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Learning Communities Today –Who benefits?

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Abstract

This paper examines the benefits of learning communities today and introspects the risks and dilemmas that confront communities of learners as they embark on school/university partnerships designed to integrate research, theory and excellent teaching practice. Building from case studies of two separate pre-service teacher education programs at Griffith University (Gold Coast Campus) and James Cook University (Cairns Campus), we identify some of the differences that exist between schools and universities. We discuss the conflicts that arise when they attempt to collaborate in the area of teacher preparation (early childhood, primary, middle years of schooling and secondary). We contend that when such conflicts are acknowledged and worked on in a positive manner by the relevant stakeholders, they become crucial to the development of robust partnerships, innovative approaches to teacher preparation and provision of interesting professional learning development to a wide range of recipients in diverse communities.

Learning communities have been discussed with increasing vigour during the last decade. The term has been used interchangeably with other appellations such as communities of practice (Wenger, 2000, 1998); learning communities (Hough & Paine, 1997; Oxley, 2001); professional learning communities (Achinstein, 2002; Hord, 1997; Swick, 2001); communities of learning (Burns, 2002) and community learning networks (Chen, 2003). In education cultures, the term learning community is most often used to describe a group of people from multiple areas and multiple levels who work together collaboratively and continually (Johnson, 1999). As such, it can contain teachers, students, pre-service teacher education students, parents and members of the community external to schools and educational systems (Chellew, 2003; Veel, 2003).

Teacher professional learning communities engage in common work and, to a certain extent, share similar values, norms and orientations towards teaching, students and schooling and choose to cooperate collaboratively. Teachers utilize methods of inquiry, research and reflection to seek and share situated (Lave & Wenger, 1991) learning and then act on what they learn (Hobson, 1996; McGrath, 2003). Learning communities are important because they drive many educational reform agendas (Hargreaves et al, 2001). They have fostered teacher community as a way of dissipating teacher isolation while improving teacher practice and pre-service teacher learning (Argyris & Schön 1978; Fullan, 2001). They are considered powerful contributors to staff development and are effective strategies for stimulating school change and improvement (Clarke, 2001; Foster, Lewis & Onafowora, 2003; Hord, 1997).

School/university partnerships

During the 90's, concern was raised over the increasing cultural divide in effective collaboration between university based teacher education faculties and their pre-service teacher training schools (Wiltshire, 1994). Bullough et al (1999) argue that the division was the result of a lack of shared vision and no overt agreement upon the larger issues of education. Further, the theory/practice divide was accentuated by those teachers who positioned classroom practice as representative of the "real world" and the university site as being too theory driven (Jasman, Payne, Grundy, & Del

Borello, 1998). Graham & Thornley (2000) called for “a mutual respect” (p. 237) between professionals in the two sites so that knowledge of their areas could be presented in an accessible and integrated manner.

In particular, school/university partnerships were considered to be ways for developing diverse communities of learning that would ensure innovative neophyte teacher preparation and the provision of relevant, experienced teacher professional development (Edwards, 1997; Goodlad, 1994). An example of this was the Professional Development Schools Program (U.S.A.) that Darling-Hammond (1994) and Newbert & Binko (1998) maintain provided best practice exemplars through their theory/practice nexus and found to be more effective than regular teacher education programs because of their implementation of improved classroom discipline plans, their increased use of electronic technologies in teaching combined with insightful reflective teaching practices. Importantly, Langdon (1998) observes that such partnerships acknowledged the crucial contribution that schools and teachers play in the development of beginning teachers.

Currently, teacher education pre-service programs are expected to develop a pedagogy/practice nexus so that the work of student teachers becomes informed by a “more practically grounded, broadly informed theory” (Yeatman & Sachs, 1995, p.45). In spite of these exhortations, criticisms remain that pre-service teacher education is irrelevant to the “real world” (Roth, 1989; Zeichner, 1986) contexts of teaching and fails to concentrate on the practical expectations of the teaching profession and its communities. Bullough, Birrell, Young & Clark (1999) and Teitel (1994) warn that some partnerships are conceived in a hasty and haphazard manner, are driven by short-term rather than long-term gains and engage in little research into the costs and benefits to all stakeholders. Moreover, initiatives such as these are frequently accompanied by associated costs that threaten their continuing success. Hence, sustainable partnerships require careful consideration and thoughtful research if they are to be effective and efficient in the long-term.

Learning community formation

Three concepts, conflict, border politics and ideology (Achinstein, 2002), are used to understand professional communities and their inherent risks. They are critical dimensions that impact upon the nature of organizational learning in schools and universities. Across culture collaboration may create conflict because norms and practices are changed. Intrusions affecting privacy, independence and professional autonomy may be resented. Critical reflection, which is essential to developing strong learning communities, includes questioning taken-for-granted assumptions about schooling and teaching practices. It encourages the adoption of alternative positions and growth, energizes communities and challenges stagnation while simultaneously promoting contexts of enthusiasm, excitement, turbulence and unpredictability.

Border politics enter the fray and identify the inclusivity of a community. During formation, learning communities define their borders and these include or exclude other groups and cultures, determine the status of outsiders and insiders, reinforce identities and distinguish who belongs and who doesn't. Any conflict makes these borders visible but can be a powerful cohesive force because the community of learners are forced to explicate professional beliefs and membership boundaries.

Ideologies are introspected. Shared values and philosophies concerning education and schooling are compared. Much stability and coherence may be enjoyed if members within the learning community share similar or complementary ideologies. However, considerable conflict occurs if these internal ideologies are noted to be in marked conflict with those held by the majority of the profession who are external to the group. It is crucial to understand how “communities form, cope and are sustained over time” (Achinstein, 2002: 422) yet it is an under explored dimension.

Teacher education and learning community formation.

In examining this phenomena, we consider two separate pre-service Teacher Education programs in Queensland, Australia at Griffith University (Gold Coast Campus) and James Cook University (Cairns Campus). In our discussion of these programs, we acknowledge the conflicts and tensions inherent in the partnerships and their impact on the development and growth of their associated learning communities.

Bachelor of Education – Primary (Graduate Entry) School University Partnership Program (Griffith University)

The momentum for this program originated from requests in the late 90's by school administration personnel for a school based teacher education program. Following extensive consultation between schools, the Queensland Board of Registration, teacher unions and Griffith University (Gold Coast campus) a B. Ed Primary (Graduate Entry) School University Partnership Program started in four partner primary schools in 2001. In 2002, two more primary schools joined the program.

The partnership program is a two-year Graduate Entry course that can be completed in eighteen months. The purpose of the Partnership initiative is to establish a teacher-education partnership with schools that ensures pre-service teachers engage in a direct linking of the curriculum taught in schools with principles, concepts and theories introduced in their university course. An outcome of this Partnership initiative is that graduates will clearly demonstrate, through their practice, an ability to apply pedagogy to their classroom practice. A further outcome is the development of a sustainable learning community between the university and partner schools.

The robust nature of a learning community depends on a readiness by stakeholders to acknowledge the difference between the cultures of university and school and a willingness to work toward overcoming these differences. For example, the issue of communication and collaboration presents as an area of continual tension. The importance, to a learning community, of these spheres is underscored by the cautions of Bullough et al (1999), Marlow & Nass-Fukai (2000) and Teitel (1994) who maintain that for a partnership to succeed effectively, continuous collaboration must occur between partners. A sessional project coordinator is employed to address these issues by liaising with students, teachers, school coordinators and university staff to ensure that the project objectives are being met. Within this role, the coordinator initiates support meetings and briefings for teachers and students. Meetings are conducted with the academic staff responsible for each Key Learning Area (KLA) so that relevant information can be passed on to schools. In addition, regular meetings are held with school principals and practicum coordinators at a

school or the university site. The purpose of these meetings is to communicate information as well as consult with key stakeholders in matters related to the university course, the program administration, student concerns and practicum issues.

Despite these efforts tensions exist. Although most teachers are extremely positive about this program and welcome the opportunity to be making significant contributions, concern remains that there is not enough alignment between university topics and school experience. The problem is exacerbated by the fact that, in many cases, university lecturers are faced with the demands of a university culture where there are heavy teaching loads as well as the pressure of research quotas. The clash of cultures related to workplace issues becomes evident. In addition, several teachers have claimed that they were not receiving the remuneration they deserved for the amount of time they invested in the program, providing evidence of Bullough et al's (1999) argument that although teachers may believe they benefit professionally from partnership programs, some teachers expect demonstrable benefits in the form of remuneration or formal recognition of their contributions. These are important issues that require further consideration by both the university and schools. Initially, a partnership may enjoy the success of the camaraderie that it engenders amongst its participants. However, as participants become tired and succumb to the pressure of their increasing workloads, initial goodwill may be unable to sustain the momentum of the program.

On the other hand, many teachers found this program to be both personally and professionally rewarding because they believed their expertise and knowledge were being recognised. When asked about the professional benefits of the program the following comments were made:

I [was] given credit for ability and professionalism. I developed a sense of achievement [and] engaged in self-reflected learnings to enhance tutorial presentations and classroom demonstration lessons (Sue).

[I had to] rethink concepts, strategies and evaluate my own teaching practices (Kerry). I appreciated the interaction with enthusiastic peers and the professional dialogue exchanges with students to find out what is happening in university today (Sue).

The students enlightened me on the new outcome based maths curriculum and I'm sure I gained as much from them as they from me (Marion).

Another ongoing tension exists that is related to the "real world" of the school versus the theoretical world of the university, and is evident in the students' belief and eagerness to spend longer periods of time in schools than at university, as well as their valuing of the practical aspects of their school experience (Zeichner, 1989).

[School] was real life interaction with kids (Melissa).

Uni taught about syllabi and curriculum. School taught behaviour management and how to put it all into practice (Julian).

[Teachers provided us with] practical teaching experience, behaviour management strategies [and] how to write units and lesson plans (Chris).

A further example of this divide is evident in students' questioning of the assessment methods used at university. They argue that on the one hand they were being taught to

use evaluation methods other than written exams and on the other hand, they were being assessed via written examinations, emphasising Marlow & Nas-Fukai's (2000) argument that effective partnerships require close collaboration between partners. Despite the ongoing nature of these tensions, focus teachers, school administrators and students consider this to be a successful program. The consensus of opinion is summed up in the words of two teachers:

Continuation of a program such as this is a necessary component in developing our future educators. More importantly, there is increased communication between schools and university which enables both sites to meet the needs and interests of our ever-changing educational communities (Graham).

Loved the program – feel like it was the tip of the iceberg – more of it please (Jan).

This partnership program continues to encourage ongoing evaluation and reflection by stakeholders because there is recognition that the success of the program relies on the program being mutually beneficial to both cultures. Consequently, regular audits are required to determine whether the demands in time, energy and resources for both school based and university based teaching personnel are congruent with the outcomes of the program. These issues require investigation and interrogation to discover ways of utilising them to further strengthen and develop our learning community.

Our challenge - How can educators engage in the preparation of student teachers as well as take on the growing number of complex responsibilities and expectations within their profession?

Bachelor of Education (ECE and Primary P-10) and Graduate Bachelor of Education (Primary P-10) James Cook University (Cairns Campus)

All education sectors within the vast Wet Tropics area of Far North Queensland which includes Cairns, Innisfail, the Atherton Tablelands, the Cape, Gulf and Torres Strait Islands, have demonstrated a commitment to implementing an e-learning community, embedded by the use of state of the art electronic technologies chosen specifically to dissipate the tyranny of geographic distance. As Schwahn & Spady (1998) contend, transformational technologies such as the internet, interactive machines and tools, digital information and on demand interactive communication dispense with the necessity to travel meaningless kilometres, and encourage the use of higher level thinking skills in order to cope with a paperless environment.

Such radical changes in the form and character of what is already available and accepted impact upon communities of practice at the macro (world/global) and micro (schools/local community) levels (Pedler, Burgoyne & Boydell, 1991). Issues of identity arise. Wenger (1998) argues that they “are an integral aspect of a social theory of learning and are thus inseparable from issues of practice, community and meaning”(p145). Further, “learning involves an interaction between experience and competence. In communities of practice, the definition of competence and the production of experience are in very close interaction” (p214). Individuals engage in and add to the practice of communities, communities refine actions and ensure the generation of new members and related organizations sustain interconnected

communities that recognise which types of knowledge are effective, valuable and should be retained. Therefore, “our challenge is to create dynamic, creative and adaptive schools that will be clearly recognised by their communities as the best place to learn” (Hough & Paine, 1997 : 174) while remaining cognisant of the perennial paradox of introducing new and vital initiatives that keep faith with traditional professional standards and expertise by retaining what we know to be effective and worthwhile. However, genuine community education is about the transformation of social systems into learning communities, within and beyond the education system (Clark, 1996; Cummins & Sayers, 1995).

In 2001, James Cook University (Cairns Campus) School of Education Professional Experience Unit recognised that new educational imperatives-demands for deeper learning, innovative and relevant national and State mandated curricula, improved literacy and numeracy standards, indicators of superior outcomes of student achievement, aligned assessments and consequential accountability and the need for rigorous preparation of pre-service and beginning teachers and provision of enhanced professional development for experienced teachers (Hargreaves et al, 2001 : 1-2)-together with their associated tensions, dilemmas and successes would impinge on programs. It was decided to use the learning community which already existed between local schools and the university as the basis upon which to build a knowledge based community of practice (Cogan, 2000) by developing capabilities which included mapping our knowledge needs and identifying related communities; extending our social learning system through developing these communities and connecting them across boundaries; defining its organisational parameters, operations and requisite interpersonal relationships; and by creating a cycle of momentum-apply, assess, reflect, renew, in order to energise future phases (Lesser et al, 2000 : 5-6).

Contextual issues need to be explained. James Cook University (Cairns Campus) School of Education provides pre-service teacher (PST) education to undergraduates who specialise in early childhood, primary and/or secondary school studies (first two years of four year course) which include a strong emphasis upon partnerships between local schools, the university, research teams and private business. Established links are noted most strongly when pre-service teachers and their school based teacher educators are paired in classrooms during professional experience periods. Common bonds are forged between the duos, emphasised by the daily pursuit of achieving professional excellence within their combined teaching practice and providing opportunities for all students to excel. Effective teaching practice is noted and becomes part of the regular rhythm of the individual school and its encompassing local culture. Almost instantaneously, the effects of such activities spill out into the immediate school community. Various, celebrations, tensions and attendant issues become unavoidable.

Achinstein’s (2002: 422) micropolitical processes, conflict, border politics and ideology, are associated with conflict in communities because they describe the political activity of teachers as they negotiate differences amongst colleagues, define which ideas and members belong to their community, and make meaning of their shared framework of values in relation to their school context. Compellingly, Huberman (1983) in Fullan (2001: 482-483) exposes classroom pressures exerted daily upon teachers by delineating the need for their consistent professional responses to immediacy and concreteness, multidimensionality and simultaneity, adapting to

ever changing conditions or unpredictability and unavoidable personal involvement with students. “It draws their focus to day to day effects or short term perspectives; it isolates them from other adults, especially meaningful interaction with colleagues; it exhausts their energy; and it limits their opportunities for sustained reflection”.

Fullan’s (2001) exhortation to move beyond reform and reculture—how teachers come to change their beliefs and habits- became our goal. The challenge of reculturing was acknowledged. Information was obtained about what is important to the work of the university/school partnerships (vision, goals, objectives and learning outcomes valued); how the partnerships go about doing this work (organisational structures, procedures and processes established); and how people in the associated partnership communities relate to each other (nature and purpose of the personal relationships encouraged and maintained). The establishment of specific knowledge building processes translated theory into action (Lesser et al, 2000; Retallick, 1999). Job embedded staff development between mentor supervising teachers and their pre-service teacher partners was noted (Roth, 1989; Stoll, 1992). Apt modelling, coupled with insightful reflections and enhanced by ongoing dialogue provided relevance, underpinned by regular feedback, mentoring, peer coaching, study groups, use of video tapes and daily journals (Zepeda, 1999).

Learning community processes were refined. Community dialogue, self-evaluation, team learning, reculturing, creativity and spontaneity, connecting everything you know (Stoll et al 2003: 142) placed emphasis upon the phases (awareness, acknowledgement, assimilation, application, assessment) of emerging learning cycles, permitting everyone to take a long hard look within themselves- to reflect realistically upon their own strengths and limitations. What can each individual contribute to achievement of organisational outcomes? (Spady, 1998: 109 –110). Accompanying teacher research provided opportunities to classroom practitioners. They could combine within on site research teams to avail themselves of the resources of colleagues on the issues and concerns that had practical importance to them (Burnaford et al 1996: 95).

Our challenges? Globalisation has caused substantial economic rearrangements, population shifts and increasing social exclusion in many rural areas, accompanied by a lack of access to advanced skills training and support resources (Alston & Kent, 2003) although ‘educators ...are jointly creating forms of teaching and learning that use the new communications technology in unique ways to amplify literacy and intellectual skills collaboratively with peers in culturally and geographically distant settings (Nolan & Weiss, 2002: 21) thereby creating a knowledge generating, virtual educational community in cyberspace.

How do we sustain and extend the social construction of these cybernetic interactions with few resources?

How do we display and maintain our humanity and acculturate the professional standards of our teaching profession while pursuing innovative programs in collaboration with our local and global communities?

KNOWLEDGE BUILDING PROCESSES

| Pre service teacher education and partners | | | | | | |
|--|---|--|--|--|--|---|
| Interaction | Evaluation | Tension | Learning | Creativity | Commun'y of practice | Reculturing |
| Early Childhood Education And the Arts (all strands) Supervising teachers arts specialists in local schools. | ECE students conduct lessons in one strand of the Arts during pedagogy showcase week. | Supervising teachers have arts backgrounds Once only nature of provision seems weak theoretically. | Classroom participants achieved desired outcomes. PST's delineated types of preparation necessary | PST's and students combined to show supervisors new skills acquired in designated arts areas | Selected schools (formed a cluster) that had not been involved in this type of arts activity previously | To be conducted as regular part of third year prac periods in the future with designated clusters of schools |
| Primary PST's and Science. | Primary PSTs combined with whole school to produce science expo. | Lectures and prac interrupted in order to permit teaching and/or attendance at expo. | All children in the school participated in the expo. PSTs planned and conducted rotational science activities with assistance of lecturer and Deputy Principal. | Students were actively involved in diverse science activities suited to their ability levels. PSTs were responsible for design and conduct of provision. | Whole primary school hosted expo and each child in the school participated (500+). | To be conducted as regular part of science lectures at yr 3 and Grad B ED 1 st year level. Other PST cohorts welcome to participate outside lecture times. |
| Secondary PST's and ICT. | Two PSTs, six year 11's and profex director design and mount two websites. | Difficulties in meeting face to face for planning sessions. Websites part of Y12 class assessments - timeline very tight. | Ideation, construction, refinement and mounting of two large web sites to project brief specifications. | Original concepts and graphics, innovative use of multimedia Drawings. | Links to business, external on line networks, Australian and overseas profess'l assoc'ns. | School to offer project brief service to local FNQ commun'ts as part of VET programs. |
| Grad B.Eds and Middle Years of Schooling. | Forty Grad B.Eds placed in one Middle School for 1 st semester Prac (two days per week for 12 weeks and block prac 5 days, two PSTs per mentor teacher). | Grad culture shock-teaching is different! Conflicts between partners and/or grads. Expectations not clearly delineated between mentor teachers and PSTs. | Fast track absorption of prac requirements and induction to preservice teaching. Deeper understanding of pedagogy suited to adolescence. Develop'l differences between early and late adolescence. | Chances to explore theory in depth through continuous practice. Team teaching and innovative planning as regular elements of good practice. | Large multi campus P-12 Govern't School with dedicated Middle Years of Schooling program and facilities. | Middle School clusters (7 schools) under construction throughout JCU SOE teacher education service area in readiness for on site teacher training in 2004. |

Table 1

NOTE: In each area delineated in Table 1 research project teams are in action. All participants in each program are online 24/7.

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