Australian Teacher Education Association
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Problematising Partnerships : *A critical review of a successful partnership*

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This paper reports on a successful cross-institution partnership in developing an online induction in core academic skills (iCAS) for first year pre-service teachers in James Cook University. The discussion takes a particular interest in the tensions of collaboration and individualism, and research and teaching in a context of accountability, limited funding and work overload. It contends that collaborative partnerships facilitate the productive disruption of scarcity mentality, subculture conflict, and isolationist perspectives. To foster a collaborative climate in teaching, we propose three primary conditions to sustain professional growth, sense of community and disrupt silo patterns through the acts of giving and sharing in a communal and reciprocal format that delays burnout and maintains personal and professional integrity.

Keywords: partnership, autonomy, individualism, collaboration

Academic work today requires more negotiation and movement between disciplinary, departmental, institutional and often sectoral boundaries than we have experienced in previous generations (Henkel, 2005). As academic performance becomes increasingly subject to internal and external administrative scrutiny, and central trends in academic culture promote and reward research over teaching (De Zilwa, 2007), we are more often attesting to the personal and professional costs absorbed by those who care about, and find meaning in their teaching work. To emphasise this now dichotomised perception of workload between 'research' and 'teaching' capacities, we will use the term *academic-teacher* throughout. At the same time that academic-teachers are feeling the pinch in terms of workload and fiscal scarcity, they are negotiating change in terms of traditional knowledge delivery and student expectation. Workload has increased as academic-teachers go in search of effective delivery modes, and are now expected to routinely deliver subject content online as well as in-class. Academic-teachers are being asked to ensure subject delivery is accessible, useable, secure, printable, interesting, interactive, up-to-date, well researched and multi-modality. This has led to many experiencing burnout and disillusionment as they increasingly feel bureaucratised and undervalued. Market driven accountabilities serve to promote contrived collegiality through enforced partnerships and competition for finances. The conditions under which we enter into these 'collaborations' can constrain productivity, as partners are unwilling to disengage from isolationist perspectives. We ask under what conditions can collaborative partnerships facilitate the productive disruption of such dispositions, create supportive institutional structures that nurture collaborative space, celebrate individual expertise in the academic community, and make more apparent the value of collaboration to augment the breadth of knowledge and expertise available to an individual?

Responses to complex working environments:
Administrative scrutiny, expressed in literature as difficulty in obtaining funds for research also extends to teaching, as we compete for project monies that have become tied to performance and quality assurance. The difficulties inherent in fiscal gain are exacerbated by confusion over exactly what constitutes quality and how university departments can go about assuring it. The only certainty is that it must have all the above mentioned aspects, as well as providing equity, cultural sensitivity, pastoral care and draw sufficient student numbers to qualify. Barrett (1998), Billing (2004), Huisman & Currie (2004), Harvey & Green (1993), Jackson (1998), Lomas (2001) and Vidovich (2002) point to the nature of changing discourse on these issues over the past two decades. Such confusion only adds to the experience of frustration and promotes burnout as increasingly we

spend our time in funds acquisition rather than on teaching. We hear our colleagues (such as Ryor 1978; Massey et. al 1994; Trigwell 2005) tell us of fragmented communication patterns that isolate individuals as competition for resources and recognition leads to a scarcity mentality that places strain on professional, personal and faculty relationships. These tensions can and often do result in subcultures split along disciplinary and ideological divides. Decipherability remains difficult even in relation to faculty division, with individuals at times holding interwoven fidelities to administrative, social, teaching, research, disciplinary and isolationist cultures (De Zilwa, 2007, p.562). As Ylijoki (2000) discusses, the emotional commitment felt by individuals often involves confusion between loyalties, as individuals and groups struggle over ideologies as well as resources. Such research illuminates the complex links between personal and professional motivation, academic relational landscapes, and the context in which people think about, develop and articulate their work (Del Favero, 2002).

In part, the complexity of these issues, that so profoundly influence personal relationships and professional partnerships, stems from the fact that academic-teachers are also faced with changing perceptions of what it is we do, or should be doing, in our institutions. If, as de Groot (1997), Henkel (2005), Nixon (2001) and Schwalbe (1985) suggest our faculties *are* places where we build our professional identities, and academic-teaching roles have traditionally been associated with high levels of autonomy, and if this autonomy is under threat through changes in regulative practice: would we be entirely amiss in suggesting that this threat (perceived or otherwise) may be a source of underlying tensions, divisions and isolationist culture? Further to this, does perceived threat to autonomy serve to constrain effective partnerships?

That the nature of academic work is changing is not in question. Neither is the experience of teaching being devalued in terms of recognition and reward in comparison with research. So how do those of us with strong teaching/learning orientations, find personal and professional meaning within a system that facilitates silo academics and does little to reward good teaching and its efforts? One increasingly used strategy that can have mixed benefits, is to learn to negotiate within, around and through collaborative partnerships. As we come to "rely less on assumed rights" to autonomy, and expectations in relation to skills bases and workload increase, the reality of our professional lives is, that collective reputations on macro and micro levels have become increasingly important (Henkel, 2005, p.170). Academic-teaching is becoming progressively publicised as the forums in which we engage learners rely less on physical encounters and take place more often in online communities. Traditional concepts of academic-teaching life are also changing, as the nature of autonomy changes from one of commodity to one of practicality, that must be realised through "managing multi-modality and multiple relationships in a context where boundaries have either collapsed or become blurred" (Henkel,2005, p.173). The formation of collaborative partnerships represents one of the more significant continuation strategies in the world of intra and inter-faculty competitiveness, and its effectiveness extends to the transnational (Herfernan & Poole 2005; Loomis & Rodriguez ,2009).

Complex, multi-layered issues that flow downward from a hierarchical system such as those facing academic-teachers, typically elicit two main responses. The first being the desire for "Heroic teaching against immutable odds" where we "charge into battle" and "gladly suffer wounds for the cause." (Baker, 1982, p.52). This approach is usually met with burnout, cynicism and ultimately, isolation. And can lead to the second phenomena, where we experience feelings of frustration, arousal and helplessness in response to complexities that threaten to consume us. Ultimately, in both of these strategies, the issues finalise themselves through depersonalisation (Weick 1984, p.41) resulting in lowered arousal. Unfortunately, lowered arousal often precedes despondency, apathetic performance, and inactivity (Huy, 2002). Neither of these responses is conducive to institutional or personal productivity. In the face of insurmountable policies that make manoeuvrability difficult for those of us on the 'shop floor' the following option may be the most appropriate course. We

draw upon Weick's (1984, p.44) suggestion that "Small wins provide information that facilitates learning and adaptation" and further, they:

> "...preserve gains, they cannot unravel, each one requires less coordination to execute, interruptions such as might occur when there is a change in political administration have limited effects, and subparts can be assembled in different configurations."

Project Synopsis:

iCAS (induction to Core Academic Skills) is a small cross-faculty/cross divisional teaching partnership, and offers elucidation of the above mentioned points through a look at the role of the "small win" in developing and maintaining effective professional partnerships. Developed to support the transition of 400 pre-service Education students into university study, iCAS is an embedded, assessable online programme composed of five modules: Orientation, Critical Reading, Information Literacy, Critical Writing and Presentation and Exams. The collaboration included an academic from the School of Education, a faculty librarian, a social scientist and a socio-linguist, both from the School of Indigenous Australian Studies. The success of the partnership is evidenced by its timely completion of the project with limited funding and a tight timeline amidst natural and technological disasters (via tropical cyclone Yasi), firmer collegial relationships and strong positive student feedback of the program. An integral aspect of this success was a shared teaching/learning orientation and similar pedagogical philosophies. The remainder of this paper takes these philosophies, embedded into iCAS to support intellectual well-being of learners and inverts them to reflect on ways these may be used to analyse the usage of professional partnerships to support intellectual well-being of academic-teachers, to delay the onset of burnout, and to draw new meaning in a changing profession.

Project Principles and Online Teaching:

The guiding principles and the central aims of the project were informed to a large extent by its online nature. It is worth a brief detour here to discuss some of the organisational and workload issues academic-teachers face when creating an accessible, useable, secure, printable, interesting, interactive and supportive learning structure. As Foster (1992, p.195) states:

> "Since a single academic can rarely be, as well as a subject-matter expert, an expert in all
> the other skills necessary to produce the desired qualities in the finished packaged product,
> there would seem to be a *prima facie* case for team work..."

Further to this, in direct contrast to the oft heard comments along the lines of 'just throw it online', Foster's findings showed the basic workload of a successful, non-face-to-face subject increases by a "factor of four or more to one." (1992, p.195). In addition to this, like many Australian universities the project provided for a diverse cohort. James Cook University is a regional university, with high percentages of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island, first generation, mature age entry level and overseas learners. Our cohorts also include high percentages of low socio-economic, diverse ESL, and geographically isolated students with little or no university experience. As such, the project material had to be able to stand alone. Conditions such as these exponentially increase the demand on individual academic-teachers to near impossible limits, when taken in consideration with other workload commitments. Add to this, restricted autonomy (or perceptions of), and we begin to make more explicit the links between expectation toward extremely high levels of multi-modality skilling, the nature of online teaching, expectations of institution and learner, and academic-teacher burnout.

There is one dimension yet that we have not discussed and this is the nature of online learning content that has an exposed shelf life. This new dimension requires academic-teachers to learn new ways of thinking about and delivering content, for as Elton, (1989, cited in Foster, 1992, p.193) tells us:

> "... materials used are both permanent and public, in direct contrast to classroom and lecture hall, where most teaching happens through speaking and behind closed doors. Permanent materials lend themselves to detailed course design in a way that traditional teaching does not, because it is possible to link systematically, objectives, method and content, and to improve the system through field trials and feedback. The public availability of the system also lays it open to public critique and accountability – a powerful incentive for competence and good work."

These differences also offer powerful incentives to create supportive, effective partnerships, where we can draw upon diverse expertise, points of view, experience and ongoing professional development through peer review and critique. The three guiding principles directing the project and the partnership were: *Recognition, Revelation and Re-evaluation*. Below we look at what each of these principles meant in practical terms as a pedagogical philosophy, and how we can apply these in inverse form to reflect on partnerships.

Recognition in this context refers to an articulated awareness of the core teaching philosophies of each of the collaborative partners. In the interest of intellectual freedom (for ourselves and our learners) we did not want to present knowledge in "discrete portions or bits of information" to "technicize" and treat the acts of reading, writing, researching, presenting and preparing for exams as "skill-acquisitions". And we certainly take umbrage with the thought that these skills and the understandings that can stem from them "no longer challenge people to go in search of meanings", or to "enter into the life of language", and "interrogate their familiar worlds" (Greene, 1986, p.234). As a group we made a conscious commitment to an "ethical understanding of the ends we were trying to achieve" and considered the possibility that all good teaching may indeed find itself offensive to someone (Barber, 1992, cited in Hostetler, 2005, p.16).

How is this recognition pertinent to partnerships in terms of this discussion? Firstly, we were forced to articulate and become cognizant of our philosophies. This cognition allowed for a more comfortable transition from private, client centred teaching (see Baker, 1986), to learning community centred teaching in the public domain. Other benefits of recognition as pedagogy *and* a partnership practice include the fostering of a supportive environ and professional development opportunities that simply do not arise for solo academics. Foster (1992, p.196) lends support for this in stating:

> "When a course is created as a team enterprise, there exists,... a culture in which it is hardly possible not to learn from one's colleagues, hardly possible not to acquire insights about their skills, approaches and philosophies in respect to teaching and learning."

However, the most important discovery, and perhaps more pertinent to this discussion, is a new understanding that *increased feelings of autonomy* can be gained, through a strengthened sense of community and personal connections with learners and peers, in what can be an isolating professional environment. These feelings of extra manoeuvrability, new frontiers in teaching and learning, peer support, and shared enthusiasm all assist in countering feelings of stifled creativity and delaying burnout. Furthermore they lead us to an understanding that autonomy can actually increase when shared.

With an understanding that teachers who are seen to be effective in the provision of a safe learning environment have been so because they have, to some degree, been able to negotiate the weight of their own habitus. We chose to reveal (the principle of revelation) the contents of our own dialogic and cultural spaces in relation to the subject content, with one another and our learners. The underlying ethos is one of *trust*. Trust is defined here as the perceived ability of our partners to be "...relied on to fulfil obligations...behave in a predictable manner...act and negotiate fairly when the possibility for opportunism is present" (Zaher et al, 1998, p.143). Research into the links between

trust on micro and macro levels (such as, Hefferenan, 2005; Huy, 2002; Zaher, 1998) suggest that trust, whatever the definition, is an integral component of successful partnerships. *Revelation* as a pedagogical *and* partnership philosophy has allowed us to experiment with professional, creative freedom and the nature of online learning communities in the public domain. Leading us to ask: can we create a new synergy on our information highway that does more than attempt to replicate the in-class dynamic between learner, teacher and content if we learn to bridge online worlds through partnerships that bring diverse perspectives and expertise?

The act of *re-evaluation* entailed foregrounding the idea that learners can re-evaluate their position in the world. And from this, can enter into new negotiations with society. There is some delicacy involved in this step, as it is essential that the areas of our life in which negotiations are impossible (such as culture, gender, obligation), are not negated and are recognised as implacable. However, at the same time, we can support the recognition that we all hold propensities towards and awareness of "expanding horizons" and "unexplored territory" and that we all hold "questions to be asked" (Hostetler, 2005, p.21). If we invert this, we promote the idea that we can re-evaluate the ways in which we are conceptualising and enacting *our* transitional situation. Current literature suggests that "for those who care about teaching and learning, the indifference from all quarters is sometimes overwhelming" (Baker, 1986, p.51); and that "the rewards for outstanding teaching" frequently lead to "little more than the private satisfaction of a job well done." (Baker, 1986, p.54; Lortie, 1975, p. 195). However if we take collaborative relationships into account and begin to view them as an integral aspect of the new academic-teacher landscape, we begin to see our own horizons expanding once more in contradiction to the cries over a diminishing autonomy. We can, from here extrapolate outward and the aforementioned unexplored territory becomes a reference to the experience of a shared autonomy – in which we ask questions and seek solutions together rather than toil alone in isolation and despair.

Conclusion:
Collaborative ventures if they support an underlying assumption of trust can provide additional frameworks of identity, shared autonomy and community – the very things lamented over in current discussions on university transformations. Ultimately, the single connecting link is the human one. De Zilwa (2007, p.568) suggests that:

> "those who perform successfully in changing environments possess distinctive attributes such as innovation, willingness to take calculated risks, clarity of direction, tolerance of ambiguity and uncertainty, persistence, seeking incremental advances, flexibility, and acceptance that not very venture or appeal for funding will succeed."

In other words, they aim for the keeping of integrity though small wins. We asked previously, under what conditions can collaborative partnerships facilitate the productive disruption of scarcity mentality, subculture conflict, and isolationist perspectives to create supportive institutional structures that nurture collaborative space. From this discussion we draw three primary conditions that can be enacted within limited manoeuvrability: a willingness toward shared autonomy, revelation, and an actualisation of autonomy rather than the perception of it as a commodity. These conditions *can* create teaching spaces that enable professional growth, sense of community and disrupt silo patterns through the acts of giving and sharing in a communal and reciprocal format that delays burnout and maintains personal and professional integrity.

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