

SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND PARTNERSHIPS WITH REGIONAL AND REMOTE SCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how notions of social entrepreneurship have inspired me to engage in innovative partnerships with two small rural schools in Central Queensland, Australia. I seek to explore practical ways in which to help rural schools contribute to the transformation of their schools, considering that we are now in an information-based society operating in a postmodern world where change happens quickly and continually.

The paper explores the mapping of the journeys undertaken both by the schools and by myself as a university lecturer, and analyses how the concept of social entrepreneurship is used to empower schools with these changes. I examine the two partnerships with local schools more closely in terms of helping the participants – myself included – become social entrepreneurs by deploying innovative problem solving strategies that can provide ways forward to help us to begin to revolutionise the regional and rural education ‘industry’ and in the process engage regional and rural communities.

INTRODUCTION

Change, change and more change – all one ever hears about today is change. No wonder there is an increasing incidence of change fatigue when it is difficult to pick up a newspaper, turn on a television, click on the web or talk to a loved one without eventually acknowledging that things have changed (Peters, 2001a). Contemporary economic and social contexts coupled with competing perspectives on ‘the future’ create significant dilemmas for educators and educational leaders who are increasingly expected to act in entrepreneurial (and futures oriented [see also Allison & Douglas and Smyth & Down, this issue) ways whilst also remaining true to the professional standards of their present environments (Faculty of Education and Creative Arts, 2004).

One way of beginning to manage change in contemporary educational contexts is by embracing notions of entrepreneurship in general, and social entrepreneurship more specifically (see also Harreveld, this issue). This paper discusses how the concept of social entrepreneurship can be used to create meaningful partnerships with regional schools in order to embrace ‘authentic’ learning experiences that assist students to position themselves within global and local contexts. I explore firstly what it means to be an entrepreneur or to participate in the entrepreneurial process more generally.

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ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Although there are many definitions of entrepreneurship, a recurring theme in those definitions is innovation (see also Allison & Douglas, Smyth & Down and Fullerton, Danaher, Moriarty & Danaher, this issue). According to de Leon (1996), "An innovation need not be something entirely new; rather, it could be the creative combination of familiar elements, that is, a known intervention used in a new way or a new setting" (p. 496). The key element for an entrepreneur when this definition is considered is a creative and innovative attitude that allows the entrepreneur to conceive of and implement ideas in new, interesting and re-interpretive ways.

The dilemma that education faces with the concept of the entrepreneur is that traditionally "most discussion of entrepreneurship focuses on the creation of for-profit businesses, whether initiated by individuals or (less commonly) within the context of an existing organization" (Hindle & Rushworth, 2002, p. 9). Education and profit do not sit comfortably together to the extent that, when the term 'social entrepreneur' is considered, "Many social entrepreneurs would not describe themselves as 'entrepreneurs' or feel comfortable with that terminology" (Thompson, 2002, p. 412).

Despite this potential objection to the term 'entrepreneur', the notion of the entrepreneur is useful in postmodern contexts where the traditional boundaries of education are beginning to blur (Walker-Gibbs, 2001, 2003). When I conceptualise the social entrepreneur, I am assuming that s/he exhibits certain behaviours, characteristics and attitudes associated with 'business entrepreneurs' but is more focused on the humanitarian goals of improving people's lives socially than on amassing profit (Thompson, 2002). From this perspective, the boundaries and distinctions among the educator, the entrepreneur and the broader community potentially become blurred and are re-interpreted and re-envisaged.

The next section of this paper explores the issues associated with this concept of social entrepreneurship whilst outlining two partnerships between myself as an academic in an Australian regional university and two different rural primary schools. (The schools are referred to as School A and School B, and the teacher is assigned the pseudonym 'Polly', in order to ensure the participants' anonymity.)

SCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS AND THE SOCIAL ENTREPRENEUR

I have outlined in the previous section of this paper that educators in all sectors are facing changes and challenges to the way that schooling specifically, and education generally, are perceived. Linked to this change are the concepts of the knowledge economy (see also Allison & Douglas, this issue) and globalisation (see also Hartley, this issue) associated with the increased reliance on information communication technologies (ICTs).

The context in which I am situated is Queensland, Australia, with the dominant education authority being Education Queensland. Education Queensland has developed a *Rural and Remote Education Framework for Action 2003-2005* in which it is argued:

School environments in rural and remote areas are often characterised by...[engaging in] [c]reative partnerships with local community organisations, businesses and industries for building innovative learning environments and experiences for students....Partnerships [are] being fostered out of a commitment to the wellbeing of fellow community members. (Education Queensland, 2003, p. 10)

At the same time, Education Queensland (n.d.) also encourages teachers to engage with the concept of productive pedagogies. "Productive pedagogies are effective pedagogy, incorporating an array of teaching strategies that support classroom environments, and recognition of difference, and are implemented across all key learning and subject areas" (p. 1). So we have a local context that has to respond not only to more global changes to education but also to policy directives (see also Hartley and Harreveld, this issue) to make education more relevant to multiple perspectives, including regional and remote.

Within that context, I was introduced to Polly early in 2003. Polly is an innovative Year Seven teacher, who embraces Education Queensland's productive pedagogies and who seeks continually creative learning opportunities that help her Year Seven class engage with new literacies and new technologies. Polly is also concerned with producing meaningful and productive learning, not only for the school but also for the rural community in which School A is situated. This was in response to Galletly's (2002) statement that "We live in times vastly different to [*sic passim*] what has been and no doubt vastly different to what lies ahead...Education Queensland is emphasising the need for students to become active learners with powerful literacy skills" (p. 3).

The decision had been made by Polly, in consultation with the Year Seven students, to establish a website for the school that also highlighted the region in which the children lived. Polly was trying to use ICTs and web-based learning to begin to help her school manage the futures oriented discourses being engaged with locally and globally. The characteristics that Polly displayed in bringing together the various participants in this journey were those of a social entrepreneur. The notion of the social entrepreneur in this scenario becomes more apparent when we turn to what Peters (2003) argued are the key traits to surviving the new world:

1. Think like an entrepreneur
2. Always be a "closer"
3. Embrace marketing
4. Pursue mastery
5. Thrive on ambiguity
6. Laugh off vigorous screw-ups
7. Nurture your network
8. Relish technology
9. Grovel before the young
10. Cultivate a passion for renewal. (pp. 244-246)

I became involved in a partnership with Polly because of the entrepreneurial traits that Polly exhibits in her work as a teacher in a rural school. For example, in consultation with her students, Polly negotiates a real life enterprise that results in their leaving a legacy not only for the school but also for the community in which the school is situated. Polly and her students embraced the marketing of the website, enthusiastically responded to the many technical challenges of implementing new technology and incorporated the need for the students to become the holders of the knowledge and the teacher to become the facilitator of that knowledge.

An important lesson for the adult participants was to know when to take large steps away from what was happening and let the students take more responsibility for the development of the website. This was difficult when there were deadlines to meet, educational curriculum objectives to achieve and disagreements amongst the different groups. However, this process was made easier by having already established roles and responsibilities and by having modelled appropriate languages prior to the construction of the website. The students were given ultimate responsibility and negotiated approval for the final product. If there were a disagreement with the design, for example, the designers discussed the design principles behind the image with various members of the school and regional community and the producers reminded the group about the

outcomes of the questionnaire that was sent to parents, teachers and community members. All the participants had to recognise that we would make mistakes along the way but at the same time we needed to, as other entrepreneurs do, stay passionate and committed to our goals. As Willmore (2003) argued, "We would all like to avoid making mistakes, but that is impossible when starting out. In fact, *screw-ups can be key learning opportunities* when we evaluate them intelligently and learn the appropriate lessons from them" (p. 28; *emphasis in original*).

Whilst I was working with School A, I was also involved in a research project that was centred on the notion of engaging in research partnerships between schooling and university communities. The project saw me as an academic at a regional university and students from the pre-service education program engage with students, teachers and other staff at School B, a local state school in a partnership of learning based on the principles of *Learning Initiatives* developed by the school. Ultimately, *Learning Initiatives* enable students to work in teams to solve real world problems, create products or performances and develop community projects for real purposes. Through the process, they investigate topics important to themselves, the community or the world in which we live. The work that the students produce fulfils an identified community need and learning is for real purposes, not simulated. (For a more detailed outline of this project, see Cooling, Graham, Moore & Walker-Gibbs, 2003.)

In October 2000, School B was established as a Learning and Development Centre for Technology, with an operational focus on providing learning and development experiences for Education Queensland teachers, with an emphasis on effective learning and teaching using ICTs. As previously stated, *Learning Initiatives* are characterised by interactive, school–community relationships. These interactive relationships can be in two modes. In the first instance, students utilise expert knowledge available in the community to enable their own learning and to achieve the goals of the initiative. In this mode, students have connections to real experts who for the most part are consultants, to enable them to complete the learning initiative before them.

In the second instance, students produce knowledge, products or services that are valued by the community. In both modes, students are receiving feedback about the value of their work from expert sources. The questions that guided this project were:

- How do we enhance the curriculum and pedagogy of literacy learning through *Learning Initiatives*?
- How do we improve learning outcomes in literacy through *Learning Initiatives*?
- How do we demonstrate or measure improved literacy/learning outcomes achieved through *Learning Initiatives*?
- What does good literacy learning look like? Can *Learning Initiatives* deliver good literacy learning?

Pre-service teacher education students worked alongside school students in the community to develop ICT focused projects that served a 'real' purpose and that increased literacy/learning outcomes for all participants. The changes and experiences that Schools A and B were undergoing coincided with some fundamental changes that were occurring within my regional university. In 2000, the Faculty of Education and Creative Arts began to introduce a new undergraduate teaching program called the Bachelor of Learning Management (BLM) that

...focuses on the collaboration between school and university staff, in the design and implementation of the degree....Our graduates will be familiar with working collaboratively with other teaching professionals, and the community. Consequently, they should have developed a very thorough understanding of the importance of such partnerships and networks. (Thompson, Smith & Mienczakowski, 2002, p. 1)

As part of the implementation of the BLM, a core course of the program was being developed, this being *The Entrepreneurial Professional*. The main aims of this course were to use various approaches to futures studies, in order to "learn to identify, analyse, research and respond to contemporary organisational concerns in ways that demonstrate, also, an appreciation of future and possible developments of entrepreneurial discourses" (Faculty of Education and Creative Arts, 2004). The links among the courses, the pre-service teacher education program, the schools, the university and the faculty were based on the notions of future directed learning that responds to more global change.

Changes in the university are seen in the construction of the 'entrepreneurial' academic who engages with the social discourses of schooling. Discourses, for example around effective teaching, emphasise among other things student satisfaction, retention (see also Smyth & Down, and Fullerton, Danaher, Moriarty & Danaher, this issue) and

flexibility, with many of these outcomes linked unproblematically to the use of technology. According to Peters (2001b), "Education has come to symbolise an optimistic future based on the increasing importance of science and technology as the engine of economic growth and the means by which countries can successfully compete in the global economy" (p. 65). These changes of educational focus are also reflected in Schools A and B, whose missions were based on strengthening the participants' social worlds as well as maintaining relevance more globally.

INNOVATION AND CHANGE IN SCHOOLS – LEARNING AS RURAL ENGAGEMENT

The significant aspects of the cases (see also Hartley, and Smyth & Down, this issue) covered in the previous section are related to how Thompson (2002) defines social entrepreneurs as being people who:

- Identify a needs gap and a related opportunity – which they understand;
- Inject imagination and vision into their answer;
- Recruit and motivate others to the cause in question and build essential networks;
- Secure the resources that are needed;
- Overcome the obstacles and challenges and handle the inherent risks;
- Introduce proper systems for controlling the venture;
- In particular, it appears that they listen to the "voice of the community" and respond in meaningful ways. (pp. 413-414)

My involvement in both schools was entrepreneurial, in the sense that we were able to use creative problem solving skills to enhance the learning outcomes not only for the students but also for the communities in which we operated. Links were made to research opportunities, community members and the regional setting in which we were situated. Importantly, the community as much as the schools drove the projects. The university and the schools were equally active in and committed to the projects and were able to "[o]vercome the obstacles" that inevitably arise as part of working with/in these complex situations. At the same time, all participants were engaged in the entrepreneurial process outlined by Thompson (2002) as:

- (1) Envisioning – clarifying a need, gap and opportunity
- (2) Engaging – engaging the opportunity with a mind to doing something with it
- (3) Enabling – ensuring something happens by acquiring the necessary resources, such as people and money and, if necessary, premises

(4) Enacting – championing and leading the project to a satisfactory conclusion. (p. 414)

Both schools had identified gaps in either the curriculum or the learning situations that were being provided for their students. Both schools had committed teachers, managers and students who were imaginative in the solutions that they sought and achieved and they were able to identify where best to access the resources that they needed and were quite willing to look further afield for partnerships with real purpose.

The partnerships that were formed were significant and long lasting, which represents what is at the core of being a social entrepreneur. According to Thompson (2002), “I have always believed that the bonds that individuals make with each other and their communities are every bit as important as the things provided for them by the state...Every year social entrepreneurs achieve extraordinary things in difficult circumstances” (p. 413).

The concept of the social entrepreneur is valuable in helping schools and universities in general, but in a rural setting it has particular resonance with those who seek to engage with and shape learning in the ‘new’ knowledge economy addressed in this paper. According to Hargreaves (2003):

Knowledge economies are stimulated and driven by creativity and ingenuity. Knowledge schools have to create these qualities, otherwise their people and their nations will be left behind. Like other kinds of capitalism, the knowledge economy is...a force of creative destruction. It stimulates growth and prosperity, but its relentless pursuit of profit and self-interest also strains and fragments the social order. Along with other public institutions, our schools must therefore also foster the compassion, community and cosmopolitan identity that will offset the knowledge economy’s most destructive effects. (p. xvi)

Thus the knowledge economy presents opportunities as well as challenges for schools – and universities – to promote particular kinds of learning and thereby to (re-)engage the communities whose members compose their stakeholders and their constituencies. Dealing with change or the future is not new but the future that schools are expected to deal with is new. Both schools outlined in this paper were trying to come to terms with helping their students become better equipped to engage with the futures knowledge economy, as outlined above. Both schools did this by embracing entrepreneurial notions of creativity and innovation, with the focus being on the social entrepreneurial spirit of improving the communities in which they were based.

The partnership for both schools was based on helping the communities engage with key stakeholders in creative and innovative ways that focused on authentic learning experiences. The ways in which these partnerships were entrepreneurial was different in each instance. For School A, the entrepreneurial aspect of the partnership was not just locating a perceived 'expert' but also incorporating this expertise in innovative ways. The expert was not just involved at a superficial level that was determined and negotiated by the teacher but was someone who became an active member of the school community. The project culminated in a website for the use of both the school and the community in which the school was located. Community members were actively involved in deciding what was to be included in the website. This project was also innovative, in that the 'expert' worked with the students, teachers and community but was not the main driver of the project. Rather, it was the students who decided not only what they wanted to do (build a website) and why they wanted to do it (to leave a useful legacy) but also who would participate and how those participants would be involved.

The partnership with School B was different, in that it originated as a result of a previous research partnership with another academic member of the university who changed employment at the beginning of 2002. Prior to this time, I was introduced to the school via this academic in order to pursue and extend upon the work already being done in the local education community as an ICT learning centre. The partnership developed out of a common social entrepreneurial goal of listening to the "voice of the community" and trying to "respond in meaningful ways" (Thompson, 2002, pp. 413-414). School B's focus is on developing real learning for real purpose. The value of the learning or the product that is developed is determined by the participants and the community in negotiation with each other. The outcome in this instance was to engage students and student teachers in meaningful ICT learning for a real purpose. The innovation arose in the way that this was delivered. School students and university students worked and learnt side by side to produce, for example, movies, animations and interactive PowerPoints that documented a community event. The innovation also extended to how the university lecturer and the school educators worked side by side to develop the course content and deliver the course in a partnership. The partnership is based on trying to break down the traditional dichotomy of schools versus universities as places for learning. It is an attempt to be entrepreneurial, in the sense that it is identifying a gap and a related opportunity in order to "[o]vercome the obstacles and challenges and handle the inherent risks" (Thompson, 2002, pp. 413-414) as a means of

beginning to engage in partnerships that prove ultimately to benefit the community in which the participants operate.

The communities in which both these schools operate are similar, in that they are part of small rural communities approximately 35 kilometres from each other and the university with which the partnerships exist. Both partnerships were part of building “innovative learning environments and experiences for students” (Education Queensland, 2003, p. 10) that will help equip not only the school students but also pre-service teachers to operate in the future knowledge economy in creative and interesting ways that rely on the fostering of effective networks and partnerships beyond the school and university walls. As one university student stated when asked what they thought about the partnership between the school and the university, “...using the school as a base and new students, new teachers coming out as a learning centre. So they’re using, its like the school’s being an entrepreneur type thing, to better themselves and better their name as a school, but they’re also bettering the students that are coming out of Uni at the same time.”

CONCLUSION

All partnerships covered in this paper were conceived to help the rural community in which they are situated come to terms with the local and global identities so important to their children’s futures. Through this kind of socially entrepreneurial rural engagement, the voices of the community can be identified and strengthened in order to achieve learning outcomes that may not have been possible without the partnerships.

This paper outlined the complexities of social entrepreneurship and the ways in which this concept can help to redefine and refocus regional and rural schools and universities, locally and globally. Two specific partnerships were outlined and analysed according to the notion of the social entrepreneur who engages in rural settings. Ultimately it was argued that, through creative problem solving, social entrepreneurs are able to achieve significant educational outcomes, and in the process to contribute to the engagement of regional and rural communities, despite the complexities and dilemmas of the knowledge economy.

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