Beyond Borderlanders: Universities Extending their Role in Fostering Creative Partnerships within Communities

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Abstract: Education at all levels is awash with the language of the need for partnerships, and this extends to universities although teacher educators in universities, by way of example, are seen as ‘borderlanders’ (Jasman, Payne, Grundy & Del Borrello, 1998) or ‘living in ivory towers’. University educators are often considered to be apart from the communities in which they are physically situated and this perception sometimes creates tensions between them and other community practitioners. A one-day conference was organised by La Trobe University’s Albury-Wodonga Campus in conjunction with Victoria’s Cultural Development Network and a number of local government and educational agencies to provide a space for those involved – to not only hear how creative partnerships were already working in North-East Victoria (Australia), but also provide opportunities to develop new partnerships. The conference had a practical focus and enabled participants from a broad cross-section of agencies – schools; adult education; higher education; local government; and state-wide agencies – to learn about creative partnerships from across sectors. This negotiated arrangement between the University and the Cultural Development Network built on our established networks and knowledge of partnerships in the local community. Those attending were provided with current research and government policy relating to creative partnerships. Following this the participants became the experts and demonstrated how they had shaped communities and partnership arrangements within their respective contexts. In this paper we outline the role that we, as educators in a university setting, played to enable this event to occur; and a consideration of the types of creative partnerships discussed on the day. The major emphasis is on the potential that exists for university-community partnerships and we conclude with a reflection of how these types of arrangements have the potential to reposition our university’s role in the local community beyond university-school partnerships, and how university educators might reduce the perception that they are either ‘ivory towers’ or ‘borderlanders’.

Keywords: Creative Partnerships, Universities, Schools, Cultural Development, Community

In June 2008, the Faculty of Education at the Albury-Wodonga Campus of La Trobe University co-hosted a conference with the Cultural Development Network entitled Connecting schools and communities: Exploring the possibilities for creative community outcomes. The conference explored existing and future partnerships between schools and communities, and was the third in a series of conferences conducted by the Cultural Development Network elsewhere in the Australian State of Victoria. This particular conference was the only one co-hosted with a university and arose as a collaboration between personnel from the University and the Cultural Development Network.
La Trobe University Albury-Wodonga Campus is one of several campuses of the University, with the campus being located in Wodonga in the North-East of Victoria. The Faculty of Education at the campus is staffed by 3.5 equivalent full-time staff members and offers postgraduate courses in education preparing students to teach in schools and post-compulsory settings such as Technical & Further Education (TAFE), community education centres, hospitals and with the Department of Defence. The Cultural Development Network is a Victorian-based organisation that links individual art practitioners, community organisations and governments across Victoria around issues of cultural vitality (Cultural Development Network, 2008).

Throughout the planning stage the focus was on hearing about successful, local partnerships between schools and school communities, rather than having a cast of ‘outsiders’ espousing the benefits or opportunities for creative partnerships. Momentum grew as the conference neared – with organisations who had initially not been interested in the conference not wanting to be left out!

University personnel contributed to this event in many ways, including: participating in the working party / reference group; providing venue and facilities free of charge; utilising existing networks and the University’s marketing resources to communicate information; identifying and approaching possible presenters; providing a keynote speaker on the concept of creative partnerships; working with some presenters on co-presentations; acting as facilitators of groups; organising catering, registration; providing opportunities for our students to participate in activities and to act as conference assistants; and academic members of staff as conference discussants.

What eventuated was a program that provided opportunities for participants to be able to hear some ‘big picture’ ideas from the State Government about creative partnerships; anecdotes from an international speaker on programs she was involved in (Fitzhugh, 2008); and a theoretically-informed consideration about the ideas of community, creativity and partnerships (Selkrig, 2008). The bulk of the day was set aside for participants to be the presenters by showcasing 12 examples of ways schools and communities were already involved in different forms of creative partnerships. This process allowed people to share ideas and hear of ways that they may be able to implement approaches in their own communities. What emerged confounded the conventional wisdom: that even in a small regional location, or even a neighbourhood of schools, people were not always aware of the creative partnerships in which others were involved.

In the above vignette, a Faculty of Education in a regional university in Australia not only actively participated in a conference about school-community partnerships, but also took a proactive role in defining what creative partnerships can be. In this paper we explore the nature of partnerships and suggest that certain types of partnerships – creative partnerships – are largely overlooked in the literature, and conclude by reflecting on the potential that exists for universities to adopt a proactive role in encouraging and being part of school-community partnerships.
The Evolving Nature of Partnerships

Ling (1993) contends that when talking of partnerships the concept is problematic as a multitude of different associations or perceptions can be triggered. Perhaps unfortunately for partnerships between schools and their communities, they are sometimes expected to reflect a business model of ‘partnership’. The previous Commonwealth Government in Australia, for instance, promoted the Prime Minister’s Community Building Partnership (Community Building Partnership, 2003; Department of Family and Community Services, 2003), which was premised on business models and which used language such as ‘contributing a range of inputs’; ‘value of an investment’, and ‘benefits for the business’ (DF&CS 2003). Although these may have been the starting-point for many partnerships, educational partnerships have long been thought of as building upon relationships that include trust, respect (Gore, 1995; Shapiro, Parssinen, & Brown, 1992), and collegiality (Marlow & Nass-Fukai, 2000), and ideally, where the partners are diverse enough to ‘stimulate change in each other’ (Knight, Wiseman, & Smith, 1992, p. 270). There is a tension inherent in perceptions of partnerships where at one end of a continuum they can be viewed as embracing the ideas of relationships based on trust, respect, collaboration and integrity, and at the other extreme, concepts of compliance, compromise, unequal representation and distrust can surface.

Relationships built on these positive aspects – trust, respect, collaboration and integrity – were evident in a recent inquiry into teacher education in Australia. The Parliament of Australia’s House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Vocational Training (2007) heard of many ‘outstanding partnerships in teacher education’, noting that they were particularly around the provision of the teaching practicum and that

These partnerships are often the result of determined efforts by inspired individuals in universities, schools and systems. Key ingredients in these partnerships are the awareness that teacher education is a shared responsibility and a willingness to work in partnership with other parties to fulfil that responsibility (p. 79).

Kruger, Davies, Eckersley, Newell, and Cherednichenko (2009) refine the attributes of university-school partnerships in their research that followed Australia’s inquiry into teacher education. Acknowledging that partnerships are a social practice, they argue that partnerships are characterised by ‘trust, mutuality and reciprocity among preservice teachers, teachers and other school colleagues and teacher educators’ (p. 10). Importantly for student learning, a clear conclusion of their research is that bringing stakeholders together – in this instance, universities and schools – promotes personalised and localised interests in learning. The effects of effective partnerships, they find, are evident in a focus on students’ learning; altered relationship practices; and enabling structures that span the boundaries of school and university and that these rely upon the existence of resources: personal and professional; institutional; and the contribution of professional understandings via a shared language. These characteristics, effects and resources are represented in the Figure 1:
Bagnall (2007), not being limited to university-school partnerships, suggests that educational partnerships variously occur between two or more educational or resource providers or learners and can involve individuals, organisations or collectives. The activities of these partnerships commonly include resourcing, communicative exchange and shared engagements...[and] most commonly involve a level of interdependency between and among partners, each contributing something different to the partnership and also benefiting somewhat differently from it (p. 2).

With learning being a social, ongoing process over the width and length of our lives, where formal and informal learning settings can merge, learning necessarily involves broad collaboration or partnerships. This idea is not new, with Illich (1971) espousing the concept of ‘learning webs’ that included the numerous sources and resources beyond school sites that are available to enhance learning. ‘[T]oday’s educational institutions are increasingly required to blur the old inside/outside institutional boundaries’ (Kalantzis & Cope, 2008, p. 218) as they involve themselves in partnerships or collaborations.

The way collaborations or partnerships function in learning are open to a range of interpretations. Bagnall (2007, pp. 3-4), for instance, suggests there are three categories: partnerships towards learning; partnerships for learning; and partnerships in learning. He describes partnerships towards learning as where neither partner is involved as a designated learner; the learners or intended learners are the objects and are external to it. The negotiation between a local government and a school to share sporting facilities, or the emergence of public/private partnerships in the building of school are examples that would fit into this type of category.

Bagnall’s partnerships for learning see at least one of the partners being involved as a designated learner of the partnership and one other is not so designated. This type of partnership may be familiar to many when viewed as constituting the traditional relationship or roles of the teacher and student or learner.
Bagnall’s third category, partnerships in learning, articulates that both partners, if there are only two, or all partners if there are more, are involved as designated learners; collaboration is voluntary and is concerned in promoting each other’s learning through the partnership. This notion is not too dissimilar to Wenger’s (1998) idea of a community of practice where the emphasis is placed on the learning of people within the group and what they learn through their mutual engagement. According to Wenger (1998), a community of practice defines itself along three dimensions, viz: joint enterprise as understood and continually renegotiated by its members; it involves a mutual engagement that binds members together into a social entity; and they have a shared repertoire of communal resources (routines, sensibilities, artefacts, vocabulary, styles, etc.) that members have developed over time. This approach also concurs with much of what Kalantzis and Cope (2008) describe as ‘new learning’, where formal learning settings become learning communities.

Bagnall (2007) argues the minimal conditions required to classify a partnership as being creative is that it needs to be: novel; producing a new or different response; contextualised; intelligent; valued; and intentional. The greater the novelty the more creative it is, he contends. ‘Network’, as a term, is one of many expressions that describe groups of organisations and sectors working together. Other names that are sometimes used interchangeably include partnership, cluster, alliance, collaboration, collective and joined-up approach (Black, 2008b, pp. 5-6). Black lists the qualities of an effective network as:

- focusing on enhancing student outcomes and sets achievable goals in which students’ best interests are paramount;
- having a shared language and agreed values, aspirations and expected outcomes;
- fostering relationships of trust and respect based on democratic principles, mutuality, equity, shared ownership and common purpose;
- having the active involvement and advocacy of school leadership;
- having the capacity to respond to local circumstances and to move from soft collaboration to rigorous work;
- promoting innovative or ‘next’ practice;
- being well organised, with clear operating procedures and mechanisms for ensuring maximum participation between its members; and
- having adequate resources to fulfil its purposes, particularly in terms of time, finance and human capital (Black, 2008b, p. 7).

Emerging in some of the discussion pertaining to partnerships, particularly in relation to partnerships involving the arts, is the need for them to be ‘innovative’ or ‘creative’ (Arts Council England, 2007; Arts Victoria, 2004; Department of Culture and the Arts & Department of Education and Training, 2005; Robinson, 1999). Traditionally, Bagnall (2007) says, creativity was seen in the light of learning to be creative, or learning creativity as a skill. In more recent times, Bagnall says, creativity is being viewed as a social phenomenon, which involves, a bringing together of different perspectives and expertise to generate creative responses to challenging educational situations or broader social and environmental issues.

Recent government initiatives in Victoria via the Blueprint for Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD, 2008) point to the relationship between student outcomes and the contribution that communities can – and should – make:
Community groups and agencies, business and philanthropic organisations have a strong interest in improving outcomes for children and young people and helping them pursue academic excellence. It is important that schools and early childhood services make the most of these partnerships (DEECD, 2008, p. 29).

During the past two years research has been conducted in Australia into various types of partnerships. Following the release of Top of the Class, the Australian Government’s inquiry into teacher education, which recommended that the Government offer support for partnerships in teacher education through the establishment of a National Teacher Education Partnership Fund (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Vocational Training, 2007), Kruger et al. (2009) conducted research into effective and sustainable university-school partnerships as part of pre-service teacher preparation programs. A project was also conducted by Victoria’s Department of Education and Early Childhood Development to identify examples and characteristics of collaboration amongst schools, and between schools and other agencies in Australia and internationally that support better outcomes for students, particularly those who are underperforming in literacy and numeracy, at risk of leaving school early or less likely to enter university or to succeed in further or vocational education (Black, 2008b).

‘Creativity’ was not explicitly considered in either report; nor were ‘creative partnerships’, though it would be foolish to assume that just because they were omitted from the research that creative partnerships do not have the potential to contribute to better outcomes for students (see, for instance, Craven, 2008; Molloy, 2008). Such oversights, however, suggest that although there is an increasing realisation that students in schools will become inspired to identify with success by being exposed to stimulating learning environment that communities have the potential to provide (Black, 2008a), some sorts of partnerships or networks appear to be privileged over others. This is despite emerging evidence of the value of creative partnerships (see Eames, Benton, Sharp, & Kendall, 2006; Pope & Doyle, 2006).

Collaboration between schools and community sector agencies may perhaps be the single most important cross-sectoral relationship in improving outcomes for children and young people, says Black (2008b), yet such collaborations can be fraught with challenges. In a response to the Victorian Government’s Blueprint for Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD, 2008), for instance, various members of a particular school community that had never experienced the values of partnerships responded cautiously – if not fearfully:

We need to be careful which businesses we align ourselves with. For example, I mean, we wouldn’t wanna go and speak to some of these fast food outlets. We’d need to target businesses that are more in line with what we want to achieve (School councillor quoted in Bowlen, 2008)

…you would hope that out of some of those corporations or those big companies, there would be something we could go to partnership with. Exactly what, I can't begin to imagine at this stage. How the relationship becomes reciprocal I'm not sure (School principal quoted in Bowlen, 2008)

It’s not an opportunity for businesses to use this as an opportunity to lever their products. So, the core issue here is, is it in the interests of the child; is it in the interests of the school? (The State Premier quoted in Bowlen, 2008).
A Greater Role for Universities?

Notwithstanding the evolving and diverse nature of partnerships,

The local community is increasingly recognised as the place where cross-sectoral partnerships and networks can be most successful in tailoring solutions to needs (Agora Think Tank, 2007 quoted in Black, 2008b, p. 12).

This raises the prospect of universities, notably those in regional areas with faculties such as Education, playing a greater role than what they may have hitherto done.

Although there has been a long association between schools and universities, historically it could be argued (Connelly & Clandinin, 1994; Goodson, 2000) that myth has generated a considerable suspicion between the work of those involved in professional educational partnerships. Grundy, Robison and Tomazos (2001) described the traditional separation of the working worlds of school-based teachers and academics and that it is important to recognise that these historical relationships may create suspicion between teacher educators and practising teachers.

Jasman, Payne, Grundy and Del Borrello (1998) pointed to the ‘cultural differences’ that can exist between teacher educators and school-based practitioners and characterised the former as ‘…living somewhere in the borderlands, at the margins, as boundary spanners or as translators between theory and practice’. Their observations were made more than ten years ago, and much has changed since then, though

Australian schools have a history of partnership with their local communities to improve outcomes for children and young people, but it is an uneven history. Existing partnerships could provide a platform for more sustainable networks that link local schools, their communities and the agencies that work for the good of those communities. These networks should respond to the particular circumstances of each school and the community it serves but they should also meet universal high standards, expectations and accountabilities. *Schools need to be successful with their communities, not in spite of them* [original emphasis] (West-Burnham, Farrar & Otero, 2007 in Black, 2008a, p. 19).

The role for universities in such partnerships is not at all clear in these comments, but in regional Australia, universities are part of communities and can be ‘agencies that work for the good of those communities’ (West-Burnham, Farrar & Otero, 2007 in Black, 2008a, p. 19). Incentives to form school-university partnerships have come at a time not only when Commonwealth funding of tertiary institutions has decreased, but when teacher educators must also deal with the pressure of balancing the teaching, research and administrative demands of their roles and look to research as an avenue to generate funds for their continued existence (Cooper & Jasman, 2002).

Teacher education courses are also feeling the competitive pressure to have strong links between coursework and professional practice (de Jong & Sharp, 2003), and for those institutions located in rural parts of Australia, the contribution of teacher education courses needs to be significant – and appealing enough – to ensure sufficient numbers of teachers are available and keen to teach in rural and remote locations (Rural Education Forum Australia, 2004). Furthermore, inquiries into pre-service teacher education programs, such as that
conducted in Victoria (Parliament of Victoria Education and Training Committee, 2005), generate concerns about the quality of teaching and the recency of practice held by teacher educators within universities, with partnership agreements between universities and schools being supported as a means of overcoming these shortfalls (Victorian Government, 2005):

The Committee recognises that such close links between universities and schools are the way of the future in teacher education. They have the potential to provide pre-service teachers with a rich, relevant and realistic pathway into teaching, as well as provide opportunities to schools and the existing teacher workforce to improve learning outcomes for students. While acknowledging that such programs may be resource intensive and pose organisational challenges for both the school and the teacher education institution, the Committee heard clear evidence that the benefits of these partnerships far outweigh the potential costs (Parliament of Victoria Education and Training Committee, 2005, p. 58).

Partnerships are formed between Faculties of Education and schools (and other educational settings) when pre-service teachers are placed on practicum places. The relationships also occur when providing school-based presenters to work with pre-service teachers and who extend the students’ understanding of the meaning of ‘community’. Moving beyond these pragmatic considerations, working in smaller regional communities also allows for networks to develop and communication between organisations to grow. ‘Schools cannot do the work of improving student outcomes alone’ (Black, 2008b, p. 30) and there is huge potential for universities and schools to ‘step out together’, to appropriate the title of a Victorian Government inquiry: Step up, step in, step out: Report of the inquiry into the suitability of pre-service teacher training in Victoria (Parliament of Victoria Education and Training Committee, 2005).

Networks [and therefore partnerships] can also take many forms, from informal, idiosyncratic and short-term arrangements between small groups of teachers to formal, permanent and widespread alliances that go beyond the education sector. They can be formal or informal, fixed or fluid, extensive or intimate, short-term or long-term. They can have broad or narrow agendas. They can be expert or representative, centralised or decentralised, open or closed, local or cosmopolitan, geographical or virtual (Black, 2008b, p. 6).

By way of summary: our thinking about creative partnerships is that there is potential to extend the way in which they are considered, so that they go beyond university-school arrangements, to relationships that involve universities, schools and broader community agencies and individuals. This is represented in Figure 2.
Creative partnerships between universities, schools and the broader communities in which they are situated can generate environments in which more-expansive ideas, responses and collaborations are possible, than what is achievable between schools and universities alone. From our perspective as teacher educators, creative partnerships have the potential to alter a university’s role in the local community by reducing the perception of others that teacher educators are either ‘living in ivory towers’ or are ‘borderlanders’. What may be required first, as illustrated in the opening vignette, is that universities need to see themselves as part of community/ies and that they have much to offer partnerships beyond simply being hosts and/or detached commentators and/or limited to functioning in and with schools.

References


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