

# Learning partnerships for partnership learning: a case study of the Postgraduate Certificate in Cross-sector Partnership

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## Introduction

This paper describes the design and operation of a postgraduate level course for individuals working in the field of cross-sector partnership. In presenting this case study, the author seeks to demonstrate how innovative approaches to course design can be used to meet the challenges of facilitating learning for professionals in a relatively new, but globally important, field of work. Within the established literature on adult learning, the paper acknowledges three main traditions, those of interprofessional education, problem-based learning and experiential learning. Drawing on these (often complementary) perspectives, the author argues that the principles of *working* in partnership can be appropriately and enjoyably acquired through a process of *learning* in partnership.

The first part of the paper sets out the policy context in which this learning programme was developed. The author then discusses the theoretical context within which the case study should be understood and which influenced the original programme design. The core of the paper contains a description of the design and operation of the Postgraduate Certificate in Cross-sector Partnership (henceforth PCCP). The author then makes specific recommendations for practice based on five years' experience of developing, delivering and refining this professional education programme (1).

## Policy Context

Cross-sector partnership is a core activity in social and economic development. Substantial claims have been made by some within the global development field for the role of partnership as *the* vehicle for delivering key development strategies. Certainly, since the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development (Johannesburg) the principle of private, public and not-for-profit sectors coming together to tackle challenges such as poverty eradication has become firmly established. This principle is the current credo not just of the United Nations but of many governments and enterprises in both the developed and the developing worlds. As a result, significant resources are now being channelled into establishing partnership arrangements both internationally and at national and local levels (Zadek et al. 2001; Nelson and Zadek 2000; Tennyson 1998).

The essence of cross-sector partnership is the formation of collaborative ventures, projects or institutions consisting of representatives from different

social sectors: national government, local government, international agencies, global corporations, small enterprises, community groups, international NGOs (Non-governmental Organisations) and local not-for-profit organisations. In a partnership any two or more of such groups might come together to achieve a specific and shared goal. The underlying rationale is that no single sector or institution has the expertise, access or legitimacy to tackle a problem single-handedly. Together, however, collaborative (and often innovative) solutions might be found to intractable problems. The creation of the PCCP was primarily a response to the perceived need for high-quality professional education and training for individuals in all sectors taking on responsibility for creating, championing or managing such partnerships.

The course development was itself the result of a partnership between three rather different institutions – one academic, one governmental and one an international not-for-profit organisation (2). Consequently, the dominant ethos of the course, from the outset, was that of working and learning in collaboration. Fundamental to the design of the PCCP was a commitment to ensuring that the learning process, to the greatest degree possible, reflected the real-life challenges of working in a cross-sector collaboration. The programme founders wanted to create a process that enabled participants to acquire partnership knowledge and skills through a combination of specialist input, experiential learning and co-learning with their peers from other institutions and sectors. The participants would learn *about* partnership but, crucially, they would do so both *in* partnership and *through* partnership.

### **Theoretical context**

Transforming this value commitment into a programme design required the development team to draw on a number of diverse, but complementary, strands of learning theory. In the development phase, the use of specific theoretical approaches was sometimes explicit but often implicit as the team members drew on their practical experience and insights of past learning process design. Central to our approach was that we had all been experimenting with ways of transforming courses from the traditional 'transmission' model of teacher-centred instruction to a more interactive, learner-centred method: the paradigm shift of 'teaching' to 'learning' that had occurred during the 1980s and 1990s had still not been fully integrated into professional education, which often retained the character of conventional 'training' (Barr 2002, p.17; Boud 1998; Kolb 1984). This challenge was sharpened by the need to facilitate learning specifically across professional and sectoral boundaries (Barr 2002) and to bring a diverse learner group together around issues, problems and exercises that would engender collaborative working (Boud 1998; Savin-Baden 2004). The core of the solution to this challenge was a decision to be bold in utilising a range of learning approaches which would enable us to fashion a process which could have resonance for learners from very different professional backgrounds and national cultures.

In some respects, the closest parallel to our work with partnership practitioners lies in the field of inter-professional learning. The practice of inter-professional learning has flourished primarily in the health and social

care sectors where the professional interdependence of occupational groups has generated an interest in training practitioners together. Barr (2002, p.6) makes the useful distinction between *multi-professional education* where 'two or more professions learn side by side' and *inter-professional education* where 'two or more professions learn from and about each other to improve collaboration and the quality of care'. This distinction accurately describes the ethos behind the design of the PCCP. It was to be far more than simply teaching a mixed group of professionals with a common interest in partnership: it was to be 'a mutual learning experience through which each profession understood better what the others could contribute in a spirit of trust and mutual support'. (3)

Furthermore, most of the experiments in inter-professional education have utilised highly interactive approaches to learning, emphasising the value of small-group work, problem-solving and reflection on practice. We can, then, apply Barr's tentative definition of inter-professional learning quite closely to our fledgling attempt to create a paradigm of partnership learning: 'the application of principles of adult learning to interactive, group-based learning that relates collaborative learning to collaborative practice within a coherent rationale informed by understanding of interpersonal, inter-group, organisational and inter-organisational relations and processes of professionalisation' (Barr 2002 p. 23).

Within this paradigm, a key ingredient was the creation of learning opportunities that were shared and challenging but that would be recognised as authentic by participants from very different institutions and cultures. Boud's basic definition of problem-based learning as 'an approach to structuring the curriculum which involves confronting students with problems from practice which provide a stimulus for learning' (Boud 1998 p.15) provides a theoretical departure point here. However, as Boud and many other proponents of problem-based learning have indicated, the employment of this learning approach can take many forms. What remains distinctive is an assumption that the learner can – within a supportive environment and with appropriate materials – take responsibility for their own learning and recognise the value to be achieved through collaboration with peers (Savin-Baden 2004). Integrating this perspective seemed essential in a programme where the outcomes centred primarily on using collaborative learning to enhance participants' ability to work in collaboration.

Problem-based learning was introduced into the programme both through group work around case studies and through the creation of a practical partnership exercise, which required participants to confront real problems of professional collaboration and reflect on that experience. In the tradition of problem-based learning, the principle was to avoid being prescriptive and, instead, to place substantial responsibility on the participants to shape and to make sense of their own experience.

As we were designing a programme for a learner group rich in practical experience it was important that all members of that group were encouraged not only to reflect on that experience in order to strengthen their own

understanding but also to share their experience with their peers. Learning from experience – especially through a process of active reflection - is, of course, at the very centre of modern theories of adult learning (Schon 2002; Kolb 1984). Schon (2002 p.59) asserts that ‘When someone reflects-in-action, he becomes a researcher in the practice context.’ Our commitment was to create a learning environment in which experienced professionals would be encouraged to use reflection and collaboration to stimulate fresh insights into partnership practice and, in effect, become researchers themselves, capable of generating new knowledge through their collaborative and individual efforts. This process was reinforced through the creation of a professional journal (4), published annually by the organising institutions, which included, among its contents, short papers and reflective articles written by course alumni. Not only has this encouraged each year’s participants in their learning, it has also added to the body of knowledge available to subsequent cohorts of students.

### **Case study**

The PCCP programme is a nine-month, part-time course at Master’s level which offers participants a combination of face to face learning at two week-long workshops with a period of individual study and group work facilitated through a virtual learning environment (VLE).

The course was designed in 2001 and launched in 2002 as a collaborative project between the University of Cambridge Programme for Industry, The Prince of Wales International Business Leaders Forum and The Copenhagen Centre (5). The audience for the course was, and remains, staff working in managerial and operational roles within cross-sector partnerships. The focus of the course has, from the outset, been international and the majority of participants have been engaged in partnerships in the field of environmental protection, economic development or social care – often within international organisations. The course organisers were fortunate to receive positive backing from a number of major organisations which helped to guarantee a proportion of the course enrolment and development funding.

The course design embodies a number of key principles influenced both by the aims of the course and by the learning theory which underpins it. Firstly, the participants have to be drawn, as equally as possible, from all three major sectors (private, public, NGO): the student body itself has always been seen as a core contributor to the learning process. The organisers had had experience of running courses on partnership for single-sector groups and were committed to avoiding the obvious limitations of that approach. Secondly, participants must represent a genuine diversity of cultures and nationalities. This ensures not only that the course will be international in flavour but that the issues of partnership across cultures, as well as across sectors, will be addressed both experientially and theoretically. Thirdly, the learners are expected to take a high degree of responsibility for their learning, with a limited proportion of programmed input and a high proportion of experiential learning, research and personal reflection. Fourthly, the content is balanced between theory and practice with a substantial number of practical skills being learnt within an overarching framework of theory. Finally, the

tutors used on the course are all individuals who have had direct experience of working in international partnerships as well as having the academic qualifications to support students on a postgraduate course.

With these principles firmly adopted, the organisers created a design which consciously brought together a range of learning techniques in order to meet each of the main objectives of the course while acknowledging the likely diversity of the participants in terms of learning styles, past experience of learning and professional needs. The programme essentially consists of four main stages:

1. Residential workshop 1: a four-day workshop in Cambridge at which participants get to know their tutors and each other; attend a series of lectures on the main themes of the course; take part in group discussions and form learning sets in which they will work on-line after the workshop. This phase is relatively conventional in delivery style, though with a strong emphasis on giving the participants opportunities to learn from each other both in formal sessions and through informal, social interaction. From the outset, the differences in culture, values and behaviour between sectors are explored.
2. Partnership learning set: at the core of the programme is a small group exercise requiring participants to establish, analyse and operate their own partnership. By the end of the first workshop, each participant will have been allocated to a learning set of 5-6 people that will constitute their working partnership. That group will have some time to convene and plan how they will work together during the workshop but the bulk of their work is carried out remotely, through interaction via email, 'phone and the course's virtual learning environment (VLE). This exercise seeks to replicate some of the real-life tensions and challenges of running a cross-sector partnership. Firstly, the participants have limited knowledge of each other and may be operating with preconceptions (or misconceptions) of how colleagues from other sectors and cultures operate. Secondly, they have limited opportunities to interact face to face and have to rely on contemporary communications such as email to manage their partnership. Finally, there is a lot of responsibility on the group itself to define the method of working and the mode by which outcomes will be achieved. At the same time as participating in the partnership exercise, learners are completing a written assignment based on the first workshop and researching their final individual project. In these activities they have access both to resources through the VLE and to on-line tutor guidance.
3. Residential workshop 2: Around six months after they have first met, the participants re-convene for a second residential week in Cambridge. Although this week also involves some formal lectures, case study discussions and skills-building work, there is a greater emphasis on processing the participants' own experience and outputs. Considerable time is allocated for the working groups to analyse and disseminate their experience of working as a partnership; expert input is used to help learners understand the dynamics of their partnerships.
4. Individual project work: the last, three-month, phase of the programme requires each participant to research and write a report on an aspect of partnership working within their own employment. This piece of work is

specific to the individual and is their opportunity to demonstrate how both the theoretical and practical learning in the course can be applied to the analysis of their own professional context.

The final project (completed in phase 4) is the largest single piece of assessed work in the programme, but there are two others, each linked to an earlier phase of work. Following the first residential workshop, participants are required to write a formal academic essay analysing one of the topics covered during that workshop. This is a relatively conventional piece of written work, designed to test understanding but, more importantly, to help adult learners to familiarise themselves with the processes and demands of academic study and writing.

The second assignment is linked to the partnership working group and consists of a reflective essay *i.e.* a written submission in which the learner examines their own personal experience of partnership working. This is separate from any practical outputs from the learning set: these are examined as part of a group presentation at the second residential workshop. The purpose of the reflective essay is to encourage the learner to develop habits of reflection and self-awareness and thus to be better able to understand their own behaviour – and the interpersonal dynamics – within partnership working.

Overall, then, the course design seeks to provide the learner with a set of knowledge, skills and experience that will significantly enhance their ability to operate effectively in a cross-sector partnership. These can be summarised as:

- Understanding of the global forces creating need and demand for partnership
- Understanding of both the common interests and the diverging perspectives of the three main sectors – private, public, NGO
- Knowledge of real-life cases of successful and unsuccessful partnership
- Practical skills in the design, management and evaluation of a partnership working process
- Experience of working in a cross-cultural, cross-sectoral learning set
- Ability to research, analyse and communicate knowledge of cross-sector partnership in theory and practice
- Ability to apply learning to their own working lives and professional requirements.

The success of the course as a channel for training in international partnership has been evident in the endorsement and practical support given by major organisations (corporate, NGO and UN) and by the consistent recruitment of around 35 learners to the programme each year. Over the first five years of its life, around 150 learners have successfully completed the programme. Their contribution to cross-sector partnership has ranged from UN social reconstruction in Palestine to economic development in Zambia, from environmental protection in Poland to ethical trading in Mexico. Although, as yet, no systematic study has been done of the long-term learning impact of the programme, feedback from participants (and their employing institutions) has been consistently favourable. Many of those completing the programme have returned as contributors on subsequent courses, relating their personal

experience of partnership, disseminating case studies and reflecting on the way their learning has influenced their subsequent professional practice.

### **Conclusion and recommendations**

The approach adopted for the PCCP is recommended as both appropriate and rewarding for the learner group involved. Providing a range of learning 'delivery' methods enabled students of differing learning styles, experience and cultures to find opportunities to participate fully and to flourish. Creating a course in which even basic student interaction constitutes contact across contrasting sectors maximises the value of the learning to the participants and continually confronts them with challenges to their taken-for-granted values. Situating an active partnership experience at the core of the course necessitates experiential learning, the conscious use of newly-acquired knowledge and a process of planned reflection on observation and experience. The structuring of a full, extended programme – as opposed to a short training intervention – provides the time, space and expert tutorial support to achieve more substantial and enduring learning from the process.

The value of a programme such as the PCCP appears to lie in its ability to facilitate a learning experience which combines theoretical insight with practical skills acquisition and active reflection on experience. There is a quantum leap between studying an issue, at the remove of academic analysis, and studying it in collaboration with fellow learners whose very diversity ensures that the *study* of partnership becomes *actual* partnership. Challenges such as cultural difference and divergent sectoral values become part of the lived experience of the course as well as subjects within the curriculum.

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## Endnotes

1. The author was employed by the University of Cambridge Programme for Industry from 1997 to 2006 and, from 2002 onwards, was a co-founder and joint Course Director for the Postgraduate Certificate in Cross-sector Partnership. The opinions expressed in this paper are solely those of the author. They do not necessarily represent the opinions of any other institutions or individuals involved in the creation and operation of the Postgraduate Certificate in Cross-sector Partnership.
2. The creation and development of the programme was, in every respect, an equal collaboration between the University of Cambridge Programme for Industry (CPI), the Prince of Wales' International Business Leaders Forum (IBLF) and The Copenhagen Centre (TCC). Ros Tennyson (IBLF) and Louise Kjaer (TCC) were co-founders of the programme and joint Course Directors through much of its early life. The design, impact and success of the programme have very much been a result of their knowledge, energy and experience. As the programme has matured, its management has been simplified so that it is now offered by CPI in association with IBLF (<http://www.cpi.cam.ac.uk/pccp/index.html>).
3. Barr (2002) p.11. Although Barr's focus is on heterogeneous professions (e.g. doctors, nurses, care workers), the parallel with our learner groups is still strong: managers with similar roles but from different sectors will have highly divergent cultures, attitudes and values – including their preconceptions about each other!
4. 'Partnership Matters' is published annually and is available at <http://www.cpi.cam.ac.uk/pccp/partnershipmatters.html>
5. In the initial design phase of the programme, the three co-founders drew on advice from many colleagues and friends but, most notably, from Simon Zadek, Chief Executive of Accountability (<http://www.accountability21.net>). It was Simon, more than anyone, who encouraged us to take risks with the course design and to be courageous in our ideas!