

REFLECTIVE PIECE

## Reflections on *That-has-Been*: Snapshots from the Students-as-Partners Movement

\*Christel Brost<sup>a</sup>, Christelle Lauture<sup>b</sup>, Karen Smith<sup>c</sup>, and Saskia Kersten<sup>d</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Center for Teaching and Learning, Malmö University, Sweden

<sup>b</sup>Bridgewater State University, Class of 2020, USA

<sup>c</sup>School of Education, University of Hertfordshire, UK

<sup>d</sup>English Language and Communication, University of Hertfordshire, UK

Contact: [christel.brost@mah.se](mailto:christel.brost@mah.se)

### EDITORIAL NOTE (Alison):

The idea for this multipart reflective essay emerged from first author Christel Brost's reflections on her experience of striving to develop a students-as-partners approach within the context of a summer institute and then back at her home institution. To aid reflection on these experiences, Christel used Roland Barthes' construct of *that-has-been*, which she explains below, to examine several "mental snapshots" of her experiences and what those mean for her personally and for students-as-partners work. Inspired by the vivid, emotion-filled representation of Christel's "snapshots," we (co-editors of reflective essays for the journal, Anita Ntem and Alison Cook-Sather) invited participants from two other venues to share their reflections within the same frame.

Authors of each section of this essay use Barthes' construct to "zoom in" on different moments and lived experiences of partnership, creating mental snapshots from three students-as-partners venues. The first venue is the Change Institute at the May 2017 International Summer Institute on Students as Partners held at McMaster University, in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada. The second is the May 2017 Pedagogic Partnership Conference held at Lafayette College in, Easton, Pennsylvania, in the United States. The third is the June 2017 RAISE International Partnership Colloquium held at Birmingham City University in Birmingham, England.

### CONCEPTUAL FRAME: IMAGES OF *THAT-HAS-BEEN* (Christel)

At the end of his life Roland Barthes wrote *Camera Lucida*. After spending a lifetime in semiotic analyses, he made a remarkable shift in that book. He started to look at photographs as *that-has-been* (Barthes, 2000, p. 77), and in doing so he connects emotion and intuition. He spends a good part of the book writing about a photograph taken of his mother, in the Winter Garden, when she was five years old. She is looking straight at the photographer and thereby straight at the viewer. When Barthes writes about this photo, his mother is no longer alive. She died after he had nursed her at the end of her life. Now he is

CC-BY Licence 4.0 This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons – Attribution License 4.0 International (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly attributed.

looking at a photograph of her as a child, a child that needs nursing. The emotions that are experienced in regards to *that-has-been* affect him strongly, since the act of viewing the photograph embeds it with emotions. A semiotic analysis would not unpack those emotions in the same way, according to Barthes.

#### SNAPSHOTS FROM THE MCMASTER UNIVERSITY CHANGE INSTITUTE (Christel)

The mental snapshots exist only in my mind but if I can try and put these emotions into this essay, the essay becomes the images. And I can share the images with you.

#### **43° 15' 20.5956" N 79° 52' 15.9672" W**

I find myself once again in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada, just like last year. Why do I leave my hometown of Malmö, hop on a plane in Copenhagen, fly for eight hours, get off the plane in Toronto and get on a GO bus for another hour, to arrive at the above coordinates? The answer is in the question: because they are coordinates.

This is where X marks the spot. This is where I have found my tribe. This is where Students as Partners is lived and not just a concept described in a paper or in a lecture.

So why am I sitting alone in a room at the Change Institute, not a student in sight? I am doing my best to put the value of the experience into a reflective piece of writing that could possibly be published in the *International Journal for Students as Partners*.

I feel as if I am part of a movement and Hamilton is the epicenter. The fact that the journal was just launched, and that last year was the very first time this event took place, gives me a feeling of being part of a silent paradigm shift in higher education.

When two student partners, the Pro Vice Chancellor, the head of the Center for Teaching and Learning, and I, all from Malmö University Institution/University, took part in the Change Institute in 2016, we made such great plans. The fact that all levels of our university were represented in our group of five made us think that we would have a great impact upon our return. Did we?

I have to pull out a few mental snapshots and lay them out on the table, so to speak, since my tiny room here at the Change Institute is very quiet. Last year there was a lot of noise, giggles, and heated debate. The five of us lived in a bubble of total partnership for five days. We stayed at the Sheraton on King Street and came to the Institute in a rented car. No GPS, guessing directions, getting lost in Hamilton; instead, we always made it to the Institute on time. I, the control freak, learned a valuable lesson in that back seat. Snug between my two students I stayed quiet. I thought to myself: These are clever people. We will get there!

The Change Institute is organized in a very generous way. Lots of food is served throughout the day. Still, in the evening at the hotel, we wanted to get together. We found a lounge on the top floor of the Sheraton where we could order a cheese plate. Most nights we had that lounge to ourselves, and we all agreed that it was like coming home after a long day at work.

Looking back at those evenings a year ago I can see that the relationship created in that lounge—which became like our own living room—was not just a continuation of what occurred in the workshop but a whole new space where we did not “talk shop.” Instead, we shared personal things about ourselves. This new space is the most challenging to recreate when you return home. It is not just about sharing a meal or meeting outside work, it is about going home and “kicking your shoes off.”

The third mental snapshot was taken in the grand hall of the Change Institute. The sun was pouring in through the ceiling windows, and my four partners around the table looked so beautiful. Not because they posed for my mental camera but because they engaged in and enjoyed collaborative work, surrounded by colleagues from six other universities from around the world. Together we formed an alliance. Hopping from one table to the other in the liquid café, the feeling of being part of a movement emerged. Looking at that mental snapshot from a year ago, I can connect to that feeling in a very strong way.

It is interesting to notice that, as I sit here and write, the 2017 Change Institute is going on right now in the grand hall. However, to me, it just looks like students and teachers working, and I do not connect with their process as I connect emotionally when I look at my mental snapshot from a year ago.

I can relate to Barthes' *that-has-been*; my emotions are embedded in my mental snapshots and I therefore read them as very strong images. The essence of my experience is alliance, the alliance that was created in our group a year ago through partnership. It is important to connect to that alliance.

In my daily practice, looking at mental snapshots from the year that has gone by, I have collected a box full of less-successful images. Out of focus, messy, pale in comparison. Right now that does not bother me so much. Right now I feel connected with the silent movement that is created in these rooms.

#### SNAPSHOTS FROM THE PEDAGOGIC PARTNERSHIP CONFERENCE (Christelle)

When I decided to apply for college, specifically to Bridgewater State University, it was a whimsical choice. I didn't know where the end of my senior year in high school would bring me, or where my future was heading. In making my commitment to attend Bridgewater State University as an English major with a minor in secondary education, I was still uncertain. It was not until the completion of my first semester that I knew that school was where I was meant to be, both in learning and teaching. Upon this realization I committed myself to ensuring that I am doing everything in my power to both teach and learn to my maximum potential. So my first *that-has-been* moment is of that time of uncertainty, taken from the perspective of what is now certain commitment.

Because of my dedication as a scholar, I was afforded the opportunity to be a pedagogical partner and attend and present at the Pennsylvania Consortium for the Liberal Arts Pedagogic Partnership Conference. My second *that-has-been* moment is taken from a conversation at that conference. As someone who had not previously participated in pedagogical partnership, I was asked to present my concerns to the more experienced group of student partners. In discussing their apprehensions upon beginning their partnerships, many of them shared that they feared that they would not be able to communicate to someone higher up about their imperfections. However, this was not one of my main concerns as I realized, perhaps because of the environment at my college, that professors and students are more similar than students tend to think. At first my logic behind this thinking was just superficial: that they were students not too long ago themselves, and we are all adults. But, this was the beginning of an epiphany that was developing throughout the conference.

My biggest concern going into pedagogical partnership was, what if I can't find anything wrong with the way someone is teaching? I was reassured that no one is the

perfect teacher no matter how efficient they are; there will always be room for improvement. Then, I thought about the character of the professor I would be working with—someone who teaches with passion and care for the content at hand who would be aware that there is always more to be done and is persistent in striving towards perfection. Teaching is a craft that one cannot perfect but should be ever changing, and does so as a result of learning. What I ultimately realized is that professors are nothing but the best students, who are just trying to keep the flame alive in knowledge and learning.

The clearest snapshot I took away from the Pedagogic Partnership Conference is the realization that the position a professor embraces is a dedication to lifelong learning. The snapshot contains traces of all the faculty who participated in the conference—a multitude of people committed to a life of learning. Through this experience I was able to define expertise not as completion in learning, but knowing enough to teach and push the knowledge of your field forward. I find that teaching and learning are too often seen as relatively parallel avenues, but the truth is *effective* teaching requires teaching and learning to intersect in many different areas. Learning and teaching have a symbiotic relationship that develops a recipe for the propulsion of cognition for both the individual and society.

My last snapshot is a *that-will-be*, rather than a *that-has-been*, as I continue on my path of lifelong learning. In attending the conference, I gained a greater depth in my understanding of why I am here, both in school, and in life. I have begun my journey of lifelong learning by acquiring higher education in a field I find to be vital to the shaping of the adolescent mind. While I wasn't exactly certain what to expect as a partner or in attending the conference, both ended up being great learning experiences; what I found is that I learned most about myself and the scholarly environment. Until I attended this conference, it didn't occur to me that the commitment I was making to teaching as a result of learning and a separate commitment I was making to learning were one and the same. After my completion of my master's degree I want to teach at a high-school level, and eventually return to school to pursue a Ph.D. As I move forward I will keep in mind the important lesson I learned in Pennsylvania, that my most important goal is becoming the best lifelong learner I can be.

#### SNAPSHOTS FROM THE RAISE INTERNATIONAL PARTNERSHIP COLLOQUIUM (Karen and Saskia)

For the last eighteen months, we have been collaborating on an internally funded project investigating understandings of the term partnership in higher-education learning and teaching. We were invited to facilitate a workshop on how we have used corpus-based methods to support this work at the Researching, Advancing & Inspiring Student Engagement (RAISE) International Partnership Colloquium in Birmingham.

As the alarm went off early on 23 June, my initial thought was just how tired I (Karen) was. The Colloquium came at the end of a very busy week where I had met with a partner organisation that offers a degree my institution validates, delivered a workshop on professional development for international collaborative partners, and attended an awards ceremony where I was shortlisted for my work with external partners. These seemingly unrelated tasks were, on reflection, all partnership activities—but they were very different to the staff-student partnerships Saskia and I were going to discuss at the Colloquium. It is this diversity of meaning of partnership in contemporary higher education, and its proliferation in policy and practice that has fuelled our work; Saskia and I have sought to

understand what impact these different technical and everyday understandings of partnership have on how we view learning and teaching partnerships between staff and students.

We met up on the train from London to Birmingham and set off to walk to Birmingham City University. My (Saskia) first memory of the day is the roundabout way we approached the venue, first through the hustle and bustle of the Bullring shopping centre and then an unexpected turn through a dimly lit tunnel, which I was dubious would lead us to our destination. But we tried our luck and ended up in the right place. This *that-has-been* moment seems to be a metaphor for how I ended up at this event. Karen has had a long-standing interest in learning and teaching, and in the language of higher-education policy and practice particularly. Her decision to focus on partnership seems more logical than mine. For me, working on this project with Karen has led me down an unknown path that does not appear to fit my background in applied linguistics, but I think we are emerging on the other side of the tunnel onto a path of exploring how partnership is understood by students and staff in higher education. The Colloquium provided us with an opportunity to test out our current thinking and our approaches to research and, at the same time, learn more about other questions people were posing.

As a small and focussed event, the sessions and informal conversations were challenging, inspiring, and immensely useful for our own work and thinking. For me (Saskia), what was striking was the many commonalities I discovered in what interests me and the keynotes and workshops offered on the day. I had a couple of veritable light-bulb moments, now *that-has-been* moments, that clearly show that the kind of interdisciplinary work we do is valuable and fruitful. For Karen, the Colloquium was an opportunity to catch up with friends and former colleagues whose work I have followed for some time. One very strong impression of that day was in a session about the battleground for Students as Partners and the (mis)appropriation of practice. This resonated so strongly with our work, where we have discussed the prevalence of partnership in higher-education management speak.

During that session, I was sitting with people who have been involved in this area of practice for a long time, reminding us where things had started. At the same table, a student shared her own understandings of partnership based on her own very recent experiences. The conversations, sometimes characterized by conflict and at other times by consensus, reminded me of the importance of individual experience and the need to collectively develop understandings of what partnership means to a particular group of people, within a particular setting, at a particular time. It turns out that the corpus-based tool that we used in our workshop might well help to shape those discussions. The excitement and intellectual curiosity we saw in the participants during our workshop when they looked at how partnership was being used in different types of text (e.g., strategic documents, academic webpages, and everyday language) demonstrated that there is merit in exploring what partnership is (or could be) in teaching and learning and in potentially using corpus linguistic methods in other higher-education-focussed research.

At the end of the day, our return journey to the station seemed less convoluted, the pathway was clearer, and we had a better sense of where we were going. And that's how we feel about our work. The Colloquium provided us with a fresh challenge, reassurance, and purpose. It was invigorating. Indeed, so invigorating that Karen forgot how tired she was and wrote an abstract about partnership for another conference on the train!

## EDITORIAL NOTE (Anita):

The mental snapshots captured from these venues reinforce the essence of why the exploration of students-as-partners approaches generates enduring memories that impact partners' self-reflection in education. Christel's snapshots describe the "tone" established in the Change Institute, with not only the launch of the journal that celebrates partnership, but also the way partnerships were rich in capturing the quintessence of those dialogues wherever they were. Christelle's snapshots afforded her the validation needed for her to feel confident in her present and future role as a transformative learner and teacher. Karen and Saskia's snapshots allowed them to realize that partnership is a transformative and context-dependent process. Overall, these snapshots, some clear and some unclear, have an emotive presence and a temporality that gives these writers and their readers the opportunity to be a part of a development that, while rendered in only a handful of *that-has-been* moments, is an ongoing conversation with sustained feelings.

## NOTE ON THE CONTRIBUTORS

**Christel Brost** is a lecturer at Malmö University, Sweden. Her subjects are photography and graphic design, and she has a background as a professional photographer. As pedagogical developer at the Center for Teaching and Learning at Malmö University, her focus is *Students as Partners* and *Students as Agents of Change*.

**Christelle Lauture** is a second-year undergraduate student at Bridgewater State University, where she is majoring in English as well as secondary education. She has worked in pedagogical partnership with faculty, plans to be a teacher, and hopes to pursue both a master's degree and a Ph.D.

**Dr. Saskia Kersten** is an applied linguist and Senior Lecturer in English Language & Communication at the University of Hertfordshire. Her research interests are the second-language development of young learners of English, computer-mediated communication, and using corpus-based methods in interdisciplinary research. The latter sparked her interest in staff-student partnerships.

**Dr. Karen Smith** leads collaborative research and development in the School of Education at the University of Hertfordshire. Karen's research interests center around how higher education policies and practices impact those who work and study within universities. She is currently exploring the different meanings of partnership in higher education.

## REFERENCE

Barthes, R. (2000). *Camera lucida: Reflections on photography* (R. Howard, Trans.). London: Vintage Classics.