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Towards a scholarship of engagement: mapping the authentic partnership

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The Access & Success (A&S) project at Victoria University sets itself the goal of developing the educational opportunities and outcomes of young people in the western Melbourne region during their school years, as well as increasing the capacity of their teachers and families to support this improvement. By extension the project also informs pedagogy and practice at the vocational and higher education levels, where these young people come to engage directly with the university. Collaboration with schools and families to achieve project goals is at the heart of this research and development project.

Contributing to the present discussion on scholarship of engagement, VU's A&S project, as one aspect of the Making VU mission, constitutes a key aspect of Victoria University's broader response to the international emphasis on university-community engagement. The experiences and early findings of the first twelve months of the project, as well as the long term practices of the VU School of Education that underpin the A&S approach, offer valuable insight into conversations around universities, partnerships and community engagement.

This paper presents some early reflections on the A&S project, with an emphasis on the methodological approach employed in establishing, building, evaluating and sustaining school-university partnerships for improved educational outcomes for students. Some emerging findings and stories from our partner schools are presented, with reflections on how and why universities work with communities, and an exploration of the notion of university-school partnerships as an aspect of community engagement.

Keywords: Partnerships, community engagement, educational capital

Introduction

Internationally (Plantan 2002; Fisher, Fabricant et al. 2004), and in Australia (Winter, Wiseman et al. 2005, p.15) there is a renewed emphasis on the social relevance of higher education institutions, amidst a call for greater engagement with local communities and

more effective responses to local issues and needs. Victoria University, a dual-sector university with multiple campuses across Melbourne's west, is no exception.

Melbourne's western region is home to a diversity of communities and cultures, including many of the lowest income households in the state. Research documenting the social and economic disadvantage, cultural and racial discrimination, below average educational outcomes and insecure housing and employment persistent in the region is ample (Growing Melbourne's West 2004; Harding, Yap et al. 2004; Black 2007; Mesner 2007). Recent literature (Teese 2005; Wiseman 2006) notes lower aspirations, attendance rates and completion rates amongst school students in Melbourne's west compared with other regions.

The question facing VU is then

What is the role of a modern university located in this setting and to what extent does the socio-geographic context set the tone for its mission in educational leadership?

The local context raises significant challenges and also offers opportunities for VU to develop a creative and effective approach to working with local communities. It has made explicit connections between improvement of educational opportunities and its engagement imperative in its Making VU Mission to "transform the lives of individuals and develop the capacities of industry and communities within the western Melbourne region and beyond through the power of vocational and higher education".

This emphasis is developed in the University's Engagement Plan 2004-2008, where it is stated that "...its defining feature is its location in, and mission to serve, Melbourne's West... its responsibility to the region includes advocacy; the provision of pathways to education and training; the development of strong relationships with culturally diverse communities; the promotion of regional learning collaborations; and, ultimately, the construction of a strong knowledge base to underpin regional development... in order to be truly engaged, the University will build strong collaborations and networks with external stakeholders. It will ensure that its teaching, research and services are dynamically linked to each other and to these networks."

This is the context of Access and Success which saw its genesis as a five year research project in 2006. The research involves a brief to build the life opportunities of residents in Melbourne's West through improved education experiences, primarily in schools. In a wide ranging series of school based partnerships, university students and staff engage with students, teachers and other members of school communities to promote engaged and authentic education and training which taps into regional needs. This research aims to develop the university's own capacity in working more effectively with its student populations and local communities, especially in promoting quality teaching, learning and education and training pathways for non-traditional students.

Strengthening communities through improving educational access and success

Despite the international discourse of quality education for all (UNESCO, 2006) inequality in educational opportunity and outcomes remain clearly linked to class and socio-economics (Teese and Polesel 2003; Lamb, Rumberger et al. 2004a; Barton 2005; O'Brien 2005; Wyn and Woodman 2006). Recurrently poor educational outcomes in some communities are inextricably linked to patterns of disadvantage and social exclusion, with socio-economic barriers ensuring that the successful further and higher education outcomes most likely to ensure future economic and social stability, remain out of reach for many here in Australia (Long 2005).

Through strategic and collaborative work with local schools, Access and Success seeks to improve educational capacity and outcomes for young people in the west. Such successful partnership building requires a critical understanding of the causes and effects of the disadvantaged context within which VU is situated. The work of this project is based on a socio-cultural understanding of the educational disadvantage faced by communities in the west, drawing on a long line of research in the Australian context clearly linking social class as a determinant of educational participation and outcomes (Roper 1970; Connell, Ashenden et al. 1982; Teese 2000; Teese and Polesel 2003; Lamb, Rumberger et al. 2004a).

The project's approach to working with schools reveals an emphasis on mutual learning and collaboration as essential aspects of partnerships. It begins with the recognition of the powerful work already undertaken in many schools within the region in a context of generalised low funding and highly diverse populations. While educational outcomes are substantially lower in the west than in other areas of Melbourne, and below those for Melbourne generally (Teese 2005), schools in the west achieve many positive, indeed impressive outcomes with their diverse student cohorts. Sheehan and Wiseman (2005, p. 29) have noted that while students may enter schools in the west with literacy and numeracy levels below the state average, schools and teachers in the west are succeeding in raising the levels of these students to close to state averages by Grade 3. They rightly observe that schools do much to offset the lower educational capital possessed by families and communities in the west.

What Sheehan and Wiseman highlight then is an important feature of life in the West; families in the region do depend heavily on their schools to offset disadvantage. Many families are not able to draw on high levels of educational and cultural capital that will feed into school success. They rely on schools for that. And as Sheehan and Wiseman again point out, the schools with most to do and with populations least able to resource their own educational needs are also among the poorest resourced in the state (Sheehan and Wiseman 2005, p. 34). Understanding and valuing the successful and creative work being done in schools in the west, despite the generalised patterns of under-resourcing and low cultural and social capital, is a critical starting point for the University in building the professional relationships required to sustain successful and relevant partnership teams.

Partnerships at VU

The practices of Access and Success are firmly built upon, and reflect, the experiences of the VU School of Education (SoE), and their particular approach to teacher education. The Project Partnerships (PP) model of teacher education practicum involves VU Preservice teacher colleagues partnering with schools to develop and implement negotiated projects which respond to learning needs of students. Preservice teachers are effectively “embedded” in their partner school for a full school year, working on an agreed project in the school for one day a week and undertaking their extended supervised teaching rounds in that setting. It affords an enduring presence in the school for sustained periods and allows for strong appreciation of social and cultural dynamics within the school community. This practical approach coupled with the philosophy and practice of the VU SoE in general insists that learners and their needs must be the central focus of partnership work. Collaboration with school and community partners is rooted in the expectation of collective enquiry and the shared development of knowledge (Cacciattolo, Cherednichenko et al. 2007). While schools in the west face many shared and similar challenges with regards to student access and success, this research emphasises the need for school colleagues to identify the specific project focus of partnerships on each site. This results in partnership projects that are embedded in school planning and relevant to each context, addressing a diverse range of issues including futures mentoring, student metacognition, innovative curriculum, student disengagement and improved numeracy and literacy.

Access and Success research

The literature on university-community engagement initiatives reveals a limited amount of research into the actual practices of such programs and their outcomes. From the outset, a strong and strategic commitment to researching the nature of, practices and outcomes of our partnership work has framed the Access and Success project.

Research teams involving school colleagues, university Preservice teachers and Access and Success staff have been established to collaboratively negotiate projects based on school needs, and develop a research process to support evaluation over a two-five year period. The language being used to describe the focus for Access and Success is longer, deeper, richer and sustainable partnerships. While the work builds on the historic, successful model of the SoE, it aims to investigate and theorise the practice, support deepened relationships and generate new learning around the sustainability and effective outcomes of partnerships between schools and VU. Down the track, work will focus on transferring the model and drawing more diverse university personnel into a greater number of partnerships.

The Access and Success research agenda works alongside and with the current research in the SoE, in particular the Researching Innovative Partnerships in Education (RIPE) project, which involves site based teams of Teachers, Preservice Teachers and University colleagues collaboratively investigating the practices and outcomes of PPs in schools. The methodological influence of the VU developed Collaborative Practitioner Research methodology (Cherednichenko, Davies et al. 2001a), which argues for the involvement of all actors as active, valued, contributing protagonists in the research, appears to have

facilitated genuine attempts to challenge the historic divide between practitioners and academics in educational research. This overall research framework constitutes a commitment to a deeper understanding of the partnership work with schools, and how the relationships are contributing to the community through improved learning outcomes.

Although the methodology is necessarily developing as projects are collectively defined on each site, a clear framework has been established to facilitate the objectives of the collaborative practitioner research teams. The methodology emphasises active input from all partners, and values processes as equally important as outcomes. Each research meeting is undertaken at the school, with an agenda that guides collective reflection and discussion. These conversations are digitally recorded and then transcribed. Key points raised and critical decisions about how to proceed in action and how best to document the process are displayed throughout the meeting using a data-projector, enabling all participants to view and if necessary amend the way data is being collected and presented. Alongside these meetings researchers, teachers and pre-service teachers may contribute written cases to explore in more detail, individual responses to both the projects themselves and the experiences of the partnership process. This qualitative data is considered alongside existing and generated quantitative data as deemed relevant by each research team, to develop an understanding of the partnership model and to enable the rigorous evaluation of outcomes.

Mapping the authentic partnership

Principles emerging as critical elements of authentic and sustainable partnerships are exemplified in the following case studies which demonstrate:

- the significance of locally appropriate projects based on partner schools' specific experiences and needs,
- shared ownership of the research component of the work through informed analysis of data and mutually agreed strategies for practice,
- flexibility and creativity in the support of schools' needs and
- a joint commitment to extended partnerships rather than "quick and dirty" arrangements of convenience.

1. The Raven Cluster

The Raven Cluster project began with an initial conversation between Access and Success staff and the Principal of one of the cluster schools. He highlighted general frustration at his school's lack of success in supporting what he referred to as "disengaged" students, an issue that was strongly echoed by the other principals. From that initial conversation a project developed involving VU Preservice teachers, a teaching colleague from one of the schools and an A&S colleague to investigate this issue and the possibilities for improving practice.

The project team initially discussed the possibilities for the project, asking:

- What do we want to change? And how?

- How can we construct a learning environment, which connects the value differences and enables parents, kids and teachers to work together for learning?
- How do we connect the “right” people to ensure the “right” support
- What are the schools values? Are they explicit?
- How can we develop explicit values

They then determined their project aim: To establish an action research project which examines critical student disengagement and results in school and network strategies enabling the needs of these students to be more effectively met.

In line with the project’s action research methodology and collaborative focus, flexible planning allowed participants to responsively shape the project over time. The team engaged with participating schools to define and quantify the problem and plan a broad outline of activity for the project. The project was viewed as medium to long term, with returning and new VU students continuing to work in the project this year.

The research team was led by the school colleague, made possible through time release and project support via a successful grant application submitted by the cluster and A&S. Regular meetings involving all participants were held at the time of the weekly school visit by Preservice teachers, undertaken as part of their SoE practicum requirements.

The first year of the project involved an extensive review of the existing literature around student disengagement, and an investigation of the types of programs and placements available for “disengaged youth.” Profiles of students considered to be disengaged were gathered across 4 schools and aggregated to provide an overview of the issue in the cluster. The research team then analysed their data, developed a report to present their findings to the schools and the wider Cluster audience, and a research paper which was accepted at the American Educational Research Association’s annual conference.

This year the project has an emphasis on school-based initiatives aimed at encouraging disengaged students who are routinely “withdrawn” to alternative settings, to return to or instead remain in regular schooling and continue on positive pathways. The team is presently researching and evaluating existing approaches in the cluster schools and elsewhere to prepare a report for the cluster principals, as well as a checklist for effective student engagement strategies. There are also plans to expand to two of the cluster primary schools in recognition of the continuity of challenges faced by both primary and secondary schools in engaging students effectively.

The Raven Cluster offered the A&S project group a number of insights into the establishment of productive and enduring partnerships between the university and schools. It had been assumed by the project team that these schools, and indeed many of our partnership schools, whose literacy and numeracy scores were recognised to be low in comparison to State averages, would welcome assistance in academic support – a time honoured strategy in using university students and others in “helping” disadvantaged schools. The school however saw its own needs differently. The disengaged young people stood for a broad social and educational concern – what becomes of such young people if and when they are excluded from this and other schools? What do practices of

exclusion do for school culture and for the attachment of other students to school? In effect, by addressing the needs of this group of young people could the school not build a more positive culture for its overall student body and for teachers and parents also?

This was a much more challenging and engaging project than a tutoring or other “helping” program ever could be. School and university participants (including teachers and preservice teachers) worked on the planning and delivery of the program as colleagues. They shared the strategising and the research. An indicator of the success of this project has been its development through to a further stage and in the extension of the program into other local settings.

2. Garden College

This large secondary college in Melbourne’s west had an existing relationship with VU as a Project Partnership site, but had this year expressed interest in hosting a larger than usual number of Preservice teachers. With the aim of building upon the existing relationship and seizing the opportunity this request presented, A&S project officers arranged an initial meeting with school staff.

At that meeting the Assistant Principal responded positively to the idea of an ongoing research project. The school had recently redeveloped classrooms to create an open learning space for students in Years 7, 8 and 9, and had undergone a significant journey in a short space of time, in developing plans for curriculum changes to utilise this space and the pedagogical approach of student-centred learning. The school’s enthusiasm, hope and sense of achievement were evident in their account of this journey.

Based on the school’s own suggestions, a draft was then developed which contextualised the project and presented possibilities for a collaborative project to support the initiative. In this way an authentic capturing of the school’s perspectives for the project was assured. Subsequent visits to the school by the A&S project officers allowed for collaborative conversations between A&S and the teaching staff who had already been teaching in the Year 10 open learning spaces. These were important conversations as the staff in the learning setting would be mentoring the significant group of preservice teachers in playing a supporting role, including in a team teaching capacity.

The meetings also canvassed the layers of research to evaluate the outcomes of the project as well as the experiences and new learning for all partners. Ideas about VU resourcing the research and planning time, to ensure the development of a genuinely collaborative research team were enthusiastically discussed. At that point, space was given to the group of Year 10 teachers to have some “think time” to better consider the opportunities for the preservice teachers in light of the agreed focus of the project. It was reiterated at that point that the A&S project and more importantly the collaborative relationship carried the expectation and commitment of a three to five year partnership. This commitment was important; it reassured the school partners that the university was prepared to grow with and support the school and build sustainable projects able to become part of the culture of the school.

This case exemplifies significant aspects of an effective partnership building process. It highlights the importance of acting at optimal moments when opportunities arise. The project is located unequivocally within the school's frames of reference, drawing its energy and authenticity from the significance of the new learning setting to the school. The university is able to offer resources in the form of a number of student teachers who will, through participation in team teaching and mentoring arrangements add significant value to the new setting. Significantly the project team has taken time to work closely with and listen to the teachers working in the new learning space – rather than merely with the enthusiastic Assistant Principal – to ensure that the needs and concerns of all participants in the project are heard and valued. Finally the commitment is made for an association of sufficient length to meet the needs of the school and its students.

3. Stuart College

Stuart College initiated contact with A&S with a view to extending their connection to the university through the Project Partnerships Portfolio process, an alternative form of application to VU for students in Year 12. Having heard that A&S were currently developing projects to support students in Melbourne's west they were eager to explore the possibilities. An initial visit covered a range of open ended questions about teaching and learning in the school, generating a picture of the challenges and successes the school has experienced and is facing.

The school colleague referred to the 'tall poppy' syndrome that often overshadowed student success. She felt that students were discouraged by their peers from achieving, singling out numeracy in particular as an area where improvement could be made. She wanted to see pathways improved for senior students, in particular to professions such as teaching, and noted that the school serves families who set great store by their sense of community.

The detail of the conversation contextualised these issues, and enabled A&S staff to raise a number of possibilities for collaborative projects in response to the issues raised. Draft plans have now been made to involve preservice teachers to work closely with a select group of Year 10 students, assisting this group to become numeracy mentors for Grade 6 students of one of the school's feeder primary schools. Such an initiative potentially addresses many of the points of concern raised in the open conversation.

This project was described by school participants and A&S partners as "ticking all the boxes" for the school. It allowed the school to explore some culture-changing strategies in ways that school students could find meaningful and non-threatening. Student leadership, self esteem, raising student numeracy capabilities, improving transition between primary and secondary schools, as well as permitting secondary students to experience the role of 'teacher', were just some of the possible outcomes of this collaborative partnership.

Conclusion

Partnerships that are authentic – and by extension engagement strategies that are meaningful and sustainable – build on relationships characterised by respect and active communication. One of the strongest findings of the research to date has been the importance of active listening between university and schools, and of genuinely shared agency in developing site based projects. This shared ownership and responsibility builds engagement in all partners and helps guarantee the longevity of shared projects. It also builds skills and expertise across a much broader array of fronts than would be the case in a university-dominated project merely “hosted” by schools or communities.

In the cases described above the university benefits through its richer associations with institutions that provide direct conduits into its local community – associations that mean among other things stronger interest in university provided courses and pathways. Schools’ association with the projects allow them to tap into a range of resources otherwise unavailable, and to build an institutional identity associated with active, effective and productive learning. Teachers and preservice teachers are afforded opportunities to develop recognised skills in the conduct of research and of reflective practice, to contribute to significant work shaping policy and practice within their schools, and to be recognised and accredited for this work.

Such partnerships are not developed overnight. As Bruckhardt and others have noted the development of a scholarship of engagement involves significant redefinition of research, learning and the traditional hierarchies characteristic of relationships between universities and their communities (Bruckhardt, Hollan et al. 2004, p. 9). This project’s focus on cooperation and shared enterprise in the service of positive educational outcomes allows us to explore alternative and possibly more productive and effective partnerships which are, we hope, more appropriate for our time and region.

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