Collaborative Learning Through School-University Partnerships

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Abstract
The Innovative Links Between Universities and Schools for Teacher Professional Development Project is an action research based professional development project which was initiated in Australia in 1994 as a National Professional Development Program. The grantee for the project is the National Teaching and Learning Consortium and comprises 14 universities at sixteen campuses, each of which hosts a Roundtable consisting of university colleagues, schools and union, employer and National Schools Network representatives. Schools involved in the project work in partnership with university colleagues to examine and improve work organisation practices in schools, enhance teaching and improve the educational outcomes for all students.

This paper reports specifically on the experiences of the University of South Australia Roundtable with `building new partnerships' between school-based and university-based colleagues. The concept of collaboration is explored using themes identified in five case studies which have been jointly written by school and university based colleagues about the first year of the project.

Introduction
In recent years there has been a world wide focus on the need to improve the educational outcomes of all students through the professional development of educators, the reform of educational work practices and work place culture, the restructuring of educational institutions and the transformation of teacher education courses. Central to these reform processes is the idea that there is little point changing either schools, or the teacher education departments of universities, independently from each other. What is needed is reciprocal development of both in order to produce learning environments which facilitate the learning processes, and maximise the learning outcomes, of both educators and students. In particular, there is emphasis on reform programs which are based on partnerships between universities and schools. The Center for Educational Renewal in the USA summarises this need for `simultaneous renewal' and school-university partnerships in the following way:

The Center for Educational Renewal advocates simultaneous renewal because we believe both schools and teacher education need fundamental
change. It makes no sense to make teacher education fit with what schools want, when most schools need fundamental change. It makes no sense to fit schools to current teacher education programs if those programs need fundamental change. Nothing less than simultaneous renewal of both schools and teacher education will do the job. (Center for Educational Renewal, 1994, p2)

School-University Partnerships
Although academics have always worked closely with schools, until recently much of this work has been based on the model of the academic as an 'expert' who uses involvement in school research to produce an 'academic literature about teacher research in an academic discourse' (Zeichner, 1994, p2), or takes on the role of developing teachers' knowledge and skills via a process of 'mentoring' or 'cognitive coaching' (Cairns and Ward, 1992; Cryns and Johnston, 1993; Freeman, 1993; Garmston, Lindner and Whitaker, 1993; Louden, 1992), or through facilitating collaborative action research projects within the school (Friesen, 1995; Johnston, 1994; Sagor, 1992; Stewart, Baker and McDonald, 1995; Waters-Adams, 1994).

In recent years there has been growing dissatisfaction, both in Australia and overseas, with the notion of school/university partnerships based on a one way transmission of expertise from academics to teachers. This has resulted partly from greater acknowledgment of teachers' professional expertise and need to take control of their own professional development, and partly from criticism of the tendency for some university researchers to exploit school-based involvement for their own ends. Zeichner (1994) provides one example of the way academic involvement in schools has been seen as exploitative by teachers:

Another reason for teachers' lack of enthusiasm for academic research on education is the frequency with which they can see themselves portrayed in the literature in a negative light....Teachers on the other hand, feel that academic researchers are largely insensitive to the complex circumstance with which they are faced in their work and frequently feel exploited by university researchers. (p5)

The recent emphasis in schools on collaborative learning and collective inquiry (Ladwig, Currie and Chadbourne, 1994) has provided new opportunities for teachers and teacher educators to work in partnership in ways that can enhance the learning opportunities of both parties. Teacher educators are finding they can play a significant role in supporting teachers' collaborative inquiries to reform work organisation and practices, while at the same time increasing their own understandings of school reform, effective professional development and the needs of pre-service teaching students (Calhoun, 1993; Garmston,
Lindner and Whitaker, 1993; Louden, 1992; Yeatman and Sachs, 1995).

Innovative Links Between Universities and Schools for Teacher Development

In Australia, the 1993 Accord with the Teaching Profession tied all funding for professional development to programs promoting partnerships involving teacher organisations, education authorities and universities. As a result, simultaneous professional development of teachers and teacher educators became an integral part of the reform process and was the driving force behind the development of the Innovative Links Project (Innovative Links Between Universities and Schools for Teacher Development) which was the first attempt in Australia to use a formalised school/university partnership approach to professional development.

The Innovative Links Project is an action research based professional development project which was initiated in 1994 as a National Professional Development Program. The grantee for the project is the National Teaching and Learning Consortium and comprises 14 universities at 16 campuses, each of which hosts a Roundtable consisting of university colleagues and representatives from schools, employers and the National Schools Network. The project has been funded on a year by year basis since 1994. Although funding for this project will finish at the end of 1996 it is anticipated that the school/university partnerships it has initiated will continue to develop.

Schools involved in the project have worked in partnership with university colleagues to use collaborative action research to implement a program of school reform aimed at improving teaching competencies and learning outcomes for all students. The work has been closely linked to the on-going program of school reform and restructuring of work organisation initiated by the National Schools Project and continued by the National Schools Network.

In South Australia, the University of South Australia has hosted a Roundtable which involves six teacher educators working with six schools. Five of the schools (two primary schools and one secondary school located in Adelaide and one primary school and one R-12 school located in the country areas) joined the project in 1994. The sixth school, a non government college for boys in years 5-12, joined the project in 1995. In the first year of the project individual schools focussed their school-based action research on one or more of the following aspects:
• middle schooling
• staff appraisal through the development of teacher portfolios
• developing critically reflective teaching practice
• students participation and empowerment through peer support.
At the end of the first year of the project the five original schools, together with their university colleagues, wrote stories documenting their interpretations of the first year of school-based research and school-university collaboration. From these stories the following themes have been identified in regard to the benefits and challenges of collaborative learning through school-university partnerships:

• the affective dimension of collaborative learning
• the commitment to social justice
• the challenge of reconciling theory and practice
• the importance of leadership
• the complexity of whole school change.

These themes will be discussed in the rest of this paper.

The Affective Dimension of Collaborative Learning
All the stories of the first year of the Innovative Links Project depict participants' struggles in moving from safe, comfortable and predictable working situations to ones which involved risk taking, discomfort and the tension of living with uncertainty. Although all five schools were, to varying extents, already engaged in educational reform in their particular area of focus, their decision to involve themselves in the project meant a commitment to moving into new areas of learning and practice through school-based action research and a close liaison with a university colleague. For the university colleagues, involvement in the project meant forming a close relationship with, in most cases, a previously unknown group of people, and negotiating ways of supporting and facilitating their research and development work.

For both school and university participants, forming new relationships and moving into new areas of learning resulted in emotional responses ranging from feelings of inadequacy, defensiveness and reluctance through to elation and pride in regard to personal and school-wide achievements. The emotional demands of change can be seen in the following comments taken from two of the stories:

Teaching is about being in control and in charge, to be clear about what and how one is doing things. To risk being unclear is to risk loss of credibility with peers, loss of sense of self, and to risk being seen as ignorant. (Tunney, p28)

... it is the emotional dimension of the process which also needs highlighting. Teachers (both school-based and university-based) have feelings which play an important role in learning. ... People involved reported feelings of excitement, satisfaction and delight, as well as feelings of frustration, anxiety and pressure. (Dobbins, Johnson and Gilmour, p72)

It is clear from all five accounts that educational change and
collaborative learning make considerable demands at the emotional level and that those who become involved in such initiatives need courage, determination and support to sustain them through the doubts and stresses that come with trying to change theory and practice. In every school the nature of the relationships between the participants in the project were critical to the success of the reform work. Where relationships within a school, and between school and university colleagues, were based on mutual trust, respect and shared goals, these relationships provided the impetus to maintain the hard work in difficult times, as can be seen in the following comments:

... the group's cohesiveness and strength was used to reassure and cajole members into taking a few personal risks to expose some of their beliefs and practices to greater scrutiny. (Johnson, p44)

The struggles inherent in such a project and manifest in the story have been very real and demanding. At times they have threatened to overwhelm the project but the commitment of the key staff, the support of the principal and colleagues and a belief that the change will be beneficial for the students and those concerned for them has ensured that the project continues to offer excitement and challenge for individuals, the school and the community. (Coote and Williams, p60)

Time was needed to establish relationships amongst members of the LINKs working party to ensure that the "group processes" were facilitative of the project. (Dobbins et al, p71)

Because the Innovative Links Project has been based on partnerships between schools and universities, an additional challenge for establishing trusting and mutually respectful relationships was that of breaking down some of the initial perceptions held by school colleagues that university colleagues were likely to be too theoretical, out of touch with the realities of teaching and either critical or exploitative when working in schools. In one of the stories the process of overcoming these perceptions in order to establish a productive working relationship was represented in the following way:

... the quality of the working relationship between the university colleague and the teaching team was central to the development of the project. As school personnel acknowledged that the university colleague was willing to continue learning about the School's culture and ethos and was not making judgements, they became less deferential and more confident in assuming responsibility for the project. (Dobbins et al, p 71)

One way that the Roundtable participants in South Australia tried to overcome teacher concerns about university colleagues being too 'academic' was by changing the nomenclature for university-based participants suggested by the Innovative Links National Executive from 'academic associate' to 'university colleague'.
Despite the realisation by project participants that time and effort needed to be spent on creating a supportive environment for participants and building trusting relationships, there were situations where the emotional stresses of change were such that they became an impediment to progress. For instance, one school began the project with a focus on teachers working in learning teams but had to abandon the structure of teams when the majority of staff found it too emotionally challenging for reasons such as those described in the following comment:

Clashes of values, differing beliefs about group norms, different skill levels in group participation and the perception that more practical demands on teachers ... were of greater import, led to frustration, dissatisfaction and an underlying confusion about the purpose and role of these teams. (Tunney, p 28)

Overall, the partnership experiences of the Innovative Links Project in South Australia have clearly demonstrated the importance of recognising the affective demands of collaborative learning and involvement in change. Yet these demands are often overlooked in the literature about educational research. As Brookfield (1990) notes "... the emotional dimensions of learning receive scant attention in formal research, for they escape standardised measures and formal controls. (p 45) He suggests that "learner embrace the unfamiliar while concurrently longing for the familiar. They take two steps forward and one step back." (p 63) The stories of these five schools illustrate that attention must be given to creating a supportive environment, building trusting and mutually respectful relationships and helping participants deal with the emotional stresses of change.

Collaborative Learning and a Commitment to Social Justice

One of the aspects of the Innovative Links partnerships in South Australia that caused a degree of emotional stress and intellectual challenge for many participants was their commitment to social justice and critically reflective teaching practice. From the very beginning participants made a commitment to social justice as a key focus for their school-based action research. In making an application to join the project, schools had to specify how their work reform was informed by principles of social justice and would improve the learning outcomes for all students. Three of the schools also made a specific commitment to becoming more critically reflective about their practice through considering it in a broader ethical, social, political context to see how it contributed to a more just and humane society. In one of the stories the challenge of critical reflection is described in the following way:

To be critically reflective is to frame `why' questions that make
visible the inequities in educational processes and outcomes. (Tunney, p24)

While a commitment to social justice and critical reflection was one of the most exciting features of the partnership work, it also presented participants with a substantial challenge. Many teachers struggled with the notion of subjecting their personal beliefs and practices, and those of their colleagues, to genuine critical scrutiny as to how they were contributing to disadvantage for some students. Those teachers who had been used to working in autonomous isolation found it threatening to have to disclose aspects of their work in a more public arena. Even those teachers who were already working collaboratively were used to this occurring in a comfortable environment of uncritical acceptance, and so found it quite traumatic to ask questions of themselves and each other that challenged some aspects of their philosophy and practice. Teachers' discomfort with critical reflection was described in some of the stories in the following ways:

This was a very unsettling process for most group members as they were not used to questioning the political and social dimensions of school decisions to this extent. (Johnson, p36)

Critical reflection was difficult because the concept was new to the group. (Grearly, p82)

In one story a teacher was directly quoted as describing her difficulty with critical reflection in a 'focus group interview' in the following way:

That process of asking those hard questions brought on a few ugly feelings - uncomfortable feelings for all of us. I thought, 'That's not what we thought we were going to do. We don't want to do that. That will bring everything down.' (Johnson, p36)

The emphasis on critical reflection also challenged some university colleagues in terms of finding effective ways to challenge and support teachers to critically reflect on their beliefs and practice. Moreover, some university colleagues expressed concern about the level of emotional stress the process placed on some teachers.

In summary, the experiences in the first year of the Innovative Links project showed that becoming critically reflective is not an easy process, nor one that should be entered into lightly. This view is supported by much of the literature about critically reflective teaching practice. Theorists such as Hargreaves (1992) Liston and Zeichner (1987) and Smyth (1989), while calling for teacher to engage in "ethical discourse" whereby they examine issues in the light of broader social, ethical and political questions about social justice, all acknowledge the discomfort that ensues form such reflection. Schon
(1987) also alludes to this discomfort when he notes that in order to move forwards reflective learners "must move into the center of their own doubts." (p 83) The experiences of the teachers and university colleagues who explored critical reflection indicate that it is very different from the isolated autonomy or comfortable collaboration that are the norm in most schools. Brown (1995) suggests that before deciding to explore critical reflection teachers need to respond to the following series of questions framed by Smyth (1993): "am I prepared to endure discomfort? am I prepared to confront my own assumptions and beliefs (even when these seem unchallengeable)? am I willing to take the time to describe and theorise about what is happening within my practice?" (cited in Brown, 1995, p3) Many participants in the Innovative Links Project did not adequately understand what critical reflection involved and so were unprepared to cope with the discomfort and uncertainty that accompanied coming to grips with this process.

Reconciling Theory and Practice in Collaborative Learning
A further challenge for all the participants in the Innovative Links work in South Australia was that of developing the theoretical underpinnings of practice through the reading, reflective writing and professional discourse that are a necessary part of collaborative learning through action research. For some teachers, consideration of the theory behind their own practice and current educational theory in the literature, was something that they had not engaged in since leaving college or university. Some found it both threatening and alienating. In all schools, the hectic nature of everyday life and the constant internal and external demands made it difficult for even the most motivated participants to fit in time for reading, as these excerpts reveal:

Some teachers have relished the opportunity to read, some have suffered through it with difficulty, and others have rejected it outright, as too difficult, too jargonistic, not accessible because of the degree of difficulty of the ideas, presentation or language, or a perceived lack of relevance to teachers' work in the classroom. (Tunney, 1996, 25)

Teachers find it difficult at times to ignore pressing and stressful work issues and concentrate on the project. It was difficult to find the time and energy to read articles between the meetings or to keep journals, even though the intention was there. (Grearly, p82)

For much the same reasons many teachers also struggled to find the time or the inclination to write about their practice, either in the form of reflective journals about their classroom research and learning, or when it came to documenting stories for sharing with a wider audience:

One of the most important aspects of action research is the journal
writing, the compilation of the raw material for reflection and learning; yet this is one of the first ‘tasks’ to be abandoned as the pressures of limited time take their toll. (Coote and Williams, p57)

One of the on-going challenges of this project was the documentation of all phases of the action research cycle. While the working party agreed in principle to the value of written reports and was diligent in keeping journal notes, the writing of formal reports proved to be time-consuming and difficult. (Dobbins et al, p 68)

However, on the positive side the focus on collaborative learning through action research resulted in an increase in the opportunities in all schools for staff to engage in professional discourse about theory and practice. This was recognised as one of the most beneficial outcomes of the Innovative Links work:

... there was a marked increase in professional dialogue learning communities as the core staff moved from the old model of predominantly professional isolation towards the new professionalism of collaborative planning and teaching. (Coote and Williams, p 52)

Connections were made between activities, thinking about these activities and the stages of action research. Explicit links were made between theory and practice as teachers had time to share their ‘theorising about practice’. (Dobbins et al, p68)

It is interesting to note that in two stories changes in language were identified as one of the outcomes of increased professional discourse:

Probing questions were asked of one another and new language was used to describe some activities. (Dobbins et al, p68)

Symbolism is crucial in managing educational change and improvement and this project suggests that a useful initial step is to change the language of the school to include ‘middle schooling speak’. (Coote and Williams, p57)

Reconciling the gap between theory and practice has been recognised as an issue in the literature about teacher professional development (Hargreaves, 1992). The Innovative Links Project in South Australia showed that even when support and release time are given to teachers, they find it difficult to give their attention to reading theory or writing reflectively about theory and practice. However, they relish increased opportunities for professional discourse and this proves an effective means of theorising about practice.

Collaborative Learning and Leadership
All the stories indicate that the success of the Innovative Links
reform work in South Australia was dependent on strong leadership by the principal, and/or one or more other key people in the school. In each school a number of people were identified who were enthusiastic and committed to the goals of the proposed reform and they were given the task of undertaking a leadership role for the Innovative Links work within the school. These groups were given formal recognition as key players through titles such as the 'Links Coordinating Committee' or the 'Learning Conversation Team'. They took responsibility for much of the planning, implementation, evaluation and documentation of the reform work. Part of their role was to communicate with the whole staff and to provide the support needed for them to become involved in the change process.

In all schools the university colleagues worked most closely with those who were identified as the key players, although they also had contact with the wider staff through staff meetings and other whole schools professional development activities:

The university colleague presented materials on issues and principles of reconstructing teachers' work and middle schooling that provided much `food for thought'. This role of an independent, external, critical friend and sounding-board proved to be of great benefit in these critical early stages. (Coote and Williams, p51)

The roles played by university colleagues were negotiated within each school and evolved as the research and development work proceeded. A dilemma for schools and university colleagues throughout the Project was how to fully utilise the expertise and resources of university colleagues, without creating a situation where schools were overly dependent on their leadership. This dilemma is illustrated in one of the stories in which regret is expressed because the country location prevented more frequent interaction with the university colleague, but there is also acknowledgment that this had some advantages:

The limited contacts, however, were advantageous for both the school and the university colleague. The school retained the ownership of the project and avoided the very real possibility of becoming over-dependent on the university colleague to solve the school's problems. (Coote and Williams, p55)

In response to the issue of schools needing to develop independence and ultimately take responsibility for the evolving changes in theory and practice, the role of university colleague tended to change in each school over the life of the project, as did the roles of other key players in the research and development work. The need for constant modification of leadership roles was commented on in several stories:

The response to the complexity of this project by the coordinating committee and University colleagues had been one of intense negotiation. (Tunney, p 29)
The university colleague academic was intensely involved for the first five meetings, but then gradually reduced direct participation as the functioning of the group and her role changed. (Grearly, p77)

... with a flattening of the leadership-management configuration as teachers and teams took more responsibility, the less formal professional dialogue presented and effective daily management approach and reflected successful responsibility and power sharing. (Coote and Williams, p54)

Many researchers (Lee and Smith, 1994; Newmann and Wehlage, 1995; Groundwater- Smith, 1996) have pointed to the importance of leadership in effective school change, and most particularly the vision and communication skills of the principal and other key players in the school (Peters, Dobbins and Johnson 1996). The stories of the schools involved in the Innovative Links Project confirm the view that there is a need for strong leadership from some members of the school community, but that it is also important that leadership roles be negotiated and responsibility gradually devolved to a wider group over time. The project also revealed the sensitive nature of the involvement of university participants in school reform because of the fine line between support and creating dependency.

Collaborative Learning and Whole School Change

The Innovative Links Project was intended to achieve significant 'whole school change'. The degree to which this occurred over the first year appears to have been related to the extent to which the original decision to become involved was a democratic one and allied with long term goals identified on a school wide basis. At least one of the schools did go through a genuinely collaborative approach in making the decision to participate. Their story describes a process of extensive consultation with all staff and students and the parent body through the School Council executive. It also describes a lengthy process of "problem identification" as the first phase of the research whereby data was collected from all staff and students about the focus of "student participation". It was noticeable that in this school there were significant 'whole school" outcomes by the end of the first year.

In some schools there does not appear to have been the same level of whole school consultation and involvement in the initial stages. Although schools had been asked to provide evidence in their initial application as to how the planned research had been agreed to by the staff in a democratic manner, in some cases the momentum for reform appears to have come primarily from the school leadership and a few 'key players' rather than from a genuine commitment by all staff. In at least one school a large turnover of staff at the end of the year had also eroded the level of commitment to the decision to participate.
which had made in the previous year. This meant that in some schools participation during the first year tended to be limited to the leadership groups described earlier, with the rest of the staff being kept informed via news bulletins and staff meeting reports, rather than being directly involved. As a result, attempts to transfer the insights gained from the research work to the wider staff met with some resistance as indicated in the following excerpt:

The 1995 attempt to involve other faculties in a process similar to the one undertaken by the project group met with limited success. It appeared that most of the staff had a tendency towards conservative resistance to change. (Grearly, p83)

Another school's story reflects their awareness at the end of the first year that "the establishment and development of middle schooling programs need to take a long term perspective for a significant and more fully sustainable change to occur" and that "there must be, at very least, a 'critical mass' of staff committed to creating and sustaining the change for it reasonably to be expected to succeed." (Coote and Williams, p56)

In response to the realisation at the end of the first year that the majority of staff were not fully committed to the original research focus, two of the schools decided to adjust their focus to areas that were considered to be more relevant by staff as a whole.

The difficulty of achieving whole school change is one that is consistently addressed within the literature (Fullan, 1993; Peters, Dobbins and Johnson, 1996). For instance, in a recent study of four schools selected by the National Schools Network as examples of successful whole school change, it was found that a significant proportion of the staff in each school (up to a third) were not supportive of the change and felt increasingly alienated and isolated from the directions in which the school was moving (Peters, Dobbins and Johnson, 1996). By the end of the first year of the Innovative Links Project it was apparent to schools that whole school change required a long term perspective and that change needed to be based on 'problem identification' within the context of a vision of the future to which all staff were committed.

Conclusion: Collaborative Learning Journeys
The five stories written at the end of the first year of the Innovative Links Project in South Australia highlight a number of issues in relation to the affective dimension of collaborative learning, the challenges of becoming critically reflective and reconciling theory and practice, the important role of leadership in school change and the complexity and long term nature of whole school change. From consideration of these issues a number of recommendations about
collaborative learning partnerships between schools and universities can be derived.

In working collaboratively schools and universities should:
• anticipate and acknowledge the affective demands of collaborative learning and spend the time and effort needed to create a supportive environment, build trusting and mutually respectful relationships and help participants deal with the emotional stresses of change.

• investigate the emotional, intellectual and practical demands of critically reflective teaching practice, as well as the political, social and ethical implications, before deciding to make it a focus.

• provide opportunities for participants to engage in professional discourse as a means of theorising about practice.

• recognise that teachers need considerable support and release time to be able to give their attention to reading theory or writing reflectively about theory and practice, and acknowledge that even when these are provided, teachers may still find it difficult to turn their attention away from the constant demands of school life.

• recognise the need for strong leadership from one or more school-based participants but also that leadership needs to be negotiated and dispersed if school wide change is to occur.

• recognise that university colleagues need to evaluate and adjust their facilitation to help school-based participants develop independence as researchers.

• acknowledge the importance of shared vision, genuinely collaborative decision making and an extended period of “problem identification” as a basis for embarking on whole school change.

Finally, it may be useful to note that participants across the schools and the university found the metaphor of a "learning journey" to be extremely useful in thinking about the on-going, ever-changing and at times tortuous nature of the change process. As one school put it:

The learning journey is under way, but there is a long way to go and much to discover. (Coote and Williams, p 61)

References


Reculturing. National Schools Network.


