Rewriting Partnerships: Community Perspectives on Community-Based Learning

Rachael W. Shah
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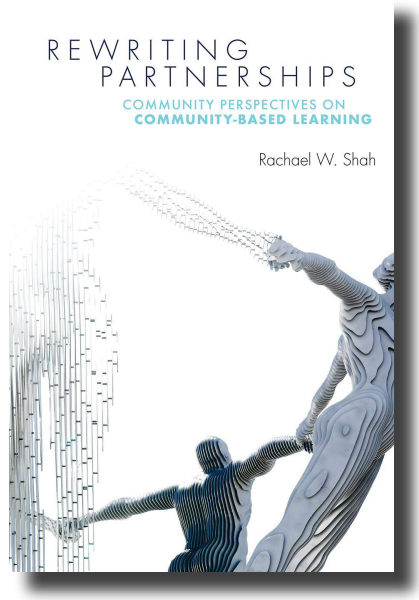

As I read Rachael W. Shah's *Rewriting Partnerships: Community Perspectives on Community-Based Learning*, I found myself asking key questions for my own community-university partnerships. What should I be doing to support marginalized voices? How can I best encourage my students to take a "participatory posture" with community partners? (85). Which high school students can help me assess their partnership with my college composition students? Shah's insights on community voices and the politics of knowledge inspire me to engage more fully with my community partnerships at every turn. Shah's fluency at breaking down the difficult issues in community engagement through graciously offering tangible solutions support me to be a better teacher. Shah posits the framework of critical community-based epistemology, which is deeply rooted in the thorny issues of community engagement and strengthens the architecture of community-engaged collaborations by filling a gap in the field's literature around questions of "how community members themselves view and experience community engagement" (5). Community voice is traditionally devalued in contrast to dominant ways of thinking and being associated with institutions of higher education. However, Shah argues that "community members, with experiential knowledge of university-community partnerships, have critical insight to offer to the conversation—and they become invaluable partners in understanding the nature of engaged pedagogies" (16). With narratives from her experiences coordinating Wildcat Writers at the University of Arizona to Husker Writers at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Shah creates a welcoming space to be critical about how we construct knowledge with or create barriers for community members. *Rewriting Partnerships* leads the way for community-based researchers and practitioners who need concrete guidance on how to create space for community voices and to craft equitable community-university programs that recognize community partners as assets.

Shah starts the first chapter recounting her interaction with a homeless woman who refused Shah's help by saying, "I won't be your service project"—teaching Shah that "community engagement is not always viewed the same way from different social locations" (3). This experience sparked a realization that community partnerships are viewed differently depending on who you ask. In response to that interaction, *Rewriting Partnerships* is Shah's journey of uncovering community partners' perspectives on community-university partnerships in hopes of making those partnerships more equitable, inclusive, and representative of both university *and* community needs and voices.

Shah's first chapter sets up critical community-based epistemologies as a framework to effectively incorporate community voices into community engaged pedagogies by weaving three strands: experience, participation, and assets. The experience strand draws from John Dewey's stance that "knowledge is created in experience" and Cornel West's "centering the experiences of those who are most vulnerable" (15–17). This strand suggests that community partners' experiences and perspectives are the most valuable to understanding community-university partnerships and improving program design. Shah asserts that knowledge is built from experience, and as community-engaged scholars, we must ask, whose experience matters and whose experience is not represented? The participation strand is inspired by Paulo Freire's understanding that people are subjects, rather than objects, suggesting that the dynamic between community and university partners is a two-way street—both contributing to knowledge production and exchange through dialogue and openness. The last strand, assets, speaks to the advantage that marginalized people have when "interpreting stories of power" (30). Due to their position in the margins, community partners have a wide gaze into dominant forms of power and knowledge production and see how that dominance negatively influences the center and those around it. Together, Shah's three strands of experience, participation, and assets weave critical community-based epistemologies into a framework that values the perspectives of marginalized groups to upend the destructive impact of dominant forms of power. The rest of the book highlights the stated strands of experience, participation, and assets by including the perspectives of community youth, instructions for university partners to create space for including community voices, and skill sets that both community and university partners can develop to practice openness.

Shah's second chapter draws from experiences of youth who participate in community-university partnerships. Shah starts the chapter with an experience with one of her high school partner teachers, Maria Elena Wakamatsu—who is rhetorically weaved into the narrative of *Rewriting Partnerships*. During one of Shah's field trips to Wakamatsu's high school class, Shah is surprised to find a bounty of food made by the high school students to welcome the university students. The food represents not only as an ice breaker and entry into getting to know the university students, but the food also foregrounds the "assets of Desert View [High School] rather than positioning the high school as a site of deficiency" (42). This chapter champions role fluidity, which "challenges the notion that there are only two set roles in a community-university partnership, those who give and those who receive, implying instead a

range of positions and easy, fluid movement among them" (62). This fluidity in roles is what makes *Rewriting Partnerships* interesting. Role fluidity challenges the conception of knowledge production flowing from the universities to the surrounding communities, suggesting that community-university partnerships follow a server-served dynamic. Instead, role fluidity modifies that flawed conception and says knowledge production flows from the community to the university, the university to the community, and the community *with* the university. In other words, role fluidity validates all kinds of experience—especially non-dominant forms—for creating knowledge. Consequently, practicing role fluidity calls for appropriate approaches *into* communities. Shah explores an approach that community and university partners can take to communicate more effectively in the next chapter.

A participatory posture can help make sure the products—or deliverables—of a community-university partnership are useful. Shah's third chapter explains that a participatory posture means being assertive and taking initiative, and speaks to the experiences that community partners have when dealing with university partners. Sometimes, the university partner's role is unknown, unassigned, or vague. In community-university partnerships, it helps to know what each partner is doing and what is expected; otherwise, there may be deliverables produced from the partnership that have little use. Shah uses the following questions to ensure those who create the deliverables have basic knowledge before even creating the deliverables: "How will the deliverable integrate with the network? Who will be interacting with the deliverable and how will it be used? What knowledge from the organization's network is needed to create a strong deliverable? How can that knowledge be accessed? Do any aspects of the organization's knowledge need to be challenged?" (77). The deliverables produced from the product should be produced with both community and university needs in mind. In other words, the negotiation of how the deliverables are made are meant to be two-way, not one-way. A participatory posture eliminates the process of university partners assuming what community organizations and partners need, and instead, holds university partners accountable for what they do and how they do it.

To actualize a participatory posture, in the fourth chapter Shah describes the skills needed for community engagement from the perspective of the community partners, which boils down to "open minds, open construction of self and others, open hearts, open revision, open communication, and open structures" (97). Due to an increase in graduate focus on community engagement programs and a dearth of critical literature to support those programs, it is important for community-engaged practitioners to learn openness (98). Openness is an asset-based knowledge production tool that speaks to the role fluidity Shah discusses in the book's second chapter. Assumptions of who holds what expertise—based on positionalities—can reinforce unhealthy partnership relations. Rather, being open to others' experiences and skill sets positions both dominant and non-dominant forms of knowledge as welcome at the table for an intervention that is challenging and complicated. Openness challenges the ego, redefines intellectualism, and promotes an attitude of play to "interact with difference in a generative way" (106). Building healthy partnerships depends on how we position each other and view each other's skills as assets. Being open confronts our

dominant dispositions and pushes us to redefine not only our constructions of others, but also of ourselves.

Shah's fifth chapter changes directions and uses the already stated concepts of relationality and openness to rewrite the architecture of community-university program designs. Shah argues that community-university programs could approach community voice from three angles: community advisory boards, participatory evaluation, and community grading. As a current graduate teacher in the Wildcat Writers program that's mentioned throughout *Rewriting Partnerships*, I see the changes that Shah implemented when she was the program's graduate coordinator. We still have an advisory board that consists of both graduate students and high school teachers. We still maintain role fluidity between community and university partners. We are still graced by the wisdom of Maria Elena Wakamatsu—the fearless community organizer and retired high school teacher who graciously offered her voice for the last word in the book. This chapter concisely uses the concepts in the already stated chapters to design community-university programs that community-engaged researchers and practitioners can help implement at their institutions. By implementing community advisory boards, participatory evaluation, and community grading, community-university programs can establish partnerships that incorporate openness, participation, and role fluidity.

More research is needed on critical community-based epistemologies and how this framework shifts the narrative on asset-based community-university partnerships. Seeing how Shah secured funding for community partners at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln's Husker Writers should inspire other community-university programs to not only validate community voice through discursive, developmental, and programmatic means, but also through monetary means. Our Wildcat Writers program has yet to secure funding for community partners, but we look to Shah's leadership and scholarship for ways to improve. In the conclusion, Shah extends critical community-based epistemologies to the Inside-Out Prison Exchange and applies the concepts in the previous chapters to the dynamic between incarcerated individuals and college students. While critical community-based epistemologies nicely fit in with the Inside-Out Prison Exchange, new community-engaged practitioners might have an easier understanding of the application to the Inside-Out Prison Exchange if the section were expanded to an entire chapter. Alternatively, new practitioners would have benefited more from several examples of situations where critical community-based epistemologies can exist. Overall, *Rewriting Partnerships* offers a clearly organized account of how community partners are not service projects, but are, instead, invaluable beacons of experiential knowledge and lived experiences that university partners have the opportunity and privilege to access with open minds and open hearts.