# The Boundary Spanner: exploring the new frontiers of a school-university partnership as a community of practice.

Paper presented at the AARE Conference, Freemantle 2001.

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#### **Abstract**

This paper is an attempt to conceptualise, from the perspective of the author as 'boundary spanner', a new school-university partnership between the University of Sydney and a Senior High School. The paper firstly, provides a background and discussion of key issues in school-university partnerships. The issues include the different cultures of schools and universities, and whether these differences preclude productive partnerships, the boundary spanner as facilitator of these partnerships and schools and universities as communities of practice. Secondly, the paper explores two activities of the University of Sydney school-university partnership in terms of the concept of a community of practice. This exploration provides an initial and tentative analysis of the early implementation of a school-university partnership.

#### Introduction

At the beginning of 2001 the Faculty of Education, in the University of Sydney, formed an educational partnership with the Georges River Educational District in NSW. This partnership was intended to more closely link the school and the university in the preparation of pre-service teachers. The schools agreed to provide the university with access to practicum places in district schools while the university agreed to provide professional development to assist teachers in their roles as practicum cooperating teachers. Also at the beginning of 2001 within this District a Senior High School was established and this school also entered into a partnership arrangement with the university. The partnership with the school involved the appointment, by the university, of two lecturers whose responsibilities included: teaching at the university, teaching university courses at the Senior School, developing and implementing University Developed Board of Studies Endorsed Courses, teaching these courses to Year 12 students at the Senior School, engaging in the professional development of teachers and generally facilitating the partnership between the school and the university. This paper is an attempt by the author, as one of the lecturers, to provide an initial analysis and evaluation of the school-university partnership at the Senior School. The paper firstly, examines the background and major issues associated with school-university partnerships in general. Secondly, it explores two specific activities of the partnership.

# **Terminology**

In accounts of school-university relations the literature employs a number of terms to describe these relationships, namely: collaboration, cooperation and partnership. How do these relationships differ? According to Hord (in Goodlad 1988: 38) whether a relationship can be described as collaboration or cooperation depends on the degree of autonomy each party is prepared to sacrifice. Hord suggests that *collaboration* best describes a relationship in which both parties share the responsibility for decision making. Cooperation however,

describes a relationship where the two parties, with separate and autonomous programmes, agree to work together to make both programmes work better.

The term *partnership*, is also used and according to Goodlad (in Clarke 1988: 40-41), describes a relationship which is symbiotic that is, one in which the mutual interests of the two parties are equally served. That is, the relationship is one of 'working with' in order to satisfy mutual self-interests. However, Goodlad argues the two parties to the partnership must be dissimilar and selfless enough to assure satisfaction of self-interests. Schlechty and Whitford (1988: 191-192) suggest partnerships as organic rather than symbotic relationships. That is, relationships that emphasis not mutual self interest but rather the identification and development of the common good for both parties. Day (1999: 152), like Goodlad, argues that both parties to the partnership have something different, though complementary, to offer the joint enterprise.

It is the term partnership that is used in this paper firstly, because it is the terminology employed by the stakeholders in the school-university relationship examined in this paper. Secondly, because the relationship is one of joint enterprise in which both parties are committed to making different but complementary contributions. However, as Sirontik (1988: 177) argues whatever, the relationship may be called partnerships are often messy and ambiguous places. It is one such ambiguous place that is examined in the latter half of this paper.

#### **Background**

School-university partnerships are not new and have a long history, particularly in the United States. At present in NSW, as educational boundaries are continually redefined, partnerships between schools and universities seem almost *de rigueur*. It might be argued that it is a situation in which having a partnership is good for public relations and for institutional reputation and has resulted in what Gehrke (cited in Teitel 1994: 249), has called a 'trophy mentality'.

In the United States Clarke (1988) identifies the first school-university partnership in the late nineteenth century. This partnership consisted of 47 representatives from Harvard University and 42 from schools and was specifically concerned with discipline specific knowledge, pedagogy, and teacher preparation. As school-university partnerships developed, and certainly by the 1920s, the university's role became dominant. This dominance resulted from the university's control of both subject content and instructional methods in the schools as well as through the role of the College Entrance Board of Examiners who acted as gatekeepers to university entrance. So dominant was the university position that by the 1930s Ralph Tyler argued that schools needed to be freed from the restrictions of universities. The relationship between schools and universities changed in the post-war period as universities turned to schools to assist in the training of the large numbers of teachers required for the expanded school population. By the 1950s these partnerships emphasied colleges and universities working together to foster 'excellence in education' (Maeroff cited in Clark 1988: 47).

In the 1980s, widespread, dissatisfaction with teacher preparation in the United States led to new forms of school-university partnerships. The most visible of these, argue Kochan and Kunkel (1998: 325), is the Holmes Group (1990) which developed a number of guiding principles for school-university partnerships. The most significant being the development of a new institution, the Professional Development School. The aim of the Professional Development school is to promote simultaneous renewal in both the schools and the universities (Teitel 1994: 245).

In NSW formal school-university links in the 1990s included the Innovative Links project and more recently in the establishment of formal partnership arrangements between schools and universities. The Innovative Links project, grew out of the National Schools Network and established a new reciprocal relationship between practice and research, between university academics and teachers in schools. 'The Innovative Links project represents formal and explicit partnerships between schools and universities which are seen as central to renewal and development of teacher professionalism.' (Sachs 1997: 271) In this way the Innovative Links Project, like similar projects in the United States, endorsed school renewal.

At present in NSW school-university partnerships in the form of what Crump (2001: 10-11) calls multi-sector and joint campus sites continue to be implemented. These multi-sector sites not only involve schools and universities but also TAFE and Adult and Community Education (ACE). Examples of these multi-sector sites include: Dubbo College which links Charles Sturt University, Dubbo School of Distance Education and Western Institute of TAFE; Nimbin Educational Precinct which links the University of Western Sydney, Western Sydney Institute of TAFE, and a Senior High School and the Georges River College which links the University of Sydney, Southern Sydney Institute of TAFE and Oately Senior High School at the Oatley Education Centre. These sites represent a nexus of different cultures and it is understanding and conceptualising the cultures of the school and the university within the Oatley Education Centre with which the paper is concerned. Before examining this partnership there are a number of pragmatic and conceptual issues to be considered: the different cultures of schools and universities, given this whether or not these relationships can work, the boundary spanner as facilitator of the partnership and schools and universities as communities of practice.

### **School-University Cultures**

The cultures of school and university have traditionally been seen as fundamentally different. The major differences are outlined by Brookhart and Loadman (cited in Teital 1994 and Stevens 1999) as: tempo, focus, reward and power. Tempo refers to the pace at which school and university time is measured. School time is reminiscent of time in Llareggub, 'Listen, Time passes. Listen' (Thomas 1954/1995:4). That is, school time is 'fast time' audibly measured in segments. University time on the other hand moves at 'half time' seemingly slower and audibly unmeasured. Focus refers to the theory and practice divide. Teital (1994) suggests that this divide can be expressed in terms of the expertise of the school teaching staff resting in having answers while the expertise of the university staff is in asking questions. This theory practice divide is one of the reasons traditionally seen as making it difficult for schools and universities to work together (Haberman's 1971). Arising from this theory practice divide are the different reward systems in schools and universities. In the former the rewards come from teaching while in the latter the rewards come from publications. Finally, power while the teacher may have power in the classroom it is argued that expert power in certain areas is seen to reside in the university. It is not intended here to explore these differences but simply to ask a question and explore some of the responses to this question in the literature. Given the different cultures of schools and universities is it possible for school-university partnerships to work?

# **Can These Partnerships Work?**

According to Haberman (1971) schools and universities cannot work together. He describes the two institutions as: 'Slow-witted, lumbering elephants circle each other for a century only to discover that they are both males and incapable even of friendship. Reports, books and demonstrations on how we might cooperate have not affected any reality.' On the other hand, however, De Bevoise (1986:10) argues that schools and universities can work together if both institutions are open to both risk and innovation and are prepared to give up

part of their sovereignty. However, Sarason et.al. (1977: 22) suggest that, rather than give up part of their sovereignity what happens is that, 'Each agency is an island, seeking ways to expand its land areas, fearing erosion from uncontrollable and unpredictable sources, and nurturing the fantasy that there must or there should exist the quantity and quality of resources that could ensure a safe and goal-fulfilling life'.

Other commentators make specific suggestions for facilitating school-university partnerships. Liebermann (1986) suggests the need in partnership arrangements to concentrate on activities rather than on goals. This is echoed in Maeroff (1983) who emphasises the need to concentrate on action rather than on the machinery of the partnership. On the other hand Sandholtz & Finan (1998: 17) argue that partnerships are about relationships not about implementing specific programmes. Others, notably Kochan and Kunkel (1998), emphasis the governing framework of the partnership. They suggest that this framework should be small, non-bureaucratic, and involve equal sharing of power. Schon (in Clark 1988:60) emphasises the need for time. Sirotnik (in Sirotnik and Goodlad 1988: 169) argues that school-university partnerships are evolving social experiments within the contexts of peoples' own work, ideologies and interests who are struggling with alternative ideas and organisational arrangements and activities promoting collaboration between traditionally non-cooperative institutions. One widespread approach, in the United States, in facilitating school-university partnerships has been the appointment of a *boundary spanner*.

# **The Boundary Spanner**

The *boundary spanner* is a popular term in the United States used in educational and other contexts for individuals who make new connections across boundaries. It is a term, which is used to highlight an individual's membership of what Lave and Wenger (1999) called multiple 'communities of practice'. The term is also used in the field of diplomacy and international relations. In this context the term emphasises not only the role of the individual in spanning or brokering across boundaries but also emphasises the changing nature of these boundaries. Hocking (2001) argues that these boundaries, are becoming increasingly porous and are increasingly seen as 'sites of intense activity' which 'continually reconstitute themselves in response to shifting patterns of interaction' (Hocking 2001: 6). International relations in the age of globalisation, Hocking argues, are not about boundary control but rather about the need to access and be present in different environments.

In the educational arena the boundary spanner is similarly charged with spanning increasingly porous boundaries between educational institutions. It is the boundary spanner who thus, provides the participatory connection between separate and different communities of practice. Ansell and Weber (cited in Hocking 2001: 6) argue that the boundary spanner operates both within and outside of organisations. 'They aim at modulating, regulating, and sometimes controlling what kinds of resources, signals, information and ideas pass in and out of the semipermeable membranes that are the boundaries of the organization.' Wenger (1998: 109) similarly argues, that boundary spanning is a complex activity involving translation, coordination and alignment between communities. Stevens (1999: 287) suggests that the boundary spanner is an intermediary who literally and figuratively commutes between school and university. Clark (cited in Sandholtz & Finan 1998: 13-14) suggests that these liaison positions require people who are knowledgeable and comfortable with the cultures of both institutions. That is individuals who have legitimacy in both cultures, who move freely between them, interpret the language, understand the reward systems, and translate the ideas of those in one culture to those in another.

A useful way of conceptualising the self as boundary spanner, Stevens (1999) suggests is to adopt a surrealist position. Adopting such a position, Stevens argues, can enable the

boundary spanner to gain new insights through visualising the ultimate irrationality of combined rationalities. That is, in the school-university partnership the boundary spanner needs to challenge preconceived notions about cultures and roles. Developing a healthy school-university relationship, she argues, does not always lend itself to logical analysis. She sums up her view of being a boundary spanner thus, 'Building trust, acting on intuition, enjoying the serendipity and attending to the "feel" of my relationships are part of boundary spanning. Part of my work does not lend itself to rational analysis. Surprises may be hidden in the closet.' (Stevens 1999: 298) What conceptual tools might be helpful in assisting the boundary spanner analyse and understand this role?

## **Conceptualising a School-University Partnership**

In order to better understand my boundary spanning experiences I have located these experiences within the general literature of school-university partnerships as well as within the literature of situated learning. It is the concept of *communities of practice* and its constitutive elements, identified and examined in the work of Lave and Wenger (1991), Wenger (1999), on which this paper draws. When it is argued that schools and universities have different cultures what is being argued is that they each have a different *community of practice*. In this sense a community of practice here refers to the particular socio-historical context in which the activities of the two institutions are pursued (Wenger 1999: 48). Within communities of practice Lave & Wenger (1991: 29) emphasis the significance of what they call *participation* and *reification*. *Participation* describes the social experience of living in the world in terms of a community of practice. While *reification* is giving form to experiences by producing objects and so creating points of focus around which negotiation of meaning takes place. Reification and participation within a community of practice are so interwoven that they are almost indistinguishable (Wenger 1999: 55-63).

A significant question for this paper is how do individuals become members of communities of practice? Lave & Wenger (1991) argue that individuals become full participants in a community of practice through *legitimate peripheral participation*. This is a kind of apprenticeship whereby individuals, before becoming full members of a community of practice, legitimately participate in the activities of the community. In this way participating individuals become enculturated into the community of practice.

Communities of practice are distinguished by many things including their discursive practices. These discursive practices, in the Foucaultian sense, represent a power / knowledge nexus. As such these practices determine what can be said and thought, and who can speak and when and with what authority. It is these discursive practices that not only identify objects within communities of practice but also constitute objects within that community of practice (Ball 1996:2). Thus, discursive practice emphasize the situated nature of knowing and hence the significance of power within the situation. Within the school-university partnership it is the discursive practices of the dominant institution in any one partnership activity that determines the nature of that activity and gives that activity situated meaning. How can these conceptualisations be used to understand specific activities within a school-university partnership?

#### The School-University Partnership

The remainder of this paper is an initial exploration of two activities of the partnership between the University of Sydney and the Senior High School at the Oatley Education Centre. The Centre accommodates four distinctive, yet related communities of practice, that is, the Senior High School, the University of Sydney, TAFE and Adult Community Education (ACE) can be viewed as a 'nexus of perspectives' of these communities of practice (Wenger 1998: 105).

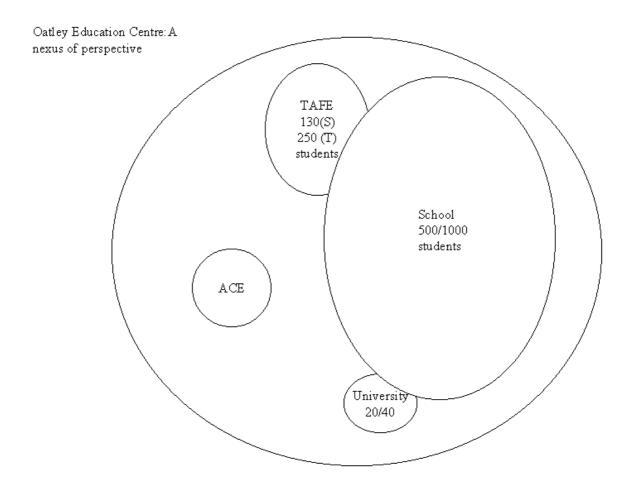


Figure 1 (a): Oatley Education Centre as a Nexus of Perspectives

The above figure represents the relative size, in terms of physical space and numbers of students, of the different communities of practice in the Centre. Judged by these characteristics the Oatley Education Centre is, in its day-to-day activities, the Senior College. This has significant implications for the discursive construction of educational practice within the Centre. Thus, the Centre, might best be represented in the figure below. In this figure the Centre becomes the Senior School.

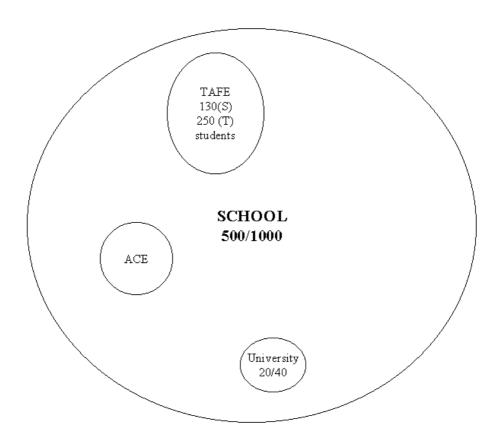


Figure 1 (b): The Oatley Education Centre as the School.

All of the educational communities, with the exception of ACE, contemporaneously share the Centre. All of the communities, again with the exception of ACE, also share students and curriculum. It is the sharing of students between the Senior School and the University of Sydney and the subsequent implications for this in terms of communities of practice which is the focus of the remainder of this paper.

#### **Partnership Activities**

In 2001 the University of Sydney appointed two sesquicentennial lecturers as boundary spanners to facilitate the partnership between the university and the Senior High School. As one of these lecturers I have, since my appointment, been involved in the following partnership activities at the Senior School.

- 1. The development of a University Developed Board of Studies Endorsed Course, *The Nature of Knowledge and Learning*. This course is at present being taken by year 12 students at the Senior School.
- 2. Facilitating a Bachelor of Education first year tutorial at the Centre.

It is these activities which are intended to assist in bridging the gap between the communities of practice of the school and the university. The initial partnership bridging activities have been conceptualised as opportunities for students to engage in legitimate peripheral participation. That is, university students participating in school activities and school students participating in university activities. How far then have these activities enabled students to engage in legitimate participation within different communities of practice?

#### **Bachelor of Education Tutorial**

In the second semester this year a group of twenty, first year Bachelor of Education students elected to take their Education tutorial at the Centre rather than at the university. In order to overcome timetable difficulties the tutorial was held early in the morning so that students could return to university following the tutorial. It is important to note here that the school is some distance from the university. By road the distance is between half an hour to an hour depending on the time of travel. By rail the trip is forty-five minutes. Some students elected to take the tutorial because they lived near the High School. However, all of the students said that they took the tutorial to take advantage of the 'in-school' experiences offered as an adjunct to the regular tutorial programme. Students who take the education tutorial at the university have no opportunity, apart from observing one lesson, to be part of a school community of practice in their first year. The in-school component was introduced as a pilot programme in an attempt to bring the communities of practice of the school and the university closer together and thus, enable the students to engage in peripheral participation within the community of teaching. The in-school component of the tutorial consisted on two kinds of experiences: a panel of teachers and shadowing a teacher.

There were ten tutorials in the second semester programme and the focus of these tutorials was child development and teacher preparation. For four of these tutorials dealing with: child protection, the expectations of teachers, teaching as a profession and the teacher and the community, tutorial discussions included a *panel of teachers* from two local primary schools and from the Centre. The purpose of these panels was to give students access to practising teachers and thereby, encourage students to link the theory of lectures and tutorials with the practice of teaching. To ensure that the link with the theoretical content of the course was maintained each of the teachers involved in the panels read the required tutorial readings for the relevant panel topic. On the panel teachers linked these readings with their own practice as teachers. Time was allowed at the end of each tutorial for students to ask questions and to talk with teachers.

# Student responses:

In their comments on the teacher panels students spoke about the panels being 'interesting', 'enjoyable', 'fun', had 'wonderful stories', were 'refreshing', 'compelling', and made students realise 'things that are special about teaching and make it rewarding.' Amongst the comments made by students in evaluating the panel of teachers were the following:

- 'they were teachers and taught at the present time this validated what they were saying and it allowed me to see how the theories were put into practice. It made the theories seem more real and relevant'
- 'the panels gave a human element. They allowed us to put issues into context'
- 'the teachers were able to relate to the sort of fears we may have regarding the profession of teaching'
- 'a real and useful perspective'
- 'a realistic view of what teachers go through'

Overall, the comments by students reveal how these panels enable students to engage in peripheral participation giving students the opportunity to 'be on the other side.'

The other in-school experience was the opportunity for students to shadow a teacher for a day. Students were thus able, to differing degrees, to share in the activities of the community of practice of teachers. This was more effective in the cooperating primary schools where students were able to participate in a range of activities during the day. The students in the high school were restricted to observation only.

#### Student responses:

Students saw this experience as an opportunity for 'hands on experience.' For many students it was shadowing that clarified for them their choice of career:

- 'I now know it is what I want to do. I loved it.'
- 'I still really want to teach and this experience reinforced that. This experience just made me realise how valuable teachers are and how much impact they can have on a child's life.'
- 'It was very valuable, it inspired me. Teaching is my passion and to be left at uni in lectures with no practical I was quite dismayed.'

In their comments on the shadowing experience students particularly commented that they were able to linked their lectures on child development and teaching to their shadowing experiences and to their own school experiences. Students also made comments on the teachers' content and pedagogical knowledge, linked school experiences with lectures, tutorials and course readings and the diversity of roles teachers are required to play within the school community.

The reason for the introduction of these two in-school experiences was to bring closer together the communities of practice of the school and the university. The result of the engagement by students and teachers in these experiences, I suggest, can be described in terms of Lave and Wenger's (1991) *legitimate peripheral participation*. Students, as newcomers to the community of teachers, were exposed to full participation and to actual teaching practice. In the words of one student, 'It has made the whole notion of being a teacher less foreign.' Through engagement with the panel of teachers and through the shadowing opportunities students were able to experience participation within the community of teachers. While the teachers who took part in the panels and in the shadowing procedures were able to engage in the community of practice of teacher preparation and to contribute to that community.

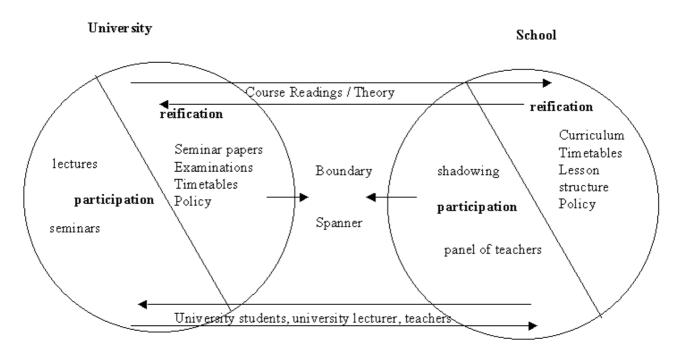


Figure 2: Bachelor of Education Tutorial Legitimate Peripheral Participation

The above figure shows the communities of practice of the school and university and how, through participation and reification, students moved from one community to the other. The boundary spanner is shown as the link between the two communities. The course theory and participating individuals are seen to flow between the two thus, facilitating legitimate peripheral participation. The second partnership activity however, reveals a different kind of community participation.

### The University Developed Board Endorsed Course

The second of the partnership activities is the development and implementation of the University Developed Board Endorsed Course, *The Nature of Knowledge and Learning*. Following the introduction of the new look Higher School Certificate (HSC) a number of university courses were developed as extension courses to supplement the HSC. The Board of Studies Guidelines (2001: 3) includes the following as some of the characteristics of these courses:

- 1. Assist in providing for the needs of high ability students in Stage 6
- 2. Provide the opportunity for high ability students to undertake university level course while at school
- 3. Ensure that students experience tertiary study in a supportive environment
- 4. Encourage students' independent, reflective and ongoing learning through engagement with higher level, challenging university courses.
- 5. Give students a taste of university course content, university course delivery and university life in general.

It is point five that signals the intention for these courses to provide Year 12 students with peripheral participation within the community of practice of the university. The course, *The Nature of Knowledge and Learning,* as a course in epistemology examines the contested nature of knowledge through a consideration of the modernist epistemological tradition and the post-modern challenge to that tradition. As well the course explores the complex nature of learning. Subsequently, the course enables students to participate in the community of practice of the university. A community in which the emphasis is as much on questions as on answers. This is in contrast to the school community where the emphasis tends to be on right answers for the HSC.

Whilst the intention of the University Developed courses is to help bridge the gap between school and university and hence initiate legitimate peripheral participation, I suggest, that in the case of, *The Nature of Knowledge and Learning*, something else is happening. Rather, I suggest, that even at this early stage of implementation what is developing is a *boundary practice* (Wenger 1999: 115) or *borderland landscape* (Clark 1988: 57). Within the boundary practice, *The Nature of Knowledge and Learning*, can be viewed as a *boundary object* (Wenger 1999: 106-107). The purpose of such objects being to coordinate the perspectives of the two communities of practice. These objects however, may not create a bridge between the communities.

Earlier in this paper Figure 1 illustrated the dominant position of the school within the Oatley Education Centre. This physical dominance has also resulted in the dominance of the school's discursive practices in the partnership activity of the University Developed Board Endorsed course. This discursive dominance is the result of a number of factors. Firstly, the students doing the course are school rather than university students and it was the school, not the university, which acted as gate keeper for course entry. Also while the Board guidelines indicate that selection procedures for students may vary nonetheless, the selection process is expected to be similar in a number of ways, namely:

- higher achieving students
- demonstrated potential to succeed in first year university
- possess high level research skills
- effective written and oral communication skills (Board of Studies 2001: 5).

It could be argued that, judging from evidence of student school reports, while students reveal a wide range of skill levels, few could however, be characterised as higher achieving students.

Secondly, in promoting the course the school has constructed the course as preparation for university which, in turn, appears at this stage of the implementation to have been constructed by students as a study skills course. It is however, a course in epistemology designed to allow students to experience peripheral participation in the community of practice of the university. Thirdly, the course is taught at the school where, for example, the discursive regulatory procedures are very different to those students might experience at the university.

Students in this course do not experience university 'life in general' largely because of the discursive practices of the school. However, these discursive practices are balanced by the discourse of the university developed curriculum and by the university style delivery of the course. Students have already highlighted the difference between the content and delivery of *The Nature of Knowledge and Learning* and their HSC subjects. Students observed that the university course is freer because it is not about learning the 'right way' to do something and then regurgitating this 'right way' for examinations. The course is also freer in the sense that students said that they were able to investigate what they wanted because there was no syllabus. It is of course not that there is no syllabus but rather it is the nature of that syllabus that has enabled students to share in the kind of content and delivery that they are more likely to encounter at university. It is, I suggest, the discursive practices of the two communities of practice, as they operate within this course, which is leading to the development of a boundary practice. Thus, rather than students experiencing peripheral participation in the university they are instead participating in and forming a new community of practice, the boundary practice.

#### University Developed Board Approved Course

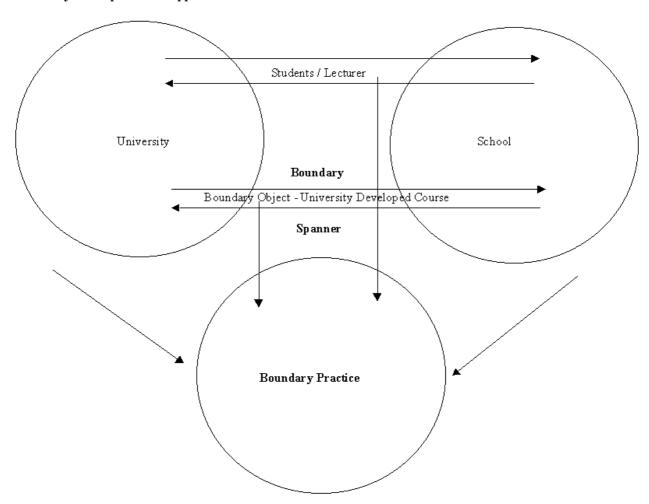


Figure 3: University Developed Board Developed Course as Boundary Practice

In the above figure the boundary spanner is still positioned between the two communities of practice, the university developed course is a link between the two communities and the students and the boundary spanner, as lecturer, move between the two communities. However, what seems to have happened as a result of this partnership activity is that rather than students engaging in legitimate peripheral participation they are involved in the formation of a new and different boundary community.

# Conclusion

This paper has argued that school-university partnerships can be conceptualised in terms of the interaction between communities of practice. Following from this the activities of the partnership may result in legitimate peripheral participation of newcomers into the new community of practice or may result in the formation of a new boundary community. Whether or not peripheral participation or a new boundary practice develops is largely determined by the power relation of the discursive practices of the university and the school within specific partnership activities. This conceptualisation is one way of understanding the day-to-day activities of the partnership and also of evaluating how far the goals of the partnership are realised through these activities.

The findings in the present paper are tentative and the theory emergent. It is intended that research on this partnership will continue through 2002. As a neophyte boundary spanner I

am mindful of Clark's (1988: 49) warning regarding school-university partnership, 'Those who believe that they have discovered some bright new ideas are doomed to spend considerable energy relearning the experiences of the past – and are quite likely to be dismayed by some of the obstacles they face that have been both generated and encountered over the years of interaction between these institutions.' Nonetheless, within the changing educational landscape school-university partnerships are potentially powerful vehicles for facilitating educational change and institutional renewal.

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