3 Making space

Expanding professionalism through relational university–community partnerships

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Introduction

This chapter critically explores university–community partnerships as a means of expanding professionalism in higher arts education. Such partnerships have become an increasingly pervasive feature in higher education more generally, viewed as fundamentally a “good thing”. The discussion here seeks to problematise how professionalism can be challenged and expanded through partnership “spaces” off-campus—not just in the physical sense of linking town and gown, but also in relational ways that develop collaborative approaches to arts engagement, teaching, research, and learning. Higher education currently stands against a global backdrop of increasingly destabilised political systems, where issues such as mass migration, climate change, left-right extremism, invasive technology, pandemics, and “post-truth” media invoke outrage on a daily basis (Bauman, 2010). Adopting a relational approach to education, through partnership spaces, allows universities to plan and teach for uncertain times (Gordon, 2007) and “supercomplexity” (Barnett, 2012). Challenges abound for the institution, staff, and students when partnerships become a feature of the changing mission and purpose of universities. Being outward-facing, university–community partnerships can become an obvious arena to explore and develop expanding professionalism across disciplines, institutional structures, research agendas, and various student cohorts. Extending teaching, research, and learning opportunities beyond the university “ivory tower” and into society more broadly defined (acknowledged as being in a perpetual state of change) is thus an ideal space within which to prepare for unknowns and connect with diverse communities. It could be argued, in fact, that it is *the* space in which a truly expanded vision for professionalism in the arts and education can be realised.

Problematising partnership spaces in higher arts education

University–community partnerships often act as a key feature of the overall societal and educational missions of universities. The learning within these partnership spaces can inform expanding professionalism through relational experiences; as Griffiths notes, it is “the kinds of personal and community relations that sustain

learners and teachers alike, as they create a good life together” (2013, p. 248). This chapter is particularly concerned with how professionalism is expanding for those “inside” the university (staff and students) by going “outside” the university. The term “ivory tower” is often used to perpetuate the myth of an elitist, sheltered, and secluded world of academia. Yet, within ever-increasing networked and complex societies, this notion of such an isolated academic space has become redundant (Boyer, 1990; Rodin, 2007). Universities increasingly “cross over” into “new fields” for place-based forms of teaching, collaborative learning, research, and knowledge exchange, and as a result are redefining their role within society.

Making such partnership spaces is not always altruistic in nature, of course, with many partnerships formed as “for-profit” campus companies, spin-outs, or incubators. Henkel explains, “higher education systems now need organisations and workforces that embody values, forms of knowledge, structures, and relationships that are more varied than, and do not necessarily sit comfortably with, those of academe if they are to meet contemporary demands” (2010, p. 7). Whether money-making or not, university–community partnerships then constitute a major response to expanding professionalism required to connect courses, academics and students to the “real world”.

In this book’s call to consider the “game-changing” potential of partnership spaces in higher arts education, Pierre Bourdieu’s field theory is worth considering. For Bourdieu, a field is a social space, involving networks or configurations of relational positions, “the social world can be represented as a space ... Agents and groups of agents are thus defined by their relative positions within that space” (Bourdieu, 1985, p. 724). Within these fields, particular practices are (re)produced by agents and institutions, playing by and within “the rules of the game”. For Bourdieu, the *practice* itself results from social structures within a particular *field* interacting with one’s *habitus* (embodied ways of thinking, being, and doing). In thinking with and beyond Bourdieu in relation to partnership spaces for higher education, Marginson’s (2008) suggestion that the boundaries between fields are much more permeable than imbued by Bourdieu is also useful to note. What happens when one leaves the “ivory tower”? When one encounters a less familiar “field”? Reay et al. (2005) contend that such experiences can lead to transformational change, but can also potentially lead to much uncertainty and ambivalence. Hence, there is much to be understood, questioned, and developed when universities traverse into new fields attempting to build bridges through relational partnership spaces and perhaps by doing so, “change the game”.

In seeking to address the increasingly social and inclusive imperatives for higher arts education, this chapter is concerned with university–community partnerships that are not-for-profit, that reflect the multiplicity of learning, teaching, and research opportunities within diverse contexts such as projects in schools, hospitals, museums, concert halls, or family services. Such “authentic” experiences can offer unique professional and personal development spaces to both students and staff in higher education and there is a growing body of research in this area (Bartolome, 2013; Brophy, 2011; Burton & Greher, 2011; Conkling, 2007; Kenny, 2014, 2018; Power & Bennett, 2015). Such spaces are also multi-layered,

complex, and involve risk. Maxine Greene frequently argues for “real-life” experiences to foster “wide-awakeness” (1995, 2001), to take “risks” and enter into dialogues “where nothing stays the same” (1995, p. 16). As such, she presents arts education specifically as holding a unique way to revive the “democratic imagination” (1995), particularly when one enters into a communicative space with the “other”. Adopting this lens, knowledge can be created through partnership experiences, thus potentially expanding professionalism through learning relationally. This resonates strongly with the concept of “relational professionalism” (Bonilla, 2017; Phelan, 2001; Reeves, 2010; Ward, 2010), where education privileges engaged relationships, or relationality with others, but also in turn with the self. For Bhabha (1994), hybridity, or a “third space,” occurs where two or more individuals/cultures/moments interact to create a new phenomenon. This “third space” then establishes new social, political, and cultural potential, opening up to new modes of thought and ways of being. Akin to Bhabha’s concept of “third space”, university–community partnership spaces are in essence designed for such relationality and expanding professionalism.

Identity change and development is a key part of expanding professionalism within these “third spaces”. The academic world of close-knit “tribes” (Becher, 1989) has essentially been disbanded within the contemporary university where identities in higher education are now viewed as multiple, constantly in flux, and contextualised (Henkel, 2010; Taylor, 2008). As such, the various spaces and differing relationships within them form and inform these identities. Henkel explains, “identity is conceptualised as a project or continuous process of construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction in the context of multiple and shifting collectives and relationships” (2010, p. 10). A framework for learning from and within diverse and expanded communities is all-important then, and university–community partnerships hold much potential for what Taylor describes as “creative commons for identity assemblage” (2008, p. 38).

University–community partnership spaces take a “place-based learning” approach (Ellsworth, 2005), acting as a means to construct knowledge, make meaning and inform emerging identities within immersive, contextualised spaces. Pushing Bhabha’s ideas about “third spaces” to be more context-dependent within “places”, Ellsworth (2005) provides interesting insights in her arguments about places of learning as “embodied experiences”. As such, she describes “pedagogical pivot points” as facilitating “moments of becoming” or “the force through which we come to have the surprising, incomplete knowings, ideas and sensations that undo us and set us in motion towards an open future” (2005, pp. 17–18). This also has strong echoes with Greene’s concept of “wide-awakeness” discussed earlier. Furthermore, Ellsworth espouses for learning experiences to be inter-relational, putting “the inside and outside in relation” (*ibid.* p. 37), where through engagement with the “outside world” learners can gain sensitivity to context, broaden social awareness, examine their perceptions, and open up to self-change.

Connections between such open learning experiences, espousing relational professionalism, and understanding education as “risk” (Biesta, 2013) are also highly relevant to consider when working in partnership. As social contexts are

always in flux, Biesta claims a true educational encounter is one that is open and therefore “risky” and “weak”; “It is beyond our control and fundamentally out of our hands ... when we keep education open anything can happen, anything can arrive” (2013, p. 23). Within university–community partnerships, the ground is ripe for such an “open education” due to both the unpredictable but also collaborative nature of such experiences. Yet, Biesta (2017) also argues that it is not enough to simply be exposed within interventions; one must also participate dialogically to “learn from” the encounter. He argues that external relationships facilitate us to move towards “grown-up-ness”, not in a developmental sense, but rather as a mature, ethical, and agentic approach to human existence, “to live in the world, without occupying the centre of the world” (2017, p. 9). University–community partnerships demand such a dialogical process, such relational professionalism, where communication, responsiveness, and responsibility are central to the endeavour.

While university–community partnerships espouse collaborative and equal modes of working, to actually achieve meaningful partnership as part of expanding professionalism requires, firstly, an ethical approach. By their nature, these partnerships are in fact interventions. Interventions *by* whom and *for* whom are important issues therefore to avoid the “rational community” (Biesta 2006, pp. 60–70) further marginalising and/or objectifying the “other”. Nichols and Sullivan (2016) share a caveat in this regard where they found the potential for such partnerships to perpetuate stereotypes amongst university students. They encountered a troubling ethical dilemma in bringing white, middle-class students to a detention centre which housed predominantly black working-class juveniles, thus reinforcing the divide further. Within arts projects, there can also be a tendency towards “victory narratives” (Kenny & Christophersen, 2018) or a prevailing “goodness discourse” (Christophersen, 2013) in their set up, execution, and reporting. To address this, one must continually ask in our efforts towards an open and inclusive education, are we in fact engaging in exclusionary acts? What are the ethical implications of working in “risky” partnerships? How are tensions negotiated in practice around how such partnerships operate and their value to the institution/the individual?

Encounters in the “real world”

I present here a series of insights from my own “creative commons” (Taylor, 2008) using a reflexive practice lens. Taking a Freirean stance—particularly in his view of education as “cultural action” itself (Freire, 1985)—these “encounters” consider the emancipatory, social, and political imperative within educational acts, thus offering potential pathways and possibilities for transformation through relational partnership spaces. This approach resonates with Sharon Todd’s appeal to culturally reimagine education, “to engage in the imaginative spaces that can be created in bringing socially engaged art practice into conversation with educational practice” (2018, p. 976). Drawing from a collection of case studies, projects, and personal reflections, these insights are drawn from mine and my students’ encounters of partnership working over the last decade. In doing so,

three distinct themes are presented for discussion in the spirit of making meaning from university–community partnerships and “connecting the dots” to expanding professionalism:

- (1) disruption through partnership;
- (2) intervention and identity;
- (3) reflexive practice for critical engagement.

All encounters are contextually placed at Mary Immaculate College, University of Limerick, Ireland. The projects referred to include a university children’s choir, a transnational partnership, and an after-school music project (each project has its own distinct ethical clearance). These specific projects are selected for the challenges and opportunities that each brought forth for expanding professionalism and to highlight the inherent problematics of university–community partnerships. While these experiences are context-specific, they also serve to inform broader thinking about how university–community partnerships might paradigmatically bridge the worlds of arts and education, theory and practice, as well as “town and gown” to holistically address a new, expanding professionalism for higher arts education.

Disruption through partnership

Some university–community initiatives target minority or “marginalised” groups. These represent a broadening out of spaces for learning, interaction, and engagement coupled with a social justice remit. The MIC Children’s Choir provides a good example of this (see www.youtube.com/watch?v=890Gm24Uvb4). This children’s choir initiative links the university and surrounding Limerick city schools from urban areas of socio-economic disadvantage. The partnership choral initiative involves approximately 14 student volunteers and 150 children each year from across five primary schools. A qualitative case study of the partnership, carried out over the first two years, examined the musical, pedagogical, social, and affective aspects of the initiative for all participants (Kenny et al., 2016). The extent to which such an initiative tackled third-level elitism and affected student–teacher awareness of this was also investigated (Kenny, 2018). From a student learning and expanding professionalism perspective, the student volunteers had to confront their “habitus” (Bourdieu, 1985, 1986), in this scenario, their internalised stereotypes and assumptions in relation to disadvantaged areas in the city where they study. For instance, the students had low expectations regarding the children’s ability to learn and enthusiasm for singing. Once engaged, “in relation” with the children, school, and context, they quickly realised that their biases were false. Furthermore, the initiative challenged the students to reflect on their own economic, cultural, and social “capital” (Bourdieu, 1986), specifically in relation to their access to and participation in education to date:

all of the students noted the children’s interest in what each of the students did at college, how one “got in” and what happens within its walls. This was

quite a revelation for the students as college life was an assumed future pathway for them growing up.

(Kenny, 2018, p. 212)

In this way, the students' engagement with these communities demonstrated the multifaceted role of a choral/community learning experience. It was not just about choral leadership skill-building; the initiative also informed their values, judgments, and beliefs as emerging arts educators with the aim of also in turn shaping and expanding their professional practices and identities.

The MIC Children's Choir had the opportunity to broaden out its partnership working to include an arts-in-education experience with university composer in residence, Anne-Marie O'Farrell (see annemarieofarrell.com). A specially commissioned contemporary classical piece was met with some scepticism from students, children, and class teachers alike. Frequently, the research uncovered that the children wanted to sing more popular music and "easier" repertoire. One child commented on the piece, "I get very confused with that" and another noted, "it was actually really hard ... you'd be doing one song and then you'd be in another song the next minute" (Kenny et al., 2016, p. 20). The steep learning curve encountered was vindicated, however, through the large-scale staged performance of the work. One student claimed, "I learned a lot about how to prepare the children for a performance and make sure everything runs smoothly on the day. Also that it is okay for them to make mistakes in the performance" (*ibid.* p. 31). Furthermore, the students were confronted with working with challenging material, pushing their artistic boundaries, building their own musical repertoires and future repertoire choices for the classroom through the experience, thus expanding their professionalism:

It took a lot of work to try and make it accessible to them [the children], and it was good from my point of view to be able to teach something that isn't immediately motivating in itself because that is part of teaching, you know everything that you teach isn't going to be loved by children.

(*ibid.*, p. 31)

Such partnerships disrupt, acting as "an altered chord" (Christophersen & Kenny, 2018) due to the fact that one enters the space of another. Artist residencies within university settings continue to develop opportunities to work in this way (see for example Freer, 2007; May, O'Donoghue & Irwin, 2014), widening further the potential interactions for students, lecturers, and professional staff within universities. Exposure to the unfamiliar or "other" is not always comfortable. In this sense, the encounter with a contemporary composer for the Children's Choir is what Biesta would call a "risk" (2013), where participants were challenged to collaborate across multiple partners (namely, teachers, students, children, university lecturers, and a living composer). Furthermore, the artistic material itself challenged all partners to engage with something new, unfamiliar, uncomfortable, and in a very tangible way, never even heard before. Not only then were they engaged

in learning something “new from the outside” (Biesta, 2013, p. 44), but they were literally creating a new piece of art, relationally.

Intervention and identity

As stated earlier, university–community partnerships can be viewed as “interventions” within society, and so the imperative to do “something good” is emphasised often. The complex nature of such partnerships facilitates (or arguably promotes) the potential for heightening opportunities for “othering”. Yet, as Biesta argues, such “weakness” is core to education (2013). Applying this stance to higher arts education, then, dealing with the conversations and tensions that arise from real-world learning partnerships is fundamental to ongoing professional development and professional identity formation. Within a contemporary view of academic multiple and shifting identities, as part of expanding professionalism, such experiences inform one’s academic identity “as an ongoing, troubled and conflictual domain” (Taylor, 2008, p. 27).

University transnational partnerships offer alternative ways of being in and visions of the world, not to mention the numerous ethical dilemmas they present. This is not just the case for student exchange but also staff exchange. I have been fortunate enough to engage with several of these partnerships over the past decade, each one challenging both my professional practices, ethical approaches, and personal development in different ways. Westerlund and Karlsen claim (2017, p. 84), such partnerships require us “to identify our own personal and professional understandings, and to constantly and critically re-examine and test them in relation to those in the international and majority-world”. To offer one example, I was involved in the Zambia–Ireland Teacher Education Partnership (ZITEP) for four years. The project was initiated in 2007 as a partnership between Irish and Zambian Colleges of Education with financial support from Irish Aid and the Department of Education and Skills, Ireland. The overall goal was to improve the quality of teacher education in Zambia through reciprocal exchanges between Zambian and Irish college lecturers as well as through action research projects.

During my time in the programme the “partnership” element of ZITEP (even highlighted in its very nomenclature) troubled me. How could it be considered a partnership when one party clearly held more “power” than the other? The financial power is of course obvious: 60% of the Zambian population live below the poverty line, while Ireland is considered one of the richest nations in Europe. However, power does not lie in money alone. The programme’s overriding aim was to raise the quality of teacher education in Zambia—that we Irish participants might learn something to inform our own teacher education development was rarely imagined. The project itself then could be viewed as an act of “symbolic violence” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992), where there were obvious taken-for-granted ways of thinking and behaving. As a result, administrative and structural challenges abounded, which in some instances undermined the initiative completely. These challenges manifested in various ways, from last-minute cancelled

visits to a refusal to free up Zambian lecturers to attend professional development sessions, for instance.

That is not the full story, however. While reciprocity was lacking “at the top”, the professional and personal relationships developed between the Zambian and Irish lecturers “on the ground” tell a different tale. A relational approach to the partnership was indeed present at this level of interaction, built up through a mutual exchange of knowledge/resources, peer observations of each other’s classes, co-planning, co-teaching, and co-reflection of workshops and lectures, culminating in acting as co-researchers on action research projects (leading to joint conference presentations and co-written research reports). Furthermore, meals were shared, arts practices mutually engaged in and glasses of local beer raised together. Taking a Greene lens to reflect on this time, there was an “opening up” to multiple realities and narratives through the experiences shared (2001, p. 54):

The proper way to encounter another person is to be open to them, to be ready to see new dimensions, new facets of the other, to recognise the possibility of some fresh perception or understanding, so you may know the other better, appreciate that person more variously.

While hierarchical and patriarchal stances often blocked progress within the initiative (no doubt aggravated by the clear power imbalances), the “ethics” of the interactions were much more nuanced in practice than originally planned for in policy. The actual “partnership” element existed amongst the one-to-one professional relationships formed, and so contributed to expanding professionalism for the individuals involved despite the institutional challenges. In these “on the ground” acts of reciprocity, in these “third spaces” (Bhabha, 1994), our academic identities were constructed and reconstructed in response to the context and relationships engaged in.

Reflexive practice for critical engagement

While active, “situated” experiences are espoused within university–community partnerships, the importance of reflexive practice during and after these experiences has been well argued for in previous studies with emerging arts educators (Kenny, 2018, 2017, 2014). It has been noted (Kenny et al., 2015, p. 166), “both practical participatory arts experiences and reflective approaches to teaching and learning the arts are fundamental to informing emergent teacher identities as well as values and approaches to teaching the arts in schools”. Taking a relational approach to professionalism, the need to consider the complex movements, relationships, and interactions within partnership spaces is called for in order for professional learning to occur (Bonilla, 2017; Reeves, 2010). This is an ongoing process often requiring dynamic flexibility during the actual partnership experiences themselves, as well as post-activity.

The value of such reflexive practice is highlighted in one particular study carried out with student arts educators in an after-school music project (Kenny, 2014). This

was a music education partnership between the university, a community resource agency, and a school—a university–community partnership. The case study problematised the development of a “community of musical practice” (Kenny, 2016) between the university students and children as well as the complexities around the shared practices formed. Amongst other qualitative research methods, the student participant reflective logs were a key form of data used in the analysis. These logs revealed deep insights on leadership, problem solving, roles assumed, participation, and enjoyment, which all helped to characterise the partnership process investigated. Furthermore, akin to the MIC Children’s Choir study (Kenny, 2018; Kenny et al., 2016), engaging with marginalised schools challenged the students’ perceptions and stereotypes about “disadvantaged” communities, thus informing their emerging professional identities and practices. One student wrote (Kenny, 2014, p. 404):

my expectations were a bit low to be honest, and I thought the children wouldn’t respond at all due to being from a disadvantaged school. But when I went out there, the children were dying to learn music and it got me really motivated to get the best out of them for the weeks that we were there. Over the weeks, my expectations grew and it got me thinking, what could I do next?

Required professional flexibility within learning situations was an aspect all of the students wrote about in their reflective logs. It was revealed (Kenny, 2014, p. 404): “We had to change our original plans as a result of each workshop, we adapted our approaches”. This project capitalised on relational modes of working from multiple partners to inform their emerging professional selves. Firstly, the students themselves taught the children in a group of six. This required (and perhaps even forced) co-planning, co-teaching, and co-reflection. While time-consuming, this ensured significant degrees of reflexivity due to the high frequency of dialogue (and so relationality) required in order to carry out the project. The children were very much partners in this learning process too. Responding to context and to the children’s learning “in the moment” came about from actual interaction, again reinforcing the importance of dialogical engagement to inform growing relational professionalism. A final layer of partnership working was of course in the overall project management that existed between the university, resource organisation, and school. Again, multiple conversations and co-reflection was core at this level to ensure effective delivery and capitalise on relational expertise. Therefore, the multiplicity of learning, teaching, and reflexive interactions in this project illustrates strongly the potential impact of partnership working for expanding professionalism for the many partners involved.

Conclusion

The discussion and “encounters in the real world” presented in this chapter seek to inform key questions that relate to university–community partnership’s impact on expanding professionalism in relational terms, how they inform and shape identities, the ethical considerations required within such “disruptions”, and the role of

reflexivity to foster critical engagement. Biesta argues cogently for educational space to be a “worldly space”, to transform professional practices claiming, “It teaches you something that is fundamental about human existence, namely *that you are not alone*” (2018, p. 16). University–community partnerships, as illustrated, can act as a “worldly space” to both re-frame and expand the mission of higher arts education. In looking outwards, university staff and students can use such partnership experiences to move beyond the traditional dominant binaries of master/apprentice and town/gown, to develop more collaborative and “situated” forms of arts engagement, teaching, and learning. Such a shift sees a relational professionalism that is focused on context, negotiated through actual interaction from multiple partners, embraces uncertainty, and blurs the boundaries of a (false) teacher–learner dichotomy.

We are witnessing a contemporary changing mission and purpose for higher education. University–community partnerships are a key feature of this in their setup as being outward-facing, embracing the complexity of societal experiences beyond the campus boundary walls. Such partnerships, then, are ideal spaces in which an expanded vision for professionalism in the arts can be realised. However, despite the robust evidence and rapid development of these “worldly” partnership spaces, university–community projects can often sit on the periphery of “core” business. Taking a macro view, projects are typically short-term, underfunded, and rely heavily on a small number of individuals to drive them. This is particularly the case with not-for-profit arts-focused partnerships (for example, two of the projects reported on in this chapter no longer exist). While the continuous roll-out of university–community partnerships is welcome, such projects need to move away from piecemeal implementation to become more formally institutionalised within existing university structures. Only then can partnership sustainability and long-term benefits be realised.

Leaving “ivory towers” in favour of partnership encounters organically opens up a dialogue about the “spaces” where teaching, research and learning can occur and the value of situated, practice-based forms of knowledge. Greene advocates for educators to “seek out multiple excellences, to think of academic rigour in connection with the cultivation of qualities of mind in diverse domains” (1995, p. 179). University–community partnerships are thus proposed as offering enormous potential for “pedagogical pivot points” (Ellsworth, 2005), where one engages with an “outside world”, in order to reengage with an “inside world”. Professional (and personal) identity construction is therefore both individual and collective through partnership working in a plural, complex landscape. Through such a relational lens, we are better able as arts educators to facilitate dialogical university–community partnership approaches and thus offer “risky”, “worldly” spaces (Biesta, 2018, 2013) in expanding professionalism within higher arts education. We cannot do it alone.

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