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## Creating and Sustaining Professional Learning Partnerships: Activity Theory as an Analytic Tool.

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## **Creating and Sustaining Professional Learning Partnerships: Activity theory as An Analytic Tool.**

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*Abstract: Significant attention has been paid to the forms and practices of effective school-university partnerships in recent times as they are commonly seen as a key element to improve the quality of teacher education programs and thus graduate teachers. However, analysis of the effectiveness of such partnerships has not been so evident. This article critically reviews the notion of partnership and its practice in Australia, then presents a conceptual lens via activity theory through which to analyse opportunities and challenges, particularly with respect to school-university partnerships, within the current climate. A Professional Learning Partners Program in a specific context in Australia is also described to present one initiative that aims to develop an effective partnership between school and university.*

### **Introduction**

The need for effective school university partnerships to improve the quality of teacher education and teacher professional development has received significant attention in recent years both internationally and nationally (Allen, 2011; Allen, Howells, & Radford, 2013; Bloomfield, 2009; Darling-Hammond, 2006; Moss, 2008; Tsui and Law, 2007). Although forms of partnership exist for many purposes in education, one of the primary aims of many current partnerships between schools and universities is to enhance the quality of preservice teachers' learning concurrently with supporting teacher professional development. The focus of this paper primarily concerns these forms of partnership.

Engagement between schools and universities through partnership schemes has become a particular focus in Australia since the enactment of a National Education Agreement in 2008. Professional experience or practicum programs are unquestionably at the heart of engagement and 'partnership' between schools and teacher education institutions. Over time the shared endeavour of professional experience has evolved from relationships based on assumed professional service provided by teachers and schools towards the preparation of new graduate teachers, to new forms of relationship which in various ways acknowledge the importance of integrative, reciprocal and collaborative approaches. The distinctive element of these new forms is the concurrent delivery of benefits to both pre-service and in-service teachers (Brady, 2002; Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Le Cornu & Ewing, 2008; Walsh & Backe, 2013; White.,

Bloomfield, & Le Cornu, 2010). However, whilst many of these relationships may be presented as innovative forms of partnership, in recent times within teacher education and in particular with respect to professional experience programs, notions of ‘partnership’ are commonly more institutionally mandated and defined in response to centralised specification and accountability regimes. Relationships that traditionally have been developed and implemented at a local level in individualised and context specific ways, tend now to be centrally specified for auditing purposes with respect to national prescriptions linked to the accreditation of courses and teachers (AITSL, 2011). In fact, it could be claimed that within the prevailing rhetoric of education policy and practice, new alignments are being progressed between notions of partnership and neo-liberal agendas. Debate concerning the significance of the new partnership ethos is far from conclusive. Whilst partnerships may be seen to represent new forms of social governance based on mutuality as well as trust and collaboration, some researchers suggest that the rise of a discourse of partnership could also be seen as an example of a compensatory mechanism to address some of the constraints arising from neoliberal market-orientated approaches (Furlong et al., 2006; Lerner & Craig, 2005). Additionally, while there have been a number of partnership initiatives to develop more connection between schools and university (Brady, 2002; James & Worrall, 2000; Moss, 2008; Trent & Lim, 2010; Tsui and Law 2007; Zeichner, 2010) it has been claimed that such collaboration does not necessarily lead to better outcomes (Bloomfield, 2009; Douglas & Ellis, 2011; Johnston, 2010; Ledoux & McHenry, 2008; McLaughlin & Black-Hawkins, 2007; Smedley, 2001; White, Bloomfield, & Le Cornu, 2010).

This article critically reviews the notion of partnership and its practice in Australia, then presents a conceptual lens via activity theory through which to analyse opportunities and challenges particularly with respect to school-university partnerships within the current climate. A Professional Learning Partners Program in a specific context in Australia is also described to present one initiative that aims to develop an effective partnership between school and university. We use our program as an exemplar case study in this article to highlight the issues and as a way of reflecting on the model at our institution as a means of improvement. We propose the use of activity theory as an analytic tool to support educators to engage creatively with partnership work in ways not necessarily circumscribed by accountability measures.

### **Notions of ‘Partnership’**

Increasingly in Australia the work of education both within and between schools and the tertiary sector is being framed in terms of an institutionally-focussed discourse of ‘partnership’. Whilst education and teacher education in particular has traditionally involved the sites of schools and tertiary institutions linked in collaborative endeavour, the language of ‘partnership’ has not previously been employed so insistently as in recent policy initiatives.

As a term ‘partnership’ commonly denotes notions of sustained relationship and equal exchange as well as reciprocity and mutuality achieved through a process of negotiation of relationship in terms of common purpose, forms and practice. Yet, the Oxford English Dictionary (OED)’s definitions pertinent to the notion of partnership encompass a range of meanings indicative of the nuances associated with this discursive field and its practices. Thus a

*partner* is defined not only as one engaged in shared activity but also more explicitly functioning variously as *associate*, *companion*, or *accomplice* (OED, 2011). These three versions of *partner* express some of the complexity and even ambiguity held within the reach of notions of partnership. The first, *associate*, conveys relationship and linkage as well as an expectation of shared purpose. The second, *companion* implies something closer, more personal and collegial, possibly conveying intimations of care and mutual support. The third meaning *accomplice* however, signals something more uncertain, carrying the possibility of subterfuge, perhaps even ‘partners in crime’! Thus, as has been claimed; “Partnership is neither a neutral term, nor one with a fixed definition; rather the meaning of ‘partnership’ is discursively constructed and contested through political rhetoric, policy documentation, programme regulations, and grassroots practice” (Edwards, Goodwin, Pemberton & Woods, 2001, p.295). In terms of this range of dictionary meanings it could be asked whether within the current discursive field partnership is serving to constitute relationships that in fact express association, or if additionally they are assumed to encompass companionable, mutually supportive shared intent and practice? More particularly, within a context of institutionally mandated ‘partnership’, is there a risk that forms of partnership may be reduced merely to superficial performances wherein partners function more as accomplices? Thus, when consideration is given to formations termed ‘partnerships’ within the broader political context currently associated with education, issues of exactly what is being conveyed, implied or strategically intended in terms of the strategic application of this language is of interest.

How are notions of partnership currently impacting on teacher education? It is significant that the Standards and Procedures for the Accreditation of Initial Teacher Education Programs in Australia designate ‘partnerships’ as one of six key Principles: “National accreditation is built around partnerships involving shared responsibilities and obligations among teacher education providers, schools, teachers, employers, and teacher regulatory authorities” (AITSL, 2011, p.1). Thus any teacher education institution (TEI) in Australia seeking accreditation currently for pre-service teacher education courses needs to provide clear evidence of its partnership relationships in terms of their contribution to meeting national accreditation requirements. Specifically, they must present evidence that they “have established enduring school partnerships to deliver their programs, particularly the professional experience component”, and provide detail of “the elements of the relationship between the provider and the schools” (AITSL, 2011, p.15). The specific evidence required to substantiate ‘enduring school partnerships’ is yet to be clarified. Nor has indication been given as to how within limited teacher education resources, and given the thousands of placements needing to be arranged by each teacher education institution (TEI) each year across hundreds of sites, what could be termed, with integrity, ‘enduring partnerships,’ between TEIs and schools can be consistently established and sustained. It is of concern that such very real imperatives, carrying significant resource implications for both teacher education institutions and schools, could serve to diminish the integrity of existing relationships by inducing a ‘tick the box’ approach to ‘partnership’. What have been traditionally locally negotiated collaborative relationships between TEI’s and schools, and in particular around pre-service professional experience programs, could be seen to be at risk within increasing neo-liberal agendas of prescription and accountability.

## Partnership Formations in the Australian Context

The broad field of education at Federal, State, sector and institutional levels is currently strongly organised in terms of partnerships formations. Frameworks that link the Australian Federal Government and the States across large social reform agendas and which aim “to fund specific projects and to facilitate and/or reward States that deliver on nationally-significant reforms” (COAG, 2011, p.1), are structured in terms of partnership. For example the National Education Agreement, brokered through COAG (Council of Australian Governments) in 2008, articulated within three significant Smarter Schools National Partnerships, namely: Improving Teacher Quality National Partnership; Literacy and Numeracy National Partnership and Low Socio-Economic Status School Communities National Partnership. It was through these federal-state articulations, built around funding linked to systems of accountability, that \$18 billion flowed into education across five years. At first glance framing these large-scale initiatives within the language of partnership served to convey a comforting sense of collaborative intent and investment, linking the Federal government to the implementation agendas of the States. Documents reassured that the development of “detailed implementation plans” within these large scale partnerships aimed to be collaborative, with the States and Territories having the flexibility to decide how to implement specific reforms (DEEWR, 2009b). Yet whilst cemented within partnership agreements, the ‘partners’ had very different roles and responsibilities, with power differentials evident. Thus the Federal Government largely controlled priority setting, funding flow and accountability protocols, including the auditing of key performance indicators. The States and Territories were held responsible for the development and implementation of programs and processes through which to deliver reforms to produce outcomes appropriate to the designated performance indicators. These differentials of power and control, evident across federal-state partnerships, are situated in a wider climate of political contestation and a momentum for centralised control impacting on all levels of education.

In New South Wales, in response to the National Education Agreement and of particular significance to universities and teacher education, the *Smarter Schools National Partnership on Improving Teacher Quality* was developed by the State government. This partnership emphasizes on the critical period in the teacher “lifecycle” to develop and retain quality teachers and leaders in schools and classrooms (DEEWR, 2009a). Key components that speak directly to relationships between TEI and school sectors and in particular professional experience programs require through Indicative Performance Indicators that school sectors:

- “jointly to engage with higher education providers to improve teacher quality
- establish quality placements for teacher education courses
- establish Centres for Excellence” (COAG, 2008b, p.10)

As a key performance indicator, the establishment of Centres for Excellence in NSW since 2010 in particular applied pressure on school sectors to consolidate already existing relationships and in some cases establish new partnership initiatives with universities. In this period up to 50 Centres for Excellence, involving Government and non government schools clusters were established in NSW to improve the quality of the professional learning of teachers (DET, 2009a). Thus a national partnership framework that linked the States and Territories with the

Federal government, joined in commitment to a broad participation and productivity agenda and significant designated funding streams, was articulated at a state level in ways that sought to define and progress partnerships between school sectors and teacher education providers around teacher professional learning. This imperative intersected with similar partnership imperatives directed towards universities that were encapsulated within the national teacher education course accreditation requirements (AITSL, 2011). However, whilst there is much to be celebrated in terms of the priorities and resource allocations linked to these partnership initiatives, it is worth considering the assumptions embedded within them.

A key influence in conceptualising the history and place of partnerships within Australian initial teacher education was the report *Top of the Class* (House of Representatives, 2007). Amongst its recommendations for teacher education was promoting the adoption of partnership as a condition of teacher education, but also the provision of appropriate support structures for this shift. By recognising that existing partnerships were limited in arising from “determined efforts by inspired individuals in universities, schools and systems” (2007, p.79), the report advocated the establishment of a National Teacher Education Partnership Fund. In response to this report and its recommendations regarding policy development, *Teaching Australia* (now AITSL) commissioned a research study into university-school partnerships (Kruger et al, 2009). Not surprisingly a central finding of this study concerned the key qualities that characterise partnership as social practice, namely that they are achieved within conditions of trust, mutuality and reciprocity but also are contingent on the provision of effective resources. Other researchers have identified themes similar to those identified within the work of Kruger et al. They claim that by raising awareness of these potential tensions, better outcomes in planning and implementing school-university partnerships can be achieved. Similarly, within recent research which investigates factors that contribute to an effective partnership between an urban Australian University and a state Department of Education, Allen, Howells, and Radford (2013) identify factors which sustain an effective partnership, namely “coherence and alignment between schools and the university; communication, logistics and systemic considerations”; as well as “equity issues”. They suggest that attention must be given to these issues at the level of institutional governance. This supports the findings of Kruger et al (2009) regarding the need for conjoint policy development to guide partnership development beyond individual initiatives. They state that “policy will be insufficient to ensure that local partnership teams are able to sustain their work. Encouragement will require targeted funding...within a strategic framework supportive of local achievements” (2009, p.13). Recently there has been a new movement in the procedures to enhance the school-university partnership in NSW, which aims to implement high quality professional experience. In 2013, the NSW Government released *Great Teaching, Inspired Learning – a Blueprint for Action*, in which the provision of high quality professional experience is identified as a key issue. A Framework for High-Quality Professional Experience (BOSTES, 2013) in NSW Schools is setting out the expectations for high-quality professional experience placements in NSW schools, has been developed in response to this initiative. Additionally, the Department plans to formalise the professional experience placement arrangements between NSW public schools and universities through a Professional Experience Agreement with the stated aim of enhancing consistency and confidence in the provision of high quality professional experience in NSW schools.

It is of fundamental importance that universities continue to engage actively with schools in collaborative approaches to progress both pre-service and in-service teacher professional learning (Le Cornu & Ewing 2008, Le Cornu, 2010). It is not disputed that teacher education relies on experiential learning occurring not just within the work-place context of schools but that it needs to be informed by the knowledge and expertise of practising teachers. Additionally, the integrative work to weave together school and university-based learning, too often simplified to bridging a theory-practice divide, is seen at its best to emerge from collaborative structures, professional relationships and partnerships that link the major sites of learning, educators and bodies of knowledge. However, the extent to which centrally prescribed imperatives can sit alongside more traditional practices of partnership is questioned within this paper. Is the notion of partnership which has been traditionally embedded within the more local work of teacher education and through which TEIs link to schools and teacher educators with teachers, at risk when framed within broader partnership formations dominated by institutionally-led agendas of accountability, prescription and accreditation? As Cardini states: “although the theoretical concept of partnership is directly linked to the idea of social and community participation, in practice partnerships seem to be the instrument to implement top down central policies” (2006, p.398). There is thus a need to approach the field now being defined through notions of partnership with a critical eye. Cultural-historical activity theory provides an important analytic framework to deepen understanding of the complexity of elements, relationships and identities that comprise institutional organisations and their inter-relationships. The following section of this paper draws on activity theory and in particular Yrjo Engeström’s frameworks (2001) to present a more nuanced picture of the separate systems of schools and TEIs (universities) that aspire to link in partnership relationships.

### **Activity Theory as an Analytic Tool**

Activity theory originated from the works of several Russian scholars (Kant, Hegel, Marx and Engels, Vygotsky, Leont’ev, Lucia etc.) in the 1920s. Among those, Lev Semenovich Vygotsky and post-Vygotskian scholars make important contributions to the development of Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT). The key proposition within Lev Vygotsky’s (1978) work is that action, learning and meaning-making are culturally mediated as opposed to merely arising from an individual cognitive source. Activity theory has been further developed by Engeström (1987) who proposes that CHAT was noted through three generations of development. The first generation focuses on the work of Vygotsky and in particular his conceptualisation of the actions and agency of individuals and the linkages between subject and object as mediated by cultural artefacts or tools, both conceptual and practical. Here activity theory focuses on individual persons. Vygotsky claimed that “the self could no longer be understood without his or her cultural means; and that society could no longer be understood without the agency of individuals who use and produce artefacts” (Engeström, 2001, p.134). Second generation activity theory, influenced significantly by Alexei Leont’ev (1978), emphasised the social basis of learning and situated individual and group activity within a collective activity system. The key point here is the shift from the individual and their learning seen as an internal cognitive act to place it within the complex social interactions between the

individual subject and his or her community as context for the learning process. Thus the unit of analysis moved from an individual focus (on learning, meaning making or practice) to that of a collective activity system. Engeström's major contribution to activity theory has been to develop models in which connected elements of an activity system can graphically represent individual and group actions and their cultural mediation as well as the dimensions and dynamics of the collective/social system. These social elements he termed, *Community*, *Rules* and *Division of Labour*. His model (Figure 1) provides a representation of aspects of the social system identifying the distinctive foundation for the experience and processes of meaning making and practical activity.

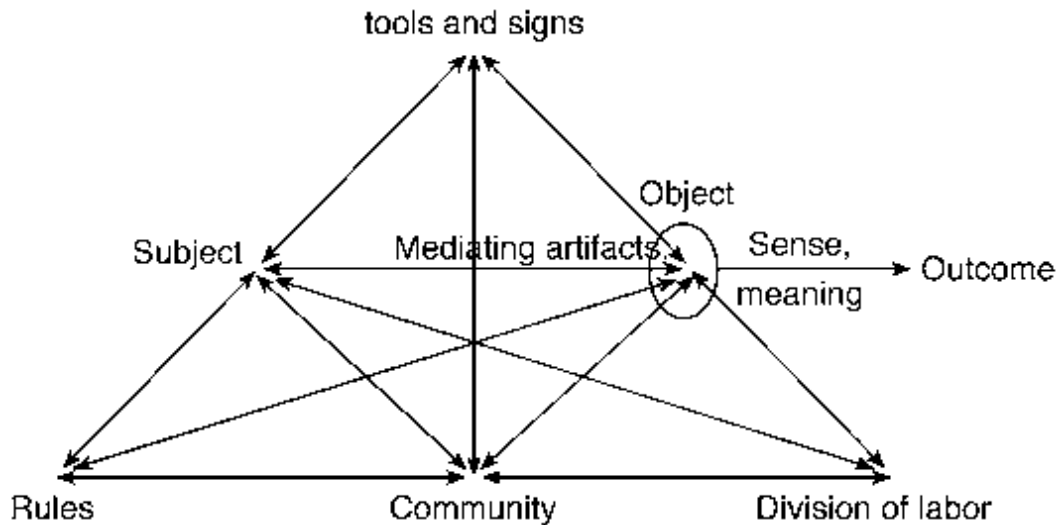


Figure 1. The structure of a human activity system (Engeström, 1987, p. 78).

The *Object* in Engeström's model is the goal of the activity. He depicts the *Object* as an oval space aiming to indicate the potential within activity systems for a field space characterised by movement, possible contradiction, tension and potential for change. Additionally, in Engeström's model, mediating artefacts are conceptualised as both *tools* and *signs* and thus conveying an activity system that encompasses a discursive space in its broader sense meditating between the *Object*, meaning making and the *Outcome* of the system. The socio-cultural elements that form the base of this model signal clearly the need to pay attention to social dimensions but also to the power dynamics, including discursive contestations that characterise any collective system. The work of Grossman, Smagorinsky and Valencia, (1999), Valencia, Martin, Place and Grossman (2009) as well as Gutiérrez (2008) draws on activity theory to focus on the dynamics of identity formation, examining "how the social organisation of people's everyday practices supports and constrains people's cognitive and social development" (Gutiérrez 2008, p.151). Thus this analytical framework prompts researchers to investigate different elements of social learning systems in order to understand the patterns of social activities and development (Doecke&Kostagritz, 2005).

In his proposal for a third generation of the theory, Engeström (2001) advocates a conceptual tool "to understand dialogue, multiple perspectives, and networks of interacting



activity systems” (p. 135). The third generation of activity theory uses a joint activity system, which includes at least two interacting activity systems as the unit of analysis (Figure 2). The third generation highlights the role of contractions within and between activity systems (Engeström, 2001) as sources of change and innovation (Il’enkov, 1977 as cited in Tsui and Law, 2007). Figure 2 provides a comprehensive framework to understand the interaction of different communities of learning in contact from an activity theory perspective.

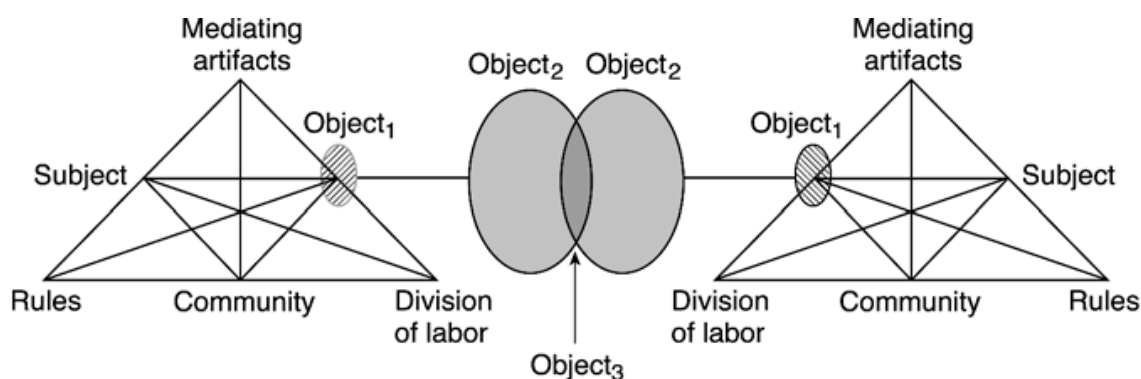
In summary, with respect to third generation activity theory, Engeström (2001) cites five key principles:

1. The prime unit of analysis is a collective, artefact-mediated and object-orientated activity system, which is to be seen in terms of network relations to other activity systems. With sustained interaction, participants in separate activity settings have the potential to reach general agreement over the purposes and meanings of significant tools and artefacts, as well as shared and new objects and outcomes of their shared activity.
2. The ‘multi-voicedness’ (hybrid discourses) of individual and intersecting activity systems arises from the diverse histories of the participants, moderated in response to the divisions of labour as well as the rules and forms of community. This leads to requirements for negotiation and translation – but also reveals contradictions that provide impetus for change in the system and its participants.
3. The third principle is historicity, acknowledging that any activity setting has a sustained cultural history and thus cultural embeddedness or inertia. Change process needs to acknowledge and work with the threads of on-going influence arising from such histories.
4. Contradictions, defined as “historically accumulating structural tensions within and between activity systems”(p.137), have a central role in providing the catalyst for change and development of the central activity. To reach functional stasis systems need to be assisted to move through contradiction to consensus.
5. The final principle is that of “expansive transformation” through which new patterns of activity are produced. This requires the object(s) and the motive(s) of the activity to be reconceptualised through collective activity to forge new forms and meanings, as represented by the space representing Object 3 in the figure above (Engeström, 2001, pp.134-137).

The third generation of activity theory provides a valuable theoretical base to deepen our understanding of the field of professional experience that connects university and school, that is two distinct communities of learning and activity systems. In a previous paper (Bloomfield, 2009), pre-service professional experience was analysed in terms of a single activity system framework. Engeström’s model provided a way to present and analyse not only the complexity of interactions within this particular arena of learning but also the significance of the socio-cultural influences on pre-service teacher professional identity formation. However, professional experience or school-based programs of professional learning within teacher education is commonly typified as a site of contestation and tension across the discursive fields and practices embedded within the two key settings/communities of learning within which teacher professional learning occurs, namely the university and the school. Guided by both school and university-based educators, informed by distinct bodies of knowledge that arise from realms of theory and practice, and overlain increasingly by institutional prescriptions via professional standards

frameworks, professional experience as a field of learning engages pre-service teachers and their educators in complex collaborative and integrative learning systems. This complexity can be represented through the multiple participants within the community and the diversity of discursive fields and practices encapsulated within the dimensions of *Rules*, *Community* and *Division of Labour*. As such, each of the elements within a single framework not only encompasses multiplicity but also commonly tension and contestation, between as well as within these elements. The framework offers a way of looking at the different actions within a complex system such as professional experience.

Professional experience is a key focus for partnership work between schools and universities within pre-service teacher education and thus provides a crucible within which arise many of the productive possibilities and challenges when universities and schools seek to work together collaboratively. However, when professional experience or in fact partnership work is represented as one activity system alone, an assumption is made that the ‘community’ of educators is collaboratively directed towards a shared ‘object’ that regulates “the horizon of [schools’ and universities’] possible goals and actions” (Engeström, 1999, p.170). Nuttal, Doecke, Berry, Illesca and Mitchell (2007) in a study that was informed by activity theory, concluded with respect to teachers and teacher educators working within professional experience, that the ‘assumption of a common object is highly unstable, or at least more complex than first thought’ and that this is due “not only to the contradictions inherent *within* schools, early childhood centres, and teacher education settings as distinct activity systems but the contradictions that are emerging *between* these systems” (Nuttal et al., 2007, pp.50-51). Tensions in the field of professional experience have commonly been identified as a result of the differences between the two systems (school and university). From an activity theory perspective, and focussing on the analysis of partnerships between schools and universities including those associated with professional experience, it is the intersections between separate activity settings, each of whose practices are aligned with trajectories focussed towards potentially different ‘objects’, that is of significance. This is particularly well encapsulated within Engeström’s third generation of activity theory modelling, as represented in figure 2



**Figure 2: Two interacting activity systems as minimal model for third generation of Activity Theory (Engeström, 2001, p.136)**

Third generation activity theory offers the conceptual tools “to understand dialogue, multiple perspectives and networks of interacting activity systems” (Engeström, 2001, p.135).

Engeström's model of activity system networks identifies as a key focus the space of overlap or distance between what might be understood as the objects of the fields of practice of separate systems. It is the dialogic work guiding the interaction within this space that has the potential to support the collaborative development of critical understandings of the elements characterising each separate system, and their internal dynamics – including tensions and contradictions.

Additionally, it is collaborative work within this space that has the potential to develop and articulate shared outcomes. Thus with respect to understanding the dynamics of partnerships and more specifically those associated with the field of professional experience, it may be more productive to map the activity settings of the schools as separate from the university, as for example in the Figure 3 model. The left triangle represents the activity system of university where the preservice teachers as subjects are influenced by their rules from the university and the right triangle represents the activity system of school where the supervising teachers are the subject whose activities are regulated by the rules from their school such as school-based regulations. In terms of this model, for relationships to function as productive partnerships, in this case with respect to professional experience, it is the shared work of clarifying and communicating what each system (the school and the university) perceives to be their core purpose or object which is of key importance. The collaborative work to delineate, and perhaps reformulate mutuality of purpose, then is fundamental to drawing the systems together. In terms of this model, Object 3 then represents such a collaboratively constructed material object, practice or conceptual entity that has the potential to clarify shared meaning and significance across the interacting systems (of the partnership). During the professional experience, preservice teachers and supervising teachers are the subjects of the two systems. In the university system, the object is primarily to produce quality graduates who at base are able to satisfy the professional standards at graduate level, but commonly are also for example critical thinkers. Meanwhile, from the perspective of the school system, the object is commonly seen as producing classroom-ready teachers, able to fit within the prescribed system of schools. For example, as Tsui and Law (2007) argue, the object of mentoring preservice teachers within professional experience from a school perspective is to ensure that preservice teachers are able to teach at a competent level so that the supervising teachers “do not have to “clean up” the mess when they resume teaching their own class” (p.1292). Thus not surprisingly the objects of these two systems do not always align. Therefore with respect to professional experience, the schools and the university, can commonly function as different systems with different objects, rules, tools, and divisions of labour, which have been described within figure 3 below. When two activity systems interact across the learning process of preservice teachers within the field of professional experience, contradictions can be generated as their learning is embedded in two systems characterised by different perspectives and voices.

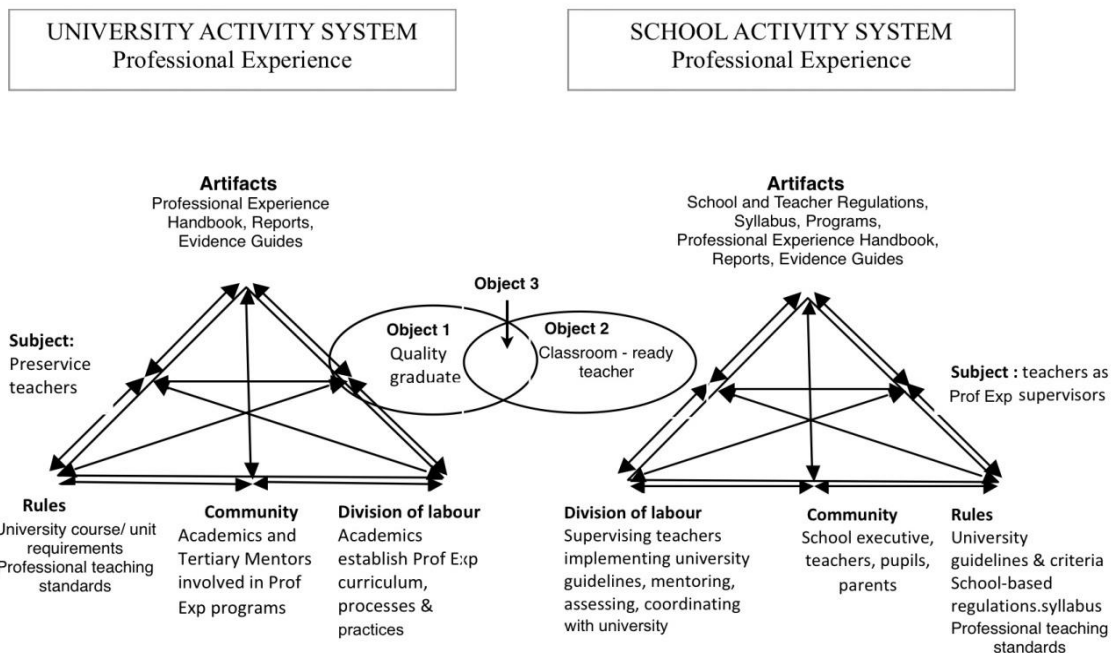


Figure 3. Third generation activity theory: Professional experience (after Engeström, 2001)

Drawing on Engeström’s more complex interactional activity theory model, it is evident that unless sufficient overlap between objects or activity trajectories of the separate systems is achieved, for example through collective activity and productive partnership work, the whole basis of collaborative engagement is put into question. This paper claims that a climate that mandates and prescribes partnership forms and processes has the potential to close down the space for such crucial collaborative and developmental work between schools and universities, in fact to flesh out mutually agreed upon outcomes.

The value of Engeström’s third generation models lies in the focus for analysis being directed both towards each individual system and also towards the intersecting or boundary spaces. This aligns closely with what Homi Bhabha termed ‘third space’ (Bhabha, 1994; Gutiérrez, 2008), and Zeichner ‘hybrid’ or ‘third spaces’ (Zeichner, 2010). In a similar vein, Rose (1999) refers to the ‘third place’ as a place to compromise the diverse value of different communities.

Whilst in some activity theory exemplars the boundary or third space has been developed as a physical space (Lambert, 2003; Gutiérrez, 2008), it is more generally conceptualised in terms of practices and processes that facilitate discursive and social interactions. Engeström links notions of boundary space to Vygotsky’s “zone of proximal development”, in terms of the potential for a collective journey leading to “expansive transformation” (2001, p.137). Gutiérrez refers to “collective third space in which both joint and individual sense making occurs” (2008, p.152). A common theme within this work is that “going beyond customary boundaries...in the openness of third space, [the] ensuing creative combinations and restructuring of ideas can provide new alternatives to oppositional thinking” (Martin, Snow and Franklin Torres, 2011,p.2). However, it cannot be assumed because the work of separate systems is perceived or even

required to intersect, as in for example mandated partnership forms, that productive third spaces will necessarily arise. As with all good relationships, attention needs to be given to the quality of the interactions and communication as well as the facilitating conditions.

A crucial consideration, particularly in relation to aspiration and pressure towards partnership formations concerns then how the space between universities and schools, and in particular around professional learning facilitation, can be established, nurtured and perhaps protected from institutional mandates. Referring back to figure 2, when there are two intersecting activity systems, each with an Object (1), effective collaborative work within the boundary space allows not only new forms (Objects 2) to emerge but also from their intersecting zones, a new shared Object (3) to ideally evolve. In our view, this shared object is quality teacher learning across career stages. The key questions here concern not necessarily the forms of the objects but the facilitating conditions to support the professional learning underpinning processes of collaborative or partnership work. A number of studies (Allen, et al., 2013; Yamagata-Lynch & Smaldino, 2007) have stressed the importance of creating these conditions to nurture the effective partnership. The partnership is arguably stronger if it is based within and around the professional experience and the professional learning of all parties. Understanding professional experience through the perspective of activity theory can enable all stakeholders to identify the core issues of contradictions from the professional experience. This then can be seen as the foundation to initiate the partnership between school and university. The primary focus of a partnership, in our view, is on developing a third space where such different elements of the two systems come into view and can be renegotiated.

### **Working in the ‘Boundary Zone’**

According to Akkerman & Bakker (2011), a boundary can be regarded as a sociocultural difference which impacts on discontinuity in action or interaction. They further note that "boundaries simultaneously suggest a sameness and continuity in the sense that, within discontinuity, two or more sites are relevant to one another in a particular way" (p.133). However, boundaries are also seen as sources of contradiction (Tsui and Law, 2007), as sociocultural differences in value between school and university are prominent. Yet, Akkerman and Bakker (2011) believe that continuity in action and participation can be established despite sociocultural differences. Alsop (2006) argues that although the school and the university have different practices in preparing teachers, they are both fundamentally concerned with the development of teacher quality. Notions of boundary can be found in university-school partnership literature (Allen, et al., 2013; Arhar et al., 2013; Smedley, 2001; Tsui & Law, 2007; Waitoller & Kozleski, 2013). For example, drawing on the theoretical framework of activity theory, Tsui and Law (2007) claim that contradictions between supervising teachers and tertiary mentors can be resolved by creating a space where all participants can generate collective knowledge by crossing community boundaries in the professional experience. They employed a professional development group called "study lesson" to establish a boundary object to trigger learning from all stakeholders from the two systems. Boundary zone, boundary crossing and boundary objects are central concepts to describe the shared practice and understating the interaction between the two activity systems.

Suchman (1994) describes boundary crossing which “involves encountering difference, entering into territory in which we are unfamiliar and, to some significant extent, therefore, unqualified” (p.25). In this case, the participants need to negotiate the objects of the shared practice. The third generation of activity theory highlights the concept of “boundary crossing”, which notes the nature of a process where multiple communities come together and form new meanings through interaction and negotiation within a boundary zone.

For Engeström (2001) a *boundary zone* is a material and conceptual space between activity systems. It is here that he advocates for the critical and collaborative engagement of participants from separate activity settings. This is the work of what he terms *expansive learning*, which idealistically could be seen as an aspiration for engaging in partnership. He presents as an example of activity theory in practice a project that sought to address the challenge of tracking children with illness through the complex and separate levels within health systems in Finland, namely a children’s hospital, associated primary health care centres and patients’ families. He creates for these three activity settings a boundary zone which is both a place of engagement and a process of structured critical dialogue. Within his ‘Boundary Crossing Laboratory’ over ten sessions a new model of patient care and communication protocols was negotiated through facilitated problem-solving dialogue between participants from the three stakeholder groups. Central to the process was the provisions of the conditions, including the time, for the “conflictual questioning of existing standard practice”, that is analysis of contradictions, as well as the modelling of a new pattern of activity (p.151).

Seeing boundary encounters as occurring within discursive spaces as developed by Gutierrez’s (2008) work around students’ development of a “socio-critical literacy”(p.148), provides a further focus towards consideration not only of contested meaning and bodies of knowledge but also the associated power and identity contestations. This is particularly pertinent to partnership work involving teachers and academics where what might be required is a reconceptualisation of their distinct professional roles as educators. Commonly there is very limited contact including discussion involving groups of teachers and teacher educators, despite them all being involved in the shared endeavour of professional experience. It is unusual for collaborative professional learning spaces for teachers with academics to be sustained. A further study pertinent to considerations of professional experience as interactional activity systems is Pirjo Lambert’s (2008) work on developmental learning transfer between work and school sites within vocational teacher education. Lambert presents as a *boundary zone* the ‘Learning Studio’. She aims for this to provide a dialogic space not only for students but also educators from the teacher education institute and workplaces with the aim of promoting transfer of learning between all participants across these spaces. She identifies working with and in some cases creating *boundary objects* as mediating tools in expansive learning. Tuomi-Gröhn & Engeström (2003) argue that the core feature of a boundary object is its potential to facilitate and promote collaboration between partners. *Boundary objects* have sufficient common identity or purpose to link the work of separate systems but are also context-specific enough to assist in the identifying points of difference. Engeström, Engeström, & Kärkkäinen (1995) argue that the potential for boundary crossing depends on several factors such as the way boundary objects are used and negotiated by all stakeholders. The development, interrogation and in some cases reformulation of a *boundary objects* is seen by Lambert as central to the unifying work within her Learning Studio. Lambert presents examples of *boundary objects* – both material and conceptual. For example, documents that summarised students’ conceptualisations of curriculum when

collaboratively interrogated by participants in the Learning Studio led to development of a new collaborative model of curriculum planning. Referring back to Engeström's model of interacting activity systems this would be seen as an example of development of Object 3, linking the settings of school and work sites. In this process students are repositioned as *boundary-crossers*, reflective of Wenger's (1998) concept of a broker, those with the capacity to make connections across communities of practice, as well as Langer and Craig's 'strategic brokers' and 'partnership champions' (2005, p.415).

These research projects draw on activity theory to provide a critical framework to support the analysis of programs or initiatives that purport to collaboratively engage separate fields of activity under the banner of partnership. Additionally, the concepts of *boundary space*, *boundary object* and *boundary crossing* each provide more detail to guide the planning and implementation of partnership work. To move beyond distancing tensions between activity systems the focus is not just the quality of interaction but also creating productive interpersonal dynamics. Engeström sees as outcomes not only shared new objects of the core activity but also heightened critical awareness of the cultural embeddedness of separate activity systems and their traditional rules of interaction. He advocates for conditions that support creative engagement with the inevitable contradictions that arise across the *boundary space* or zone. Engeström's work identifies that social interaction can be problematic in terms of hierarchies of authority, the historicity of systems, and the complexities around initiation of change and thus new learning. Functional partnerships are contingent on productive and sustained interactions between what are traditionally separate systems of activity. What is frequently absent when 'partnership' is mandated is attention to differences in the key elements involved in the inter-cultural encounter. If partnerships whether at Federal-State level or within teacher education across universities and schools are to have integrity, consideration needs to be given as to the extent they operate with shared objects and outcomes. Partnership formation and sustenance needs partners to have the capacity and time to analyse their own settings, those of their partner(s), the interaction zone, as well as what they each bring to or need from the potential partnership. The *Professional Learning Partners Program* outlined here briefly provides an exemplar of the influence of Engeström's third generation activity theory in guiding the formation and analysis of partnership work.

### **Creating a Boundary Zone: Professional Learning Partners Program**

The long-standing divide between university and schools can potentially be bridged by involving stakeholders from separate systems in exchanging their ideas within the boundary zone. There are examples of partnerships that attempt to close this potential separation as does the Professional Learning Partners Program (Arhar, et al., 2013; Allen, et al., 2013; Douglas & Ellis, 2011; Tsui and Law, 2007; Wilson, 2004). Drawing from CHAT (Engeström, 1987, 2001) and literature in boundary practices (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011; Tuomi-Gröhn & Engeström, 2003), we explore a lens to design a Professional Learning Partners Program which aims to connect schools and university. Thus, in this section, we describe a program that aims to cement partnership through the provision of structured discussion workshops for both supervising teachers and university academics.

Currently the University of Sydney is engaged in several programs that aim to strengthen their relationships and partnerships with schools. The authors of this article were among those who played a critical role in sustaining and developing this partnership at the early stage. We believed we could not initiate and sustain this partnership effectively without any underlying theoretical foundations. In conceptualising and guiding this work activity theory is emerging as a productive analytic tool. A common focus has been recognising that conceptualising and developing productive boundary zones – dialogic spaces, between the university and schools and in particular between academics and teachers is crucial. Waitoller & Kozleski (2013) suggest that school-university partnerships should establish a boundary zone in which new learning trajectories of participants are created through negotiation. Frequently this zone is beset by historically embedded hierarchies, and populated by mismatches in priorities, resource constraints, uncertain role definitions and institutional imperatives. With respect to the field of professional experience, too frequently the major exchange (boundary object) has been limited to the assumed professional service traditionally provided to universities by teachers as pre-service teacher supervisors, further cemented by the limited monetary award payment for this supervision work. The Professional Learning Partners Program aims to create a collaborative dialogic space (a boundary zone) in which the professional learning of both teachers and academics is the focus (of exchange) – as such it aims to shift the boundary object from focussing on the paid supervisory work of teachers to a more complex dynamic of professional learning exchange. Of particular significance to this work in the current context of Australia, has been the release of the national professional standards for teachers (AITSL, 2013). This framework provides a basis for rich conversations around professional learning and quality teaching across four professional career stages. In the Professional Learning Partners program, professional standards have been used as a key mediating tool to initiate the exchange between staff from schools and universities. This is aligned with findings from a newly released report from AITSL (AITSL, 2014) on the evaluation of the implementation of the Australian Professional Standards for teachers which reported the evidence of the use of professional standards in collegial networks among different stakeholders.

The Program aims to provide a collaborative forum in which groups of teachers and academics outline and critically reflect on professional learning issues arising within their own distinct arenas of practice under the common theme of professional mentoring and teaching standards. We maintain that the goal of school–university partnership is to provide professional learning for all those involved including both school and university educators. Workshops each term provide the opportunity for professional presentations from both teachers and academics within a program that is collaboratively developed. One common tension arising when academics and teachers work together is addressing the balance between theory and practice (Yamagata-Lynch & Smaldino, 2007). School teachers commonly tend to value practice over the theory and university academics to value theory over the practice. It was seen as important that the topics of presentation should focus equally on the practices of school and university. In supporting dialogic exchange between participants the workshop program functioned similarly to Engeström's 'Boundary Crossing Laboratory' (2001, p.151b). Respect for difference in terms of specific socio-cultural contexts and a shared aim of not privileging either schools or universities in terms of their bodies of knowledge and practice was seen as key to establishing and sustaining a climate of mutual respect and trust. The primary aim was to support exchange of knowledge and practice, and to draw on the professional standards to provide a common language. The



common context is that of pre-service professional experience, mentoring practices, as well as the professional teaching standards. However, increasingly the focus of the workshops has widened to take into consideration the broader professional learning of the teachers and academics themselves within a context of mentoring, not only of pre-service teachers but also of each other.

Key factors (and links to activity theory) within this program are:

- The workshop program itself operates as a boundary zone. It aims to offer a material and inter-personal dialogic space for what could be termed a community of learners comprised by teachers and academics. As previously discussed, school and university can be understood as two activity systems. Identifying the overlap of the two activity systems is critical in creating a boundary zone. We maintain that the goal of the school–university partnership is to provide professional learning for all those involved including both school and university educators. Thus, the boundary zone is the place where school teachers and university academics interact and that has “become established and provides an ongoing forum for mutual engagement” (Wenger, 1998, p.114). Once a term, teachers and university academics are convened at the University of Sydney in a friendly environment that aims to exchange elements of professional practice and learning.
- A focus on professional standards documents functions as a boundary crossing tool to enhance collaboration and exchanges from teachers and academics. As seen from figure 3, both systems shared a rule (institutional requirement) that they have to meet requirements of professional standards. Professional standards are used as a common language to sustain the communication between the supervising teachers and academics.
- The sustained nature of the program, now in its fourth year, has supported the progressive building of community characterised by trust, openness and a willingness to engage in critical enquiry over time.
- Space (both discursive and material) is provided to collaboratively share perspectives around a central theme of professional experience as a site of pre-service and in-service teacher professional learning, with the aim of establishing agreement and commonality of outcomes.
- Acknowledgment and legitimation of bodies of knowledge and practice significant to both the university and the schools underpins each workshop in providing space for presentations from school and university-based educators. In this sense the participants became boundary crossers. In the workshop which is organised once per term, the school teachers and university staff discussed their practice as a possible shared innovation. In other words, the workshop sessions required discursive crossing for each of their own boundaries (personal and institutional).
- Collaborative engagement has required identifying the key *Objects* pertinent to professional experience for each setting. Initially the *Object* for schools arising from the activity system for professional experience was commonly identified as aligned with a notion of ‘teacher with classroom–ready competence’. For the university, notions aligned more around teacher as ‘critically reflective practitioner’. The workshops have allowed space to interrogate the dissonances and alignments between these notions and to explore movement towards commonality (*Object 3*).

Over time common ground has increasingly been mapped with a shared focus on sustaining quality teacher learning, both inservice and preservice. Tension and contestation has been acknowledged and engaged with rather than closed down.

- Rose (1999) argues that the third place should “operate around a share common core, and that this can be embraced and empowered within a common constitutional framework” (p.170). From the activity perspective, this is the creation of the boundary object. Considering school and university as different communities, the identification of boundary objects can form the basis for solutions to overcome the contradictions. The Professional Teaching Standards for the Graduate Teacher (NSWIT, 2005 AITSL, 2013) as a framework and practice has emerged as a key *boundary object*, to be critically interrogated and reflected against mentoring practices. As a *boundary object* the Standards have sufficient common identity or purpose to link the work of schools and universities, but are also context-specific enough to assist in the identifying points of difference. The multiple career stage structure of the framework has supported considerations of professional learning and mentoring appropriate to specific career stages beyond that of the graduate teacher.

## Conclusion

Current Australian Federal and State government policies are exerting strong pressure on schools and teacher education institutions to more specifically account for their forms and practices of partnership. In some cases this has catalysed efforts to strengthen and increase partnership initiatives (for example the NSW Centres for Excellence), linking school and universities, teachers and academics, with predictable benefits arising for the professional learning of both pre-service and in-service teachers. However, as both the formation and practices of partnership become increasingly aligned with agendas of accountability and accreditation, and within a disciplinary climate associated with resource allocations, there is a risk that partnership work within education will become performative, without significant substance beyond rhetoric.

Partnerships between schools and universities have been identified as a strategy for enhancing the quality of preservice teachers’ learning as well as supporting teacher professional development (e.g., Allen, 2011; Fullan, 1993; Smedley, 2001). Brady (2002) reports evidence which indicates that schools are ready to embrace partnership initiatives beyond the involvement in mentoring preservice teachers during their professional experience. However, the theoretical foundations of university-school partnerships remain under-developed and research in many aspects of this field is lacking. In response to this, in this article, we have discussed the use of activity theory as a foundation lens to connect schools and universities. An example from our university is one of several contemporary efforts to bridge the gaps between these two systems. This effort involves a dramatic shift in the epistemology of a situation where all stakeholders from both university and school systems can open up an intellectual space for learning.

Quality professional experience programs within teacher education are enriched by school-university partnerships that have strength and integrity. “Renewal of teacher education is the goal of partnership” (Smedley, 2001, p. 203). However, the work of partnership, including their

development, implementation and continuity is not simple. Too frequently under pressure of time, limited resources, distance and differing priorities, what the *Top of the Class Report* rightly identified as the ‘determined efforts by inspired individuals in universities, schools and systems’ (2007, p.79) fail to advance this work to sustainable and productive relationships that can with integrity be termed ‘partnerships’. Even when resource issues are addressed, policy documents that outline the parameters of specific partnerships rarely give guidance as to the processes of partnership formation and evaluation. Central to this work is the capacity to critically analyse and collaboratively develop understanding of the significant elements of the settings that aim to link within partnership as well as what collective elements the partnership aspires to develop. Engeström’s work in representing sites of practice as activity systems provides the analytic tools to identify key social elements that underpin the processes of meaning making, identity formation and relationship dynamics. His third generation activity theory explored in this paper is particularly apt to this work. It directs the analytic lens not only toward separate systems but also focuses on their space of potential intersection – the space in which the real work of partnership can productively occur. It provides a ‘road map’ to guide collaborative interrogation of not only the objects and outcomes that are perceived to guide trajectories of practice, but also key social, political and historical elements that are foundational to the practices and outcomes of any learning environment, both individual and shared. Notions such as *boundary zone*, *boundary object* and *boundary crossing*, whilst apparently simple, are powerful conceptual tools that can guide critical dialogue amongst those who aspire to join in partnership. Like two-sided mirrors they support partnership participants to reflect back not only to their individual settings and their histories but also forward, to the creative and analytic work required to collaboratively establish partnerships with integrity.

The need for the development of a theorised foundation to inform university and school partnership practice presents challenges for educational practitioners and researchers. In this paper, we argue that activity theory can be critically employed to provide a useful way forward in implementing and enhancing the quality of university and school partnership practice. The Professional Learning Partners Program briefly described is an example of employing activity as a theoretical lens to initiate and sustain the partnership between schools and university. Activity theory framework can guide partnerships between school and university to move forward by identifying the potential space where stakeholders can cross their organizational and conceptual boundaries. This paper calls for more research in the area of school-university partnership using activity theory as a theoretical lens to assist in the formation, analysis and progress of the varied forms of productive partnership.

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