Interagency Working on Foundation Degree Curriculum Development: using tension and aligning motive in the constitution of learning

Michael Doyle, University of Central Lancashire

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to consider both the tensions and the possibilities of partnership approaches to the development of Foundation Degrees. Its focus is a case study of development, and it uses data from a development workshop constructed around the explicit articulation of partner perspectives of priorities for teaching and learning, emphasizing difference. The premise for this approach is that partnership is conveniently used by policy makers as the vehicle of delivery, but the processes and tensions in development are undertheorised. Issues of difference, perspective, competing discourses and hierarchies of expertise impact on partnership working. This paper offers an analysis of how such differences might be utilised as catalysts for development, and uses Engestrom et. al.'s (1995) interventionist Development Work Methodology to align motive and use critical boundary tensions to progress collaborative curriculum development. After contextualizing and describing the case study, the paper offers an outline of and rationale for the methodology, and then presents and analyses the data. It concludes by offering an analysis, rooted in Activity Theory (Engestrom, 2001), which sees barriers in partnership working as potential catalysts for development – with certain caveats linked to the need for compromise on discursive practices, and the recognition of different and distributed expertise within processes of collaboration.

A Case Study of Development Through Partnership: Foundation Degree in Community Governance

The partnership consists of a university (specifically, a host School (Business and Informatics), a servicing School (Environment), and the University's Education Development Unit (EDU), responsible for widening participation (WP) and staff and curriculum development: the EDU initiated the process), five of its nine Associate Colleges, and the local authority employers within which the colleges are located. The University first established links with the colleges in 1993, when it set up its 'FE/HE Consortium', a partnership with thirty five colleges across the Northwest of England, with the purpose of widening access through non-traditional routes into Higher Education before the Hefce sponsored WP initiatives in 1998. The Associate Colleges were in effect a distinct group of this Consortium, with which the university had developed stronger and more strategic links.

The University is characterised by a highly dispersed 'loosely coupled' (Weick, 1976) managerial framework in keeping with the collegiality characteristic of pre-1992 universities. The PVC Teaching and Learning, when interviewed, identified the devolution of policy ownership into the faculties and schools as the biggest challenge to management in such an organisation. Nevertheless the University is proud and respectful of its collegiality, adopting what Trow (1994) classifies as a 'soft managerialism' approach to developments, involving an incremental, devolved approach to change.

The thrust to bid for the Foundation Degree prototype came from the EDU, which also has responsibility for the University's links with the college sector. It has traditionally initiated on behalf of the University new forms of curriculum design, and sits at a meso level within the organization between organizational strategy on teaching and learning, and bottom-up delivery within the academic Schools. However, as a catalyst for change it is in a strange position in the University in that it is outside the faculty structure, and therefore has to 'court' the consent of 'host' Schools and their academic communities in engaging in the implementation of its developments.

In this case the EDU, with the Pro Vice-chancellor (Teaching and Learning) persuaded a school in the Business and Finance Faculty to host this development, and used interest from another School, Environment, which deals with employed public sector workers such as Housing

employees, to service the host school's curriculum. The resulting internal curriculum network has distinct differences, linked largely to professional backgrounds and communities of practice to which the members belonged (Becher and Trowler, 2001, Trowler, 1998).

The colleges are varied in size and identity, but in common is the managerialism based on a dwindling unit of resource. There is one very large mixed-economy college (MEC) with over 30,000 students and used to delivering HE courses at all levels and with franchise relationships with a wide range of universities. There are two urban traditional further education colleges, with a range of levels of teaching from special needs and basic skills to higher level vocational courses. These two are aspirational in terms of their desire to be more 'mixed economy', but geographical limitations of student hinterlands and competition from other colleges means likely expansion will be limited. Nevertheless, the participation in the Foundation Degree has marketing advantages for these colleges. The final two colleges are more traditionally sixth form colleges, with an emphasis on 16-19 and 'A'-Level teaching. One is located in a thriving town between the Merseyside and Manchester conurbations, and the other is in a small town in North-east Lancashire.

Since incorporation in 1993 the colleges have experienced a varying degree of rationalisation of staffing and structures aimed to maximise effectiveness (defined by a range of indicators including cost, performance and retention), and responsiveness to local markets and communities, which have had a marked effect on management style and culture. Staff in the colleges have experienced to varying degrees institutional re-organisations, 'downsizing' and redundancy rounds, scathing resource cuts, and requirements to re-apply for posts. Middle managers have throughout been required to take on more responsibility, and the perception of senior managers was that they were responsible for managerial and resource issues focused on 'efficiency' and target-related funding issues, and had little time for curriculum matters.

The employers have had much in common with the college sector, as analysed in Clarke and Newman's (1997) study of public sector management For example, students in one of the local authorities were all made to re-apply for their posts during the first year of the programme. Such instability created problems not only for the college delivering the programme and of course the students, but also the commitment from the employer representatives in the development and delivery of the programme. The employers, in keeping with the position outlined by Smith and Betts (2003), demonstrated varying degrees of understanding and commitment to what the whole exercise was about. In only two of the five authorities over the period of the research was there a consistent commitment. Issues such as staff turnovers were a major factor in this. However, it must be said that some of the employers, despite consistent overtures, chose to not engage in the process as it developed, seeing it as not their function.

This was not the case in the early stages of collaborating on the bidding process. The employers saw the Foundation degree as serving an important role in professional development for their staff, in response to the Government's modernisation agenda. To an extent they responded to the overtures from Government and the University, and participated in discussions on the curriculum – to the extent that they insisted on changes to course and module titles (hence a course in Public Administration became 'Community Governance'). However, employer protagonists either moved to other jobs, or became pre-occupied with other issues and therefore became relatively detached.

With the colleges, too, there were difficulties. In one of the sixth form colleges the principal was a key early 'shaper' of the partnership, but on his retirement the new principal saw his strategic focus as being not on higher level courses, but core 16-19 curriculum. In one of the urban FE colleges a major issue became the funding model and quality assurance process. The college was working to university funding and quality assurance systems. The manager in the college where the teaching was located took exception to this and when the lead tutor in the college was forced through stress into long-term sick leave, the manager employed a part time tutor (on 'efficiency' grounds) who had little understanding of or commitment to the programme. This caused

problems between the institutions, particularly the University, which was responsible for the quality of delivery within the different locations. This reflects the tensions between modes of discursive practices, and in particular between 'management knowledges' and 'professional knowledges', both within and between organisations (Pritchard, 2000:29).

Difficulties such as these are inevitable in such a complex structural and processual partnership development. Sectoral and inter-sectoral partnerships, seen as key units in policy delivery, are expected to and are assumed to be able to operate effectively on a regional basis. Policy makers and funding bodies, such as Hefce, make little allowance for local tensions, potential conflict and widening market pressures, in particular between competing FE colleges and employers, in collaborating with a local HEI. The Foundation Degree policy strategy seems essentially functionalist and based on an approach characterized by instrumental rationality (Sanderson, 1999), premised on an assumption that partnerships between HEI's, employers and FEI's can and will develop and deliver policy.

The Literature on Collaboration and Partnership

The literature on partnership spans four theoretical strands: corporate theory, liberal humanist, complexity theory and critical theory. The positive connotations of 'partnership' are reflected in the largely uncritical, aspirational and even normative nature of much of the literature. This is particularly applicable to corporate theory and liberal humanist approaches. In corporate theory (Thomas (2002), Huxham (1993), Pennings (1981)), for example, the rationalist managerialism behind concepts such as 'collaborative advantage' - working together to enhance mutual access to resources and expertise, makes logical sense, but it relies on 'tool-kit' approaches of 'tweaking' inputs to affect outputs, and does not take into account sufficiently issues of power, meaning and interpretation. Liberal humanist approaches (Griffiths, 2000, Clandinin et al, 1993, Somekh, 1994) over-estimate the power of individual autonomy, of agency over structure, and in recognising power differences between partners, are idealistic: it seems sufficient for powerful partners to recognise difference from the outset and make espoused commitments to egalitarian practices.

Where partnership struggles, it is assumed that aims needs further clarification (Milbourne et al, 2003), or more time is needed to build up trust (Trim, 2001), or power differences have not been acknowledged and dealt with from the outset (Griffiths, 2000, Somekh, 1994). The paucity of literature on collaboration and its contextual and processual development illustrates either consensus on these premises, or that they have not been critically explored. The limited work that has been done (Johnston 1997, Clift et al 2000, Dadds, 1995, James and Worrall, 2000), points to the importance of 'acknowledging power differences, status, language, style and purpose, and the building up of strategies to mitigate them' (Griffiths, 2003: 102). My contention is that 'partnership' and 'collaboration' are therefore under-theorised, and the literature is to a degree 'captured' by normative and rationalist discourses.

Recently, Warmington et.al. (2004) have attempted to use theoretical developments in Activity Theory, such as notions of co-configuration and boundary crossing, to frame analyses of inter-professional working in the UK. In doing so they stress 'barriers' identified in more rationalist analyses of partnership (such as Milbourne et al, 2003) should be seen as spaces for dealing with contradictions, conflict or 'double binds' (Engestrom, 2001), and therefore as the catalysts for development. Such an approach has provided the rationale and theoretical framework for the methods used to gather the development data in this paper. The following section briefly summarises this framework, and is essential to an understanding of the methodology.

Analyzing Practices of Partnership and its Development

As partnerships are usually developmental and instrumental, I have used theories of contextual development of situated practice to frame and analyse my data: in particular Activity Theory (Vygotsky, 1978, Engestrom, 1987, 2001, 2003), and to a lesser extent communities of practice

theory (Lave and Wenger, 1991, Lave, 1993 and Wenger, 1998). Both are variants of social practice theory.

Activity theory offers a model (the activity system, Fig. 1) to frame the design and analyse the development of this partnership. The activity system is the unit of analysis, and consists of the subject with an object, which is mediated through tools or artefacts (after Vygotsky, 1978) and is historically situated. Engestrom extended these components within a triangular framework to include rules within the system, the notion of community and a division of labour

It provides a theoretically coherent model for developing practice, incorporating processes of mediation between subjects (partners) and the emerging 'object', or curriculum, and acknowledges operational contexts, which are rule governed and dependent on divisions of labour. It also provides a conceptual and theoretical basis to analyse 'collaboration' and the emergence of development, or 'expansive' learning. For Blackler (1995), this means that communities may enact new conceptions of their activities, based on challenges rooted in tensions.

Engestrom (2001) also incorporates collaborating activity systems, or partnerships, and further develops the concept of expansive learning, which he equates to Bateson's (1972) 'Learning III', 'where a person or group begins to radically question the sense and meaning of the context and to construct a wider alternative context'. It provides in this research context a means of conceptualising transition and development within the, at times, contested practices of the collaborators. Questioning of consensus, consciousness of contradiction and its articulation within the 'activity system', form the basis of development and, more significantly, transformation.

The issue then became one of crossing boundaries in complex interacting activity systems. Within the context of this research the subject might be the team or its individual members relating to programme learning outcomes through the mediating tools of curriculum delivery and assessment, which is subject to rules of quality assurance, and delivered by communities with distinct roles and functions.

Contradictions within the system provide the dynamic for the questioning, remodelling and evaluation of practices (Engestrom, 1999), and this process may result in 'expansive learning' for partners – knowing is constituted through emerging practice. Engestrom refers to the process of expansive learning through working professional groups as

…radical exploration…learning what is not yet there…the creation of new knowledge and new practices for a newly emerging activity; that is, learning embedded in and constitutive of the qualitative transformation of the entire activity system. (Engestrom, 2004)
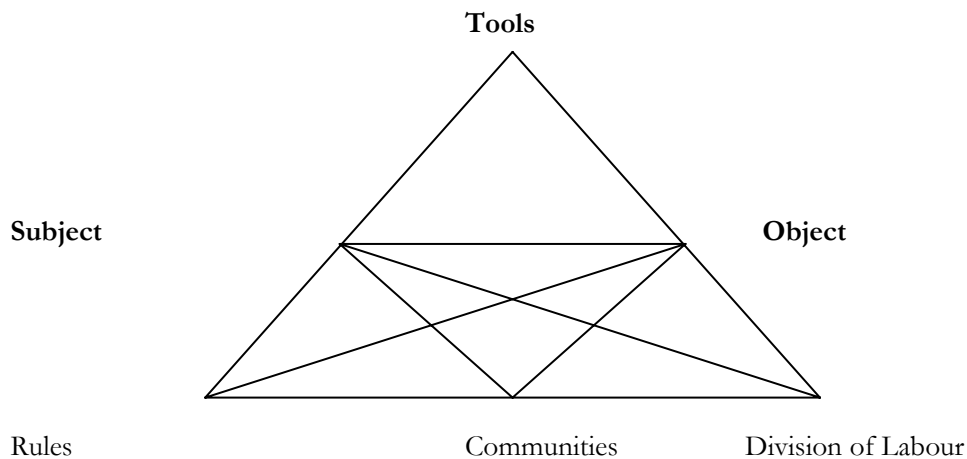
Fig. 1 The Activity System (after Engestrom, 1987)

Method of Data Collection

Data for this research has been collected through a combination of interviews with partners from the three constituencies, interspersed with developmental workshops, or as Engestrom et al (1995) call them, 'boundary crossing laboratories'. These were based on the interventionist concept of Development Work Methodology (Engestrom, et al 1995), a method particularly suited to insider-research, and the research of emerging processes. The sequence is illustrated in Fig. 2.

Individual interviews were held at the end of semester 1 for intake 1. Amongst the data gathered were two issues – individual perspectives on priority learning goals for the programme, and having experienced the first semester, changes required for the next intake of students to enhance delivery of those learning goals. This data from the interviews, made anonymous, was used as a stimulus at the start of the first developmental workshop. For the purposes of this chapter I summarise the outcomes of the initial development workshop to provide the context for the data analysis of the second workshop a year later. The starting point for the second workshop was a review of the outcomes agreed a year earlier.

Example of Data and Analysis

Summary of first development workshop

The first workshop was structured broadly around Engestrom's (1999) 'expansive learning' phases of questioning, analysing and modelling. I called these 'what' issues (those raised in the interviews), 'why' issues (discussion between the partners on the 'what' issues), and moved from these to thinking about 'how' issues for the second intake of students (Engestrom's process of 'modelling'). Subsequent actions of the cycle are examining the model, implementing, consolidating and proliferating and evaluating. In my initial data analysis each of these three segments broke down into distinct episodes: under 'what' issues, discussion ranged from the intended work-based nature of the learning to a tendency towards 'academic drift', to the problems deliverers of the curriculum in the colleges were facing operating within University practices and quality systems in different institutional settings.

Discussion within the 'why' episodes was more open and in the second of these, on assessment, college staff and the employer representative challenged modular practices and initiated processes of modelling rooted in their own situated practices, involving propositions to integrate assessment across modules. There were a number of attempts by college tutors to 'stabilize' debate (Engestrom, 2004) and anchor propositions in order to 'normalize' practice at

this stage and move forward, but these did not involve attempts at boundary crossing – rather they represented assertions of challenge to dominant discursive practices. The multivocality stressed by Engestrom was evident in this phase of the discussions.

The 'how' phase of modeling, discussing options for moving things forward for the next intake, was characterized by boundary tensions rooted in a range of issues. These can be summarized as contested priorities: for the HE staff it was consistency, timing and quality of delivery, and knowledge transfer to deadline circumscribed within modular 'containers'. For the FE tutors it was diagnosing learner starting points, knowledge construction and skills development as the pedagogical priority, and whole programme, rather than modular perspectives. For the employers, priorities were corporate human resource targets. The key boundaries were between the College and University partners, and these are summarized in Fig. 3. Boundaries were exposed in the workshop, if not crossed, but compromises were reached on four issues for the second intake: thematic approaches to assessment within semesters with skills embedding; cross-modular themes that make sense to the students; personal development planning to be introduced from induction; and University module leaders to be responsible for staff development for module teams.

College Tutors	University Tutors
Knowing - constructivist	Knowledge - cognitive
Learning - processual	Teaching - procedural
Diagnosis – individual needs	Transfer – didactic, collective
Skills - development	Knowledge - outcomes
Personal Development Planning	Modular structures and deadlines
Programme – holistic learner experience	Modules/semesters – fragmentation, Module Leader autonomy
Formative assessment	Summative Assessment

Fig. 3 Professional identities, dispositions and priorities

To an extent there were attempts throughout the workshop to stabilise the debate and reach consensus on meanings and proposed practices. The Programme Leader recognised the rationale for linking assessment between modules within semesters, and if possible across semesters. However, this posed no threat to the autonomy of the modular structure and the Module Leaders. Was the experience 'expansive' for the partnership? This was unlikely at this stage in the development process. Nevertheless, the distributed nature of knowledge and expertise did have an impact in that assessment patterns were changed for the second cohort of students, and HE staff were to a degree responsive to the problems of curriculum delivery articulated by those with the responsibility. Differences in expertise, motivation and priorities were increasingly understood to be complementary, albeit still hierarchically determined by hegemonic discursive structures and practices.

Analysis of Development Workshop Two
The collaborative practice, a further year on, was still characterised by hierarchies in terms of roles, and culture clashes of FE teachers used to operating within clearly managed practices having to relate to relatively autonomous module leaders at the University. However, there was a greater self-confidence and recognition by the FE teachers of their identity and expertise, with the kind of students on this Foundation Degree – employed, part-time adult-returners. A key issue throughout had been the HE tutors' emphasis on knowledge transfer, particularly the volume, and the practicalities, for the 'teacher-labourers' in the colleges, of meeting the needs of learner diversity in three hours per week. Engestrom (2001) refers to such contradiction and tension as the 'double bind' that provides the catalyst for change. Different perspectives and priorities for the four identified targets were clear, and rooted in divisions of expertise and professional interest. For example, while there had been developments in cross modular themes and assessment, little development had taken place in personal development planning, and the

colleges had either developed their own systems, or had adapted existing college practices. Different perspectives and motivation by the subjects in conceptualising the object (Fig 1) provide a clear boundary that either has to be crossed, or at least accommodated.

This double bind appeared very early in the second development workshop. The contradiction, interestingly, was championed by the clear opinion leader for the college lecturers. She (I will call her Susan) was experienced in delivering higher level work in a 'mixed economy college', and throughout the exchanges in the workshop, particularly in the questioning phase, her leadership of her other college partners at the boundaries being confronted was recognised and supported by them. The division of labour between writing and delivering modules was raised by Susan:

> *Try teaching what you are writing and then work out how you need to change it…it's handed down , and unless you actually go in and try to teach it to the type of students that are coming into the college three hours a week …try to deliver this module to them yourself*

When the Programme Leader (PL) responds with a question about how the problem can be resolved, Susan, with the enthusiastic support of one of the employers, responds by inviting him into her college to teach the module. The PL recognises the value of this but raises the 'practicalities' of resources, time and other constraints. While acknowledging these, a servicing University tutor, Jean, acknowledges to Susan that she is right. Another of the FE tutors, Ruth, then validates Susan's assertions:

> *The Module Leaders expectations are unrealistic. They are not aware of the problems that you are facing with that particular type of learner.*

Susan develops this theme by demonstrating how she adapts the material and prioritises in the learners' interests:

> *…adapting to what you have been given…to suit the students. You supplement it in ways the students can understand it.*

Such assertion of professional priorities, expertise and practice encourages Ruth to share

> *I might go in one week and decide that I will completely change the next sessions because I have noticed they have missed something*

The dialogue represents an emerging positioning of the college voice in this context. The other three college tutors lend their support through reinforcing verbal comment and non-verbal signals, supporting the data picked up in the individual interviews prior to the workshop.

This culminates in Susan's categorical assertion

> *You have to go where they want to take you, because it's important to them…you might start off with something that dominates the whole of the class because they want to talk about it, they want to relate it back to their experience…you have to go with that…that's given them something to bring back to the next session: it's about flexibility, but that isn't implied within the modules.*

This episode of questioning represents a complete clash of epistemologies and pedagogies, and is the result of tensions within the activity system culminating in this 'double bind'. In Engestrom's terms this is a turning point where something has to give. The PL's response effectively opens the way to a phase of analysis and modelling in moving the development forward:

> *In listening to that I am thinking increasingly that the sessions at the colleges shouldn't be so rigid.*

Susan's response is a plea for reciprocity and a recognition of expertise:

> *You have to have a structure…I think at the local level we have to take that on-board…where at the chalk face we are delivering it , we are getting to know what works and what doesn't. If we feed that back (to the Module Leaders) they need to take that on-board, and not say 'no you can't'…not that they have.*

The phase of modelling in this case represents a process of accommodation around contested discursive practices. The critical issues for the University staff reflect epistemological and pedagogical issues of knowledge transfer, quality (Jean's 'ironing out variation'), and assessment practices within modular structures. Recognition of the constraints in the colleges results in a proposal by the PL, supported by Jean, for more of the delivery to be done at the University (all Foundation degree students at the colleges attend the University for two days each semester).

The dialogue in this phase reflects positions characteristic of individual practices. For the PL this means:

> *I would need a full day and an evening to deliver significant parts of Asset Building*

Jean's response is

> *We'll have to be flexible for different modules – you couldn't talk at someone for three hours*

The needs of the learner are priority for Susan, stressing in induction that links between assessment and themes in the first semester should be crystal clear for the students – 'you know, lay it down for them'. At this Jean expresses surprise, thinking they had been made clear following the actions agreed at the first development workshop. This illustrates the distributed nature of knowledge in collective developmental practices.

The process of accommodating perspectives and priorities through modelling leads gradually to attempts to stabilize the debate and agree to normalize the practice of more delivery at the University. This meets University priorities, and is presented by Jean in a way that accommodates the college tutors' priority of supporting the learner:

> *I mean it must be difficult for them (FE tutors) to have that concrete information in their handbooks and not really have the forum to deliver it in. I don't know how you get round that.*

The PL agrees, commenting that an hour and a half per week for each module is inadequate. Susan responds by explaining that in some sessions 'we started doubling up as it was the only way you could continue it through'.

Attempts to stabilize and move forward result in a critical moment in the dialogue:

> *Jean: So that would work from your point of view – to have more formal delivery at the University?*

> *Susan: I think when they come into the University and you do keynote lectures to them , I think that would be useful.*

Susan's position as opinion leader is endorsed by Ruth:

> *I think that as a lecturer that gives you a point to aim at.*

However, Susan does express reservations that it 'would not sort everything', particularly across the other colleges, where she says 'I don't know whether they are all doing something different'. Whether this is consensus or reluctant acquiescence is uncertain at this stage.

The division of labour (and status and power) was clear throughout the whole process of development researched, and the frustration expressed by the colleges and to a lesser degree the

employer reflected the dominant discourses to which they were required to adapt. Their frustration is reminiscent of Wenger's assertion of the need for negotiability of meaning in such collaborative activity:

> *When in a community of practice the distinction between production and adoption of meaning reflects enduring patterns of engagement among members – that is, when some always produce and some always adopt – the local economy of meaning yields very uneven ownership of meaning. This situation, when it persists, results in a mutually reinforcing condition of both marginality and inability to learn. (Wenger, 1998:203)*

Wenger is essentially arguing for a recognition of expertise within the division of labour in the partnership, of 'give and take'. For the College staff to operate within the prevailing University practices and rules with no opportunity to impact and influence them is counterproductive, and will stifle development. Positions adopted through the development workshops do indicate gradual transition resulting from pressure from the bottom, with the colleges' more constructivist, learner-centred pedagogic approach resulting in effective challenges to the more traditional University emphasis on knowledge transfer. However, this occurred over a full two year period, indicating that time and the formation of relationships are important in negotiating and advancing change. It would appear to represent 'hybridity' and boundary crossing as a gradual process of mutual learning and accommodation (and the will to do so), one of movement and transformation, understanding and attempting to experience others' worlds.

Conclusion

The notion of the Activity System (Fig 1) in this case needs to accommodate diversity of subject (partner) perspective and motive in framing the object. The outcomes of the second workshop represent an accommodation of motives around conceptualizations of the object (learner development needs in contrast to covering the content of modules). Compatibility of motive and complementarity of expertise were critical in this case, ensuring development in ways that met the requirements of the different partners. For the Colleges, this means their priorities of skill diagnosis, personal development planning and knowledge construction on a whole programme basis match the expertise they bring, and the roles they expect to fulfil within the partnership. Foe the University tutors, priorities of knowledge transfer, assessment, quality and consistency were also accommodated.

This analysis is in keeping with the views of Nardi (2005) and Keptelinin (2005). Nardi demonstrates, for example, how even in a single company, the object of activity was shared between members of a research department, but that this was in tension with the company management's priorities. Management effectively appeased the researchers through framing their goals in discourses acceptable to the researchers, facilitating the ability to work to the same ends through distinct but compatible motives. Tensions, difficulties and barriers associated with partnership working, particularly in the rationalist and liberal humanist literatures, are constructed as issues to be resolved through effective planning or goodwill. These conditions of interagency working are usually the norm, and while planning and relationship building are important, the constructive and developmental nature of process , and movement through dealing with contradictions and tensions, are critical to progress. The initial questioning in Engestrom's expansive learning cycle, and the creation of space and time for it to emerge in a relational way, provide the dynamic for development, change and potentially boundary crossing. Issues of power, competing and hierarchical discursive practices and different aspects of expertise need to be recognised and accommodated.

The evidence from this case study is that boundaries were accommodated. Within the activity system, or in processes of collaborative development between activity systems, this experience demonstrates that the object of the collaboration is multi-faceted, and for it to act in a developmental and expansive way, the positions, perspectives and dispositions of the partners have to be recognised. Hence contested priorities and conceptualizations of learning, issues of skills or content, modes of delivery, personal development planning, and modes of assessment have had to be accommodated.

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