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Developing an Inter-University Partnership: The Importance of Relationally- Connected Leaders



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Abstract

We have been involved in an inter-university partnership that supports, contributes to, and influences our own and others' thinking and actions. As we have collaborated on teaching, learning, and research in the field of educational leadership, we recognise that we have developed our own leadership practice and created opportunities for others to do so. The partnership in which academics and students from the University of Central Oklahoma and the University of Waikato have been participating has evolved as a flexible and innovative endeavor over an eighteen-month period. In this relatively brief time, we have discovered there are considerable possibilities for the partnership to be developed in a number of ways that will benefit academics, students, and our respective institutions.

In this paper, we examine and discuss the findings generated by our initial inquiry as we seek to make sense of our inter-university partnership in order to sustain and progress it. Our leadership during the initial phases of the partnership appears to have been a key element in its success. We have found that the presence of a relational connectedness has influenced and enhanced our own leadership practice and subsequently the quality of the partnership. It has enabled us to facilitate the growth of a community of practice and generate academic collaboration.

Introduction

The purpose of inter-university partnerships is usually considered as being to strengthen the efforts of universities in globalising their programmes to help academics, students, and their faculties become more competitive in global markets (Etling, 2005). This requires the “breaking of barriers amongst countries around the world and building ties” (Khalifa & Sandholz, 2012, p. 344) and requires universities to collaborate on educational and research initiatives. Academic collaboration and cooperation have the potential to increase the capacity of both individuals and their institutions in sustainable ways. Significant economic benefits frequently arise from inter-university partnerships and are usually crucial for maintaining them. Carey, Howard, Goldman, Roberson, Godley,

and Ammerman (2005) point out, however, that while “financial incentives may be sufficient to lead to collaboration” between universities, they do not “assure a successful collaboration” (p. 1042). It becomes incumbent upon academics, therefore, to assume the mantle of leadership in the search for new and different ways to reach out and collaborate. Furthermore as the directions of our academic institutions shift in both composition and mission, it is imperative to recognise the importance of inter-university collaborations based upon the ethical guidelines of valuing and understanding cultures different from our own, and to engage in dialogue with potential and actual partners in ways that reflect an informed understanding and appreciation of the people involved.

Many universities use the memorandum of understanding (MOU) to develop partnerships although as Etling (2005) has emphasised, the use of a standard format can mean limited flexibility and a less effective approach. Indeed, our experiences to date have demonstrated that in the absence of a MOU and the constraints it might impose, an inter-university partnership such as the one discussed in this paper can increase the opportunities to shape and sustain a strong and purposeful partnership. Nevertheless, we have found Webber and Robertson’s (2003) partnership development experiences useful for our “future thinking.” These authors found that a formal partnership agreement was essential to “achieve the vision” (p. 19) of their partnership and that they “needed a full partnership agreement” between their two universities to enable the “exchange of faculty members, students, and papers” (p. 19). Thus we acknowledge that in time a partnership agreement may be required to further our endeavours.

The inter-university partnership discussed herein resulted from the desire for new and different ways to collaborate, but has not been formally recognised as discussed above by any formal agreement between our two universities. The essence of the partnership from its inception was embedded in the shared goals, values, and visions of two universities’ educational leadership programmes as well as those of the participants who wanted to share their knowledge, understandings, reflections, practices, and research. Notably, as the partnership has evolved, we have become aware that our leadership has contributed to, and influenced, its development in this early phase.

Freyerheim (1994 as cited in Connelly, 2007) has pointed out that collaborations must nurture the “fluidity of leadership” (p. 1244), that leadership must be shared, and that they must be understood as “evolutionary” (p. 1244). This perspective is an important one for our thinking about how to sustain and enhance our inter-university partnership. Understanding and being realistic about the “fluidity” and temporary nature of leadership in the partnership will be crucial to its success and longevity. Hence, a critical understanding for us at present is that our inter-university partnership must be nurtured to ensure the success of our current and future endeavours.

The four organising aspects of leadership in inter-organisation collaborations described by McCaffrey, Faerman, and Hart (1995 as cited in Connelly, 2007) have affirmed our leadership focus in the development of the partnership. While the first three aspects involve structural factors that “favor or inhibit collaboration” (p. 1241), it is the fourth aspect that aligns with and is most pertinent to the topic of this paper. This fourth aspect focuses on leadership capacity and style and states that leaders must be capable and prepared to make a collaboration work. It was this aspect that motivated us to further examine our

leadership in the development of partnership. Our initial inquiry has revealed that a relational connectedness is fundamental to our leadership practice in the partnership – it is evident in the praxis of the partnership and has contributed to its success thus far. For us, exploring relational connectedness as a core element of our leadership practice has been both timely and inspirational.

Background

The Partnership

The partnership was initially conceptualised by Paul as the development of an international, professional relationship between two universities where those involved in the leadership and facilitation of educational leadership programmes would have key roles. Paul's strong conviction that pooling our respective knowledge and understandings about educational leadership would prove beneficial to our institutions, academics, and students was articulated in a recent paper:

We live in a shrinking world, a world that can be seen in many avenues of life, including culture, communication, travel, the economy, our similarities and our differences. One of the most apparent structures of a shrinking world is seen in education. As educational leaders, we are called to make our programs, our ideas, and our goals reflective of this shrinking world (Haxton, Evans, & Webster (2012, p. 3).

Paul conducted initial research to identify an educational leadership programme located in a New Zealand university with a vision similar to that of the University of Central Oklahoma (UCO). Four universities were identified and each of the four contacted early in 2011. Two of the four universities responded and showed interest in pursuing and establishing a relationship. With this interest serving as a seminal point, Paul contacted both universities with the aim of arranging an exploratory trip to New Zealand. Paul travelled to New Zealand in November 2011 to meet with key people at both universities. While the meetings were productive, it was apparent that seeking to build an international relationship between the education faculties at UCO and University of Waikato (UOW) had the potential to provide both with a number of professional opportunities for both academics and students.

At UOW Paul met with five members of the university's administrative and leadership team and it was agreed that Paul and Jenny begin to investigate the possibilities for developing an inter-university partnership. A number of potential activities was discussed and included study tours for educational leadership students, a faculty academic exchange, and the possible development of exchangeable online courses. Subsequently, educational leadership students at UCO were polled to gauge their interest in participating in a study tour to UOW in New Zealand for which four key purposes were identified:

- ***Learn about the curriculum of the Educational Leadership Programme at UOW;***
- ***Learn about New Zealand primary (elementary) and middle schools;***
- ***Learn about the Māori culture and how it is embedded in diverse New Zealand education contexts; and***
- ***Collaborate and share international experiences (Haxton, et al., 2012).***

Paul and his colleagues sought to offer UCO's educational leadership students who were also practicing teachers and school leaders an "unusual opportunity, an opportunity that would set our candidates apart from others, an opportunity to learn, and an opportunity that might come along only once in a lifetime" (Haxton et al., 2012, p. 5) through academic study and school observations in a New Zealand education context. While Paul was more advanced in his thinking about the possibilities of such a partnership when his initial approach was made to UOW, it was evident that UCO's aims in progressing it were aligned with those of UOW's — hence the potential for a reciprocal study tour was also a part of the planning conversations.

A key aim of the partnership was to enable academics and students who were teaching and learning in educational leadership at both UCO and UOW to experience diverse educational contexts and to critically examine these from their unique leadership perspectives. This was especially important in light of each university's strategic plan to prioritise globalisation, further described as "... the increased inter-connectedness and inter-dependence of people and countries ..." (World Health Organization, n.d. as cited in de Lourdes Dieck-Assad, 2013). UCO lists global and cultural competencies as one of its *Central Six* strategies, with an emphasis on "transformative experiences so that they may become productive, creative, ethical and engaged citizens and leaders contributing to the intellectual, cultural, economic and social advancement of the communities they serve" (University of Central Oklahoma, n.d.). And UOW's planning framework calls for "a plan for the achievement of the University's strategic goals to international connectedness" and is exemplified in Goal 3 of its strategic plan which states, "With an international perspective, contribute to the educational, social, cultural, environmental and economic development of our region and nation" (University of Waikato, 2009). Ultimately, it was the "convergence of several important factors" (Hamrita, 2012, p. 5) that enabled this partnership to evolve.

Webber and Robertson's (2003) comment that is vital for there to be at least one academic at each university "who is willing to promote the arrangement within her or his university" (p. 23) has proven to be true for us. It has also been about our shared as well as diverse values, beliefs, and vision, which aligns with Robertson and Webber's (2000) view that "emotional engagement with learning, development of a critical perspective, movement beyond self, and development of agency" (p. 328) must be an outcome for all participants in a successful inter-university partnership.

The Study Tour

Ten students committed to the tour and subsequently participated in a rigorous preparation process. UCO's Educational Leadership master's programme prepares educators for administrative positions in schools. The capstone course in the programme is titled *Principalship/Internship* and includes 130 hours of performance activities consisting of administrative experience over and above candidates' regular job requirements. To meet the formal requirements of their study, UCO's Department of Advanced Professional and Special Services requested that 65 of the required hours be applied to the study tour experience.

Thus, in March 2012, the ten students and two UCO faculty members departed for Aotearoa¹ New Zealand.

The Programme

On arrival at UOW, the UCO group was welcomed with a pōwhiri on the university's Te Kohinga Mārama Marae.² Pōwhiri is a central part of Māori protocol and is a ceremony of welcome involving speeches, singing, sometimes dancing and hongi.³ For the first four days, the group was based on the UOW campus in the city of Hamilton during which time students attended workshops facilitated by UOW faculty and their school-based colleagues to learn about New Zealand culture and its education system. Additionally, they became immersed in a purposefully designed UOW educational leadership programme. A critical part of the programme involved visits to the UOW's partnership schools — primary (elementary) and middle schools — and opportunities to dialogue with school principals in order to examine theory in light of existing practices. It is important to emphasise that we were fortunate to have the excellent support of a UOW international development officer and an educational leadership administrator prior to and during the group's time on campus. Both provided crucial support as the programme took shape and activities to support UCO's inaugural study tour were designed.

On the completion of their university-based programme, the group travelled south to the city of Rotorua where they experienced further facets of New Zealand culture and concentrated specifically on aspects of Māori and European heritage. Finally, their journey took the group east to Tauranga, where they spent three days in that city's schools with a specific focus on school leadership.

Growing the Partnership

Led by a small group of academics within each university's educational leadership programme, the partnership that has developed since the inaugural study tour, while as stated earlier is not defined by a formal agreement, has in its current form received wholehearted support and encouragement from the respective faculty deans. Those involved have recognised its potential to contribute substantially to the learning of academics and students, and to ultimately contribute in diverse ways to their universities. It has been vital, therefore, that we research, evaluate, and critically reflect upon the partnership in order to be alert to the rhetoric and the reality of it. Further, by identifying the strengths and barriers (Robertson & Webber, 2000), the factors that appear to be contributing to its success can be drawn upon as we aspire to enhance the partnership and ensure its longevity.

In the next section the research methodology, method, and findings generated by our initial inquiry are presented.

The Inquiry

Research Methodology and Method: Professional Conversations

¹ Name given by pre-European Māori to New Zealand which means "land of the long white cloud."

² Traditional Māori meeting place.

³ Literally means the sharing of one's breath. Traditional Māori greeting involving the pressing together of noses and foreheads.

An inquiry about the partnership was an action we deemed critical to be able to make sense of, reflect upon, sustain, and progress the partnership. In this initial inquiry about the partnership, professional conversation emerged as both research methodology and method. Our thinking and experiences are supported and affirmed by Feldman's (1999) view that conversation can be a research methodology in which the "sharing of knowledge and the growth of understanding occurs through meaning-making processes" (p.1). Hollingsworth's (1994) assertion that collaborative conversations transcend informative chats and become a "place for research in which transformative processes occur" (p. 2) is also reflective of our thinking at this time. The growth and sharing of knowledge, the generation of shared understandings of each other and our institutions, and the partnership's purpose have led to the development of a "relational knowledge" that has become "clarified in action" (Hollingsworth, 1994, p.78).

We have taken something of a "hindsight" approach in our identification of a methodology and method for our initial inquiry. It was not until the partnership was established and we discovered a richness and depth to our conversations worthy of more urgent investigation that we discovered professional conversation methodology and method were the most appropriate facets. The sharing of knowledge, understandings, and experiences, as well as our reflections on them and the linking to our respective educational contexts to date have been typical of, and resonated with, Feldman's (1999) claims about professional conversation as methodology. Hence we have come to view conversation as a legitimate methodology and method for our initial and future inquiries.

We have found that professional conversation has the potential to lead us to action. Through this "intermingling of conversation and action" (Feldman, 1999, p. 9) we can see that our practice as academic collaborators in a partnership has been influenced and enhanced, although we have yet to explore the effect on our work with students. Importantly, being cognisant of this methodology and method has allowed us to be more deliberate in shaping further inquiry about the partnership.

Initial Findings and Discussion

Relational Connectedness

In our professional conversations, we have examined our experiences and endeavoured to make sense of the developing partnership. It is clear to us that relationships are central to and highly valued in the partnership (Giles, 2008). As it has grown, we believe we have identified that a relational connectedness is present in our leadership practice which has led us to lead and guide the partnership in specific ways. This relational connectedness comprises what Gibbs (2006a) has termed "intra-connectedness" and "inter-connectedness." Intra-connectedness requires a deep and "meaningful connectedness with self" and comprises an "awareness of, and sense of harmony and relationship with oneself and one's identity" (p. 78). Inter-connectedness concerns "forming deep, meaningful connectedness with others and with the world around us, including time and place" (p. 78). While we acknowledge that for the most part we are self-reporting, our professional conversations support our view that as leaders in the partnership we have brought a strong sense of knowing "who we are" to the joint venture and that we have formed a deep level of connectedness with others. Our

interactions consistently reveal a reciprocity, appreciation, and respect for others (Gibbs, 2006a).

Gibbs (2006a) and Palmer (1998) have both emphasised the importance of a further spiritual level, which for Gibbs (2006a) is extra-connectedness and concerns “relatedness of self with the spiritual aspects of life” (p. 78). Palmer (1998) describes it as an authentic spirituality that does not “dictate where we go but trusts that any path walked with integrity will take us to a place of knowledge” (p. xi). From both authors’ perspectives, however, (although paraphrased using Palmer’s words) spirituality involves welcoming diversity and conflict, tolerating ambiguity, and embracing paradox (p. xi). This is a level we have yet to explore, but we have become aware of its presence in our conversations and other interactions as we extract and expose deeper levels of understanding about our evolving partnership, the relationships within it, and our leadership of it. We are interested in and motivated by Cowan’s (2010) assertion that “spirituality may be a significant variable in equations of leadership effectiveness and organizational performance” (p. 4). It is our belief that it will be beneficial in the near future to consider this spiritual level of relational connectedness to provide further insights about our leadership and the life of the partnership.

Forming an authentic identity is the result of the multi-connectedness (Gibbs, 2006a) discussed above. As we have engaged in the partnership, we have seen evidence of this in all participants’ “self-awareness, self-acceptance, and authentic actions and relationships” (Gardner, Avolio, Luthans, May, & Walumbwa, 2005, p. 345). We see that authenticity as one of the three “foundational virtues” (Starratt, 2004, p. 3) of ethical leadership, together with responsibility and presence, have formed through the relational connectedness in our leadership practice, demonstrated by the behaviours that align with our espoused personal values and beliefs. Furthermore, we have observed that “trust and credibility” as a result of “being genuine and true” to our beliefs (Wilson, 2013, p. 3) have been established. Most notably, the characteristics of authentic leadership are evident in our desire to empower the participants in the partnership (several examples are discussed below) and in our commitment to “building enduring relationships with people” (p. 12). As George (2003) so eloquently stated, we are as “guided by the qualities of the heart, by passion and compassion” as we are “by qualities of the mind” (p. 12).

To explore the presence of a relational connectedness and hence authenticity in a further inquiry, we aim to facilitate deliberate professional conversations in order to be more articulate about our vision and purpose for the partnership and the values and beliefs participants bring to it.

Rather than the more “taken for granted” expectations of leaders that can so easily permeate collaborations such as ours, we consider that a more focused inquiry about the ways that authentic leadership can contribute to the success of an inter-university partnership is necessary. Generating data will not be a simple task, as authenticity cannot be measured quantitatively due to reliance upon self-reporting (Harter, 2002). Yet, we believe that our ongoing professional conversations will be a suitable tool in any future inquiry. Nevertheless, it will be crucial to employ research methods that have the potential to provide empirical evidence and we will investigate the possibilities in due course. Further inquiry will have the potential to deepen our understandings of authentic leadership and increase our understandings of the partnership from an international point of view.

We see that a relational connectedness is evident in our leadership practice in the ways that we have made “meaningful dynamic connections with others...with who they are... “(Gibbs, 2006b, p.1) and created opportunities for others to do so. We see too that the presence of the elements of care, expertise, insight, communication, commitment, shared values, and special efforts are shifting “the attention from the functionality of the space *between* people to an inherent connectedness that is integral to relationships” (p. 4). Evidence of these elements has been found in two key actions in the partnership: *communities of practice* and *academic collaboration*.

Communities of Practice

Communities of practice can exist in any kind of organisation and are most often based on participation rather than being bound by organisational structures. According to Wenger (1998), communities of practice are vital to the effective performance of organisations, which need to acknowledge and support them, but more so to the participants who view them as places for the generation of knowledge and developing understanding.

In our inter-university partnership, several communities of practice have formed enabling those participants who share a common set of experiences and problems to “systematically share their knowledge, expertise and tools in order to improve their practice and the performance of their organizations by interacting on an ongoing basis” (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002, p. 4). One community of practice comprises those interested in, and committed to, growing the partnership while another comprises academics and students who are researching and publishing together. A further community has been created for students to gather together to discuss educational leadership and other issues.

As a number of authors have pointed out, a wide range of characteristics is present in any successful community of practice (Bolam, McMahon, Stoll, Thomas, & Wallace, et al., 2005; Eaker, DuFour, & DuFour, 2002; Ferrier-Kerr et al., 2008/2009) and we see strong evidence of these (as indicated in italics below) in those that have developed in our partnership. *A shared vision and sense of purpose* have led to the taking of *collective responsibility* in building the partnership, which, in turn, has helped to sustain participants’ motivation and commitment. *Reflective professional inquiry* is a further characteristic that encourages professional conversations about educational issues as well as the seeking and sharing of knowledge. In addition, *collaboration* (note that this characteristic has also been identified as a key action and is discussed later) has been exemplified in participants’ willingness to dialogue on the professional activities of the partnership – working together as a team, reflecting and building on each other’s knowledge and understandings, and identifying future needs (Elliott, 1995).

By putting our collective energies to work in our first communities of practice, we have been able to draw on what Giles and Hargreaves (2006) term the “collective power” of our “shared vision” (p. 126) in relation to the partnership our respective educational leadership programmes, the work we do in education with children and colleagues, and our own academic development. We have also recognized the need to *analyse and evaluate* the partnership and other elements of it as it gains momentum. Hence, throughout communities of practice, we have begun to investigate the impact of the partnership on our learning, teaching,

research, and leadership, and will in time research the impact of our professional activities (Eaker & Keaton, 2008) within the context of our broader university contexts.

Wenger's (1998) claim that the development of communities of practice "ultimately depends on internal leadership" resonates with us and affirms our experience that leadership is "diverse and distributed and can take many forms" (<http://www.co-i-l.com/coil/knowledge-garden/cop/lss.shtml>). Inspirational leadership, day-to-day leadership, interpersonal leadership, institutional leadership and cutting-edge leadership (formal and informal), delineate several forms of leadership as identified by Wenger (1998). In juxtaposition, Wenger stated that "in all cases, leadership must have intrinsic legitimacy in the community" (<http://www.co-i-l.com/coil/knowledge-garden/cop/lss.shtml>).

We have found that the interactions involved in the partnership and our increasingly more complex collaborative partnership activities are reliant on relevant and timely forms of leadership, and importantly leadership that can draw people together through the facilitation of professional relationships where trust and credibility are present. Interestingly, the leaders of them seem to naturally draw on a distributed, non-hierarchical leadership style which Clarkin-Phillips (2011) found plays a significant role in building strong communities of practice. That is a strength permeating our current communities of practice, however we know that as additional communities develop for different purposes in the future, leadership over these organisations will occur in ways that best suit the purpose of each. Our communities of practice have been positive and rewarding actions thus far as they have developed around topics that are important to the people in them (Wenger, 1998).

Academic Collaboration

Academic collaboration has been a second important action in our partnership. Collaboration appears to have come naturally despite Kezar's (2005) suggestion that this is not usually the case because higher education institutions tend to "reward individualistic endeavors over collaboration" (p. 1). We have observed, too, that context (resources, assistance, environment) and interpersonal factors (respect, open communication, trust, connectedness) have been key elements affecting the various phases of our academic collaboration.

To help us understand the "mechanisms that influence academic collaboration" (Sargent & Waters, 2004, p. 308), we have drawn on the process framework developed by those authors. This framework, which consists of four specific phases – *initiation, clarification, implementation, and completion* – in what is a linear kind of framework, has been influential in helping us to make sense of our evolving partnership. In this partnership however, we have found that the phases of our collaboration are cyclical rather than having a discrete beginning and end. Hence we are aware, therefore, that the potential exists for us to eventually develop a framework that could be a better "fit," and offer the flexibility to guide the further development of our own and similar partnerships.

Sargent and Waters' (2004) *initiation phase* focuses on the motivation for participants' involvement. In our partnership, this phase can be clearly seen in the ways that our complementary skills, specific knowledge and expertise, thinking about career development, and more intrinsic aspects such as enjoyment of working together and building friendships have been valued from the beginning of

the partnership. Evidence of the *clarification phase* can be found in participants' engagement in professional conversations to clarify issues related to the length, scope, and goals of the partnership; develop research and teaching collaborations; and hone agreements on the purposes of the various communities of practice. We have now entered an *implementation phase*. In this phase, roles and responsibilities have been identified and action is being taken. In most collaborations however, these are typically articulated from the outset but we have found they vary depending on the types of activities in which participants are engaged. The fourth phase of *completion* refers to "how collaborators rate the success of their project in terms of objective outcomes (e.g. publications), subjective outcomes (e.g. satisfaction with the experience of collaborating) and learning outcomes (e.g. broadening content knowledge)" (Sargent & Waters, 2004, p. 315). For us, this phase is not equated with completion wherein an end to the collaboration is achieved and a formal requirement to measure its success satisfied. Instead, it concerns engaging in critical reflection and evaluation through conversations about the partnership and its various activities in order to move the partnership forward. These important conversations have led us to make a commitment to the possibilities for future collaborations in the partnership.

Drawing on the phases discussed above to increase our understandings of academic collaboration has led us to see more clearly the influence of relational connectedness in our leadership in the partnership. It is present in our actions in each phase. Hargreaves' (2000) assertion that "no one factor can be regarded as the crucible of collaboration" (2000, p. 163) reminds us, however, that out of the larger collaboration — which is our partnership — will come more diverse, complex, and multiple collaborations and that these are the actions that will sustain and enrich our partnership.

Conclusion

The literature that addresses the technicalities of forming partnerships between universities in different countries is not extensive, but the literature on other kinds of partnerships (i.e., business, academic, and inter-organisational) has been relevant and useful (Etling, 2005) in shaping our understandings and guiding our journey to this point. What we do know from the literature is that developing and maintaining an inter-university partnership is complicated (Robertson & Webber, 2000) and requires effective leadership. As Stephens and Boldt (2004) have stated, "it will not be until the collaboration has started that the partners will know what particular challenges each will face" (p. 1). To that end, we have taken careful note of the advice proffered by Webber and Robertson (2003): it is critical for a partnership to have credible champions "willing to promote the arrangement in his or her university" (p. 23). Our aim to create a unique partnership — one that has the potential to create new knowledge, understandings, and pathways — has so far provided us with the motivation and resilience to address the challenges encountered.

The partnership has taken considerable time and energy to establish and sustain, and at times there have been tensions. Our initial findings suggest that a relational connectedness which guides leadership practice and leads to robust professional relationships is integral and underpins our partnership. It seems that our relationally-connected leadership style has been a significant influence in the

early life of the partnership. It has led us to explore the possibilities for the partnership and to research our leadership practice in ways that “harmonise with the interests, values, and complexity of teachers, learners, cultures and communities” (Gibbs, 2006b, p. 4) participating in the partnership. We have become aware that each person’s authentic identity is linked to and has been formed further in the context of the partnership as well as observed the ways that an intra and inter-connectedness in our leadership has enabled the establishment of meaningful connections among people and with “existing and new concepts” (Gibbs, 2006a, p. 77).

Working in relationally-connected ways has enabled us to dissect and organise the diverse and innovative actions comprising the different kinds of collaborations we intend to form which will contribute to research-led teaching and learning in our two universities. While we are agreed that the work and ideas need not always be the same (Robertson & Webber, 2000), they do need to contribute to our common purposes. For us this means being aware of how we can be supportive of, contribute to, and inspire each other’s endeavours (Gibbs, 2007).

Although our history is brief, our shared vision for the partnership remains an integral strength in its life. As the partnership progresses, we know that we will need to take account of the fluctuations that will inevitably occur as people enter and exit, as change is experienced in our respective institutions, and as research and teaching initiatives are re-prioritised. Once the urgency that we are presently experiencing subsides however, the reality of the work required to sustain the partnership will need to be reflected upon and issues addressed. Furthermore, we do not see such fluctuations as barriers; rather, we hope we can view them as challenges with the potential to move the partnership to a deeper level for a better understanding of each other’s beliefs, values, and views of the world (Gold, 1989). Central to this, we believe, will be a relationally-connected style of leadership.

In this first inquiry, we have reflected on relational connectedness as a key element of the effective leadership that has contributed to the development of a successful partnership. In future inquiries, we intend to examine leadership further as the partnership continues to grow. We know that we have built positive relationships and found ways to involve and stretch our own and our colleagues’ thinking. Trust has been built by delivering what we said we would and we have offered colleagues leadership opportunities as they have arisen because we have recognised that each person can bring specific expertise to the partnership to broaden the knowledge, understandings, and practice of both students and academics (Day, Harris, & Hadfield, 2001). In time, we are certain to work ourselves out of a job as we deliberately construct different roles in the partnership to draw upon and balance individual strengths (Gold & Evans, 1998). It is timely, then, for those of us participating in this partnership to acknowledge the existing leadership roles, but to also assume them, with the ultimate aim of being able to create new knowledge, new communities of practice, and new methodologies (Christianakis, 2010).

As academics, we recognise that we are frequently called upon to rethink our strategies, beliefs, and values in light of change (Khalifa & Sandholz, 2012). Hence, we are alert to the need to not only reflect on and re-think our approaches, but to re-examine our beliefs as the partnership grows so that we are open to new possibilities. This inter-university partnership is in the early stages of becoming a

powerful professional collaboration. Although the path has seemed occasionally formidable, we have found ourselves participating in a partnership characterised by a relational connectedness. We are hopeful that this mutual endeavour will light not just one, but many paths for others to follow.

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