

## Theme 7: Reaching, Whose Responsibility

### Reviving Humanity: Grasping Within and Beyond Our Reach

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Typically, the phrase ‘hard to reach’ refers to students, implying that those *reaching out* are both other than students and located in some privileged ‘center’ of power and capacity. The ‘privileged’ strive to ‘save’ as many marginalized subjects as they can, the story goes, as evidence of their humanity. But the unacknowledged dehumanization of those deemed ‘marginalized’ in this process only reaffirms the socioeconomic/racial binaries of our history. Therefore, we want to push back on this “*single story*” (Adichie, 2009) of the ‘hard to reach’, to argue that staff can be equally hard to reach in the traditional student-staff dynamic and to highlight how student-staff partnerships create spaces conducive to *reciprocal reaching across*. Such reciprocal extensions of our hands and hearts allow us to share our complex histories and co-create multiple new stories that decenter traditional notions of position, power, and capacity.

The traditional teacher-student relationship has staff members conceptualizing, implementing and assessing the education that unfolds in higher education classrooms. The ‘hard to reach’ students might find themselves unengaged by what is on offer, but they might also be striving to connect or wishing there were a place for them to bring their humanity to their academic work—to be valued for what they have to offer and not only for how well they receive what is offered to them. Pedagogical partnership creates a space that is not constructed solely by the staff member, that intentionally complicates the one-way transfer of knowledge and that explicitly invites a centering of human exchange.

Through a perpetually negotiated exchange within the spaces student-staff pedagogical partnerships create, students and staff, who have different identities, positions, roles and responsibilities, strive to grasp—understand, take ahold of—what is offered by the other in the exchange. Some of what we offer in partnership is known, familiar, relatively easy to take ahold of and some is beyond our comprehension, beyond our immediate ability to grasp. Partnership complicates the seemingly one-way *reaching out* from those in a privileged center to students who are at some perceived remove. It also allows for a productive *reaching past* where we have been. Whilst there is a danger that we might reach past one another in the sense of missing one another, we might also reach past the limiting assumptions embedded in our shared and respective realities. Staff and students who engage in reciprocal *reaching across* the fluid, open spaces of pedagogical partnerships begin to support pedagogies that turn our differences from divides into possibilities for more life-affirming human connection.

Partnership heeds the voice of those who call for connection. Baldwin said: “*The effort, it seems to me, is: if you can examine and face your life, you can discover the terms with which you are connected to other lives, and they can discover, too, the terms with which they are connected to other people*” (Standley and Pratt, 1989:55). Junger (2016), quoting Rachel Yehuda, echoes this point: “*If you want to make a society work, then you don’t keep underscoring the places where you’re different—you underscore your shared humanity*”. So too in the educational realm. Pedagogical partnership is not a test of ‘who knows more’, who has greater power and capacity, but an opportunity to build a learning environment—both within the partnerships themselves and in relation to the “*contact zones*” (Pratt, 1991) that are the focus of the partnerships—premised on the coexistence of people who are different from one another.

The fact that we are all different from one another is what we have in common (Solomon, 2012) and can be what connects rather than divides us. As Alison has argued,

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*“what matters is what we do with the distance that difference creates; it can inspire fear and disdain, and we can conceive of it as constituting unbridgeable divides among us, or it can inspire respect and empathy, and we can see it as a basis for developing connections and as a resource for learning and growth” (Cook-Sather, 2015:5).*

As the demographic of academia changes, Olivia contends, we must develop new ways of talking across what is built to separate us. This plurality of ‘codes’ is an important call to building intersectional understanding of one another—a ‘reach’ for qualifiers that humanize us in the eyes of those we encounter. Professors<sup>i</sup> have a unique, performative role that allows them both to teach a new way of thought and to exemplify how to reach across differences. Partnership creates the space for not only staff, but also students to enact that role.

There is growing evidence that when students and staff work in pedagogical partnership, they create spaces defined by reciprocity (Cook-Sather *et al*, 2014), by “*a balanced give and take not of commodities but of perspectives, insights, and contributions*” (Cook-Sather and Felten, 2017:176). This basic, human exchange enacts the ebb and flow of life; it is more ‘natural’ than the authoritative performances that both staff and students are typically expected to enact based on their prescribed and assumed identities, positions, roles, and responsibilities. Examples of such reciprocal exchanges in pedagogical partnership are now too numerous to list, but recent special issues of both established journals (e.g., *International Journal for Academic Development*, 21, 1; *Mentoring and Tutoring: Partnership in Learning*, 23, 5) and newer venues (e.g., *Student Engagement in Higher Education Journal*, 1, 1; *Teaching, Learning and Inquiry*, 4, 2) offer some recent examples.

The reaching across that the two of us have experienced in pedagogical partnership attests to the humanizing potential of this work. As the creator and facilitator of the Students as Learners and Teachers program (Cook-Sather, 2015), Alison has spent ten years working to support semester-long pedagogical partnerships between undergraduate students and academic staff through which everyone involved engages in “*self-authoring’ a professional identity*” (Gunersel *et al*, 2013: 35; Cook-Sather, 2016), strives to develop culturally-sustaining pedagogies (Cook-Sather and Agu, 2013), and strengthens themselves as people. As an undergraduate student, Olivia has participated in two very different pedagogical partnerships through this program, one in which there were significant overlaps in identity and experience between her and her staff partner and one in which there were significant differences. Her experience is that it is affirming to be in direct dialogue with someone, no matter the overlaps or differences, because, in partnership, you see each other for the role that you have been placed in (student vs. professor), you are welcomed to discuss the structural separations created by those two roles, and you add the other macro separators that impact your ability to talk to each other. She is inspired by hooks’ (1994) call to disrupt the assumption that emotional relationships in academic settings show a lack of intellectual integrity. It is the combination of transparent emotional commitment and theory that awakens academic spaces and leaves room for different forms of engagement. Through the partnership work, the reaching—and humanizing—go both ways.

While many of us stop talking when we encounter difference, coming together in the space of pedagogical partnership and talking across differences is a step towards naming the institutionalized barriers that restrict our eyes/ears from working across differences. Baldwin (1995) reminds us that, “*People are trapped in history and history is trapped in them*” (119); there is rarely a time for us to stop and think about our present roles in creating history. If we want the change we speak about in education, we have to try something different from what we know. We are conditioned as passive members of society to play along with the roles that have

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been defined for us. Those who dare to think outside of the parameters are ostracized for being radical (with its own set of negative connotations) when we should be applauding their efforts to think of a world 'beyond our reach'.

The kind of grasping—understanding, taking ahold of—what is both within and beyond our reach that pedagogical partnership inspires breaks down traditional hierarchies and barriers that have both professional and personal manifestations. It allows us to re-work our complex histories. And, whilst partnerships are intellectually and emotionally demanding, from our perspective, the *reciprocal reaching across* they facilitate are the best hope for reviving humanity.

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<sup>i</sup> Professor is the equivalent of a University Lecturer in the USA