**Chapter 8**

**Working at the Intersection: partnerships as participatory mechanisms for disruption**

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# Intersection: a place where two or more roads meet.

‘Intersection’ is a common term in America for what we in the UK might call ‘crossroads’, the place where roads cross, and we wait in turn for each other to pass by without engagement (hopefully). It is not, however, this understanding of intersection as the place where we successfully negotiate around each other that I am alluding to here. My use of intersection denotes a space where people do come together and, rather than avoid each other in that middle space, actively engage with each other. In mathematics, as I understand it, the intersection is a set that contains elements shared by two or more given sets. This is a more appropriate way for conceptualising the type of intersection discussed in this chapter.

It is important to understand what is meant mean by the words we use as they shape our perceptions of what and how things are and how processes might function. Without a clear definition, there is the likelihood of commonly used terms or phrases becoming commonly understood without shared meaning. Naming is merely a shorthand identification of a general practice; it does not define the properties of the practice being named. A name can:

easily be used to substitute concept for precept, the name of the thing for the thing itself. … Once assigned and classification has occurred, exploration ceases. (Eisner, 1988, p.17)

The sharing of common terminology can build what Easen (2000, quoting Edelman, 1964) termed ‘illusory consensus’. This has the potential to fall apart when the naming words begin to be endowed with specific and different meaning and actions by the various parties involved (Easen, 2000). To avoid masking the differences between the agreed name and the tacitly understood practice those involved need to engage in a more critical form of dialogue to clarify understandings of the concept (Cook, 2004).

Illusory consensus is evident in the use of the term ‘Partnership’. Partnerships are generally seen as a ‘good thing’ with partnership working widely cited as key to effective provision. The call to work in partnership can be found in most educational policies; for instance, Education Scotland states that there is a need for local authorities and schools to ‘to create strong partnerships with a range of organisations to deliver a personalised learning experience for every child and young person’ (n.d). In such policies, the form partnership might take is generally not made explicit. It could be argued that the label ‘partnership working’ has been applied as a way of encouraging work across agency boundaries and across stakeholders long before understandings about how the process of working together has been developed. More often used than clarified, ‘partnership’ tends to be used as an umbrella term embracing different relationships based on different organisational structures and processes. Partnerships are generally conceptualised, however, as striving for a supportive place, where shared understandings are aired. People engage in partnerships with the hope of being in a comfortable place, a place where agreement can take place and overarching common interests between different players are assumed. Such assumptions can, however, as Ballock and Taylor, 2001 state:

underplay the difficulties in bringing together different interests and different cultures. For this reason, it is important to bring a critical perspective to bear, to understand the expectations and assumptions that lie behind a term that commands such widespread support across the political spectrum and to be clear about its implications. (Ballock and Taylor, 2001, p.2)

# Defining Partnership

Notions of partnership working do not have a ready framework or defined model to draw on. Partnerships exist along a broad continuum of practice with different interpretations enabling them to mean different things to different people, even when those people are engaged in the same partnership. Definitions of partnerships working are as varied as the practice. LeRich and Taylor suggest there is

a pervasive conceptual confusion about the meaning of ‘partnership’. … partnership work is more often implicit than explicit and simultaneously contested and taken for granted. … The danger is that this lack of clarity will lead to an uncritical approach to partnership. (2008, p.11)

In general, partnerships tend to be conceptualised as a means of facilitating a democratic and inclusive process, one that provides opportunities for expressing opinions and building shared understandings. The nature of the partnership relationship is generally presumed as a genial way of bringing different agencies or groups of people together. Defining the characteristics of partnership, Mayo and Taylor (2001) identified equality and reciprocity as key elements within that relationship, and Rummery (2002) states that two defining characteristics are a degree of interdependence and of trust. Bidmead and Cowley (2004) framed partnership as a:

…respectful, negotiated way of working that enables choice, participation and equity within an honest trusting relationship based on empathy, support and reciprocity. (p.208)

In 2014 the HEA produced a set of principles and values for successful partnerships which, whilst including some of the more familiar values such as inclusivity, reciprocity, responsibility, empowerment and trust, also highlighted ‘challenge’ as a key element that enhances the effectiveness of partnership working:

Challenge – all parties are encouraged to constructively critique and challenge practices, structures and approaches that undermine partnership, and are enabled to take risks to develop new ways of working and learning. (HEA, 2014, p.4)

What follows in this chapter is the discussion of two challenges for partnerships, firstly the challenge of clarifying the form of partnership working in relation to its purpose and secondly placing the notion of challenge and mutual critique within partnerships as a vital, dynamic element for developing practice.

# Uncritical approaches to partnership working: an example

I began my career as a teacher, specifically a teacher of children with special educational needs. During the 1990s, I was head of a Preschool Service (PSS) for children with special educational needs and their families. At the heart of the work of the PSS was a set of ‘mix and match’ partnerships that intersected at various points. Those who stood on the corners of the crossroads in these partnerships included teachers and nursery nurses in the PSS, parents, educational psychologists, social workers, paediatricians, speech and language therapists, health visitors, physiotherapists, nurses from the community team for learning disability, educational support staff, nursery school staff and local authority officers. I have used the idea of standing on the corners of the crossroads deliberately here, for in hindsight, although the PSS staff would have described the way we worked as being ‘in partnership’, our predominant way of working was not intersectional. Rather the partners would meet together to share/provide a perspective (state our case), debate our case with the perspective of others currently at various corners, and when one view predominated that way was chosen as the way of travel (perhaps with a few compromises here and there). This was seen particularly in the more formal meetings where all parties, brought together to make key decisions about a child’s future, reported their perspective and then made a decision about which perspective to choose to work with. The meetings followed a given formula that allowed people to voice their opinions. Discussion about how the partnership might work to greater effect, what might be achieved from bringing the knowledge of different partners together for shared critique, were not part of the process. Agreement was achieved through a process likely to adopt a ‘least worst’ approach, choosing a way forward that was most acceptable to most people, rather than considering whether there could new ways of understanding and shaping practice.

Not defining the form of a partnership can result in s partnerships that are unlikely to meet their perceived function, especially if that function is also not defined and shared within the partnership. For instance, if the perceived function is shared learning, yet the form of the partnership is ‘organisational’, then the space for shared learning is compromised and that function is unlikely to be realised. Table 1 demonstrates the relationship between form and function in partnership approaches.

**Table 1: Form, function and impact on generative practice**

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| Partnership | Purpose | Impact on practice |
| Bureaucratic | To demonstrate to others that relevant parties are connecting. | Limited: parties likely to continue on own preferred (or directed) pathway. |
| Organisational | To ensure that all involved parties know what others are doing. | May affect the framework for practice (timings etc.) but is unlikely to affect the practice itself. In this process ‘Worlds and people are what we meet, but the meeting is shaped by our own terms of reference’ (Heron 1996, p.11). |
| Democratic | To find out what all involved parties are doing and decide a shared way forward: to choose, in a rational way, between a range of options for practice. | Leads to streamlining practice according to an agreed way of working based on a current practice: shared action. |
| Participatory | To engage with the perspective of involved others with the intention of shared learning for developing practice. | Leads to new, shared understandings not defined by given frameworks for understanding ways of working: innovative. |

In the PSS, this way of working, where the foundations (form and function) of partnership are not actively and collaboratively defined, could be seen in the day-to-day working relationships with parents.

# Partnerships with parents: form and function

The Preschool Service included a home visiting service as part of its remit. The principle for developing partnerships with parents was to develop a relationship that was harmonious, trusting and co-operative, the reasoning for this being that if teachers and parents ‘got on’ together we could work together for the best outcome for the child. Parents and teachers worked together and rubbed along in what was, for the most part, seen as a good relationship. It was a well-respected service. As the ‘visiting’ teacher, we saw ourselves as forming learning partnerships with parents, working with parents to better understand their child’s needs and develop learning opportunities together. The rationale for working together was that everyone would learn, the child who was at the heart of our endeavours, the parents from the experience and expertise of the teachers and the teachers from the particular knowledge held by the parents of their child’s likes, preferences and behaviours. The partnership could, therefore, have been conceptualised as an intersection, a place where knowledge from different parties could be brought together to build a bigger picture. In hindsight, however, a key issue was that partnerships tended to be formed serendipitously, their form not being shaped by a conscious, shared exploration of purpose. The nature of the engagement was not openly discussed and debated with parents, and so it varied according to pragmatics. Whilst there were many undefined and generally un-negotiated ways of being in that partnership, three of the approaches that could be recognised as being played out in the home visiting partnerships with parents could be termed delivery, instructive/informative and collaborative.

Delivery: for some parents the partnership/relationship was preconceived as a space with clearly defined, but different roles, for themselves and the teachers. Teachers were positioned as deliverers of learning, i.e. the person who came to teach their child whilst they, the parent, provided the space for this. Some might sit in the room, on the settee, and observe the teacher as they played with their child on the floor; others would take the opportunity to get on with other things until the teachers had finished. It was rather like sending your child to school, but having the teacher come to the house provided the added opportunity for the teacher to explain what had been done and why and to give parents ideas for things to carry on with their child until the following visit. The parent was then likely to say to the teacher ‘thank you very much’ and ‘see you next time’, but the commitment to continuing the activities with their child was not necessarily enhanced by engagement and thus could be limited.

Instructive/Informative: in this scenario parents welcomed the teachers into their homes, listened to what they had to say about their child’s learning and worked with them and their child on tasks suggested by that teacher. Although teachers were seen as deliverers of knowledge about children’s learning, and the model of education adopted fell into a more hierarchical approach, parents would be engaged with their child, trying out the ideas, making an assessment of the impact of the suggested approach with the teacher and contributing adaptations to improve the approach to make it better suited their child and their own way of being together with their child and others in the family.

Collaborative: here teachers were the adult who came into the lives of the families with whom parents could discuss their child and talk about what was happening for them and their child. Discussion would start from what the child was achieving, successes would be celebrated, and there would be joint discussions about how to build on that success. Teachers and parents would throw their shared knowledge into the pot and decide what to do next. Strategies for developing opportunities for learning were not pre-formed but forged through those discussions. This was the hoped for approach by the PSS staff.

All the above forms of working were not overtly formed through discussion with the parents but rather serendipitously shaped through unspoken expectations with an overlay of habit and custom. The impact of this was that whilst a key rationale for partnership working within the PSS was the opportunity for shared learning, many of the working partnerships were unable to deliver this aspiration. Recognising what a partnership is for should dictate the way in which it is enacted. Different forms of partnership, different levels of engagement, are, however, likely to offer different opportunities from for joint working. Partnerships have, as McLaughlin (2004) states, ‘no a priori right to being the most effective service delivery method in all situations’ (p.112). Neglecting the process of articulating purpose can result in expectations from partnerships that cannot be actualised, resulting in less than optimal outcomes.

A collaborative educational process needs to open a space in which participants are both invited to engage in work which is important and meaningful for them, and also insist that they reflect on the manner in which they perform that task so that together they learn how to move toward a more genuine collaboration. (Reason, 1998, p.153)

# Challenge within partnerships: the purpose of mutual critique

The approach to developing partnerships in the PSS was pragmatic. Whilst some partnerships might develop in a participatory way that enhanced learning opportunities, many were democratic and others could be described as organisational or even purely bureaucratic. In a partnership that consists of a range of people with multiple viewpoints, if these viewpoints are merely debated and prioritised, if partners merely stand on the corners of the crossroads without entering the intersection, the opportunity to find new ways of seeing and working can be lost. To develop practice rather than choose from a proffered range of current ways of practising, partnerships need to provide the opportunity for disrupting given working practice through a shared critique. Developing a space for mutual reflection and critique of taken-for-granted knowledge, an intersection, provides a springboard for improving practice through the disruption of current norms.

The following example from a research project carried out in a health service setting (Cook, 2011) describes a strong relationship between partners, but where mutual critique is not undertaken, the status quo is left undisturbed. This has a direct impact on the effectiveness of practice.

A man recovering from a stroke attended regular appointments with a physiotherapist at a Neuro-Rehabilitation Centre. The aim of the clinical visit was to assess his needs and provide physiotherapy but also to provide him with exercises he could do at home between visits to the clinic. The man attended with his partner and both really liked the physiotherapist. They described him as ‘a hands on man’ who spent time explaining things to them, talking with them about the issues and what needed to be done to help improve mobility. Both the man and his partner said they felt included in the discussions and decisions made with the physiotherapist at the clinic. They were happy with the treatment and the way they all ‘worked well together’. Although they did not use the term, it could be described as a strong working partnership: a democratic partnership that brought together interested and relevant parties, providing a basis for working together built on mutual trust, respect and conversation. During the process of the research project, however, the man and his partner revealed that although they liked the physiotherapist very much, and engaged with him during the clinic time, the exercises were not continued at home. The reason for this was that by the time they arrived home they could not always remember exactly how to do them. Rather than risk doing the exercises incorrectly, which they believed might ‘do more harm than good’, they did not do them. Asked why they did not explain this issue to the physiotherapist, they replied that because he had said he was a very ‘hands on’ practitioner, and they appreciated and respected that, they did not want to ask him to write things down. They interpreted his positioning as a ‘hands on’ practitioner as meaning it would be against his practice to do so. By asking for written information, they believed they might disrupt his way of working or even offend him by seeming to criticise his practice. They did not want to lose access to him, despite the fact that the effectiveness of the intervention was drastically reduced by not embedding it into daily life at home. A shared discussion of what was really happening, and why, a mutual critique of the impact of the treatment was therefore not instigated.

As demonstrated above, even where partnerships are built on a strong and positive relationship, if the point of the partnership becomes to maintain equilibrium rather than engage in reflexive critique, it is unlikely to provide a generative space for developing effective practice. Whilst critique is not the same as conflict, general use tends to conflate the two and in common parlance in the UK, to be critical is seen as negative and hence to be avoided. As the notion of partnership has the connotation of a non-critical space, as Clarke and Glendinning (2002) suggest, the difficulty in adopting a critical approach is its link to conflict, and:

Like ‘community’, partnership is a word of obvious virtue (what sensible person would choose conflict over collaboration?). (p.33)

# Developing generative partnerships: the role of challenge, conflict and collaboration

To learn something new about an element of practice in which you already have considerable expertise may mean that you have to let go of some of your own ideas/beliefs about working practices. This is not easy for any party. A conceptualisation of partnership where the very essence of that is not about building on received shared understandings brought to that partnership, but using that partnership to seek out different understandings, involves what Habermas (1998) termed reciprocal perspective taking:

mutual recognition, reciprocal perspective taking, a shared willingness to consider one’s own conditions through the eyes of the stranger, and to learn from one another. (Habermas, 1998, p.159)

This is at the very heart of a generative, participatory partnership approach. It challenges partners to create a mutually enhancing process for learning together as a catalyst to developing more effective working practices, to develop a co-constructed approach where:

strands of knowledge and learning are unearthed and critiqued. These strands ultimately act as catalysts for new knowing leading to development and change. It is the space for imaginative freedom and new ideas. It is a place to celebrate ‘The importance of not always knowing what you are doing’ (Atkinson and Claxton 2000). (Cook, 2009, p.281)

It is, however, difficult to let go of long-held, cherished certainties and beliefs about ‘good’ and ‘appropriate’ services and to unpick taken for granted rationales. Hauling apart general awareness to reframe and develop new ways forward is likely to be a variable, unstable and messy process as partners zigzag between intuitive and critical modes of thinking. This necessitates a kind of collaboration that goes beyond the building of a harmonious relationship to reach a common goal. It involves co- labouring, defined by Sumara and Luce-Kaper (1993) as ‘toil, distress, trouble: exertions of the faculties of the body or mind … an activity which is at times likely to be uncomfortable’.

(p.393)

This deconstruction of the term ‘collaboration’ embeds challenge as part of the process. Understanding the term collaboration as co-labouring allows us to reconceptualise partnerships as a place where partners expect to do some hard, reflexive work together to mutually challenge common understandings and expectations. Partnerships thus become places that offer a strong, relationally driven space where ‘mutually incompatible alternatives’ (Feyerabend, 1975) can be debated and wrestled with; where co-labouring takes place. Here well-rehearsed notions of practice and belief can be deconstructed to allow for the dawning of the new. Through surfacing a range of perspectives not merely to be ranked but to be jostled with, critiqued and subjected to engaged dialectical discussion, co-labouring provides a space for new theories and practices to be developed. It disturbs what the philosopher Roland Barthes (1982) describes as ‘studium’, the general awareness, recognition, and even enthusiastic commitment we have for ways of acting that we recognise, and with which we can affiliate and associate. Co-labouring disturbs the ‘studium’, the common ‘rules’ through which we frame our seeing and understanding. The outcome is a co-authored, mutually developed approach to practice. A characteristic of effective partnerships would then be that partners undertake an element of reconceptualisation, not in terms of the principles of respect, trust and strong relationships partnerships might be formed upon, but a reconceptualisation of their form and processes.

A collaborative educational process needs to open a space in which participants are both invited to engage in work which is important and meaningful for them, and also insist that they reflect on the manner in which they perform that task so that together they learn how to move toward a more genuine collaboration. (Reason, 1998, p.153)

# Partnerships: spaces for critique and communicative action

Whether it is for the development of educational practices, the forging of a new business, researching an area of shared interest, a solid relationship needs to underpin partnership working. A strong relationship can provide the space not only to enable the ‘work to be done’ but to reconceptualise and build understandings of what could be achieved. For this to happen the term ‘partnership’ needs to be conceptualised beyond taking a shared stance and towards forging shared understandings, with critical challenge being the catalyst for change. The difference between what I have termed democratic and participatory partnerships will determine whether people are standing at the corners of that partnership or engaged at the intersection, choosing from the menu they already have for practice or generating new ways of working. Participatory partnerships are intentionally disruptive to enable the reframing of viewpoints. They necessitate active participation by those involved and an openness to questioning their own perspective and practice in the light of that of others. It requires seeing the positives of critique and challenge, recognising that as difficult but not disrespectful, contesting but not discourteous, a way of learning rather than a way of maintaining status quo. The development of partnerships built on relationships that value critique purposefully opens up the gap between what Reason (1998) described as ‘…the clarity of the present and the as-yet undefined possibilities of the future, a gap which stimulates the imaginative capacities of the participants’ (p.154).

This stimulation of the imaginative capacities is articulated below by a researcher, a man with learning difficulties, who had been engaged in a collaborative research partnership. I would like to suggest that in any taxonomy for effective participatory partnership working that includes challenge, critique and co-labouring, ‘enthusiastic engagement’ should be an essential element.

The more things just got blown into the air, the more fun it was...When we were discussing and debating stuff, during some of the discussion that we had, your mind slipped a few times before it settled. It’s like you started it off and someone would say something and it would be like, “Erm, I’m not quite sure of…” And then it started a bit of a debate up. And then by the time you finished the debate you had most of the answers and then it was like, “Eh.. you know, we’ve just answered it.” … I just love information. I just love having information and coming up with new things for it. Just love it. And doing this meant that ... I’ve got my little drug going where I’ve had all the discussion and everything going. And information going and flying all over the place. And it’s just like, Yessss! Aye. I just love learning. (David ). (Cook and Inglis, 2008, p.63)

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