

The role of partnerships in the delivery of transformational international service learning

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BACKGROUND

Within Australia (Bradley, 2008), and likewise in Europe and North America (Zemsky, 2006), higher education is being urged to engage and commit to imperatives of social inclusion and equity through a variety of strategies at the local, national and global levels. The agenda of social inclusion, particularly in light of recent government policy in Australia, is conceptualized at two levels; the first being the engagement of a range of students from previously under-represented demographics, and also for the university sector to extend its engagement with broad sectors of society empowering previously disadvantaged communities (Alexiadou, 2010). It is the second understanding in which this paper is located, as universities are realizing the potential value of service learning projects as mechanisms for meaningful student engagement within practice settings. Such experiences are seen as 'going beyond' the normal learning that is associated with 'traditional' cooperative education programs. Cooper, Orrell & Bowden (2010) conceptualise service learning as an extension of work-integrated learning, where service learning, particularly in a globalized context, facilitates the capacities of students to view themselves as agents of transformation. As contested by Hoekema (2010); "students who spend time volunteering during college, compared to those who do not volunteer, become more convinced that individuals can change society, feel more committed to personally affecting social change, and develop stronger leadership skills" (p. 10).

Commitments to engagement by universities with the community are often conceived as partnerships between the various organizations "based on a mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and expertise between universities and communities" (Australian Universities Community Engagement Alliance, 2010, p.1). Partnerships hold many advantages and support the likelihood of success in achieving goals of engagement and empowerment as there is a common belief that more can be achieved by working together, in a consortium, rather than by working individually (Brown, Reed, et al., 2006). In particular, partnerships often provide avenues of access for the university sector into identified communities, which facilitates the translation of academic work (theory and research) into practical solutions and activity. In particular, such partnerships can provide opportunities for university students to utilize the skills and knowledge developed during their time at the university, in challenging environments and practice settings. Working alongside community organisations, universities are able to gain access to a range of settings in which students are able to employ their skills and knowledge to advance the needs of this particular group.

This paper presents a review of a recent partnership between the Australian Catholic University, Rotary Australia World Community Service (RAWCS) and the Government of the Republic of Vanuatu, which facilitated an immersion program of six pre-service teachers within a school in a remote area of Vanuatu. The program also involved the engagement of university academic staff in the delivery of professional development programs to existing school staff. The program has provided a model of community-centered praxis (Singer, 1994), which has seen benefits for the students as well as the school and university staff, laying the foundations for long-term engagement of the University in Vanuatu.

AREP SCHOOL PROGRAM

Arep Secondary School is located on the island of Vanua Lava, Vanuatu, in Sola, the capital of the north province of Torba. It provides boarding school facilities for around 200 students from the local islands, and is the only school in the province allowing students to complete Year 12 (though students are required to move to either Santo or Port Villa for Year 13). Within Sola, conditions and the environment are significantly different to Sydney, Australia. The school has an unreliable source of electricity, provided by a generator within the school grounds, and limited access to running water. The climate is tropical and the town has two unsealed roads, and approximately 3 vehicles, with a population estimated at around 1000 people. The school syllabus is based

upon the South Pacific examinations, but is evolving in line with the government's movement towards a national 'home-grown' syllabuses and curriculum. Despite these different sources, the syllabus is highly reflective of the New South Wales curriculum documents, and pedagogical practices developed through the university teacher education program are easily transferable to the Vanuatu context. Within Arep, due mainly to the changing educational context and a desire amongst the staff of Arep Secondary School for improved student learning outcomes, there presented a significant need for developed pedagogical practices.

The Australian Catholic University, in partnership with RAWCS, undertook in July, 2011 an immersion program at Arep Secondary School for 6 teacher education students (also referred to as student-teachers, due to their dual role as university students, and also as teachers within the classroom) and 2 academic staff from the School of Education. The program primarily aimed to provide for the teacher education students a unique international setting in which they could engage with teaching practice. As such these students were engaged in teaching across the secondary school for a period of two weeks, living in nearby accommodation. Of the six students only one was a secondary trained student, with three others being primary, and the remaining two from the early childhood / primary program. The experience of teaching in the classrooms, therefore, was a different experience for most students compared to what they had previously encountered. This difference provided for interesting and unexpected learning experiences for the students, as well as sources of professional learning for staff within the school. For example, the primary trained students brought to the experience highly developed skills of engaging students in active learning and discussion, which was a key focus of development for the school staff, yet, likewise, the student-teachers learnt more about timing and lesson structure given the nature of a secondary timetable. Complimenting the experience of the student-teachers, and providing a further element of capacity building for staff within the school, was the engagement of the academic staff. This element shifted the program from a simple practicum experience to a model of community engagement and empowerment.

UNIQUE FEATURES OF THE AREP SCHOOL PROGRAM

Common models of service learning, conceptualise a three-way partnership between the university, student and community organisation (or industry partner). This model, represented below as Figure 1, has embedded within relations of power between the various stakeholders. Such a model can be referred to as a triangular model of service learning. The relations of power are highlighted through the unidirectional arrows. An obvious relationship, for example, is between the university and student-teacher, especially where there are concerns of assessment within the particular program. More importantly is the subjugation of the community group by the charitable university. This model characterizes the actions of the university as 'doing' something to the student-teacher (e.g., transmission of learning), both the university and the student-teacher combine to 'do something' to the community organisation, in an act of charity. The university is positioned as the superior source of expertise and knowledge, whilst the community group is powerless and in need of direction. That is, the 'charitable' university provides its expertise and resources to the 'deserving' community (Bingle & Hatcher, 2002).

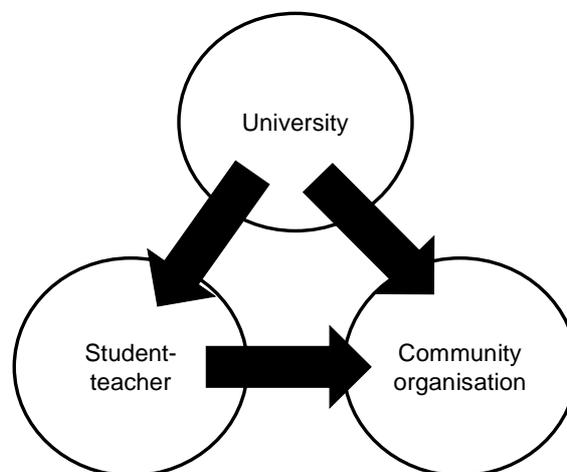


FIGURE 1: 'Traditional' model of Service Learning

The experience of Arep School differs from this model in two significant ways. Firstly, there was a deliberate effort made to ensure that the model was a shared partnership with expertise and resources moving between all partners, thereby empowering each partner in the process for greater social change outside of the immediate project. Secondly, it incorporated a fourth participant, in RAWCS, that facilitated the project organisation, the development of partnerships and provided the basis for future endeavours in a range of other settings. RAWCS also provided a facilitation of engagement with the community group, Arep School, so the school had a voice in shaping the activity of the university.

The model, represented as Figure 2, created an experience that was constructed around a position of community-centered praxis (Singer, 1994), or what can be referred to as a 'tetrahedral model' of community partnership, visually represented with the community organisation at the apex, and as the central-focus, of a four-sided partnership. This model enabled the partner school to identify specific needs, with solutions formulated through a collaborative process, which engaged the school, the university academics and the students partaking in the immersion experience. This model differs from normal teacher professional experience programs, and 'traditional' service learning models, which position the student-teachers as learners, partnered with an expert classroom teacher, supported by university representatives. In this model the professional experience was a collaborative exercise in which the student-teacher was both learner and teacher, working in collaboration with the existing school staff, alongside and mentored by the university academics. As Cooper, et al. (2010) contest, effective partnerships which support service learning are best grounded in concepts of reciprocity and multidirectional flows of needs and benefits. This element of collaboration and shared values was a central tenet to the success of the program empowering all partners in realizing the shared goals of the project.

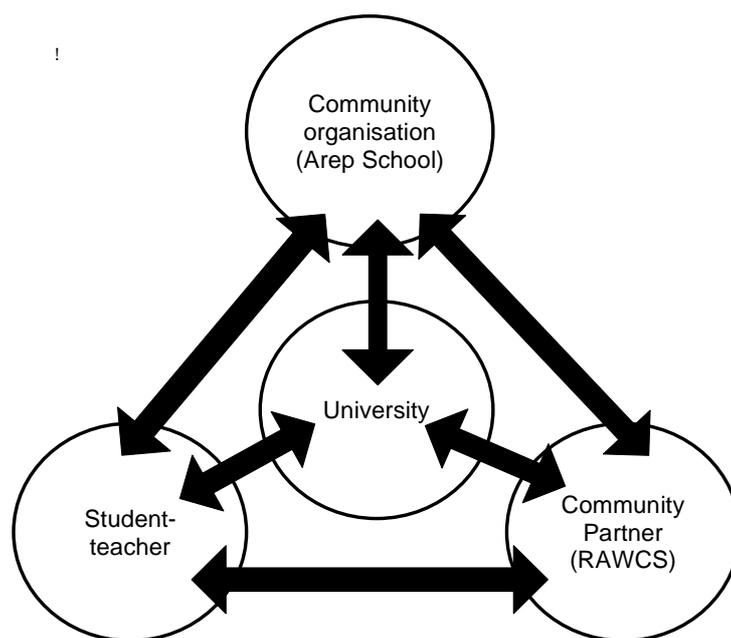


FIGURE 2: 'Tetrahedral' model of community partnership

DISCUSSION

The model of partnership adopted in the project created greater complexity in the relationship between the university and the partners, but this was off-set by the ability for the community partner (RAWCS) to take responsibility for many of the organisational aspects of the project; for example insurance, flights, accommodation, etc, thereby reducing the organisational workload of the university staff enabling greater focus on the social goals and educational outcomes. The formation and sustainability of this partnership required considerable energy and negotiation. Rotary had been working within the Sola community for nearly a decade

prior to this project, therefore held a lot of the social capital and networks in the relationship. However, there also existed a shared professional understanding between the teaching staff within the school and the university staff that was outside of the existing relationships. At times these 'external' relationships came into conflict with each other and re-negotiation of position and power occurred as a consequence. Such a process is to be expected within a complex relationship such as that which is described here, and, to some extent, is a necessary process to ensure that the partnership is truly mutually beneficial and equal.

Within the 'tetrahedral model', the most interesting aspect is the empowerment of the students to manage their own experience. A consultative process was had between the university academics and school leadership team to create some common understandings of need and resources, and as a simple professional development program this conversation would have normally remained within this relationship. However, with this project the student-teachers brought recent classroom experience, novice energies and passionate pedagogies that both complimented and extended the professional development program. Working with the university academics as mentors the students were challenged to create sustainable resources and pedagogies that they could demonstrate and share with the staff in the school, as well as negotiate with the school staff to have a reciprocal sharing of expertise. Unlike 'normal' professional experience programs, based on a novice-expert model of apprenticeship, where a student-teacher is subjugated to the expert-teacher, this experience required the students to be able to operate at the level of an experienced teacher, and work alongside the school staff as peers and colleagues.

This experience, although being incredibly worthwhile and beneficial to all concerned, was by no means without challenges. Within any partnership there must occur processes of critical reflection and review. Likewise, within this partnership similar processes had to occur. A critical element to the success of partnerships is open and equal dialogue and communication. Given the geographical locations of the partners and the inability to secure reliable communication technologies, at times the level of communication between the partners was not as high as would have been hoped. Often this required assumptions to be made based on reasonable judgments and previous experience of some participants in Vanuatu. Some of these assumptions did not, naturally, marry with the reality. Therefore, such partnerships and experiences require great flexibility by each of the partners to compensate for that which does not meet the ideal.

One of the great challenges, and also learning opportunities, from this partnership has been the realization and negotiation of cultural positions. For example, coming to understand the cultural hierarchies of the school community presented as a challenge for the students that were used to the experience of a more democratic school culture. Also understandings and demonstrations of the role of the teacher varied considerably between the student-teachers and school staff. The challenge was not to note these differences but to develop an appreciation that both can be simultaneously productive and correct. It is this negotiation of respect for difference and diversity that presented as the most significant outcome of this experience.

CONCLUSION

A tetrahedral partnership enables universities to be more fully engaged with greater numbers of community groups and to reach further than their immediate networks. Beyond working with Arep School, RAWCS has partnership programs in many countries throughout the world and therefore may provide a future stepping-stone for similar experiences to be undertaken in a variety of other settings. Such a partnership program needs to be engaged and understanding of the needs of the community group giving voice to them in the process. Although the university is often the conduit that leads the conversation, it is the community group that needs to be at the centre of focus and empowered to shape the outcomes. This model is not about the university 'doing things to' or graciously with the community group, but enabling the community group to choose to do things, in partnership, with the university.

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