve the alignment between pedagogy and evaluation (Schlosser and Sweeney, 2015) – examples of the fourth arena: curriculum design and pedagogic consultancy. All such work requires complex negotiations of power and responsibility (Mihans *et al.*, 2008; Kehler *et al.*, 2017; Luo *et al.*, 2019) and of identities (Matthews, 2018; Mercer-Mapstone *et al.*, 2018).

While this work is often undertaken by pairs or teams of students and faculty without wider institutional support, more and more institutions are developing programs to support pedagogical partnerships. Such programs provide spaces within which faculty and student partners can “*experiment and learn from our mistakes and innovations*” (Schlosser and Sweeney, 2015, p.1), and they create ‘as-if’ spaces in which participants can experience partnership as a way of being that they then enact beyond the spaces of partnership (Cook-Sather and Felten, 2017a). Launching a pedagogical partnership program can involve professional risks as program leaders make “*deliberate choices*” and take “*serendipitous steps*” that do not guarantee success but do “*wear the ways for future travelers*” (Ahmad and Cook-Sather, 2018, p.9). Program directors aim to support faculty “*not only to learn to be a better teacher but also to develop teaching styles to grow with the students and culture on campus*” (Oleson and Hovakimyan, 2017, p.3; also, Goldsmith *et al.*, 2017).

Like the partnership work on which it reports, this article was co-researched and co-authored by differently positioned participants in partnership. Miciah is a former undergraduate student who has participated in a classroom-focused pedagogical partnership with a faculty member; Launa is a former staff member and a current faculty member who has supported the facilitation and launch of pedagogical partnership programs; and Alison is faculty member who has participated in and directed a long-standing pedagogical partnership program and supported many other institutions in launching such programs.

### Methods

We chose to focus on pedagogical partnership programs that are institution-wide (sponsored by teaching and learning centers or institutes), take curricular design and pedagogical consultancy as a primary – although not necessarily exclusive – focus and support over-time partnerships (as opposed to one-time student observations of classes), because these are the programs that are proliferating most rapidly. Our sample does not, therefore, encompass every kind of partnership that exists (see <https://www.mickhealey.co.uk/resources> for examples of more partnership initiatives).

We sent a survey approved by Bryn Mawr College’s ethics board to directors of thirty-eight pedagogical partnership programs in Aotearoa New Zealand, Australia, Canada, England, Grenada, Hong Kong, Israel, Italy and the United States. We asked the directors of these programs to respond and also to invite participants in their programs to respond to eight survey questions:

1. Describe how the pedagogical partnership program you have developed or are developing is designed (how it is structured, how long partnerships last [e.g., a

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- semester], what the focus of partnerships tends to be [e.g., consultancies, research, course redesign etc.] and any other detail).
2. What is the range of types of partnership your program supports (e.g. student-faculty; student-staff; student-administrator; and other)?
  3. How long has your partnership program existed or is it still in the conceptualization stage?
  4. What, from your perspective, were the needs and hopes that inspired your conceptualizing/launching a pedagogical partnership program?
  5. What, from your perspective, were the barriers or challenges to developing a pedagogical partnership program?
  6. What were the conditions/climate/support structures at your institution that facilitated the conceptualization and/or development of the program?
  7. If you could dream big – imagine partnership on whatever scale you might, ideally, enact it – what would that vision look like?
  8. What advice do you have for people/institutions just starting out developing a pedagogical partnership program?

We also included optional questions about institutional context and dimensions of participant identities.

We received forty-one survey responses. While not all respondents identified their roles, responses were from: eleven program directors, most of whom were also faculty members; nineteen faculty members who participated as partners; ten student partners; and four administrators who also had other roles (president of the college, faculty member, former student partner). We read participant perspectives using constant comparison thematic analysis (Creswell, 2006; Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

### Findings

Below, we provide brief summaries of the findings from all of the survey questions, conveying in a condensed form the main points respondents made.

#### ***Program design, types of partnership and duration of programs***

Responses to the first three questions of our survey revealed that all programs on which participants reported – those based at large research universities, small liberal arts colleges, community colleges and medium-sized teaching-intensive institutions – focused on student-faculty partnership, with four also mentioning partnership with community. Of those respondents who named a focus of their student-faculty partnership structures, ten indicated a focus on learners' perspectives, eight on professional development, six on student voice, four on connecting student and faculty perspectives, three on student engagement and two on equity and inclusion. The programs represented in our survey had been in existence from between six months and nine years and several had ended.

#### ***Needs and hopes that inspired the launch of a pedagogical partnership program***

In response to our question about the needs and hopes that inspired the conceptualization or launch of a pedagogical partnership program, respondents named a variety that pointed to the possibility of what one respondent called a “*shared project of education*”. These included: bridging the gap between faculty and student perspectives; providing faculty

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development opportunities; promoting equity and inclusion; gathering student feedback for faculty; creating meaningful classroom experiences for students; and empowering students with leadership experiences.

Highlighting the gap between faculty and student perspectives, for instance, one program director respondent noted that both students and faculty in one institutional context *“carried a number of assumptions about each other”* that made it hard to connect and grow and this director’s hope was *“that partnership could help rebuild some trust between students and faculty, and support this teaching-centered culture in a formative rather than evaluative way”*. In keeping with the hope of promoting equity and inclusion, another respondent saw *“the need (and potential) for the program to help a predominantly white faculty and staff become much more aware and self-aware in relation to the experiences of students of color, students from backgrounds quite different from their own.”* And a respondent who identified as a first-generation college student emphasized the importance of students having *“a voice in the learning process”* and highlighted how their learning through partnership *“about how to succeed in college”* complemented faculty partners’ *“changing [their] perception and techniques in the teaching and learning environment in higher education”*.

### **Conditions**

Recognizing the context-dependent nature of pedagogical partnership work (Healey and Healey, 2018), we asked participants about the conditions at their institution that facilitated the conceptualization and/or development of their program. The top four conditions respondents noted were: location of the partnership program in a center (39%), campus culture (32%), grassroots support (27%) and administrative support (27%). Touching on several of these, one respondent traced the development of partnership from informal activities *“without the explicit name of partnership”* through grassroots networks that introduced *“the explicit language”* of partnership through the inclusion of partnership *“as a central pillar in a major university policy document driving the allocation of financial resources”* through the founding of *“a formal institutional program... called 'student-staff partnership”*. This respondent expressed the hope that partnership *“will always be developing”*.

### **Barriers and challenges**

In acknowledgement that barriers and challenges can impede partnership work (Bovill *et al.*, 2011; Marquis *et al.*, 2019; Mercer-Mapstone *et al.*, 2017), we asked participants about those in their respective contexts. The most commonly cited challenge was dealing with reservations, trust and expectations (41%), including *“acceptance of the professors”*, *“administrative fear”* and *“the intricacies of power”*. The second most common challenge was *“the perennial time conundrum”*, mentioned in 38% of responses – the challenges of recruiting partners willing to find, make and hold time and organizing that time into *“meetings with students, meetings with faculty”* and meetings between them. Following this, 20% of respondents pointed to insufficient funding as a barrier to enacting partnership.

### **Dreams**

In response to the question about what their vision for partnership would look like, 31% of respondents indicated that they wanted to see partnerships expand within their institutions

and 16% mentioned creating a network of student partners across institutions. One respondent captured this desire for expansion of *“the ethos”* of partnership, which *“would be embodied in everyday pedagogical practices and curriculum work”*, thereby *“engendering a sense of student and academic agency that naturally flowed into everyday work of the university”*.

### ***Advice for those planning to launch partnership programs***

We group the recommendations that respondents offered for developing pedagogical partnership programs into five main categories, presented in the order that those seeking to launch partnership programs might want to consider them.

- *Build on existing resources.* Seven respondents advised: utilizing scholarship on partnership; starting from a model that can be adapted to fit a particular context; and recognizing and expanding on the forms of partnership already present within an institution. As one respondent put it, *“be inspired”* by the wealth of partnership that already exists.
- *Design with the intention to grow.* Fifteen respondents advised starting small, while creating the structures necessary to expand. They advised program developers to embed evaluative measures in the design of the program and be intentional in *“choice of faculty and students”* in the initial cohort in order to set a positive tone for and inspire growth of the program.
- *Secure support for the launch.* Eight respondents offered specific advice for launching programs, including building strong foundational support and securing buy-in from faculty, students and administration. Seventy-five per cent of respondents mentioned recognizing that faculty and students can serve as staunch advocates for a program. Respondents noted the importance of being *“fully supported by the administration”* to sustain, financially and structurally, a pedagogical partnership program and creating positions such as post-baccalaureate fellows – recent graduates of undergraduate colleges who take on staff roles – who are *“former participants as student partners themselves”* and who bring a perspective program directors *“could never”* have.
- *Communicate to a wider audience.* Eight respondents suggested that program developers should, when planning a partnership program, consider how to articulate their goals to faculty, administrators and students. They recommended *“link[ing] to a strategic agenda”*, *“finding your allies”* and doing some *“seed-planting’ for partnership”*.
- *Engage students authentically and ethically.* Ten respondents advised developers of new programs to embed partnership in the program design process in order to engage students as authentic partners throughout and beyond that process. They advised against tokenizing student partners as convenient *“student endorses”* and, instead, recommended advocating for students to receive compensation for their time and expertise, constructing a collaborative work environment with partnership embedded meaningfully in its structure and ensuring students have an understanding of university decision-making processes.

### Discussion

Our findings confirm the benefits and challenges other studies of partnership have found (Marquis *et al.*, 2019, 2018; Mercer-Mapstone *et al.*, 2017; Matthews *et al.*, 2019). Furthermore, the advice that participants in our survey offered is consistent with that offered by other scholars of pedagogical partnership who have analyzed a wide range of programs (Cook-Sather, Bovill, and Felten, 2014; Healey, Flint and Harrington, 2014) as well as with that offered through how-to editorials (Healey and Healey, 2018) and guides (Cook-Sather, Bahti and Ntem, 2019). As we analyzed the responses to all the survey questions, we were struck by how the attitudes and approaches emphasized by respondents paralleled qualities of “*growth mindsets*” (Dweck, 2015).

Dweck (2015) coined the term “*growth mindsets*” to describe people's beliefs that talents and abilities can be developed through “*hard work, good strategies, and good mentoring*” (p.10). Conversely, “*fixed mindsets*” are beliefs that talent and abilities are fixed or unchangeable. Applying these notions to contexts such as school, work, athletics and the arts, Dweck (2008) found that people who held growth mindsets showed greater achievements and engagement in their work and their learning. Growth mindsets are associated with greater student achievement and engagement in learning (Dweck, 2008; 2016) and educators who adopt growth mindsets not only believe they can improve, but are more likely to seek out opportunities to learn (Gero, 2013); they also model for their students these beliefs in their abilities (Auten, 2013). Students and educators who hold growth mindsets share a common perseverance, desire and willingness to learn (Gero, *op.cit.*).

Our data highlighted the interconnectedness between growth mindsets and learning: several respondents articulated the *learning potential* of partnership. Participant responses all showed not only a common perseverance, desire and willingness to learn (Gero, *op.cit.*) required for partnership, but also that they believed they could learn *from each other*. The survey responses revealed, like much literature on partnership, a willingness and even eagerness on the part of faculty to work with students in non-traditional ways and to value what students bring to the collaboration as a source of learning. Likewise, they revealed the importance of creating structures and practices that recognize students – and allow students to see themselves – as active agents in their learning and in transforming institutional norms and educational approaches. Like the students-as-change-agents approach, developed at the University of Exeter and the University of Nottingham, which “*explicitly supports a view of the student as ‘active collaborator’ and ‘co-producer,’ with the potential for transformation*” (Dunne, in Foreword to Dunne and Zandstra, 2011, p.4), growth mindsets emphasize active, engaged, strategic learning. In our analysis of participants’ responses, we saw the emphasis not only on students, but also on faculty engaging in such learning through processes based on respect, reciprocity and shared responsibility – the premises of pedagogical partnership (Cook-Sather, Bovill and Felten, 2014).

The language survey respondents used echoed the language used in partnership literature, which points to the growth mindsets participants in partnership draw on and develop to enact partnership, even though the literature does not specifically use the term ‘growth mindsets’. As we noted in our background section, partnerships allow faculty and students to “*experiment and learn from our mistakes and innovations*” (Schlosser and Sweeney, 2015, p.1) – an enactment of growth mindsets. Similarly, the ‘as-if’ spaces of partnership (Cook-Sather and Felten, 2017a) are particular places of learning that draw on and nurture growth

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mindsets. Directors likewise draw on and model growth mindsets in the choices they make and the steps they take to support partnership (Ahmad and Cook-Sather, 2018). And finally, growth mindsets are evident in descriptions of partnership as fostering the development of teaching styles that *“grow with the students and culture on campus”* (Oleson and Hovakimyan, 2017). In the remainder of our discussion, we revisit the findings we presented in the previous section and explore further how drawing on and developing growth mindsets is a generative way of thinking about partnership work.

In regard to needs and hopes participants expressed, the program director’s goal to *“rebuild some trust”* between students and faculty to promote learning reflects both the director’s growth mindset and her invitation to faculty and students to develop growth mindsets as well. Furthermore, when faculty change their *“perception and techniques in the teaching and learning environment in higher education”* to be more inclusive of a diversity of students, as one student respondent noted, they are drawing on and developing growth mindsets.

We also interpreted the theme of growth mindsets in participants’ responses to the survey question about conditions for developing partnership programs. One can approach the development of partnership programs with the fixed mindset that institutional structures and practices are intractable and thus will always impede the development and flourishing of such programs. Alternatively, one can embrace a growth mindset and pursue patterns of possibility, like the respondent who traced the development of partnership from informal activities through grassroots networks through the inclusion of partnership in university policy documentation through the founding of a formal institutional program.

Participants’ responses regarding barriers revealed another aspect of the fixed/growth mindset phenomenon. While it is important to acknowledge that the most common barrier participants cited – dealing with reservations, trust and expectations – may be prompted by *“the unrelenting measurement of performance”* that is *“institutionalized and normalized in everyday life”* (Lynch, 2010, p.55) in many higher education contexts, another set of factors that influence these responses is the threshold concept to partnership – that students have valuable knowledge of and important perspectives on teaching and learning (Cook-Sather, Bahti and Ntem, 2019). A lack of confidence in students’ knowledge about teaching and a diminished sense of trust in the partnership process reflect fixed mindsets about both faculty and student roles in teaching and learning. In contrast, survey responses highlighted the need for individuals to see beyond traditional academic roles – countering what one faculty member called the *“growing us-them divide between students and academics”* – that position faculty as the holders and gatekeepers of knowledge and students as the mere recipients of that knowledge. We saw growth mindsets reflected in respondents’ recognition that both students and faculty hold and can deepen or expand legitimate knowledge about and capacity in teaching and learning.

The second most common barrier – time – can also be understood through the framework that growth mindset offers. While working with students as partners takes more time than working alone, *“the time you spend creating and building partnership that enhances student engagement and accountability is time you save later on”* (Cook-Sather et al., 2014, p.17). Furthermore, while there is no question that busy schedules make it difficult for people to find time for partnership work, such work can be energizing and time can actually feel more expansive, accommodating and generative. While not denying the time constraints people feel, our data revealed that trading – for a more fluid focus on energy – the fixed notion of

time that typical academic schedules reflect can change the way participants experience and think about time.

The desire to expand partnership both within institutions and beyond institutions – the most common ‘dream’ participants shared – is a reflection of the belief in the possibility of improvement and the desire for opportunities to learn (Gero, 2013). And the advice respondents offered also reflects growth mindsets: the advice to “*design with the intention to grow*” and the recommendation to select a cohort that understands the reciprocal value of learning place growth mindset at the program’s core. Similarly, the recommendation to engage students authentically and ethically, as opposed to tokenizing them, disrupts certain embedded assumptions about what faculty development can mean and requires people who do this work to embrace a growth mindset.

### Conclusion

We set out to learn from directors of and participants in pedagogical partnership programs what it takes to launch and sustain such programs. The survey responses, particularly the advice, provided numerous answers to that question. Our data also prompted us to link with the notion of growth mindsets these responses and other research findings about the attitudes and approaches required for the development and flourishing of pedagogical partnership programs. It is through this reading of our data that we have been able to provide a new way of thinking about partnership. Participating in pedagogical partnership programs affords both students and faculty a unique opportunity to be in continuing dialogue about their learning.

Through partnership, both student and faculty partners engage in the “*hard work, good strategies, and good mentoring*” (Dweck, 2015, p.10) that support achievement and engagement in all partners’ work and learning (Dweck, 2008). Our survey respondents highlighted the importance of continuous growth to keep educational practice dynamic and vibrant. They thereby revealed that pedagogical partnerships can be common spaces where partners can enact and develop growth mindsets. Moreover, partnership invites participants to adopt shared identities as *learners* and collaborate in the joint work of teaching and learning. Our respondents helped us see *how* growth mindsets were embodied and enacted through partnership programs. They illustrated the importance of recognizing students as teachers as well as learners, of faculty embracing a commitment “*not only to learn to be a better teacher but also to develop teaching styles to grow with the students and culture on campus*” (Oleson and Hovakimyan, 2017) and of the openness, receptivity and dedication of all involved to engaging in learning.

Often, higher education institutions push to scale rapidly such initiatives as partnership programs, to increase participation numbers and to serve as selling points. Like many of our respondents, we recommend starting small partnership programs and leveraging the partnership ethos and practices that already exist at an institution (Cook-Sather, 2020). When participants start by embracing growth mindsets toward and through pedagogical partnership, rather than focusing on growth in terms of numbers, teaching and learning might then be enacted as a shared endeavor in a sustainable way.



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