

***Co-creating Equitable Teaching and Learning: Structuring Student Voice into Higher Education* by Alison Cook-Sather**

A Book Review by Mara Wald (Bryn Mawr College)

It is rare to have experienced the phenomena described in a book – not just in the abstract, but literally. That is case for me with [*Co-creating Equitable Teaching and Learning: Structuring Student Voice into Higher Education*](#) by Alison Cook-Sather. As previewed in Chapter 1 and elaborated on in Chapter 5, the book is guided by an overarching principle of supporting partnership in education among students, staff, faculty, and institutional leaders in pursuit of equity, agency, and resistance to white supremacy culture. In this review, I draw on my unique perspective of how this book addresses the role of partnership work in providing support for improving students' mental health and creating a sense of belonging.

Drawing on co-creation defined as “shared decision-making, shared responsibility and negotiation of learning and teaching” (Bovill, 2020, p 2), the book offers three sub-principles. The first is to be guided by a commitment to equity (Chapter 2), with equity encompassing access, inclusion, affirmation, agency and justice. This principle is essential for ensuring that higher education is more equitable for all students, and student-faculty partnerships have the potential to foster this principle and practice through first enacting it in partnership and then supporting in teaching practice (de Bie et al, 2021). Drawing on hooks's (1994) call to push beyond boundaries and interrogate systems of domination, the second principle is to provide structures, not prescriptions, for engagement (Chapter 3). This principle focuses on each student individualizing what they get out of courses, and it allows partnerships to be tailored to

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the needs of participants, and therefore supports agency and the pursuit of education as the practice of freedom (hooks, 1994), rather than following set and oppressive ways to engage. The third principle is to make, rather than take up, space for learning and growth (Chapter 4). Rather than being solely facilitator-directed, co-creation supports opening different spaces so participants' lived experiences can be in dialogue with one another. This builds on the partnership principles of "respect, reciprocity, and shared responsibility" (Cook-Sather et al, 2014). Each chapter integrates student-authored vignettes of their experiences and works through how the focal principle plays out at course, program and institutional levels. The Foreword and Afterword are written by recent undergraduates who participated in one or more of the co-creation efforts analyzed in the book.

As an undergraduate senior at Bryn Mawr College, I have participated in all three levels of co-creation that Cook-Sather describes across these principles. In the spring 2023 semester, I completed the undergraduate education course Cook-Sather uses as her focal example. During the 2022-2024 academic years, I served as a pedagogical consultant to a faculty member through the Students as Learners and Teachers (SaLT) program which Cook-Sather uses as an example of programmatic co-creation. Since spring of 2022, I have co-facilitated Pedagogy Circles for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, one of the examples of inter-institutional forums Cook-Sather describes at the institutional level of co-creation. I can attest to the ways that course, program and institutional level co-creation can make space for learning, growth, and support for students like me and many others.

Being guided by a commitment to equity is core to my experience on all three levels of co-creation. While the students enrolled on the undergraduate course come from a wide variety of experiences at our institution, we all want to find a way to make higher education institutions more equitable and accessible. The course focuses on understanding systemic inequities within higher education and finding specific mechanisms to interrogate and transform these inequities. Similarly, in the role of SaLT pedagogical consultants, my fellow student consultants and I work to support our faculty partners in developing accessible and inclusive classroom

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environments. Through understanding my faculty partner's commitment to focus on student success and sensitivity to cultural differences and identity in the classroom, I was able to help him find ways of aligning his pedagogical practices with those commitments. Finally, co-facilitating the weekly open-forum, open-ended conversations we call Pedagogy Circles for Diversity, Equity and Inclusion entails holding all participants (co-facilitators included) accountable for not just discussing the pursuits of equity and justice, but also enacting commitments that arise during our conversation.

Across course, program and institutional levels, open-ended structures, not prescriptions, for engagement allowed to me experience an immense amount of growth and awareness of how I personally learn best and feel connected. At course level, each student is encouraged to explore a form of transformation that feels significant to us. Each assignment has guiding structures, but each student generates their own criteria, which we are expected to meet in ways that are most productive for our own learning and exploring. In my work as a SaLT student consultant, I adapt the programmatic guidelines for myself and for my faculty partner in our one-on-one exchanges. Pedagogy Circles feel perhaps the most open-ended of the three levels, simply because they are comprised of a collection of people coming from a wide range of places who can use the weekly structure to enhance their own goals and purposes for learning and growth.

Embracing the principle of making, rather than taking up, space for learning and growth has allowed me as a student to lean into my own agency and make human connections. At course level, the co-created classroom environment has a deeply engaged feeling, which makes space to build relationships that further our personal and collective learning goals. In SaLT, the one-on-one relationship built within programmatic structures has allowed me, as a liminally positioned student, to make space for both the instructor's learning and students' learning, positively impacting classroom spaces. Within the institutional level Pedagogy Circles, we are explicit in our desire to create space, first and foremost, for coming together and building connections with others alongside whom we can grow and learn.

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As many equity-seeking institutions, educators and students strive to foster experiences that make historically underrepresented groups and individuals feel as if they matter, the examples offered in *Co-Creating Equitable Teaching and Learning* can and should serve as a guide to resisting hierarchy and harm—and centering humanity—within the higher education experience. Co-creation leads to the creation of more equitable, anti-racist spaces through inviting, nurturing and empowering spaces and connections by giving attention to voices that are underrepresented in education and by centering student wellbeing. Key takeaways for me from experiencing these different levels of co-creation have been the recognition that the journey towards equity is ongoing and ever-evolving, that they require a commitment to embrace the process of unlearning, relearning, and constantly reassessing, and that the challenge of engaging in them can be alleviated through partnership, which provides a supportive structure for growth.

References

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