EDUCATION-LINE

An 'inter-cultural' view of community-academic partnerships: tales from the field

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Introduction

Community-academic partnerships are becoming increasingly popular in the development of educational policies, programs, and research. To obtain resources for research and programs, funding agencies are frequently requiring the formation of these partnerships with little or no recognition of the power differentials and inter-cultural dimensions (and conflicts) that shape these relationships. In this paper we draw attention to how power and culture shape these relations using cultural studies and feminist theory to consider two case studies from our own experience of community-academic partnerships.

Cultural analysis, operating in the intersection of anthropology and cultural studies, offers new ways to conceptualize the relationship between the actively constructed meaning systems that constitute culture, and the externally imposed conditions of structural relations (Eisenhart, 2001). A cultural production framework challenges reproduction theories that reduce human agents to bearers of structural relationships. In this view, culture is a resource for ordering and valuing our world, and a continual dynamic process of creating meaning in social and material contexts, a process which is continually produced even as it may be reproduced.

Feminist theory can also assist in the development of more critical partnership studies. For example, Nancy Fraser (1997) draws attention to two dilemmas of justice: redistribution, a response to material inequalities, and recognition, which seeks to address differences in culture and identity. Both are required to achieve social and economic justice. She calls for a "critical theory of recognition, one that identifies and defends only those versions of the cultural

politics of difference that can be coherently combined with the social politics of equality" (p. 12). Her work, along with other feminist scholars, helps to focus attention on how the relationships between community and academic institutions are embedded in both material and cultural inequalities and differences.

Partnership studies – moving from a pragmatic to a critical orientation

In the partnership literature, which spans several disciplines, the dominant view is that it is a good idea requiring strategic intervention to address challenges. It is a way to become more efficient while meeting rising public expectations for accountability and relevance (e.g. Darlington-Hope, 1999). Partnership is sometimes represented as a moral responsibility in higher education (Dotolo & Noftsinger Jr., 2002) and "an axiomatic social good" (Beder, 1984a). In this discourse, partnership ameliorates social conditions and makes things better. Most empirical studies of partnership focus upon practical management issues. Partnership structures, conditions and contingent factors have been examined to explain how successful and enduring partnerships are formed, maintained, and assessed. Barriers to sustaining partnership have included "turf issues", "academic snobbery", and "institutional self-centredness" (Williams, 2002) with little concrete assistance for addressing and overcoming barriers (Lynch, 2002).

Few critical analyses have attended to structural relations and some have questioned whether turf issues make collaborative partnerships impossible (Lieberman, 1992). Critical studies have examined resistance to research partnerships involving academics and non-profit organizations (Barnsley, 1995), entrenched inequalities and contradictory interests in a university-community partnership (Cobb, 2003), and power imbalances between the university and community (Lynch 2002).

Shauna's case: entangled webs of meaning and power

For this discussion, I find the analogy of a spider web, or multiple webs, a useful device. Imagine if you will, a spider web suspended in the branches of a very large tree (which is situated in a large forest); the web is not symmetrical but somewhat skewed. The tree represents SSHRC, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, the main granting agency for research in the social sciences in Canada. The web began to be woven about six years ago by the main spider, the network's principal investigator (PI), who sought funds from SSHRC to develop a national research network. The PI worked to build a strong centre and formed a steering committee and hired staff to organize and coordinate the entire network/spider web and to maintain communication with the big tree/SSHRC. The network is called WALL (Work and Lifelong Learning) and its focus is on the current forms, contents and outcomes of organized educational, training and informal learning activities in Canada's economy, with particular attention to work and learning patterns across different social groups.

Starting at the centre, the PI begins to spin lines out to different branches, some close and others far away. Each line represents a stand alone case study (there were 12 in total), each examining some aspect of work and learning focusing on a particular group or context. Some of these lines are short as the PI invites researchers within his own institution to work on a specific case study. Other lines are a little longer and extend to universities in the same province and some lines go much further to the other side of the country, linking with academics several thousand miles away – that is my/our project. There are also lines that extend beyond the tree and the forest to other parts of the world to individuals who serve as the international partners.

Each of the 12 case study projects represents another web of relationships, involving partnerships (required by SSHRC) between a university researcher and a community-based organization. There also exist relationships with graduate students who work as RAs. At the centre of each of these webs, sits an academic researcher; they are at the centre because SSHRC rules require that only academic researchers can administer funds and therefore the economic power is maintained in academic sites. In my particular project, I shared the role of PI with my research partner, Jen Liptrot, who is the Executive Director (ED) of a community-based women's organization in Toronto, Canada called ACTEW: A Commitment to Training and Employment for Women. ACTEW is a member-based organization of non-profit training agencies that offer employment-related programs for women. ACTEW has an existing web of relations extending across Toronto and the province of Ontario. It was ACTEW members that initiated this specific project when they observed women working in IT without formal credentials who lost their jobs during the downturn in the IT economy in the late 1990s. These women were struggling to re-enter the field, facing employers who did not recognize or value their on-the-job acquired IT skills. And so this project set out to document the learning pathways of these 'non-credentialed' or what we've been calling 'accident' IT workers and to explore how these women's IT skills were valued and recognized. ACTEW needed an academic partner so they approached Shauna who was known to them because of previous initiatives.

Our own case study web was also skewed as it stretched across thousands of miles between Toronto and Vancouver. And the web shifted as well as several RAs came and went, although the UBC RA, Kaela Jubas, has remained throughout the project. ACTEW had to work with three different RAs, each one finishing a distinct task creating some fragmentation and gaps in continuity. This was not planned, rather these women left the project as their own lives took different turns. Having three different RAs required Jen to orient each of them to the project. To help keep our web working, we communicated regularly on email, had teleconferences every few months. Our face to face meetings were limited to the annual research network meetings.

Another added challenge was the financial regulations whereby ACTEW RAs could not be hired by Shauna, but through the university where the network's academic PI worked. Jen had to rely on the structures and other faculty of that university to recruit and hire students, a

process that, not surprisingly, did not go smoothly. Other research costs, including coverage of ACTEW staff time spent on the project, were paid by Shauna at UBC. This complicated payment arrangement was fraught with problems and we had to often intervene and clarify procedures, redirecting our energies to bureaucratic practices, taking time away from actual work on the data collection and analysis.

Despite these multiple challenges, we did progress with the project and have at this point developed a website, conducted an extensive literature review and completed 75 interviews. Another important difference in orientation and practice related to what we regarded as our constituencies. While most of the interviews were conducted by UBC researchers, ACTEW developed much stronger connection to women's IT organizations and developed an advisory committee and held meetings with this group. At UBC, our constituency and more direct connection is to our research subjects. We do not have strong links to other community groups, and have not built the kinds of relationships developed by ACTEW. UBC researchers have, instead, made links back to our research participants, sharing findings with them through regular research updates.

Different cultures and practices were apparent in our relationship with WALL central, particularly when it came to notions of productivity and progress. During the third year of the project, much to our surprise, the funding for most of the case studies was frozen. The rationale was that the 'milestones', as laid out in the original SSHRC network proposal had not been met. As with many qualitative studies, once field work began and as we faced different hurdles, we had to make adjustments to our methods and goals. While we had relayed these matters in our quarterly reports to WALL central, it became obvious that SSHRC was expecting WALL central to still meet these original goals.

As Fraser has noted, the power struggles of this partnership reflect problems with the politics of recognition and redistribution. In our struggles with WALL central, there was little value or recognition of the dynamic and changing nature of qualitative field-based research nor of the value of dissemination to research participants. This lack of recognition led to inequalities in the distribution of economic resources. Recognition and redistribution were also at play in the relationships between academic and community-based researchers. Each of the PIs for this case study had different constituencies, reflected in the different priorities and SSHRC regulations regarding the administering of research funds maintained structural hierarchies and the unequal distribution of resources.

Lynette's case: boundary crossing and maintenance

Lynette's case involved partnership negotiations between two Canadian colleges and an aboriginal education institute. "South College" (a pseudonym) received two years of funding from a federal agency to develop a *virtual campus* offering education programs in conservation management to rural and northern aboriginal communities. The agency contract required

partnerships to increase the success and sustainability of the project.

South College approached two northern post-secondary organizations, a smaller northern college, "North College", and a First Nations education society, "NNES". Both organizations were aware of the considerable community interest in conservation management programs, and began partnership negotiations with South College. Negotiations between the two colleges began smoothly, but eventually shifted away from the virtual campus project towards an ongoing discussion about articulating courses. NNES negotiated and signed a partnership agreement with South College to offer the entire program on their own campus, without North College participation.

A political planning analysis of these negotiations reveals a tangled and shifting web of ambiguous and sometimes contradictory interests. For example, both North College and NNES staff shared a primary interest in addressing social inequalities by strengthening First Nations and the rural northern region. But their other interests diverged in important ways. North College staff was concerned about the survival of the college itself, which they felt was an important community asset, and provided staff with paid work in an area marked by high unemployment levels. Despite their resistance to the virtual campus project, most North College participants believed that some kind of partnership with South College could meet their interests in serving the local community. Their individual interests were neither singular nor fixed, but presented a range of shifting priorities and possibilities. Staff at NNES shared a primary interest in self-determination for their First Nation. NNES staff used partnerships as a strategy for social change, supporting self-government by providing education and training opportunities in their region. They wanted to offer the full South College program because of its high quality and credibility at the provincial and national level.

A cultural analysis offers deeper insights into the social and political context, by focusing on meaningful cultural elements that materially and symbolically organize people in and across times and spaces: discourses, texts, and actions that various groups take up in relation to each other (Eisenhart, 2001; Levinson & Holland, 1996). These shared understandings and systematic actions are linked with the foundations of deeply entrenched social structures. A pluralism of discourses and practices were mobilized among the three post-secondary organizations during the partnership negotiations. Differing assumptions about culture and social relationships shaped thinking and action among participants. During partnership negotiations among the colleges and NNES, a pervasive *human relations discourse* focused on individuals, while boundary discourses were concerned with social and cultural discontinuities. Two boundary discourses about the role of culture emerged in this project, which have been called *cultural difference* and *cultural politics*. These interfaced with discourses that addressed power relations in terms of *core and periphery* and *territoriality*. A *human relations* discourse focuses on individual agency and relationships, rather than focusing upon social and political dynamics between groups. Within organizations, a human relations perspective is often used to understand working relationships (Bolman & Deal, 2003). "*It wasn't about power, so much, as just relationship building.*"

Some of the negotiators regularly analyzed their planning activities using a human relations frame, and relied upon sensitivity and sophisticated communications skills to effect change. They believed that negotiation strategies were idiosyncratic, and often explained individual choices with "*it's her personality*", or "*that's my personality*". When things went wrong, they explained the problem as a misalignment of person and organization, or as flawed interpersonal communications or group dynamics. This perspective often coexisted with other perspectives that acknowledged and addressed cultural and social differences. The *cultural difference* discourse conceives culture as organized sets of knowledge that are shared widely through a bounded social group. This concept views social processes as ultimately orderly and harmonious. In this popular and longstanding discourse, culture operates as a marker for different social norms. Like the discourse of human relations, the cultural difference discourse has been criticized for ignoring political dimensions of relations between social and cultural groups, reducing differences to superficial traits such as differing customs or social rules (Eisenhart, 2001). Most of the northern participants also employed a cultural politics discourse, which integrates an awareness of cultural difference with the recognition of social power relations. They knew that differences between cultural groups went beyond norms, rules and values. They lived with the political implications of cultural difference in everyday encounters, including tensions between distinct First Nations as well as deeply entrenched inequalities between aboriginal and non-aboriginal societies.

A core and periphery discourse is intimately associated with relations of power. It describes unequal, unjust, and exploitive political and economic relationships, including classical forms of colonialism (Collins, 2000). Marginalized groups sometimes develop an oppositional view from the periphery, a sense of solidarity that becomes a site of radical possibility and resistance (Collins, 2000; hooks, 2000). From the beginning of the project, South College assumed that it would play a central role, serving a periphery of community partners and students in what they described as "remote First Nations communities". South College controlled all development work on the course and virtual campus in the initial stages of the project. In the early planning stages, there were no community partners to take issue with South College's centralized control as interested community groups were either awaiting funding approval or negotiating their roles with South College. South College participants seemed unaware of the power implications of this discourse, which framed their thinking throughout the project. But every participant at North College spoke of the limitations of their peripheral northern rural location, and their vulnerability to domination by a powerful centre, represented by South College, with whom they must compete for students and associated funding. North College staff and administrators perceived the potential for conflict with outside institutions, and were determined to resist outsider domination. They responded to the *core and periphery* discourse with a decentring strategy, by claiming their marginality as an important site of resistance, and a source of strength. They linked *core and periphery* assumptions with a *territorial* discourse, to describe the South College initiative as a form of "poaching" on their territory. NNES participants took up this discourse in a different way. They did not claim their strength came from a marginal position. Their discourse of *cultural politics* represented a different world-view,

which constructed a landscape of many cultural cores. NNES is located near the core of their own nation, and staff perceived themselves in a position of equality with planners in an institution central to another social domain. Despite South College's integral role in an education system that has long dominated and oppressed northern First Nations, it offered programs and certification that would serve NNES' own goals. The First Nations students, most of whom held extensive traditional knowledge and experience on the land, could gain access to alternative forms of knowledge, and the credentials necessary to challenge provincial and federal government hiring and policy. NNES did not resist South College activities, but welcomed its involvement in their own project.

Conclusion

These case studies reveal the challenges that arise due to, in some cases, radically different cultures and worldviews and the need for funding agencies, participating institutions, and organizations to recognize and work with these differences. Through a cultural studies and feminist lens, this analysis questions and troubles the tangled assumptions represented in concepts, partnerships, and inter-cultural activities. This analysis contributes to both theory and practice by further illuminating partnership practices, and the complexities of social and cultural relations. Our goal is to provide analyses of partnerships to enable more democratic boundary practices.

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