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Transformational Partnerships: A New Agenda for Higher Education

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Abstract In this article we develop the concept of transformational partnership and illustrate how such an understanding has enriched the relationship between a particular university and a school system. Transformational partnerships are different in purpose, nature, and strategies from transactional partnerships. They are based upon genuine engagement and a focus on common goals and mutual benefits. In transactional partnerships each institution pursues its own goals with little consideration of mutual goals or shared purpose. The areas of community engagement, leadership, and transformational

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partnerships provided key concepts for analysing the case study showing how higher education institutions can think and work differently with other institutions, organizations, and groups to achieve mutual benefits.

Key words partnerships · transformational · transactional · community engagement

Universities and K-12 schools are currently facing the challenge of being asked to pursue both excellence and equity in a climate of accountability and competition. The research reported in this article is situated within the context of a time when, in Australia and in other countries, there is public focus upon expanding access to higher education so as to include more persons from lower socio-economic strata and underrepresented groups (Reay et al. 2010); increasing government emphasis on deregulation and free markets regarding student base; and a competitive research environment (Australian Government 2008; Bezzina 2000; Butcher and McDonald 2007; Lane 2007). Primary and secondary schools, in the Australian context, are being challenged to address the educational needs of their own communities, which can be subject to factors such as intergenerational disadvantage, that is, generations of communities who have not sought nor had the facility to enter higher education (Vinson 2007). The schools are also being held publicly accountable for student learning outcomes, school performances in national assessment examinations, and other economic public accountability (Grimshaw 2002).

At the same time many universities in Australia (Australian Universities Community Engagement Alliance [AUCEA]), Europe (The International Consortium for Higher Education, Civic Responsibility, and Democracy), and North America (Talloires Network - an international association of institutions committed to strengthening civic roles and social responsibilities) are responding to the imperative for social inclusion and equity within a broader commitment to university community engagement which is “based on a mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and expertise between universities and communities” (Australian Universities Community Engagement Alliance 2010, p. 1). The Australian Catholic University, one of the case study partners reported in this article, elucidated the idea of an “engaged” university further when it described community engagement as follows:

Engagement with the human community is not just service to the community through imparting knowledge about social issues and problems. Engagement is a reciprocal process whereby communication is backed up, if possible, by interaction in ways that can effectively alter the way the problem is perceived by oneself and others. Genuine engagement moves beyond the level of mere service and allows the opportunity for societal response to help redefine the nature of the problem itself and perhaps forge new solutions (Sheehan 2006, p. 5)

This kind of community engagement calls for deep transformational partnerships rather than more superficial transactional exchanges.

Partnerships: Transactional and Transformational

Partnership is receiving increasing attention in education and other public sectors in western countries as this concept “encapsulates the belief that individuals and organizations can achieve more by working together (in partnership) than they can by working individually” (Dhillon 2009, p. 287). However, partnerships can take many forms.

One type of relationship between universities and schools/school systems is driven by the pursuit of individual purposes. Schools and systems may need particular expertise, or professional development, or a review of graduate teachers; and they approach a university which can respond. Universities need practicum places, research sites, or future students; and so they look to schools to respond. Such relationships are necessary to the operations of schools and universities, but they lack a capacity to be generative. In most instances the two institutions are left unchanged by the interaction, and what has taken place is simply an exchange - a *quid pro quo*. Such a relationship calls for little openness to the other party, and it is unlikely to result in growth or development for either party. Exchanges like this were identified by Burns (1978) as occurring between leaders and followers, and he labelled them *transactional*. More recently, Lussier and Achua (2004) wrote that: “transactional leadership seeks to maintain stability rather than promoting change within an organization through regular economic and social exchanges that achieve specific goals for both the leaders and their followers” (p. 358). With the substitution of university and school for leaders and followers, this description could well apply to many current partnerships between the two institutions. However, transactional exchanges or partnerships are not sufficient to achieve the mutual benefits and new ways of perceiving and changing realities that are expected of an “engaged” university.

In the leadership literature, discussions of transactional leadership are usually juxtaposed with a treatment of *transformational* leadership. Transformational leaders have been portrayed (Bass and Riggio 2006) as people who set challenging expectations and in so doing motivate others to do more than they intended, and indeed more than they may have thought possible. These authors see transformational leadership as “inspiring followers to commit to a shared vision and goals ..., challenging them to be innovative problem solvers” (p. 4). Once again, it is possible to conceive of a similar expansive relationship existing between partners in a genuinely engaged relationship.

In this article we use the labels *transactional* and *transformational* to describe types of partnerships between universities and schools in the context of community engagement. A transactional partnership is one in which the parties are concerned with the achievement of their individual purposes through the exchange of appropriate considerations. In the process, they are likely to remain fundamentally unchanged. A transformational partnership is one with a moral dimension (Starratt 2004) in which the parties come together to pursue common purpose and create the possibility of generative growth and change through mutual interaction as they apply their resources to addressing complex problems (Brown et al. 2006).

A commitment to long-term collaboration in goal setting and to sharing of perspectives, capacities, and resources is integral to university-community or university-school partnerships designed to make a difference (Butcher and Egan 2008; Dhillon 2009; Holland and Gelmon 1998; Howard et al. 2007). This is also the case with partnerships for community development (Mullinix 2002). Long-term collaboration requires an openness to change not only in the nature of the partnership but in the organizations themselves. These are critical elements to embarking upon a transformational partnership.

The Research Methodology

In this article we address the question of what can be learned about the development, sustainability, and benefits of partnerships by applying the notion of transformational partnership to a case study of the ways in which a university (the Australian Catholic

University) has engaged with a school system (the Parramatta Catholic Education Office). For this research we used a participant observation approach within a case study (Stake 1994, cited in Punch 2009). Two of the authors were staff of the university during the development of the initiatives described in this study while the third worked for the school system. All three individuals played significant, yet different, roles in shaping the initiatives treated in the case study. One of the authors of this paper was the Head of School in Education (NSW) at the Australian Catholic University (ACU), another was a director in the Parramatta Catholic Education system; the last author was a member of the School of Education (NSW) at ACU and was directly involved in the delivery of initiatives.

This study is of the type described by Mitchell (cited in Gomm et al. 2000) as reflecting “the fundamental descriptive material an observer has assembled by whatever means available about some particular phenomenon or set of events” (p. 168). It may be further identified as *ex post facto* research wherein “the researcher takes the effect (or dependent variable) and examines the data retrospectively to establish causes, relationships, or associations and their meanings” (Cohen et al. 2000, p. 206). In our study, we drew upon the narratives of our own experiences as participants in the partnership, in some instances several years after the events in question, as part of a process of uncovering significant findings which might be of use in understanding the nature of partnerships. The strength of this type of approach was captured by Flyvbjerg (2006), who wrote, “narratives not only give meaningful form to experiences we have already lived through but also provide us a forward glance, helping us to anticipate situations even before we encounter them, allowing us to envision alternative futures” (p. 240).

The method used in this case study allowed an exploration of the history and nature of the transformational ways in which the school system and university worked together across a number of initiatives. It enabled us to identify the benefits of this mode of relationship and to recover recurring themes in order to recognize principles that are integral to the development and sustainability of transformational partnerships.

More specifically, the development of themes was undertaken using an application of a retrospective historical narrative approach, which drew on the experience of the researchers as key players in the development of the relationship between the two organizations. This level of involvement brought with it the advantage of close familiarity with events. As with all participant observation, it also carried a risk of bias. Researchers participated in structured dialogue about their individual participant experiences of the relationship between the university and the school system. The team engaged in a critical discussion of differing perspectives and developed a single set of themes and emerging principles on which the members agreed.

The Partners

The Australian Catholic University, a university with six campuses across three states and one territory of Australia, has 14,000 students including 3,200 graduate students. The Parramatta Catholic Education system oversees more than 70 Catholic schools and approximately 41,000 students located in the western suburbs of Sydney. ACU and Parramatta Catholic Education share a commitment to common values and purposes with regard to education. The mission and vision statements of the two organizations, drawing on the shared traditions of the Catholic Church, express their commitment to the educational, social, ethical, spiritual, and religious domains. ACU is committed to being attentive to the needs of its diverse and dispersed student body, valuing free inquiry and

academic integrity while bringing a distinctive spiritual perspective to its teaching and research and to its work with local, national, and international communities. In all its activities, ACU is guided by a fundamental concern for justice, equity, and the dignity of all human beings.

Parramatta Catholic Education's mission statement expresses its commitment "to strive, as a work of love, for the full human development of [its] students, grounded in the teachings of Christ and at the service of society" (Parramatta Diocesan Schools Board 2000, p. 1) As a system of schools, it is committed to being inviting, inclusive, and just; to providing quality learning environments for students; and to supporting the development of its staff. Thus, there was (and is) strong alignment between the two partners in educational focus and priority on both excellence and equity.

The Evolution of the Partnership

The initial engagement between ACU and the Parramatta Catholic Education system in 1992 focused on the delivery of what was then a Master's Degree in Educational Administration in a way that made access easier for the Catholic Education school staff. Subsequently an ACU staff member took up a senior position at Parramatta Catholic Education, creating a link which enabled the development of opportunities for the staff members of both the Parramatta catholic schools and university to get to know one another and to learn more about the context of the "other" organization.

Over time the relationship became more focused and structured with the establishment in 1992 of a Liaison Committee to examine and promote new ways in which they could work together to achieve their shared goals, especially in the areas of classroom practice, curriculum leadership, and religious education. The committee was jointly chaired by a senior staff member from each organization, with the chair and location of meetings alternating. Key stakeholders from each organization were members of the committee, several of whom remained members for more than ten years. The Liaison Committee focused initially on maximizing the opportunities and benefits provided by the collaborative work of ACU and the Parramatta Catholic Education system. It provided a means for implementing a shared purpose of mutual benefits for the two organizations.

For more than 15 years the partnership between these two institutions underpinned a range of initiatives. Early projects, such as joint postgraduate [graduate] courses, were designed to maximize the benefits of work that was already being done. Secondments (whereby staff could be transferred to the other organization temporarily) and a sharing of staff appointments across ACU and Parramatta Catholic Education were discussed and implemented. Later, a custom began of holding periodical joint staff meetings in order to share news of current developments in each organization and to discuss possibilities for further joint undertakings. During this period of 15 years a series of separate initiatives emerged in the context of this transformational partnership.

Partnership Initiatives

We now describe five of these initiatives: a teaching learning consortium, a University Pathways project, joint efforts in overseas capacity development, a refugee support program, and joint research activities. These initiatives were all designed to advance the quality and equity of educational outcomes in ACU and the Parramatta Catholic Education system, including elements of educational outreach.

The Teaching Learning Consortium

A key transition point in the life of the ACU - Parramatta Catholic Education partnership occurred during the development of the Teaching Learning Consortium (TLC), which began in 1993. Under the consortium, undergraduate teacher education students from ACU were attached to the Parramatta Catholic schools for a semester. During their placements, these students worked with the schools on projects assigned by the schools; and they were supported through structured observations and reflections. The students still attended weekly lectures although some of their weekly tutorials were replaced by their school-based work.

A challenge in the initial negotiations was to find ways in which it would be possible for all participants to benefit - not just the university. Ultimately, the TLC initiative was characterized by mutuality. ACU students had valuable experiences working in schools and classrooms; the Parramatta Catholic school teachers received assistance with their projects and with managing their classes, which benefited the school students, too; and ACU faculty members were able to measure their theories and academic knowledge against the grounded experiences and reflections of the undergraduate students. The initiative has continued into 2010 in this particular Catholic Education system, has now spread to three other dioceses, and has been evaluated positively by its participants (Moran et al. 2008). While the TLC began as a means for ACU to establish a greater presence in the Catholic schools of the Parramatta Diocese, it soon transformed into an initiative by which all participants could enhance their learning and professional development opportunities. In other words, the stakeholders moved away from transactional ways of relating and created transformational relationships focused on shared goals and mutual benefits, which in turn changed and enriched both organizations' practice.

University Pathways Programs

As the ACU - Parramatta Catholic Education partnership matured, the partners developed projects to benefit specific school communities. The organizations created the "ACULink" initiative, offered to Year 11 and 12 students at three Catholic high schools situated in an area where students were less likely to consider a university degree as a post-school option. ACULink allows students to take two ACU academic units as part of their program of study in their final years of high school. On successful completion of the units and admission to a related university course, the students can receive credit for the units. A similar program, named "Step Up Into Teaching" (SUIT) has the same format as ACULink, but with a focus on teacher education. Within SUIT, high school students interested in becoming school teachers are offered the opportunity to complete two units from ACU's teacher education course during school holiday periods. When these students enrol in the full university course upon finishing high school, they receive credit for the two units they have completed. The ACULink and SUIT programs were developed with the aim of enhancing the learning culture at the targeted schools and raising the expectations of their students. The benefits do not belong only to the schools. ACU benefits by establishing a connection with students, thereby making itself more attractive as a higher education institution. In the previously discussed Teaching Learning Consortium all parties opened themselves up to change because they were working towards a shared priority in the form of addressing student need. The same dynamic was observed in the ACULink initiative. All three of these programs continue to operate today.

International Capacity Development

Sometimes transformational relationships generate unexpected points of engagement. In this case, ACU and the Parramatta Catholic Education system found themselves sharing a concern at the international level, in terms of capacity development in East Timor. The partners' understanding of the concept of capacity development has been informed by the following definition from the United Nations Development Programme as: "the process through which individuals, organizations and societies obtain, strengthen and maintain the capabilities to set and achieve their own development objectives over time" (2009, p. 3). The two organizations approached the Catholic Education Commission, other Catholic systems in New South Wales and Canberra, and the Independent Education Union, and offered to help coordinate the numerous individual responses that were emerging in response to East Timor's troubled beginnings as a new democracy. As a result, ACU contributed to supporting a new teacher education college in Baucau, and Parramatta Catholic Education assisted with the professional development of East Timorese school teachers with Australian teachers volunteering their personal leave to do this. While circumstances meant that ACU and the Parramatta Catholic Education system worked in separate areas of East Timor's education system, to the present day they are still able to collaborate in establishing links between the new college and the schools in which the college graduates are to work.

Refugee Support Program

The shared commitment to educational capacity development was also evident in the involvement of ACU and Parramatta Catholic Education in the "Sudanese Pathways Project" initiated by the Sydney Catholic Education Office. Through the project, members of the large refugee Sudanese community residing in both the Parramatta and Sydney Catholic school regions who had been trained as teachers in Sudan were able to receive credit towards their teacher education studies at ACU, in recognition of their previous study and experience in their homeland. ACU and the two Catholic school regions collaborated in providing a university pathway with social and, at times, financial support for the Sudanese refugees. The Parramatta Catholic Education system offered part-time employment as teacher aides to the Sudanese university students residing in that geographical area. This employment strategy provided financial support together with opportunities to gain additional professional experience, and it provided intergenerational support to the Sudanese students in the schools.

Joint Research into Practice

As ACU increased its focus on research and Parramatta Catholic Education became more attentive to evidence-based practice, there was a further point of synergy. The partnership created opportunities for staff from both organizations to collaborate in field-based research, including projects that covered diverse issues of mutual interest such as literacy, numeracy, the evaluation of joint initiatives such as the university pathways programs, and the uses of information technology.

This collaboration between the two organizations built on existing relationships that had evolved over the early years of engagement. Just as significantly, though, both organizations were prepared to provide the resources and finance the action research projects that emerged and to provide channels for sharing outcomes, with the explicit intention of improving practice.

Discussion

The diversity of shared initiatives, as explained above, was possible only because of the long-standing relationships that had been built on a shared understanding of the priorities of the two organizations. The history of the ACU - Parramatta Catholic Education partnership, from the inception of the Liaison Committee in 1992 to the wide array of current programs and initiatives, points to a shift from the transactional to the transformational. The focus moved away from maximizing individual benefit and towards joint planning aimed at reaching mutual goals in shared areas of priority. The partners saw themselves no longer as occupying separate territories, but as sharing a common ground that made genuine engagement possible and encouraged them to be open to changes in thinking and practice.

The ex post facto research process we used to reflect on the ACU - Parramatta Catholic Education partnership gave rise to a consensus about a set of five guiding principles that we believe promote the emergence of a transformational form of engagement and enhance sustainability. These principles are that partners:

- work out of a shared purpose,
- lead collaboratively,
- relate on a basis of trust,
- ensure appropriate and adequate resources, and
- remain open to learning and change.

Work out of a Shared Purpose

Effective and sustainable partnerships require a shared purpose for both the partnership as a whole and its individual projects. Ensuring there is shared understanding of the purpose among the various stakeholders and project participants is essential for cohesive and effective work towards specified goals and for agreement on strategies.

The Liaison Committee between our institutions was established on a basis of shared values. Initially, the committee focused on maximizing the benefits of pre-existing programs; and each organization was focused primarily on advancing its own priorities. The crucial shift occurred with the development of the Teaching Learning Consortium (TLC) when Parramatta Catholic Education insisted that there be clear benefits for its schools as well as for ACU. This led to a commitment by all stakeholders to mutual learning benefits across the consortium. A new sense of purpose was created transforming practices in both organizations. From this initial transformation emerged the series of joint projects outlined in the previous section.

The history of the partnership and its projects shows the importance of working from a shared purpose. If the desired mutual benefits are to be attained, this principle must be honoured at all levels, from the overall partnership to the individual projects. It is not enough for the partners merely to agree on a shared purpose; that purpose must be at the centre of everything they do.

Lead Collaboratively

Collaborative leadership has been the focus of a great deal of attention in schools in recent years, and the dynamics discovered within the school setting can inform the present discussion of transformational partnerships. Shared or distributed leadership is not easy to

establish and maintain in practice. According to Harris (2002), there are key reasons for this, including the emphasis on individualism, privacy, and idiosyncratic institutional practice in many school settings.

Duignan and Bezzina (2006) argued that there is a need to become far more explicit about what we mean by “shared leadership.” What is being shared is the capacity of a partner to exercise influence not only in its own organization, but also in the other. The long-term relationship, valued both in its own right and for its capacity to deliver desirable and mutually beneficial outcomes, results in levels of trust that increase the likelihood not only that there will be consultation on key issues, but that the consultation will have an effect on outcomes.

In our partnership shared leadership was expressed through the formal and informal webs of relationships between the partners. We have already explained the ways in which the ACU - Parramatta Catholic Education system relationships grew from the instrumental (the Master’s program) into the structural (the Liaison Committee) and then into the organic, with the emergence of initiatives such as the international and refugee outreach and the joint research activities, which were in areas beyond those covered by the formal structures established by the partners. There was movement from the largely transactional to the increasingly transformational as the partner organizations implemented the spirit of shared leadership within the various initiatives.

Relating on a Basis of Trust

Where people were in constant conversation and where there was recognition of the leadership that was held in common, it was possible to address and respond to differences openly and create a basis of trust. Thus, while the negotiation of the original TLC took several months as the partners built on this relationship of trust, later initiatives were easier to negotiate. Whenever new staff members were involved, provision had to be made for adequate time and opportunity to establish their own relationships.

A key example of this type of opportunity is provided by the implementation stage of the TLC, when key staff members of both schools and the university met weekly for an early breakfast at a central hotel to talk about how each of the schools and its team of student teachers were developing and learning. Anecdotes and personal asides were also communicated resulting in a common understanding about the transformational learning taking place. Friendships were formed and ideas were shared, enabling joint problem-solving when issues and tensions arose. Commonalities were emphasized, and mutuality was nurtured.

Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (2000) remind us that positive transformation requires that attention be paid to issues of trust and that trust is essential “in order to cooperate toward accomplishing a common goal” (p. 556). Much of the trust developed in a transformational partnership is dependent on the honesty with which the shared purpose has been created. If those at the initial point of engagement are convinced of the sincerity and authenticity of the commitment made to the purpose, then, as happened in this instance, there is a greater likelihood that trust will result and relationships will deepen and strengthen.

It may be necessary at first for newly engaged partners to schedule formal meetings and events that encourage individuals to plan and acknowledge the beginning of the partnership; but ideally, once relationships among the partners are established, informal discussions need to continue independently of the formal structures, keeping the lines of communication open between the individuals within the partnership. Candid conversations

ultimately lead to more honest relationships, the results of which are further discussions and new projects. This process was evident in the ACU - Parramatta Catholic Education partnership, with numerous initiatives stemming from continued conversations among stakeholders. Trust is critical because it is generative; it produces greater fruits than were initially expected.

Ensure Appropriate and Adequate Resources

The resources in question here are both the financial and human assets that partners contribute to a given project to ensure its success. A project needs to be sufficiently supported by resources, and if resources are lacking, then the project must be reshaped to make it sustainable. A project can only be as big as the available resources allow. A focus on these transactional aspects alone, however, is not sufficient if transformational partnerships are to be developed and sustained.

For example, with the ACULink project (where students take two first year university units while still at school) it was clear that there would need to be a considerable application of resources from both partners in order for a project with such significant capacity for cultural change to succeed. A generation for whom higher education was often unthinkable was to be exposed to its possibilities. Courses needed to be funded, students needed ongoing support, and an appropriate location for the program needed to be identified. Expenses were incurred by ACU as it reduced the fees for the units, while the Parramatta Catholic Education system shouldered the accommodation costs as well as payment of the student fees. The building of capacity and the development of new knowledge for students who had not previously expected success at a higher education level was at the core of the partners' negotiations. At a different level, the provision of funds and "back-up" support for action research projects was critical in motivating and supporting these small scale research activities.

Openness to Learning and Change

Finally, all personnel involved in a partnership need to be open to change. Given that initiatives are often implemented to create new knowledge and new growth, it should be expected that those involved will develop and grow. There needs to be a willingness to learn on the part of all participants.

The TLC clearly demonstrated this openness to change and new learning. First, the initiative required teachers to adjust their views on how student teachers should learn in the school context and to change how they planned for the arrival of student teachers. Second, the undergraduate students needed to change their ideas about what they should be doing during their placements. Third, university staff needed to change their views on how to deliver the content of their units. No longer were they holding tutorials on campus. Instead, they were travelling to different schools in order to participate in reflection activities with the student teachers. This was a new way of teaching, but fortunately it did not take long for the university staff to see the benefits of this student engagement in learning and their subjects (Moran et al. 2008). This resulted in a core body of staff who volunteered to participate in the TLC, many of whom were involved for over eight years. Of course, such major transitions are not always easy, and there is likely always to be some discomfort in the beginning. This is why clear, open lines of communication are so important, along with openness to the possibilities of new and innovative practices.

Conclusion

The examination of the ACU - Parramatta Catholic Education partnership and its expression across a range of projects has shown the need for a shared purpose across the leadership, relational, and operational aspects of any partnership that seeks to be based on authentic, transformational engagement. The shared purpose needs to be embedded at all levels of a transformational partnership. Collaborative leadership is crucial to developing shared purpose. This requires educative, relational, and evaluative strategies that involve all stakeholders. All need to be represented in the decision-making that occurs across organizations and all need to be aware of their capacity to influence the decision making.

Collaborative leadership is built upon genuine trust among those involved. Strong relationships and the development of trust are priorities in an engaged, transformational partnership. Honesty, reciprocity, and mutual respect are the building blocks that are created through the involvement of people across the partnership and its projects. Partners must be realistic in the allocation of their resources, including people, time, and money, and need to be committed to individual projects and the partnership as a whole. They must be committed to sustaining a project for its planned duration, and hopefully beyond.

In the case of the ACU - Parramatta Catholic Education partnership, the shift from the transactional to the transformational reflected the commitment of the organizations and people involved to pursue authentic engagement. All have been learners; and, equally, all have been teachers, sharing perspectives, knowledge, and insights with one another. The readiness, at every level, to learn and to be transformed was integral to this shift.

When purposes are aligned, when relationships are nurtured through time-rich communications, and when partners acknowledge the strengths of each other and are open to change, then sustainable, transformational partnerships and initiatives can develop. The outcome is mutual capacity development; the creation of new knowledge; the forging of deep, long-term connections; and the transformation of relationships to ones of genuine engagement so as to address the educational goals of quality and equity.

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