



# Collaborative partnerships and learning: Broadening the experiences for a community organization, school and pre-service teachers

Janette Long & Matthew Campbell

*Partnerships: A Journal of Service-Learning & Civic Engagement*  
Vol. 3, No. 2, Fall 2012

---

Partnerships between community organizations, schools and universities are becoming more widespread as education faculties seek to broaden the experiences of their pre-service teachers (Kruger, Davies, Eckersley, Newell & Cherednichenko, 2009). The following paper reports on one such endeavor where a small group of six pre-service teachers, drawn from teaching programs that included secondary, primary and primary/early childhood, were immersed in a primary/secondary rural school in Sola, on the remote island of Vanua Lava, located in the northern province of Vanuatu. While international practicums are not new, what is unique within this endeavor was the nature of the partnership that included the Vanuatu Ministry of Education, the Australian Catholic University (ACU) and Rotary Australia World Community Service (RAWCS). Each partner had a layer of active participants represented by Arep Secondary School, the Faculty of Education (ACU, NSW) and the Rotary Club of Winston Hills. The partnership was able to provide both strategic and practical support to the ongoing project, creating layers of engagement and participation for the various groups. This partnership was **collaborative** as it was based upon genuine engagement with a focus on common goals and mutual benefits. It was built on relationships established over many years, which is different from other types of partnerships that often seek to obtain only individual organizational goals rather than shared purposes (Brown, Reed, Bates, Knaggs, McNight-Casey & Barnes, 2006).

---

The emergence of university-community partnerships have at the core a relationship which comes into being in many different ways; at an individual or institutional level, coming from serendipitous interactions, or through planned programs. However, the university-community partnership is too often built on a notion of charity rather than justice (Bringle & Hatcher, 2002). The charity model of university community engagement is present where resources and surplus are given from one community to another, such as the imparting of expertise from the university to the educationally disadvantaged community. A representation of such a model of engagement would indicate the unidirectional movement of resources, and subsequently power, from the "superior" university to the "deserving" community. Such models (e.g., serving food to the homeless) create opportunities for intersection with those in need and can be useful as mutually shared experiences in developing further learning and awareness. However, they lack as a key consideration, though possible as a by-product, the transformation of the social space to achieve greater levels of equity and fairness.

We argue that community engagement models need to move beyond a charity model to be based on notions of justice and empowerment. Within this model, instead of a unidirectional movement of resources, there is the emergence of the concept of mutual benefit. Here, mutual benefit is understood as more than just both parties gaining some benefit from engagement with the project. Instead, mutual benefit must be a shared value of improvement that aims for disruption of accepted social norms, thus positioning this approach within a construct of justice, and comparable to notions of fairness (Rawls, 1985). A justice model of engagement aims to change the conditions that produce disadvantage. This model does not dismiss value in the charity model, which serves benefit to some activity and elements of society, but it positions the idea of justice as being a more favorable alignment with the goals of a university in producing graduates that can be agents of change in society. To this extent, a justice approach lends itself to partnerships that are transformational of the social space in which learning activity occurs, and forms the basis of the project presented here.

While aspiring for realizations of justice and change, there should be acknowledgement that such cannot be achieved in isolation from the community. There is a need to develop sustainable and transformational partnerships as part of this process. Partnerships hold many advantages and support the likelihood of success in achieving goals of engagement and empowerment, as there is a common belief that more can be achieved by working together in a consortium than by working individually (Brown, Reed, Bates, Knaggs, McNight-Casey & Barnes, 2006). In particular, partnerships often provide avenues of access for the university sector into the identified communities. Working alongside community organizations, universities are able to gain access to a range of settings in which students are able to employ their skills and knowledge to advance the needs of this particular group. In order for partnerships to be successful, they need commitment to working collaboratively to achieve common goals, while each partner also gains benefits for themselves.

The Arep Secondary School, Australian Catholic University (ACU) and Rotary Australia partnership was an important collaboration we developed, and the first time such a project had been undertaken by these distinct and quite diverse organizations. The partnership grew from the active involvement of one academic who was working as a Rotarian in Vanuatu, who saw the opportunity to engage in a meaningful way within a school context on the remote island of Sola. As a result of discussions that were brokered by Rotary, the trial project began in which six pre-service teachers and two academics volunteered to become engaged in a new learning experience. This project would challenge and shape the participants' understandings and ways of knowing about teaching within an international and culturally rich society, and within a school context that previously had not been experienced.

## DESCRIPTION OF THE PROJECT

The Rotary Club of Winston Hills has for many years been involved in volunteer projects in countries less economically developed than Australia. One of these projects was a long-term commitment spanning the past 10 years with a community on the island of Vanua Lava in Vanuatu. Vanuatu is a small Pacific island nation located east of Australia. Its total population is estimated at around 230,000, with a gross domestic product, according to the IMF, of approximately US\$730 million (US\$2,900 per capita). It is ranked 119<sup>th</sup> out of 170 countries in the United Nations Human Development Index. Rotarian volunteer work on Vanua Lava during this time has mainly been focused on building and maintenance work on the hospital and primary and secondary school located in Sola, which is the capital of Torba Province. Torba is the most northerly province of Vanuatu and therefore the most remote province from the capital of Port Villa. Sola is a much less economically developed area with limited electricity and running water that is drawn mainly from streams and bore wells. The primary focus of much of the work undertaken by Rotary within this community was on the development of the physical environment. However, with the realization of many of the building projects, it became evident that there was a need to respond to the development of human capital.

The existing member relationship of an academic who was also a Rotarian provided a vehicle for dialogue between the teams of Rotary and the university about this perceived need. Through this dialogue, a preliminary visit of the academic was undertaken to Arep School, where through the networks established previously by Rotary, he was able to collaborate with the principal around the possibility of an emerging partnership. Evolving from this collaboration was a community-centered praxis (Singer, 1994) in which the definition of the problem and identification of solutions was generated by the school and local community, with the university partner responding to these needs through its skills and resources. Such an approach provides for the greatest empowerment of the local community and for ongoing ownership of the outcomes of a project. The original conceptualization of the immersion

project was for a small group of pre-service teachers, accompanied by academics from the university, to manage classes for the current staff of Arep Secondary School so they could engage in a professional development program. The concept evolved through further conversation over a period of 14 months to be a pilot program affording the pre-service teachers the opportunity to gain experience in living and teaching within a globalized context.

While this may appear a simple arrangement between the academic and the principal, it was far from the reality. Access to schools and education systems in most countries requires official permission with clear memorandums of agreement. As in this instance, a senior member of Rotary Australia World Community Service (RAWCS) negotiated with the government of Vanuatu a unique partnership between Rotary and ACU. This brokering resulted in an agreement with the Minister of Education providing official permission and access to Arep Secondary School, as well as laying the foundation for the extension of the pilot program across Vanuatu. The tenants of this partnership allowed the pilot project to be implemented with the possibility of extension if successful and desired by the various stakeholders. Thus this unique partnership strove to be collaborative in its purpose, as it was based upon the vision of genuine engagement to assist students and staff at Arep Secondary School, responding to their needs, where each organization had a focus of shared common goals with the opportunity for mutual benefits (Dhillon, 2009).

## **THE GOALS OF THE VANUATU IMMERSION**

While each partner did have its own goals for the project, these could not have been achieved individually. For the university, a key outcome of the project was to immerse students within an unfamiliar culture and new teaching context where expectations for learning were positioned so that these student teachers were challenged to adapt and engage in learning new things at all times (Meirs, 2009). Therefore the goals for the Vanuatu immersion embraced the development of teacher pedagogy, values and attitudes and were designed to:

Provide students with a wider range of learning and teaching experiences than those available in a formal lecture, tutorial or practicum setting;

Assist students in gaining a heightened awareness of ethical, social and cultural issues within a globalized context;

Enhance the development of pedagogy and understanding of education and schooling from a different cultural perspective;

Enable students to reflect upon and communicate the impact of their learning within an international context;

Contribute to a global community in a tangible way that could make a difference; and  
Experience professional learning as a collaborative and enriching opportunity for growth.

Thus the Vanuatu immersion endeavored to develop pre-service teachers who were able to exercise ethical and professional autonomy in a pluralistic society.

For Arep Secondary School, the goals were focused mainly on teacher professional learning and included:

Professional development sessions led by the university academics exploring whole school curriculum planning and development;

Pedagogical capacity building for teachers to learn new teaching and learning strategies;

Peer teaching and coaching with pre-service teachers; and

Continued resource building for school maintenance and development.

For Rotary, the goals continued to pursue making a difference to less economically developed communities, whose stated purpose is to bring together business and professional leaders in order to provide humanitarian services, encourage high ethical standards in all vocations, and help build goodwill and peace in the world. The Rotarian goals for this project included:

Continued commitment to making a difference for the people of Sola;

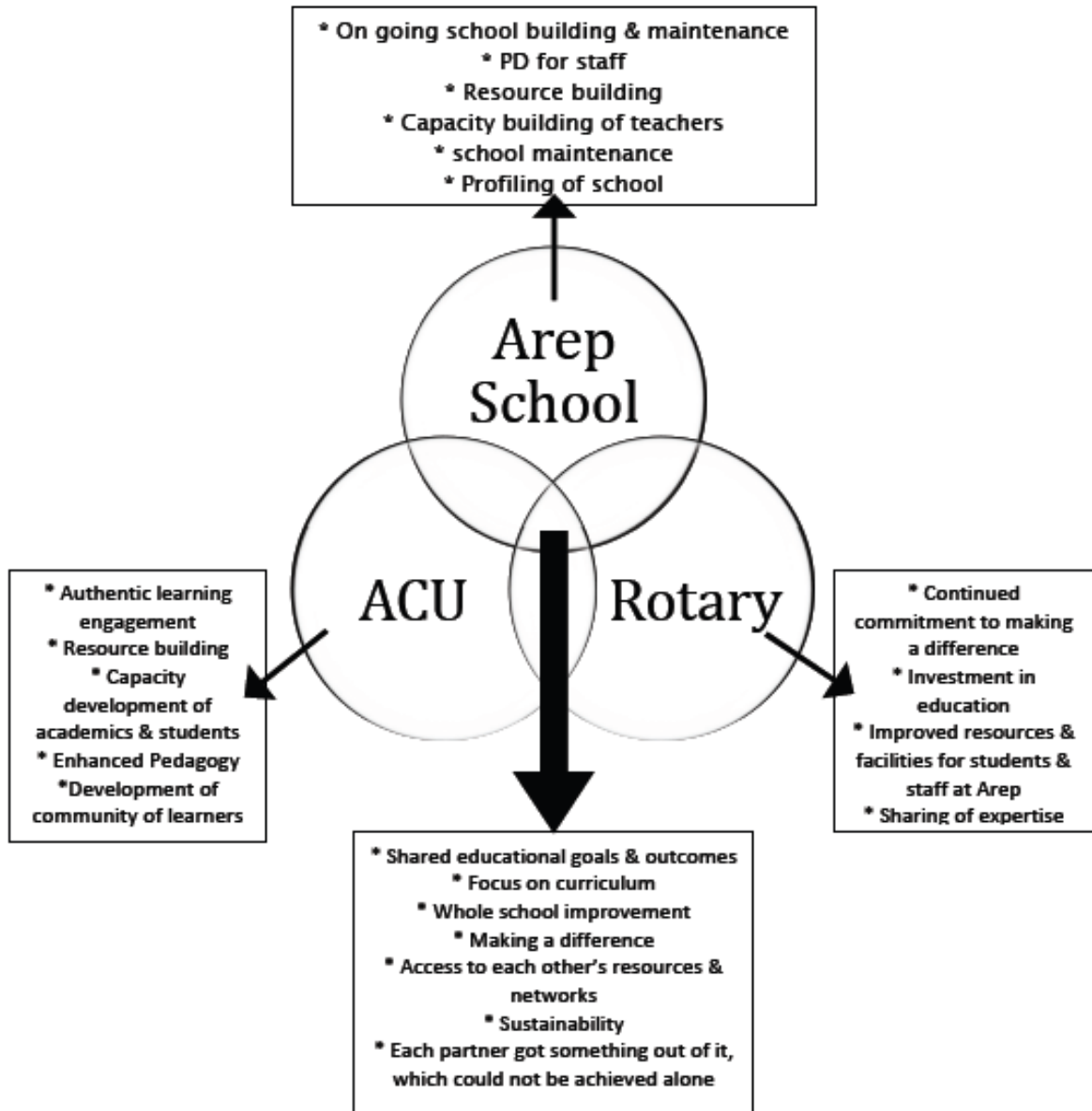
Extension of the traditional building and maintenance role to that of investment in education at Arep Secondary School;

Forming partnerships with other providers in order to make a difference; and

Sustaining commitments to previous building and school maintenance in Sola.

A key feature of the Vanuatu partnership was the shared commitment by all stakeholders to the educational capacity development of a variety of participants that included the staff and pupils of Arep Secondary School, the pre-service teachers and academic staff at ACU, and the members of the Vanuatu Rotarian team. As represented in the Venn diagram below, this partnership was perceived as sharing mutual benefits, while still gaining individual organizational benefits, a feature that Dhillon (2009) proposes is necessary for success.

Diagram 1: Goals and Outcomes of the Vanuatu Partnership



## STRUCTURE OF THE IMMERSION

The immersion project was initially advertised to the student body of pre-service teachers who were in their final years of preparation, thus having completed several practicums. Academics realized the immersion project could be challenging for some people, so experienced pre-service teachers became the target group. From 14 applications, six students were selected who were enrolled in different teacher preparation courses and had varying amounts of classroom and school experience. One was a secondary teacher who was in her final year, a final year primary student, two primary students who were in the third year and two early childhood teachers in their second year of teacher education. All were female and of various ages, family responsibilities and backgrounds.

Whilst the university provided some funding to support the project through the means of student scholarships for international engagement, the majority of the costs for airfares, accommodation and living expenses were borne by the students. The university provided time release and funds for the two academics to lead and manage the school immersion, while the Rotarians were completely self-funded.

The experience of Rotary was drawn upon as the travel arrangements and accommodation were organized and managed through their established networks, enabling fair and reasonable expenditure for the project. Thus in July 2011, a team of six student teachers and two academic staff from the Faculty of Education (NSW) at ACU undertook the inaugural immersion at Arep Secondary School. This team was also accompanied by a volunteer Rotarian group of four members who were at the same time completing ongoing maintenance and building work within Arep School. The eight university members and four Rotarians lived together for two weeks in communal accommodations located a short walk from the school. This meant that the group was able to meet and talk over meals, and during recreation time. The isolated nature of the community meant that for most of the two weeks, all 12 people were in close contact. This closeness created interesting challenges, but also intense experiences throughout the immersion, though further discussion of these is beyond the scope of this paper.

The Vanuatu immersion was organized around a two-week school period where the pre-service teachers were partnered with a class teacher and given open access to timetabled classes across a range of grades from years 9-12. To have impact in the classroom, the student teachers were asked to prepare a series of lessons focusing on cooperative learning strategies and skills of inclusion that could be utilized within any class setting regardless of age or content. With a specific focus on teaching strategies as a means to demonstrate and engage students and teachers in learning, it was envisaged these practices within the classroom would form the basis of professional development for the teachers at Arep School. The foundation of the professional development was requested by the principal and school leadership team, and



involved the academics from ACU working with the teachers at Arep Secondary School. For most school staff, this was the first professional development that they had participated in within the last 10 years. Therefore a series of workshops were implemented around teaching strategies that facilitated dialogue and cooperative learning that would engage students in learning while still exploring basic curriculum pedagogy.

## METHODS

The authors were intimately engaged in the evolution of the partnership, embedded in the experience and regarded as complete member researchers (Anderson, 2006). Such an approach, founded within ethnographic traditions, positions the researcher as both observer and participant. Normally, such an immersive position can limit the criticality of the observer-researcher as they can, at times, not be able to discern the accepted social norms of the interactions. However, within this study, the two authors, with their different backgrounds and perspectives, were able to both be immersive, but also critical through continual dialogue and co-construction of experience. To complement the experience of the authors, critical conversations were had with the students involved with the project and other partners.

Given the nature of the interactions, cultural norms and location of the project, verbatim recording of these conversations was not possible. Most conversations were undertaken within a relationship of support and reflection, with only key aspects being given permission to be shared. To have recorded these conversations presented a barrier to the ongoing natural engagement of the researchers into the setting. Instead, the two authors maintained field notes of experiences and interactions, which form the basis of the discussion provided here. Reflections drew upon the authors' own experiences as participants in the partnership, formulated through a critical reflexive process in dialogue with each other and with other informants within the research setting, such as the participating students, the other Rotary volunteers, school staff and community members. Such an approach is reflective of the proposed analytic autoethnography of Anderson (2006), though it is not completely authentic to this approach. The deep immersion of the authors provided close familiarity with the events, with a discursive approach forming a useful tool for the development of self-understanding of the researchers and a tool to manage responses to the ongoing experience. The voice of the researchers is dominant in the recount presented here and is integrated throughout the text rather than as a separate narrative.

To try to identify the key issues regarding the Vanuatu partnership, the researchers engaged in critical discussion of varying perspectives to reach agreement about the nature of events and observable outcomes. Within the project, the students were supported by the academic staff to undertake daily reflection on experiences and also in the development of a video



representation of their learning. This encouraged structured reflective practices among the various stakeholders. As advocated by Stake (2000), in this type of intrinsic case study, the researcher is specifically interested in understanding a situation through detailed description, as the researcher seeks to understand the case in all parts, including its inner workings. The following paper reports a description of the partnership, and some of the benefits and challenges of the adopted approach.

## **BENEFITS OF THE PARTNERSHIP**

During the past decade, schools globally are being held publicly accountable for student learning outcomes which are often judged through school performances in national assessment examinations (Brady & Kennedy, 2010). Arep Secondary School is also under pressure to respond to this movement as increased funding for curriculum expansion and student enrolment depends on how well the school achieves in national assessments, especially in the final school years. Schools are also being asked to be innovative and to demonstrate how they are catering to individual needs through a diverse curriculum (United Nations Development Programme, 2009).

Therefore, forming a consortium partnership with an Australian university, coupled with an existing partnership with Rotary, provided numerous benefits to the school and community. A major benefit was the presence and access to academic staff who had significant expertise in teacher education, school based curriculum development and evaluation, cooperative learning pedagogy and ICT skills – all much needed skills and knowledge requested by the staff at Arep School. While academic input was formally provided through three staff development sessions to all secondary teachers, many opportunities evolved through informal discussions and meetings as these academics were present in the school on a daily basis, in many contexts including classrooms, staff rooms, school assemblies and school social events. Thus, teachers and the school leadership team often engaged in professional enquiry about issues of student engagement, teaching strategies and curriculum/syllabus developments on many occasions.

Another benefit of the partnership was the integration of ACU's pre-service teachers into the school community. Preparing effective teachers for the 21<sup>st</sup> century requires practitioners to have a capacity to transfer knowledge and skills embedded within teaching and learning pedagogies in order to build upon them in different contexts. Teaching also requires abilities to communicate ideas clearly and to collaborate in problem solving with an ongoing desire to learn (Mockler & Groundwater-Smith, 2009). For pre-service teachers to grow in these skills and to extend their pedagogy and abilities, teaching experiences need to be organized outside of their normal cultural and social environments within school settings which are unfamiliar.

Therefore, having the opportunity to form a partnership with other organizations that would allow for the realization of this goal was of great importance to Faculty of Education at ACU.

The Vanuatu immersion endeavored to develop pre-service teachers and extend the expertise of the academic staff. Being immersed within an unfamiliar culture and new teaching context, expectations for learning were positioned so that these pre-service teachers and academic staff were challenged to adapt and engage in learning new things at all times (Meirs, 2009). While it is recognized that a two-week immersion is not a long period of time, the fact that the Rotarian team, ACU staff and pre-service teachers all lived together as a community gave this experience depth and rigor as they shared and learned from each other about Nivan culture and education.

The collaboration established between Arep School and Rotary built on existing relationships that had evolved over the past 10 years of community engagement at Sola. As with the past projects in Sola, Rotary was prepared to provide support through resources (skilled labor, building materials, teaching skills) and finances to maintain and extend the buildings of Arep School. This continued project provided channels for sharing outcomes as it had the explicit intention of improving and supporting student and staff teaching and learning spaces, plus enhanced pupil accommodation. Arep School's practice was directly impacted upon and supported by the presence and work of the Rotarian team, as rooms were painted, storerooms made secure, solar and composting toilets made operational and bunks built for an increasing boarding school population. While this team worked on the physical resources of the school, the ACU team worked with the pupils and teachers of Arep School on areas of curriculum development and teaching pedagogy.

The main aim of the immersion required a shared purpose for all partners to improve the educational outcomes for the students at Arep School. However, as Butcher and Egan (2008) advocate, individual benefits for each organization also needed to be gained. For Rotary, this was a new and meaningful partnership with a university that was seeking to make a difference to student learning outcomes by engaging in the teaching and learning processes for pupils and teachers. Rotary provided the access for ACU as it led the negotiations with the Vanuatu Minister of Education, providing official recognition and status for the project – a win-win for all partners. Rotary also opened its networks, enabling smooth transitions with transport such as priority boardings, additional weight allowances for freight of school resources, and suitable accommodation while staying in Sola. Without access to these established networks, the ACU team would have experienced frustration and barriers.

The building of capacity and the development of new knowledge for each partner within the consortium provided the platform for change and innovation. There is a "need for a shared purpose across the leadership, relational, and operational aspects of any partnership that seeks

to be based on authentic, transformational engagement” (Butcher, Bezzina & Moran, 2011, p. 39). The commitment to educational capacity development was evident in all three organizations as they shared the common goal of making a difference to the education and learning outcomes of students at Arep Secondary School.

## OUTCOMES OF THE IMMERSION

The Vanuatu immersion was perceived by all partners and participants as successful. Capacity was built and new skills and knowledge gained. Many participants, especially the pre-service teachers and the teachers at Arep Secondary School, viewed the immersion as not only collaborative, but also transformational as it made a difference to them as practitioners and also the pupils as learners. This was evident through new cooperative learning strategies to engage pupils in discussion – a new way of teaching and learning that had not been previously experienced at Arep. The partnership delivered desirable and mutually beneficial outcomes for all three organizations and resulted in creating new levels of trust where all concerned were eager for future projects and immersions to continue. However, as noted by Kruger, Davies, Eckersley, Newell and Cherednichenko (2009), effective partnerships do not just happen. Each partner needs to provide explicit resources in order to initiate and sustain the project. This was evident within the Vanuatu immersion as each partner contributed personal and professional resources, coupled with commitment, professional understanding and expertise to make the partnership work. The partnership was also systematically supported by the institutions and systems that the various organizations were embedded within, giving much-needed support and recognition to the project. This level and type of support is needed for success, especially if collaborative partnerships are to be sustained now and in the future (Bass & Riggio, 2006).

From the initial planning stage that worked with a shared purpose, a guiding framework for the school and community immersion evolved. The arrangement, through dialogue and collaboration, had grown into a true partnership with communication active between all three partners. Over the time of the immersion, a community of practice evolved between the staff and pupils of the school, the Rotarians, and the student teachers and educators from the university, which fundamentally extended the documented partnership to be a site of mutual engagement and shared praxis (Wenger, 1998). A key to the collaborative Vanuatu partnership was the shared commitment by all stakeholders to the educational capacity development of a variety of participants that included the staff and pupils of Arep Secondary School, the pre-service teachers and academic staff at ACU, and the members of the Rotary team. The partners related and communicated on a basis of trust, ensuring appropriate and adequate resources were provided to facilitate the immersion. Participants from each organization remained open to learning and were willing to change practices to ensure flexibility of response to each need as it arose. As such, the key principles for successful and collaborative partnerships that

encouraged learning were actively pursued and embraced as demonstrated and further discussed below.

## **COLLABORATIVE LEARNING FROM THE PARTNERSHIP**

As previously discussed, Arep Secondary School is under pressure to respond to the accountability movement as increased funding for curriculum expansion and student enrolment depends on national school achievement. This situation was, and continues to be, a key challenge for the principal and leadership team at Arep Secondary School, who are faced with addressing the educational needs of their own community while trying to encourage the growth of student access and entry to higher education. Most of students at Arep Secondary School are the first generation within a family to undertake formal secondary education and to be considering further educational pathways. Further to the lack of social capital around educational success, the economic costs associated with secondary education places enormous pressures on families. This, in turn, reduces the capacity for the school to generate the funding required to sustain the expected educational outcomes. In particular, access by many teachers in remote areas of Vanuatu to professional development opportunities is rare, as well as the development of new and innovative resources to support practice. Therefore, forming a partnership with an Australian university, coupled with an existing partnership with Rotary, provided numerous benefits and opportunities for collaboration, promoting learning within the school and community.

Collaborative and reciprocal learning was achieved through the structures of the teaching immersion where the pre-service teachers' lessons were proposed to be supportive of the professional development being undertaken by the teaching staff. To have impact in the classroom, the pre-service teachers were asked to prepare a series of lessons before they left Australia that were visually appealing and could remain as resources for the school and teachers to use. A variety of resources were developed with activities that ranged from whole class communication games to posters and content that compared life in Australia to that of Vanuatu. Some students used laminated calendar landscape pictures or created wall charts for learning text types, while all developed lessons focusing on cooperative learning strategies and skills of inclusion that could be utilized within any class setting regardless of size of class, age or content. These teaching strategies became the means to model to the staff at Arep how it was possible to engage students and teachers in learning processes, as traditionally classrooms in the school were teacher-centered and often silent. A core focus of professional learning need, identified by the school, was around cooperative learning models and fostering student discussion and collaboration. Staff articulated this need as they reported many students were unable to express ideas, and as the regional examinations began to change focus from recall to analysis, the students were not able to critique ideas. This was for most school staff, the first

professional development undertaken in a multi-disciplinary setting that also engaged all staff within the school. Like many schools, Arep staff meetings had a traditional administrative focus, therefore often lacked professional dialogue and sharing of practice. When a teacher previously had access to formal professional development, it was usually removed from the school context, with the teacher being alone among teachers from within their particular teaching area. Therefore, a series of workshops were implemented around teaching strategies that facilitated shared dialogue and cooperative learning among the school staff that challenged them to come together as a learning community in a new ways in order to explore curriculum pedagogy. These workshops provided a lens for the teachers in observing the same pedagogies being implemented by the pre-service teachers in their classrooms, thereby constructing opportunity for professional discourse between the academics, pre-service teachers and school staff as a community of learners. This experience created a new role for the pre-service teachers as both learner and teacher; likewise for the school staff, thereby encouraging collaborative learning for both teachers and pre-service teachers alike.

The learner-teacher dualism extended also to the university academics who evolved new cultural understandings and expertise. Thus, the Vanuatu immersion, in addition to the contribution to the local community, endeavored to develop pre-service teachers and extend the expertise of the academic staff. The mutual benefits of the immersion began to contribute to the ongoing development of the local school and community, with the academic staff acting with commitment to the common good with a fundamental concern for equity and dignity of all human beings; core values of the university (ACU Mission Statement, 2011). While the experience was very beneficial, it should be noted that it was just part of a much longer and sustained initiative finding its genesis in Rotary's engagement with the community, and extending to future initiatives and engagement. The experience expanded the understandings of the academic staff of the specific learning needs and cultural differences across various educational contexts, and through deliberate community-centered praxis, they were able to both empower the local leaders and community to view education on a more global basis, as well as critically assess some of their underpinning assumptions about education. In particular, there was engaged discussion around the practical realities of notions of colonialization and globalization within constructs of educational discourse and practice. Importantly, the engagement of the university empowered the local school leaders to engage more fully in the national educational discourse, creating a voice for Arep School in a discussion that was very much focused around the national capital and major cities.

Overall, the intensity of the immersion and the nature of the experience left lasting impacts on all participants. The functions of the partnerships operated far beyond the two-week immersion, as months of collaborative planning between each organization occurred through a variety of communication strategies. After the immersion, newsletters and reports were written and distributed throughout and beyond the participant organizations, and

presentations were made to a variety of interested groups, including the Honorary Consul for Vanuatu in Australia. Therefore, the collaborative, community-centered approach facilitated a range of learning beyond the immediate two-week immersion and has led to new understandings about the concept of partnerships.

## **REVISITING THE CONCEPT OF PARTNERSHIPS**

Within Australia (Bradley, 2008), and likewise in Europe and North America (Zemsky, 2006), higher education is being urged to engage and commit to imperatives of social inclusion and equity through a variety of strategies at the local, national and global levels. The agenda of social inclusion, particularly in light of recent government policy in Australia, is conceptualized at two levels; first being the engagement of a range of students from previously under-represented demographics; and second for the university sector to extend its engagement with broad sectors of society empowering previously disadvantaged communities. These commitments are often conceived as partnerships between various organizations “based on a mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and expertise between universities and communities” (Australian Universities Community Engagement Alliance, 2010, p.1).

The conceptualization of partnership is an important area for consideration within the university sector as it moves, in response to a range of pressures, towards greater focus on community engagement, social inclusion and internationalization. The partnership presented in this paper is a unique case study analysis which highlights key aspects of partnership approaches providing access and opportunity for universities to fulfill their social objectives, such as engagement and justice. The case involves the partnership between ACU and Arep Secondary School, Vanuatu, which was supported and brokered by Rotary. Emerging is a mutually beneficial three-way partnership, which is unique to most partnerships between the university and a community group, normally just brokered by the respective partners. This case presents a third partnership brokered by a community service organization, Rotary, who facilitated the access of the university to the needs of the recipient, in this case Arep School in northern Vanuatu. Rotary aimed for the project to extend their long-term engagement in Vanuatu, while the school hoped the project could be used to enhance the learning of their students, but also as leverage with the government for increased funding and resources. The university saw the partnership as an opportunity for engaged and transformative learning experiences for students.

## **COLLABORATIVE PARTNERSHIPS**

Within this partnership there was a shared benefit of transformation of pedagogical practices, though this was understood and experienced differently within each group. For the pre-service

teachers there was an enhancement of their practice informed by experience in a culturally different environment. For the school staff, there was an opportunity to focus on curriculum and planning practices in delivery of teaching and learning at the school level. As a result, the school experienced an improved political capital through engagement with professional learning activities not readily afforded to other school communities. Instead of focusing on scoring benefits, Butcher and Egan (2008) argue that what is critical for success is that the partners are adequately resourced, with a sharing of perspectives and capacities from each organization so the engagements are planned to make a lasting difference.

The building of capacity and the development of new knowledge for each partner within the Vanuatu consortium provided the platform for change and innovation. Overall the commitment to educational capacity development was evident in all three organizations as they shared the common goal of making a difference to the education and learning outcomes of students at Arep Secondary School. The partnership was successful as it engaged and enhanced educational sustainability through five key principles that Butcher, Bezzina and Moran (2011, p. 360) advocate are necessary for successful and effective partnerships. These principles, in which each organization must work together to achieve common goals through shared praxis, include (1) working out of a shared purpose and framework, (2) leading and managing collaboratively, (3) relating and communicating on a basis of trust, (4) ensuring appropriate and adequate resources, and (5) remaining open to learning and change.

All partners and participants perceived the Vanuatu immersion as successful as the project had not only achieved its goals, but more. The five principles for effective partnership were evident in the prior planning, immersion experience and post-evaluation sessions. The three partners had worked from a shared purpose to focus on school curriculum in order to make a difference to the teaching and learning within Arep Secondary School. The immersion was collaboratively planned with a shared understanding of its purpose and structure. The implementation of the project was managed collaboratively with different partners "stepping up" to take the lead as necessary. This was evidenced in Rotary leading and managing access to Arep; ACU staff selecting, organizing and preparing pre-service teachers for the immersion; while the principal and school staff facilitated the in-class and school experiences. The partnership evolved over an extended period, built on existing trust relationships between Rotary and the Vanuatu community, but expanding to new trust relationships with the university. There was an openness in the discussion around the development of the partnership and associated experience. There was clear evidence in how the concept of the partnership and desired outcomes evolved over the period of development. The most challenging element of the partnership, based on Butcher et al.'s principles, was the appropriate, and it would be suggested ongoing, resourcing. It is acknowledged that partnerships of this nature are resource intensive, and a critical element for long-term sustainability is the effective management of these resources. This initial experience relied



heavily upon significant goodwill on behalf of the academics in particular, but having “proof of concept” there is an ongoing development of sustained investment by the university to ensure ongoing engagement and success.

## CHALLENGES OF WORKING IN PARTNERSHIP

It would be naïve to claim that any partnership does not involve compromise, negotiation and disagreement. Likewise, within the development of the partnership described here, there were a range of challenges and issues present, despite the overall success of the venture. The challenges that emerged could broadly be classified as being considerations and boundaries of roles and responsibilities; cultural differences, understandings and practices; and communication and pragmatics. Throughout the evolution of the partnership there was a constant negotiation of boundaries of responsibility. For example, Rotary over time became responsible for the “administration” of the immersion (e.g. booking airfares, arranging accommodation, visas, etc.), while the university was responsible for arrangements regarding students. During the development of the partnership, how these spaces were defined and managed presented points of friction, particularly in ensuring the relevance of both partners in the process. Similarly, cultural differences presented an issue requiring negotiation.

Cultural differences were experienced on two planes. Firstly, there was the somewhat obvious cultural difference between the Vanuatu partners (i.e. government and Arep School) and Australian partners (i.e. university and Rotary) founded on different understandings of effective communication and cultural nuances. This issue, ever present within cross-cultural partnerships, was resolved through processes of clarification and patience. Secondly, cultural differences became particularly apparent across what could be considered professional boundaries. For example, there existed between the university academics and school staff a shared professional dialogue that was exclusionary to Rotary. This required Rotary to concede previously held positions of influence and control in managing their involvement in the Vanuatu community. It also challenged understanding by the university staff, in particular, to interpret and explain previously tacit professional knowledge. This plane of cultural difference is a unique aspect of partnership engagement as each partner brings particular professional discourses and expectations to the conversation. There was, within the experience presented here, a need for willingness on the part of each partner to renegotiate their role to ensure that they were able to allow for the benefits that flow from a shared understanding, as well as maintaining their engagement in the partnership. Within this partnership, the involvement of a “boundary crosser,” who had some experience in each space, was significant in brokering these negotiations.

Finally, and inherent within most collaborations, were issues around communication and pragmatics. On several occasions in the development of the immersion experience, issues of communication created significant problems. For example, one student had to take an alternate flight due to miscommunication around ticketing. Emerging from this experience was the critical need for communication protocols and processes, with strict timing around responses and processes. Such a procedure worked effectively between the two Australian partners; however, issues around connectivity and communication technologies within Vanuatu required an ongoing acknowledgment of the difficulties inherent in a partnership of this nature. Central to responding to these challenges, and in ensuring the success of the partnership, was an openness to communication and the development of trust between the partners; two key principles espoused by Butcher et al. (2011).

### **UNIQUE ASPECTS OF THE PARTNERSHIP**

The partnership described here extended the previously explored models of community engagement in which each partner brought strengths and needs to the relationship. The university brought to the partnership "academic expertise," which has been criticized by Bringle & Hatcher (2002) as being an elitist and hierarchical understanding of the role of a university in a partnership. However, in this circumstance this was the strength of the university that was required to make the project achieve its goals. There must be recognition of the relative strengths that the university brings to any partnership, but this should not, however, exclude the other needed resources. Rotary, which initiated the partnership, brought strengths in organization, access and experience to the development of the project, which can be identified as "organizational expertise." However, Rotary lacked the "academic expertise" that was located in the university, which was required to achieve the goal of developing empowered human capital. The final component of this partnership, the school community, brought "practice expertise," which complimented and extended the "academic expertise" of the university, and was able to be a source of deep learning for the university students and academic staff. Therefore, what resulted was a complex, mutually beneficial arrangement in which each partner was able to share their strengths, empowering the partners to transform their practice through the benefit of the other's expertise. Furthermore, this recognition of strengths reduced the duplicity of tasks in making the project work. For example, university staff was able to solely focus on the development of the academic agenda of the project, rather than trying to negotiate organizational systems, as this component was managed by Rotary. There was clear evidence of benefits being gained for all members of the partnership.

The benefits for the school were tangible and immediate, as well as enabling future success and empowerment. Changes were evident in the teaching practices in the school and around identified issues such as curriculum development. Professional interactions with university

academic staff, access to multi-disciplinary professional development, and the opportunity to observe teaching practice constructed within a different paradigm (student-centered and discursive as opposed to teacher-centered and directive) presented as immediate learning opportunities for the school staff. These elements also provided a framework for ongoing school-led development, such as having new tools for curriculum development that have the potential to revolutionize the planning process of the school staff. However, the long-term benefits for the school staff are yet to be determined. Further to this outcome, which was one key focus of the project, the participating students gained professionally and personally from the experience, being afforded the opportunity to test a range of teaching techniques in a relatively safe environment, working alongside academic mentors from the university and practice mentors from the school staff. The secondary outcome, which had not been the focus of the original planning of the partnership, provided a dynamic for ongoing university commitment and student participation in the program. Benefits were also evident for the academic staff, the wider university and for the Rotary volunteers.

The unique aspect of this partnership, beyond the specific benefits, was the utilization of a third partnership, Rotary, in the development of the project. In this case, the role of the community group was not in providing a site for university engagement, as is often the case, rather it was to provide the avenues of access to another area of opportunity. Traditional models of engagement and university-community partnerships are constructed in a model that sees the university provide a service to a particular community need, often also providing the source of what is referred to as service-learning opportunities (Holland, 2001). Such an approach relies upon a direct relationship between the university sector and the community organization requiring the support, or alternatively, the university seeking a site for a particular project. The limitations of such an approach are the ability for the community group to realize the possible benefits of a university partnership, or alternatively for the university to be aware of the particular need of the particular group. In this partnership the use of a third community partner provides for the university access and opportunity in often hard to reach and forgotten areas of the global community. Furthermore, it presented a broader problematic that the university was able to respond to using a variety of potential resources. Through the involvement of Rotary, the university was able to move beyond the normal political agendas within the partner country, which often directs support to populous areas such as the capital, to access and support a remote and regional area that may lack broader government support. Furthermore, the ongoing partnership provides broader opportunities for a range of engagement beyond the often isolated and individual needs of a single-focus community group.

Communication presented as one of the difficulties in this partnership. Normally within a partnership, negotiation needs to occur between the two partners (e.g., the university and the community group), with a clear understanding of the identity of each party (e.g., recipient and

provider). However, in the arrangement present in this experience, there was a multiplicity of communication channels, as well as varying, and at times competing, priorities. Although presenting difficulties, these were not insurmountable nor did they adversely affect the outcomes of the experience. For a large part, these difficulties were founded in the negotiation of identity within the emerging community of practice and an evolution of the understanding of the various roles. For example, while the university and Rotary had negotiated a memorandum of understanding to define how they would work with each other in Vanuatu, there were still some areas of concern around roles of leadership and responsibility. The pre-service teachers travelled under the joint identification of the university and Rotary, with Rotary being primarily responsible for the administration of the trip (including aspects such as insurance, travel and accommodation), while the university held responsibility for the conduct of students and their preparedness. Once negotiated, this joint approach meant that systems and expertise within the two organizations were able to be best utilized to ensure the success of the experience. Such a model, although requiring negotiation, resulted in the university not having to rely upon the development of new systems and structures to enable the trip, but being able to draw upon existing structures within Rotary. Likewise, Rotary was able to access expertise to further advance their projects. The identification and resolving of challenges to the immersion project once again demonstrated achievement of the five principles of successful collaborative partnerships, as each organization continually worked out of a shared purpose, kept communication open, and was respectful and trustful, while seeking to remain open to alternative ideas, learning and change. This facilitated a culture of interaction that was collaborative and caring, where people from all three organizations were willing to listen and respond to needs to ensure success. Thus all three partners achieved both individual and shared positive outcomes.

## **CONCLUSION**

The three distinct organizations within this partnership created a collaborative, and perhaps even transformational relationship as the consortium focused on shared goals and mutual benefits that enriched practice and engaged each in new ways of “doing and knowing.” These new practices allowed for learning, and in turn changed and empowered all three organizations to broaden their understandings of working within globalized communities where respect and the desire to make a difference can be achieved (Bass & Riggio, 2006). All partners opened themselves to change because they were working towards a shared priority of addressing educational needs and the development of human capital, but were able to focus on the enhancement of their particular strengths. The shared commitment to educational capacity development was evident through the successful outcomes achieved by the immersion. Each partner not only achieved individual success, but mutual benefits were gained – clearly something that could not be achieved by working alone. The future plans for

continued long-term relationships, where each partner is valued for what they can bring, continues with trust and enthusiasm. The enhancement of educational outcomes for the pupils, teachers and community in a remote area of Vanuatu remains a key goal for all these organizations that can be achieved through supporting the processes of collaborative partnerships as described within this paper.

## REFERENCES

- Anderson, L. (2006). Analytic autoethnography. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 35(4), 373-395.
- Australian Catholic University. (2011). The mission statement. *ACU Handbook*. Queensland, Australia: Academic Registrar.
- Australian Universities Community Engagement Alliance. (2010). *Principles of university engagement*. Retrieved from <http://aucea.com.au/about/aucea-principles-of-university-community-engagement>
- Bass, B., & Riggio, R. (2006). *Transformational leadership*. (2<sup>nd</sup> Ed.). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Bringle, R., & Hatcher, J. (2002). Campus-community partnerships: The terms of engagement. *Journal of Social Sciences*, 58(3), 503-516.
- Bradley, D. (2008). *Review of Australian Higher Education Final Report*. Commonwealth of Australia. Retrieved from <http://www.deewr.gov.au/HigherEducation/Review/Pages/ReviewofAustralianHigherEducationReport.aspx>
- Brady, L., & Kennedy, K. (2010). *Curriculum construction*. (4<sup>th</sup> Ed.). Frenchs Forest, NSW: Pearson Australia.
- Brown, R., Reed, C., Bates, L., Knaggs, D., McKnight-Casey, K., & Barnes, J. (2006). The transformative engagement process: Foundations and supports for university community partnerships. *Journal of Higher Education, Outreach and Engagement*, 11(1), 9-23.
- Butcher, J., & Egan, L. (2008). Community engagement research: A question of partnership. *The Australian Journal of Community Partnership*, 2(3), 106-112.

- Butcher, J., Bezzina, M., & Moran, W. (2011). Transformational partnerships: A new agenda for higher education. *Innovative Higher Education*, 36, 29-40.
- Dhillon, J. (2009). The role of social capital in sustaining partnership. *British Educational Research Journal*, 35(5), 687-704.
- Holland, B. (2001). A comprehensive model for assessing service-learning and community university partnerships. *New Directions in Higher Education*, 11(114), 51-60.
- Kruger, T., Davies, A., Eckersley, B., Newell, F., & Cherednichenko, B. (2009). *An inquiry kit for university-school partnerships*. Canberra, Australia: Teaching Australia.
- Punch, K. (2009). *Introduction to research methods in education*. London, England: Sage.
- Meirs, M. (2009). Professional learning: Improving learning for teachers and students. Paper presented at the Australian Association of Research in Education, Canberra: Australia.
- Mockler, N., & Groundwater-Smith, S. (2009). From lesson study to learning study: Side-by-side professional learning in the classroom. In A. Campbell and S. Groundwater-Smith (Eds.), *Connecting inquiry and professional learning in education: International perspectives and practical solutions* (pp. 166-178). Abingdon: Routledge.
- Rawls, J. (1985). Justice as fairness: Political not metaphysical. *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 14(3), 223-251.
- Singer, M. (1994). Community-centered praxis: Toward an alternative non-dominative applied anthropology. *Human Organisation*, 53(4), 336-344.
- Stake, R. (2000). Case studies. In N. Denzin and Y. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative Research*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (pp. 435-454). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications Inc.
- United Nations Development Programme. (2009). *Frequently asked questions: The UNDP approach to supporting capacity development*. New York, NY: United Nations.
- Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice - learning, meaning and identity*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Zemsky, R. (2006). Three challenges for higher education. *The Journal of Continuing Education Association*, 70, 37-46.