

Potential in the space between: a sociocultural analysis of a learning and teaching programme with a partner HEI in Sri Lanka (0039)

Hazel Messenger

London Metropolitan University, UK

Sutton and Obst (2011, xvi) suggest that international partnership activity may be seen on a continuum from “transactional” to “transformational”, with the latter referring to partnership arrangements that transcend the original purpose, having the power to transform organisations, individuals and communities through the generation of common goals, projects and products. This is part of the moral responsibility of higher education in the 21st century, as to see partnership activity simply as an economic exchange reinforces a colonialist perspective and limits mutual growth and development (Hudson and Mayo 2012). This is a significant area for research with international perspectives converging to inform the nature and purpose of partnership development in higher education.

This paper concerns a capacity-building programme in learning and teaching undertaken with an overseas partner in Sri Lanka, viewing it as a cooperative, third-space activity (Bhabha 1994), one that was neither ‘home’ nor ‘away’ but existing as a bi-national academic entity with the potential for both partners and the partnership to emerge changed as a result. The Sri Lankan government is encouraging partnerships between non-state (private) providers and overseas universities in order to help meet a substantial shortfall in higher education provision, identifying a key challenge to be the encouragement of active learning and teaching in HE (Ministry of Higher Education Sri Lanka 2012; The Economist Intelligence Unit 2013). Wagstaff (2013) indicates the significance of organisations learning from their partnership activity, and this paper presents a case study analysis of this programme from a sociocultural perspective, aiming to provide both partner organisations and the external community with information that may inform future activities.

Dwyer, Schorr and Oh (1987) propose a lifecycle model of partnership development, identifying five phases; (i) awareness, (ii) early interaction, (iii) expansion, (iv)

commitment and (v) dissolution. The capacity building programme was undertaken in the exploratory second phase, a time of great significance in partnership development because, as Heffernan and Poole (2005) suggest, it is in this period that organisations identify mutual benefits that could eventually lead to expansion. They propose that factors having significant influence during this period are communication of mutual expectations and developing rapport, being trustworthy, showing commitment, establishing a culture which is entrepreneurial rather than bureaucratic and valuing face to face interaction. For a partnership to develop, these factors need to be taken into account and revisited in the light of changing circumstances. At their heart is “the human experience of being with another” (Wagstaff 2013, 12) but this aspect is the least studied of partnership development, therefore opening up a number of avenues for close-up research. Key to the development of transformational partnerships are the characteristics of ‘boundary spanners’ (Wagstaff 2013; Whitchurch 2008; Williams 2010;), ‘third space’ individuals that are capable of operating successfully between ‘home’ and ‘away’ as they can be the catalysts for the development of genuinely transformative partnership arrangements (Sutton, 2011).

The development programme was instigated as a condition of validation for the partner institution to deliver undergraduate and postgraduate programmes, with the anticipation that it would be devised and delivered by the university’s CELT. Transactional partnerships are instrumental and product orientated, exchanging resources in a pre-arranged fashion (Sutton 2010) and the development programme could have been devised and implemented in this way. However, because of resource constraints, the programme was devised in the UK by the course leader of one of the validated programmes working in collaboration with CELT and then delivered by her in Sri Lanka in collaboration with the faculty’s Partnerships Manager. Rather than an expert team being parachuted in for a one-off activity, the programme provided an authentic opportunity for relationship development and the chance to influence the future. It provided a ‘third space’, where developmental, spiral time (Yamamuzi 2007) took precedence over the linear nature of the bureaucratic time often associated with the academic calendar and partnership working.

The programme took place over two separate weeks in 2014, generating a wide range of formal and informal data, including records of meetings, prepared resources, participant materials, photographs, reflective diary, participant comments and feedback and records of impact. This data has been used to undertake sociocultural analyses using cultural historical activity theory, CHAT (Engeström 1987) and an analytical tool developed by James and Biesta (2007:35) which helped to identify what was 'permitted, promoted, inhibited or ruled out' in a particular context. These approaches enabled the integration of different sources of data, the isolation of significant contextual mediators and the identification of how they influence development. They had the advantage of being able to incorporate the influence of personal characteristics alongside more structural mediators (Roth 2009) so was very helpful in identifying relational factors involved in development and for comparing the local context with the organizational. This approach allowed firstly the identification of close-up 'small stories' which were then built up to identify a range of factors on an expansive-restrictive continuum which could potentially contribute to transformational partnership development. Adapted from the work on individual and organizational development undertaken by Fuller and Unwin (2004), an expansive-restrictive continuum works well alongside the conceptualization of international partnership activity suggested by Sutton and Obst (2011).

Findings from the research identify expansive features influencing the programme's potential to contribute to a transformational partnership to include; that it provided an autonomous, uninterrupted space where relationships could be developed, the visible and proactive involvement of the partner's senior management team and the developing confidence of the course coordinator. Restrictive features identified included the limited acknowledgement or interest in the nature, purpose and outcomes of the programme within the university, the ability to follow-up actively with the course participants on a longer term basis by linking with the courses offered and the challenges of working in an unfamiliar environment and culture. On the ground, the expansive features far outweighed the restrictive ones, and the programme had the potential to provide the partnership with a hyperexpansive opportunity and transcend the original transactional purpose by impacting on individuals, the organisations involved and their communities. However, although there has been the

development of mutual trust and respect between those involved in the programme, the impact on the UK side of the partnership is at yet limited.

References

Bhaba, H. K. (1994). *The Location of Culture*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Dwyer, F.R., P.H. Schurr, and Oh 1987. "Developing buyer-seller relationships" *Journal of Marketing* 5(2) 11-27.

Engeström, Y. 1987. *Learning by Expanding: An Activity-Theoretical Approach to Developmental Research*. Helsinki: Orienta, Konsultit.

Fuller, A. and Unwin, L. (2004) 'Expansive learning environments'. In Rainbird, H., A. Fuller, and A. Monro, (eds). *Workplace Learning in Context*. London: Routledge.

Heffernan, T. and D. Poole (2005) 'In search of the 'vibe': creating effective international partnerships in education'. *Higher Education*

Hudson, A.H. and Mayo, P. 2012 'Editorial'. *Postcolonial Directions in Education* 1(1) 1-8 <http://www.um.edu.mt/pde/index.php/pde1/article/view/7/18>

James, D., and G. Biesta, 2007. *Improving Learning Cultures in Further Education*. London: Routledge.

Ministry of Higher Education, Sri Lanka (2012) National Higher Education Strategic Management Plan of Sri Lanka: 2012-2015 Mid term plan, Available from http://planipolis.iiep.unesco.org/upload/Sri%20Lanka/Sri_Lanka_National_Higher_Education_Strategic_Management_Plan_2012-2015.pdf

Roth, W-M. 2009. 'On the inclusion of emotions, identity and the ethico-moral dimensions of actions' In Sannino, A., H. Daniels and K.D. Gutiérrez (eds) *Learning and Expanding with Activity Theory* (pp.53-75). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Sutton, S.B. 2010. 'Transforming internationalisation through partnerships', *International Educator*, 19 (1), 60-63.

Sutton, S.B. and Obst, D. 2011 'The changing landscape of international partnerships,' in Institute for International Education (2011) *Developing Strategic International Partnerships: models for initiating and sustaining innovative institutional linkages*. Available from <https://www.google.co.uk/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=7&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=0CEgQFjAG&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.iie.org%2F~%2Fmedia%2FFiles%2FCorporate%2FPublications%2FPartnership->

[Intro.ashx&ei=HEPrU4mKCISV7AbD34H4DA&usg=AFQjCNFhb718QwmUUOAuVMjIzQfLq4MmtQ&sig2=lwMw4brnsrnt-rDtLfeR-A](http://www.britishcouncil.in/sites/britishcouncil.in2/files/sapd_british_council_south_higher_education_report.pdf) [accessed 13.08.14]

The Economist Intelligence Unit (2013). *Higher education in South Asia Trends in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka*. A custom research report for the British Council. Available from http://www.britishcouncil.in/sites/britishcouncil.in2/files/sapd_british_council_south_higher_education_report.pdf [accessed 17.01.14]

Wagstaff, D. (2013) *What do we know about: Collaborations and Partnership in Higher Education?* London: The Leadership Foundation for Higher Education.

Whitchurch, C. 2008. *Shifting Identities, Blurring Boundaries: the changing roles of professional managers in higher education*. Research and Occasion Paper Series CSHE10.2008. Centre for Studies in Higher Education University of California, Berkeley.

Williams, P. 2010 *Special Agents: the nature and role of boundary spanners*. Paper presented to the ESRC Research Seminar Series- Collaborative futures: new insights from intra and inter sectoral collaborations University of Birmingham, February 2010

Yamamuzi, K. 2007. "Should You Stay or Should You Go? On Development Between the Worlds of Children and Adults." *International Journal of Human Activity Theory* (1): 133-147.