

# RECIPROCITY IN PROFESSIONAL PARTNERSHIPS: OUTCOMES FOR EVERYONE

*Margaret Fletcher  
Griffith University  
Queensland*

## Reference:

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*Re-envisaging the nature of professional relationships in education has emphasised a need for partnerships among institutions that have common interests, needs and goals. Reciprocity in partnerships is an essential element of such relationships, ensuring all parties achieve outcomes that are productive and mutually satisfying. In 2000, the establishment of a formal Alliance of schools with Griffith University offered educational opportunities for university students, lecturers and teachers to creatively interact in the pursuit of lifelong learning, researched-based teaching and collaborative planning. In this paper, the evolution of the partnership is described and outcomes are reported.*

## Introduction

Establishing professional relationships among institutions, agencies and professional organisations has been the subject of Commonwealth policy over the past decade. In 1994 the Australian Commonwealth Department of Employment Education and Training (DEET) funded a professional development initiative where priority was given to forming professional relationships across a range of educational bodies.

More recently, Education Queensland in its push for reform has produced a range of policy documents that emphasise the importance for schools to establish links with outside bodies in the pursuit of effective professional development and improved teaching and learning outcomes. (See Education Queensland at <http://education.qld.gov.au/corporate/qse2010/docs/labourpapepr.doc>). For example, a goal of the Quality Teacher Program (2001) was to:

*unlock and enhance the capacity of the workforce through localised sustainable professional learning experiences delivered within professional learning communities ( p.3).*

Similar policies targeting the tertiary sector have resulted in partnerships across professional groups and the workplace. In this paper, work-in-progress is reported describing how a partnership across schools, university and a professional development organisation evolved in ways that were unpredictable but highly productive.

## **Background**

In 2000, Griffith University hosted a lunch for members of the Logan Education Alliance (LEA) – a newly formed group whose membership comprised of 10 schools and Griffith University. A serendipitous discussion during lunch between an academic and a school principal resulted in a professional relationship that is the subject of this paper. Lunchtime discussion centred on professional development of teachers and how universities could link with schools in ways that might productively improve teacher education and professional development. Topics discussed included classroom-based research, evidenced-based pedagogy and the promotion of a collaborative teaching culture.

A new course in English Education was about to be introduced in a Bachelor of Education primary degree program at the university. The course was to build on studies students had completed in first and second-year, completing a suite of three courses in English curriculum [See Bartlett Fletcher & Kearney (2002)]. The Academic and the Principal talked about better ways to prepare preservice-teachers in the core business of literacy teaching and the need for stronger links between universities and schools, academics and classroom teachers (Akerlind & Jenkins 1998). They shared ideas about content in university course work and the range of skills and knowledge graduating students needed to bring to teaching in the Logan area. The Principal vividly described the unique demands made of teachers in his school and his constant search for graduates who would *“bring energy and enthusiasm to a job that’s professionally challenging, demanding and often exhausting. But in my school we are determined to improve our students’ literacy performance and chances in life through the best of teaching. We are working together to achieve this. That’s our core business”*. The academic talked about aligning teaching, assessment and pedagogy (Biggs 1999, 1996) in authentic ways that reflected the local experience. She knew the limitations of a crammed university curriculum where learning was often removed from workplace reality. She wanted her students to move beyond the knowing to the doing; testing their knowledge outside the university and experiencing the rewards that result from working in *‘professionally challenging, demanding and often exhausting’* classrooms.

In a ‘money-where-your-mouth-is’ agreement, academic and principal organised a series of meetings with key people in the Alliance to collaboratively design an innovative course that would bring pre-service teachers and teachers together as partners in research. At the end of the day a plan had been set in place that was to assume a life of its own, and, in the words of the Principal, *“Our school has never been the same since”*.

## **The nature of partnerships and professional relationships**

Initially, educational partnerships were created by school system staff to "foster school-community cooperation, provide incentives for students, supplement curriculum and staff, and obtain equipment" (Clark 1992, p. 2). They were usually broad-based, involving multiple organisations and requiring some formal, long-term commitment. They proceeded with a “shared vision, goals and objectives developed through consensus, shared authority and decision making, new roles and relationships for the various players, integrated delivery of multiple services and cross-institutional activities” (Clark 1992, p. 2).

A distinction is made in this paper between partnerships as described by Clark (1992) and professional relationships that are based on experiences reported here. Partnerships across groups remain potentials in terms of productivity until individuals establish relationships that are based on committed activity and shared understandings. Relationships can be multiple where one member may be working with several individuals in different activities that have different objectives. Multiple relationships may be synchronous or shift over time, but they should always be complementary to the goals of the partnership. Therefore, while professional relationships may be formed within a partnership because of sub-group needs, interests and purpose, these relationships should advance the partnership as an entity.

Grundy, Robison and Tomazoz (2001) proposed a need to better understand how “professionally–shared stories” constituted professional knowledge contexts that mediated views schools and universities shared of each other in an effort to avoid impediments to partnerships. Schools tend to view universities as knowledge producers removed from the practical world of work while universities view schools as consumers of knowledge that is action oriented, removed from research-based theoretical understandings.

The partnership reported here offered opportunities for schools and university to develop understandings of their different working worlds through the integration of research and action in ways that were mutually productive.

The professional relationships that emerged from the formal LEA partnership were based on shared needs that were actioned in ways that were reciprocal and democratic. They were not always balanced in terms of roles, responsibilities and workload, but the reciprocity of benefits, both tangible and potential was evident to all. It was the capacity of individuals to work towards the achievement of each other’s goals that resulted in the realization of potential outcomes that were sometimes unpredictable but always productive. There appeared to be a domino effect where ideas generated action that gathered momentum in ways that were unexpectedly productive. As critical events, they were viewed as a promise of possibilities, impossible to anticipate but remarkable to experience as they developed into committed action.

### *Objectives*

The initial objective that underpinned the formation of this professional relationship within the LEA partnership was the establishment of an undergraduate course that would prepare pre-service teachers to teach in the local area. The issue was to facilitate the development of vocational knowledge through providing preservice teachers with opportunities to articulate, explicate, and explore their own beliefs and preconceptions of teaching (Ethell 1997). "All student teachers need to be provided with opportunities in their preservice teacher education course to foster the development of appropriate schemata for interpreting new knowledge and experiences from the perspective of teachers rather than students" (Ethell 1997, p. 283).

Teachers need to see themselves as lifelong learners (Candy Crebert, & O’Leary, 1994; West, 1998) and a path to such a view in an undergraduate course is to design assessment tasks that will equip students as researchers of their own practice.

Furthermore, authentic assessment grounds learning in the reality of the workplace, where purpose and application underpin the knowing and doing (Wiggins 1989; Torrance 1998).

The following essential learning outcomes of the course were identified, where students would be able:

- Identify their own learning needs as teachers of English;
- Strategically pursue their own learning as researchers of literacy;
- Work collaboratively with peers and members of the teaching profession to develop and test effective teaching approaches to teaching literacy;
- Plan for student diversity by researching learning needs of specified groups of students;
- Design resource materials that will support students' mastery of a range of communication media (oral, print and multimedia). (Course outline, 2001)

To achieve these outcomes an inquiry-based model of learning was designed where preservice teachers and teachers would collaborate in authentic tasks as researchers of effective practice (Cormack, Johnson, Peters, & Williams, 1998).

### **Approach**

It is one thing to establish and document common outcomes that will benefit all members of a partnership. The real challenge is actioning those goals, monitoring their achievement and evaluating their effect. It is the professional relationship component of the partnership that is the enabling power for action. Members of the group have to make it happen. This often means inventing new ways of working. It always means knocking down barriers that generally are built on tradition and compartmentalised views of work. And, it requires time and effort.

There were over 200 students enrolled in this course, and it has not been possible to link all students with teachers during these beginning stages of this project. A process was developed so some students were able to work directly with teachers, while others undertook their research from a theoretical perspective, relying on the literature to provide a context for their assessment.

LEA schools nominated areas in the field of literacy and English teaching where they would benefit from working with preservice teachers, collaboratively researching pedagogy in the classroom. Pre-service teachers established contact with these schools through our professional practice office and undertook their professional practice with teachers who would act as mentors in the project. They wrote literature reviews, formed research questions about best practice and developed resources to test in the field. A second layer of professional relationships was formed within the partnership. As pre-service teachers and teacher-mentors worked together as researchers of practice, theory was truly tested in those 'challenging, exhausting and sometimes frustrating classrooms'.

A third layer relationship developed as the academic worked with schools to facilitate the linkage between pre-service teachers and teacher-mentors. As the worlds of university work and school work merged, teacher-mentors were invited to give guest

lectures in the course. This expanded to having teachers working in a sessional capacity, tutoring groups throughout the semester.

Pre-service teachers and some teacher-mentors presented their research at a conference co-hosted by Griffith University and Meanjin Brisbane Council, Australian Literacy Educators' Association. A potential exists for further developing relationships and extending the partnership to include such professional organisations.

### Outcomes for everyone

Data presented here describing the effects of professional partnerships within the LEA partnership are drawn from surveys, interviews, forum discussions, and reflective journals.

#### *Pre-service teachers*

For pre-service teachers, the course offered opportunities to rethink the nature of teaching and learning and better understand research-driven practice. Their responses reported in Table 1 indicate their positive perceptions about the effectiveness of course features that had been deliberately designed to achieve essential learning outcomes quoted in the previous section from the course outline.

Table 1: Student evaluation of course and its effectiveness in achieving stated learning outcomes

Teacher preparation	Percentage agreement N=72		
	+ Effective	-Not effective	
Preparing you as a teacher of English	81.5	10	4.5
Developing your understanding of teaching English	85	9	6
Developing your skills as a life long learner	77	16.5	6.5
Course delivery			
Lectures	84	11.5	4.5
Invited guest lectures	86.5	8.5	5
Tutorials	63.5	26.5	10
Assessment			
Literature review	82	12	6
Conference presentation	81.5	9	9.5
Thinking Log	56.5	19.5	24

Students recognised the role research-based assessment tasks played in furthering their understanding of literacy teaching and learning. They saw them selves as researchers. Excerpts from qualitative data exemplify this: “It began our researching careers”; “By researching literacy issues, I have gained understanding in how to address them in my teaching”

### *Pre-service teacher / Teacher connection*

It was impossible to predict the outcomes that resulted from linking universities and schools through pre-service teachers and teacher-mentors. The following indicate the breadth and depth of results that have evolved.

For example, KI described the collaborative experience of researching with her teacher and how rethinking a research question refocused the research:

*And when I got to my teacher/mentor who was just really, really excited to have me which was really good And I discussed with her what I had done – a bit of the internet with the kids in the class to find out what was happening.... We then changed the question to “How can we enhance literacy skills through the use of the Internet- Searching the internet”.*

Pre-service teachers have been invited to re-present their research within the Alliance in a range of school contexts. They have led after-school staff meetings on outcomes-based assessment, presented their work at Planning Days, Learning Development Centers and most recently at the LEA Conference where 560 teachers participated.

They recognise how their work has developed them as members of a learning community:

*I think it kind of makes us aware of what is out there, and motivates us to go out and find information that is useful, and things that we need to know. And also to be able to integrate theory with practice and understand that it can actually be done, that (theory) is not just these scary books in the library.*

Teachers saw the potential for their own learning as they worked in researching literacy in their classroom. A specialist course at the University was designed to enable teachers to formalize the work they were doing with students. Five teachers within the Alliance are now enrolled in post-graduate studies. One of these teachers reflected on the following outcomes for her:

*As the leader of this project I have benefited personally from the opportunity to work collaboratively with teachers, pre-service students and tertiary educators throughout the project. Extensive professional reading has validated my beliefs that improved assessment, planning and pedagogical practices will lead to collaborative school-wide improvement and increased student achievements.*

Two teachers presented their work at the LEA conference and are designing a professional development program to implement in their school as part of their Masters of Education studies.

In an effort to bring best practice in schools into the university, and to enhance professional development for teachers, eight classrooms have been video-taped over the past two years. These videos have become quality resources for all members of the Alliance to use as instructional material in a range of contexts. They are used in lectures and tutorials, professional development workshops, conference presentations and on pupil-free days to stimulate discussion and reflection. They are borrowed by visiting teachers to use in the professional development of staff outside the Alliance.

Furthermore, these events result in less tangible outcomes such as increased professionalism for teachers, confidence building within and across schools, recognition of expert knowledge and best practice; collaboration through shared vision and professional learning that is localized, embedded and life-long.

Recently, the Alliance presented a successful Learning Innovation Proposal to the Quality Teacher Project to support the establishment of professional learning teams for the improvement of the use of ICT in each school. Over a period of several months, members met regularly to ensure the process was representative of the needs of the partnership and reciprocal in terms of outcomes. This was further advanced at a strategic planning meeting where reflections of past and future directions stimulated further possibilities and potentials. In the Principal's words:

*We've just spent two days sitting in a room on that (Griffith University) campus with representatives from 7 primary schools, 3 high schools and members of the university from the educational faculty planning for next year where we have areas of mutual interests. During the pupil free day in August we had an international standard conference with all the members and outside teachers. This is the sort of thing that demonstrates we have a rather unique partnership and it's within the context of that we need to publish and share our work.*

### **Conclusion**

This paper is a response to the need to share work that is unique in ways that are still being understood. I have presented a theorised view of how professional relationships contribute to the reciprocity of effective partnerships. Like the multi-layered relationships that continue to grow within the Alliance, across universities and schools; academics, teachers; preservice teachers and students, multi-layered outcomes are still being discovered.

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## **Ms MARGARET FLETCHER**

Margaret Fletcher teaches at Griffith University in literacy education in undergraduate and graduate programs. She is a writer about literacy practice in primary, secondary and tertiary fields of education, and a consultant to schools and government in developing and implementing English curriculum and policy. Her research interests include professional development through partnerships, effective literacy teaching practices, tertiary writing discourses, technology and innovative approaches to student-centered learning.

## **POINT OF CONTACT**

### **Work**

**Margaret Fletcher**

**Faculty of Education**

**Phone (07) 3875 5770 Fax (07) 3875 5965**

**Griffith University**

**NATHAN Q AUSTRALIA 4111**

**Email [M.Fletcher@mailbox.gu.edu.au](mailto:M.Fletcher@mailbox.gu.edu.au)**