In a recent conversation with colleagues with half a century of work in service-learning and community partnerships under our collective belts, we mused about why we continue to wrestle with some of the same issues after so many years. We still ask whether participation in service-learning can enhance students’ understanding of difference, power, privilege, and systemic oppression. We puzzle over what is the relationship of service-learning to social justice and what should it be. We ask ourselves how we can prevent service-learning from perpetuating the status quo and whether social justice is, in fact, the ultimate goal of service-learning. With regard to partnerships, we still question whether campus-community partnerships really can be relationships among equals. Or are the disparities of power, resources, and sphere of influence too great to allow equitable partnerships to develop (Jacoby, 2015)?

Such questions have led some leaders in our field to wonder whether we have reached a threshold in the growth and promise of service-learning and community engagement (Hartman, 2013; Kliewer, 2013; Saltmarsh, Hartley, & Clayton, 2009). As Howard (2015) reminds us, when we reach a threshold, it is wise to “return to the beginnings, to the origin, to fundamentals” (p. xii). I agree that sometimes we must look back before we go forward. Happily for us, Novella Keith takes us on a journey to do just that. Engaging in Social Partnerships is about collaborations that intentionally cross borders not only between organizations but also those of “class, race, ethnicity, culture, professional expertise, power, and other markers of difference” (p. xii). Reading these words in the preface raised my hopes that Keith’s work would provide insights that would take my own thinking to the next level in response to the above questions. I was not disappointed. Without excessive recapitulation, the first two of the book’s four parts situate the ways we think about and act with regard to campus-community partnerships in relevant conceptual, theoretical, and historical contexts. Part one also contains the first of four case studies illustrating how these contexts play out in real human interactions. In Part three, each of the three chapters brings us in close contact with the practitioners involved; we learn about their experiences and hear their stories. Part four provides a helpful summary and suggests processes for moving forward.

Keith immediately welcomes readers into what she later calls a circle of friends, defining her audience as everyone who is “a current or future higher education practitioner — whether your practice involves teaching, leadership, administration, research — and your work brings you in contact with groups and communities beyond campus walls” (p. xii). Although the book rightfully contains much about practice and profession, the focus of this book is squarely on the professional. It builds on the substantial work on civic professionalism of Scott Peters (2004) and especially William Sullivan (2004), and concentrates on how we can become democratic civic professionals who engage in social partnerships across divides that tackle issues of mutual concern, social relevance, and public purpose.

Chapter 1 situates the need for those of us committed to service-learning and community engagement to become democratic civic professionals in four important current trends. The first is the rise of a “network society,” in which the world is interconnected through ever-changing networks that function
increasingly rapidly and in horizontal and decentralized forms. The role of the connector in our networked world is essential; in the scope of Keith’s book, the connector is the democratic civic professional. Closely related to the interconnectedness of our network society is globalization that manifests itself in our own neighborhoods as well as across the world, bringing with it an increased social heterogeneity and attendant issues of how we construe diversity as difference. As Keith explains, diversity itself is not a problem; rather, the problem lies in the social and non-governmental political processes that allow inequalities in the distribution of resources and diversity itself to become transformed into opposite categories of individuals: those who are dominant, active agents (Self) versus passive recipient, object, nonagents (Other). This Self-Other dichotomy invokes social justice, which entails fair distribution of resources as well as agency to participate in meaningful action to alleviate injustice. The third and fourth contexts are related ones: wicked social problems and pressures on higher education to be relevant, to address society’s most serious problems, and to embrace its public purpose. I found this account of powerful current trends to be a helpful grounding for Keith’s identification of the practices the democratic civic professional should learn about and embrace in order to engage in social partnerships that have the potential to raise up both individual participants and communities. I will surely add it to the readings for the course I teach on social change.

The second part of Chapter 1 makes the distinction between the academic professionals we are and the democratic civic professional, or wise professional, for which Keith believes our times call. She begins this discussion by recounting the well-known understandings of reciprocity that call for us to work with rather than on the community and to view ourselves as partners rather than service providers. Before I could think “ho-hum,” Keith moved on to identify, with compelling freshness, three ways of practicing reciprocity as democratic civic professionals: disturbing and interrupting our normal ways of practice, moving away from the Self-Other construct by changing the dynamics of dominance and oppression, and advancing from providing and sharing information to co-construction of knowledge. I knew I wanted to read more.

Chapter 2 offers an in-depth case study of a university-school-community partnership together with three lenses, as Keith calls them, for reflecting on it. Without going into too much detail, the case involves a grant to create a family center within a nearly 100% African-American inner-city secondary school with a well-respected African-American principal in collaboration with the center for social and economic justice housed in the Social Work Department of a nearby urban university as well as other community organizations. The center is directed by a white man who is passionate about community advancement and is very well regarded by many at the university for his accomplishments. The critical moments in this case occur during the process of searching for and selecting a director for the family center. A broad-based board of key stakeholders moved quickly to advertise the position. The interview process yielded two finalists deemed qualified by the board, which submitted its ranked recommendations to the director of the university center, who, because of university regulations, served as the Principal Investigator (PI), with the school principal named as Director of School-Based Services and Project Associate. The issues that make this case a captivating and all-too-familiar example come to the fore when the PI reversed the rank order and offered the position to the candidate whose strengths were primarily university-recognized expertise rather than the one with deep knowledge of and experience in the local community. The school principal, who disagreed with the PI’s decision but felt he had no choice but to acquiesce, lost his hope and interest in the family center. He decided to redirect his efforts to working with people he trusted to obtain funding for important initiatives that he believed the family center, under its current leadership, would not address.

As I avidly read the rich details of this case, I could not help but think of one of my first forays into the world of campus-community partnerships when the then-President of the University of Maryland (UMD) asked me to develop our America Reads program under the Clinton administration. UMD President William E. “Brit” Kirwan had been appointed as a member of the College Presidents Steering Committee for America Reads, which implied that we would be one of the first 20 campuses to initiate the program. This was nearly 20 years ago, and I was only about five years into my work as Director of Community Service-Learning. I well remember forming the America Reads Steering Committee to guide the design and implementation of our program in 10 elementary schools in our county, whose population was three-quarters people of color including two-thirds African Americans. The committee, which included the county school system’s reading supervisor and two or three teachers, was 100% white. The program got off the ground running and continues to be strong today. However, I never gave any thought until I read this case study of how much different, and stronger, the program might be if the initial Steering Committee had included at least a couple of African-American community leaders or parents. I expect that many of you will also find that Keith’s family
Jacoby

center case and the others cited, contain bits of your own experiences and encourage you to reflect on them in a new light. By this point in my reading, I was hooked. I couldn’t wait to read the rest of the chapter in which Keith describes the alternative practices that the players in the case study — and I — could have utilized. Keith purposefully leads us through a discussion of how “thinking tools” (p. 37), including collaborative governance, collaboration across borders, and using the “multiple lenses” of social justice and power might enhance our understanding and practice of partnerships. Stay tuned.

In Chapter 3, Keith provides the historical perspectives that she believes will add to the contextualization of our work and help us understand why we view partnerships and community engagement as we do. She describes what she believes — and I agree — to be an “ongoing major struggle for service-learning” (pp. 52-53) between students providing service in the spirit of charity and working with communities toward social change, in the spirit of social justice. Keith raises a question that has stayed with me since I first read it. As we seek to advance our work by institutionalizing it on campuses, Keith wonders: What exactly is being institutionalized?

The second part of Chapter 3, I admit, was challenging for me to get through. It painstakingly analyzes modernity and neoliberalism as meta-contexts of our work. Although my first instinct was to skim these dense pages, I plowed through them and am very glad I did. Keith’s description of what it means to be modern includes viewing oneself as the citizen of a nation rather than a member of one’s tribe or local grouping, adhering to authority legitimized by law and technical expertise rather than local custom, and making judgments based on objective evidence. Technical reason, or positivism, values problem solving that leads to clear, definitive answers. In addition to modernity as a frame for understanding what we perceive to be normal in partnerships, neoliberalism and the marketization, to use Keith’s term, of higher education are also critical contexts. Leaving the details to readers, I will only note that neoliberalism gives rise to the deregulation of higher education and universities’ needs to compete in a free market, which in turn lead to the importance of metrics to determine the quality of universities’ outputs. This dominant discourse is in diametric opposition to democratic engagement that embodies reciprocity and values voice and knowledge that are not in the realm of university-defined expertise.

Part three, which consists of Chapters 4 and 5, examines what it would really mean for us to cross boarders to become democratic civic professionals and to move toward what Keith calls “wise practice.” Chapter 4 delves deeply into three concepts and practices of being professional: the expert professional, the professional as social trustee, and the civic professional. As I read and reread these descriptions, I challenged myself — as I challenge you — to decide which description is most applicable to whom we are now and to whom we want to be. Expert professionals who work with communities tend to conceptualize their role as using their expertise to provide efficient delivery of services to the public. Professionals as social trustees view their knowledge and expertise as held in trust for the public and used for the public good. Underlying this orientation is the belief that the social trustee professional has a greater understanding of what people need than the people themselves. In contrast, the civic professional believes that knowledge should be gathered and created collectively with individuals in the community and that knowledge created collaboratively becomes social capital. This social capital is one element that builds the trust that is essential to border-crossing collaborations.

Building trust also requires the civic professional to “unlearn normalized dispositions, attitudes, and behaviors — habits of the heart — that are both personal and professional” (p. 87). For university professionals, these are likely to include viewing collaboration through “a lens that hides privilege, savior orientations, unexamined assumptions about community deficits, and the like” (p. 86). Keith also reminds us that community members also view collaboration through lenses informed by history and experience that may predispose them to seek out their privileged professional partners’ disrespect and deficit assumptions of the community.

Keith ends Chapter 4 by exploring how communities of practice and third spaces can help us journey into the process of border crossing. Many of us are familiar with, belong to, or, as I do, facilitate communities of practice around our work. In my case, I coordinate our service-learning faculty fellows, who come together regularly to develop and enhance their service-learning courses. Keith encourages us to think about what it would look like if we moved toward developing networks of learning communities that spanned the campus-community divide. The thought of how I might begin this process in my practice is very much with me as I write this review. To engage in border crossing, however, requires that we begin the process by entering and inhabiting the “borderlands,” creating a third space, where we experience the discomfort of the unfamiliar, where we try to step out of our normalized roles and enter new identities that leave behind our masks of “authority, silence, polite correctness” (p. 93). In a third space, everyone contributes to the development of all participants, to the development of the space as a home place for all, and to the development of a truly
authentic, collaborative project.

As I finished reading this chapter, I found myself thirsting for more from Keith about borderlands and how to move toward building trustful collaborations through the wise practice she believes can help us get there. As with the latter part of Chapter 3, Chapter 5 is mostly dense and conceptual but includes a helpful example that applies the concepts. Keith begins with contrasting the prevailing notion of professional practice that is geared toward scientific problem solving with that of *phronesis*. Of our traditional, instrumental views of professional practice, Keith states that “the good is envisioned only as the most efficient means to meet preset goals” and that, practice can be perfected but does not have to be relearned (p. 104). Phronesis, on the other hand, “has to be invented all the time, since what was wise today may not be so in different circumstances” (p. 104).

The linear practice of basing decision making on analysis and evaluation is replaced by an ongoing interplay of individual and collective hearts and minds, character and intellect, virtues and capacities. In phronesis, virtues are construed as ways of being that lead us to reach toward a collective happiness “worth having” (p. 105), as opposed to the familiar ethics of duty and responsibility. The good is defined more expansively to include what brings out the best in ourselves as well as in our shared enterprise.

Keith then describes the “thinking tools” advanced by French sociologist and philosopher, Pierre Bourdieu, that can help us become wise practitioners who embrace phronesis in our quest to become democratic civic professionals. Bourdieu’s framework includes habitus, field, and capital. Habitus describes how professionals’ experiences interact with prevailing social structures to shape our dispositions and orientations to practice. Field refers to the social spaces in which habitus is situated. Bourdieu uses the metaphor of the game to explain the concept of field, in which the field’s logic, or rules, are well established and based in history and traditions that are part of the social fabric. Capital, then, refers to the assets valued in a field.

As I continued to digest this material, I eagerly moved on to Keith’s next step, integrating phronesis with the habitus-field-capital framework to suggest a way forward from normalized toward wise practice: “…Bourdieu helps us to make sense of what actually exists, whereas phronesis is about what should be and…what we should try to enact in our own particular practice situation” (p. 113). Knowing that readers might feel a little lost in the abstraction of these critical concepts, Keith provides a table and a concrete example that clarifies how these concepts apply in practice. She illustrates a university-school partnership in Jamaica that involved herself and her colleagues. The table and the example take us through the “moments,” in Keith’s terms, of her border-crossing partnership framework, which begins with our normalized assumptions about what constitutes good practice (Moment 1), the tension between the real and the possible (border-crossing/third space), and moving toward wise practice and becoming a democratic civic professional (Moment 2). I thirsted for more cases, hoping in particular to find others that I could relate to my own situational context. I found them in Part three.

The three chapters that comprise Part three are all about learning through cases and engage the voices of four of Keith’s colleagues in border-crossing partnerships. I was happy to see that two of the cases satisfied my hunger for cases that are service-learning-based. The first case in Chapter 6 involves a four-year collaboration in which students and teachers in an inner-city high school and an urban university engage in service-learning activities with members of a coalition of community organizations. I appreciated Keith’s discussion of service-learning as counter-normative pedagogy (Clayton & Ash, 2004; Howard, 1998), particularly how she used the border-crossing frameworks described in Chapter 5 to inform the service-learning process including course requirements and reflection questions. She then proceeds to explore three critical incidents illuminating the changes that needed to be made for the collaboration to move toward the development of the players as democratic civic professionals. Among the learnings this chapter reinforced for me is the process of the university students’ “sensemaking” as they grappled with the importance of constructing the “good” in the project given the specific context and participants of the service-learning activities. In the context of the critical incidents particular to it, the case takes us through the process of moving toward wiser practice by constructing the good, interrupting a variety of normalcies, and providing just-in-time supports for changes in direction that seemed to lead toward the good. In reflecting on the case, Keith wonders, as I often have with my own service-learning work, whether the optimum balance of challenge and support was achieved for the university students and other participants in the case. Was there more emphasis on disrupting the normalcies, a challenge in itself, and not enough on celebrating small and large achievements? This question and the many others raised in the chapter will remain with me, as it will with other readers, as we search for wiser ways to practice.

The case in Chapter 7, “Building Trust, Sharing Power, Crossing Borders,” was for me a particularly robust and personally enriching example of how the border-crossing partners experienced uncertainty, ambiguity, and discomfort as they worked their way
through a five-year collaboration that culminated each year in a multimedia performance held in a social-justice-focused church in an economically disadvantaged African-American community. Rather than risk omitting critical incidents and nuances by summarizing the year-by-year narrative ably recounted in three voices, I will highlight one of my key learnings and how I might apply it in my own work.

A concept in this chapter that especially resonated with me is that of the ally. At one point, Keith tells one of the key players, Billy, an artist and theater faculty member at Temple University, that she admires his work in terms of being an ally. Billy replies that he no longer uses the term because it implies for him, among other things, that “you need my help” and “I stand outside your story and try to help you…” (p. 173). As Billy and Keith try to unpack the concept and practice of being an ally, Billy suggests that they couch the conversation in terms of “resonance,” which is the reflective process of freeing oneself from the bind that requires us to be one or the other. Resonance is about empathy, listening to understand other people’s stories, and a deep sense of recognition that comes from deep reflection that situates us in the stories of others. In my future courses, I will deconstruct the term ally with my students and use Billy’s reflective assignments and class discussions as models that engage his students in sharing their stories around their own racial histories in order to understand the impacts of the Brown v. Board of Education decision on them as well as on the African Americans in the partner community. Students who were bussed, for example, and had both positive and negative experiences as a result, had never thought that the Brown decision personally affected their lives or the lives of their families and neighbors. In reflecting on my own teaching, I realize that there were lost opportunities for learning this past semester as my students and I were stunned by the events that occurred in Baltimore, 30 miles from my campus, following the death of Freddie Gray while in the custody of Baltimore City police officers. We discussed the recurring violence triggered by critical incidents, the root causes of the police actions or inactions that led to the violent reaction, the press coverage of the incidents and the extent to which they reflected reality, and the ongoing effects of the events on the city and the state. I did not, however, facilitate reflection and discussion among my students on how they and their families might have personally affected, or might be affected by, the events. Billy’s thoughtful account of his experience will encourage me to delve more deeply into sensemaking with my students in the future.

Chapter 8 takes us into an ethnically diverse, economically depressed suburb of Paris to illustrate cultivating civic capacity through the group process of Transformational Social Therapy (TST). Developed by French social psychologist Charles Rojzman, TST has been successful in getting deeply divided people to come together to work on particularly difficult problems in settings where hopelessness and violence are rampant. The TST process described in this chapter centers around improving students’ academic achievement in a dysfunctional school in a community of economic and educational deprivation. Keith takes us through four scenes, as she calls them, which provide an outstanding example of praxis, in which she embodies the principles and practices of TST in descriptive analysis of the process as it occurred in Maville. I found this account fascinating and could not put the book down until I had finished the chapter. As I read, I found my mind returning to how the process embodies the frameworks for border-crossing and becoming a democratic civic professional that Keith provided in earlier chapters. The TST facilitators in this case worked hard to develop a productive group of angry and hopeless individuals by recognizing and supporting its collective intelligence. TST is itself a wise practice that engages participants in embodying the virtues, making sense of the situation, and defining and co-constructing the good. The facilitators spent a good deal of time and effort enacting TST theory and practice to enable participants to drop their masks to reveal and interact with the virtue of humility. A similarly complex and meticulous process of sensemaking led participants to see through the habitus of violence, how violence was responsible for much of what was bad in their situation, and that the participants were responsible, in part, for constructing the violence in their situation. The process intentionally focused on the school as deficient and problematic rather than characterizing the students as such, a reversal of the normalized view of the situation. Through constructing and enacting the good, participants collaboratively defined a good day at school, which led to a list of keys to school success that began by focusing on changing the school rather than changing the students.

This is heady stuff. I admit that I found myself in awe of the lengthy, deep, deliberate TST process that moved participants from seeing themselves as powerless victims to enhancing their civic capacity to develop a plan for collaborative action toward school reform. My mind drifted toward wondering whether my work could ever be as disruptive to the norm, as collaborative, or as fruitful as this process and evolving product. However, Keith’s chapter summary quickly summoned me back to her overarching purpose, which is to help all of us develop our own civic capacities – to move toward wise, democratic practice, in our own settings, in our own ways, incrementally, and at our own pace.

What could I take from this case into my own
practice and my own development? As Keith reminds us, the value of case studies “is not an applicability to the particular, but in the food for thought [they] can provide” (p. 137). This case provided much for me in the way of food for thought. To offer one example, I came away with a more complex understanding of the practice of engaging diverse viewpoints through perspective-taking, which is widely promoted as an essential college outcome by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (Dey & Associates, 2010). Much has been said about the importance of developing perspective-taking in college students as a critical tool for a multicultural democracy. The TST process utilized in the Maville case opened my eyes to the wise practice of engaging mistrustful and unwilling potential participants in improving their own situations and the world by welcoming expression of their grievances. Through listening, asking probing reflective questions, and inviting the students to “entertain the notion that reality is more complex than the binary one portrayed through their masks,” the skilled TST facilitator created space for the students to air the needs, fears, and wounds that led them to adopt their defensive masks, including violence (p. 202). Without taking these first difficult, painful steps with both the youth and the adult participants, they would never have felt safe enough to use their agency to tackle the serious problems the school and the community faced. My main takeaway was that the eventual engagement of the wary and cynical participants would not have occurred through the typical attempt – which I have relied on throughout my years of work in campus-community partnerships – to motivate them by invoking the need to work together for the common good. The normalized process of motivating people who disagree to work together toward a shared goal would “insist that ‘violence’ be left outside the room” (p. 210). It would have failed. This realization provided much of the food for thought promised by Keith, as I continued to ponder: Short of pursuing the extensive training required to become a TST facilitator, how might I and my colleagues engage with our students and partners in perspective-taking that engages the principles of wise practice?

In the final chapter, aptly named “Looking Backward to Go Forward,” Keith brings us back to the two intertwined questions framing the book: what does it mean to be a democratic civic professional who engages in border-crossing campus-community partnerships and how can we become one. Keith takes seriously the suggestion that higher education’s movement toward democratic engagement has reached a threshold in its development. She does not hesitate to address head-on our most challenging questions, complexities, and dilemmas – those that we must address in our work: how it can enhance our students’ understanding of inequality, power, privilege, and oppression; what is the relationship of social justice to our work; and whether campus-community partnerships can really be reciprocal relationships among equals. Engaging in Social Partnerships offers fresh ways to critically examine these questions both as individual practitioners and collectively as a field. Following a useful summary of the book’s key points, Keith offers her own list of questions for each of us to consider as we enter and then work in partnership. I will certainly do so. To what extent would you do so? To what extent would you avoid being a spoiler, I will share just one of her questions (actually the string of them that heads the list under working in partnership): “What is this particular situation like? Who are you and who are they in it? What is visible and what is invisible but still part of the situation? How do all these influence the situation and interactions?” (p. 229). It would surprise me if other readers do not immediately bookmark Keith’s list of questions for use in their own partnership development work.

For Keith, the ultimate purpose of this book and our work is to promote a vision of a more just world. In the conclusion, she articulates her vision of “a society with more equity and justice, a deep sort of democracy, one in which we are able to work together – to struggle together – and build a common future out of a fractured, oppression-ridden, and very imperfect past and present” (p. 229). She recommends that we think deeply about all this and join with others across borders to reach toward new possibilities. So, for me, now what? I have already begun integrating Keith’s perspectives into my thinking about “all this.” And, yes, I do plan to join with colleagues, a “circle of friends” in Keith’s terms, to consider the possibilities her book raises, how it relates to the big questions about our work, and how we can use what we learn from the book and each other to take small and large steps to enhance our work and, as Keith has helped me to affirm, to realize its virtually limitless potential.

References


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