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Theorising partnerships for site-based education development in vocational education and workplace learning

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ABSTRACT
Site-based education development now constitutes a common approach to preparing learners for particular occupations, enabling them to secure employment and at the same time achieve broader social, economic and personal outcomes. New forms of partnerships, other than traditional vendor–client relations, are necessary to achieve such multi-faceted goals. This can be achieved by recognising and appropriately integrating pedagogical contributions in different sites to cater for learning needs. Accordingly, professionals from educational institutions need to actively collaborate and engage with a range of key personnel to form partnerships for the purposes of harnessing and facilitating learning opportunities within the constraints of given sites. An action research process enables participating partners to work towards and achieve agreed outcomes. Outcomes addressing areas causing concern are developed and discussed ‘on site’, forming site-based education development. Using a collaborative action research methodology that addresses issues identified by those in particular sites, solutions can be made visible and problems worked through. This enables the partners to achieve agreed outcomes developed during the life of the partnership. Outcomes and possible training areas are developed and discussed by key partners, particularly those in workplaces. In this article, we draw on intersecting sets of understandings around the philosophy of site-based education development, founded mainly on two overarching theories of workplace learning and practice architectures, to theorise partnerships for site-based education development. Some findings and ideas from two exemplar action research projects are presented to exemplify the key concepts.

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Introduction
The concept of site-based education development (SBED) has become a common feature of the responses of educational institutions to the changing nature of learning about and for work and continuing employment. This is particularly true in Australia, where the site may be a school, a workplace, a college or a registered training organisation (RTO). It is common for educational provision to be framed within a SBED framework so that it is
appropriately and effectively responsive to the local needs, opportunities and circumstances of students, schools and communities in diverse and different local situations – at each local site’ (Kemmis et al. 2014, 184). For this reason, SBED in Australia extends beyond traditional education and training provisions, with a specific focus on preparing learners (students and workers) for particular occupations and enabling them to secure employment. At the same time, the partners are striving to achieve broader social, economic and personal outcomes. Clearly, it is not practical for such multi-faceted outcomes to be served by any single institution or enterprise; rather, they demand the combined efforts of various partners collaboratively adopting a holistic approach to local (site-based) development. Furthermore, any partnership constantly needs to assess changing contexts in different sites, and to accommodate appropriate adjustments on an ongoing basis. Using a collaborative action research (AR) methodology and addressing site-specific issues, solutions can be made visible and appropriate responses to problems or concerns developed during the partnership. Some findings and ideas from exemplar research projects are explored and discussed.

**Theoretical foundations of site-based education development**

SBED is a contemporary approach to education, initiated and facilitated primarily through reforms to local and national education systems in various countries. In Finland, for example, this reform was through ‘delegation and deregulation’ to the municipalities. In Australia, ‘school-based curriculum development’ was the start of local responsiveness through education (Edwards-Groves, Brennan Kemmis, and Ponte 2010). However, this does not only apply to education through schools; vocational education and training (VET) institutions and universities are also actively engaged in SBED. VET institutions have a long history of operating in partnership with industry, but are now extending their engagements with local communities to achieve broader social goals. University programmes are also being rejuvenated by work-integrated learning initiatives (Choy and Delahaye 2011). The competitive nature of educational provisions in Australia means that researchers continue to explore innovative ways to transform their provisions and practices in order to achieve greater levels of effectiveness and increased efficiencies. For example, recent research and innovations in work-integrated learning and community-based sustainability education focus specifically on preparing students for their life-worlds (Billett 2010a). These initiatives illustrate an intense interest in and commitment to embedding SBED within the contexts, or ‘practice architectures’, of the worlds inhabited by learners.

SBED is based on two over-arching theories of workplace learning (for example, Billett 2010a, 2010b, 2012; Eraut et al. 1998; Fuller and Unwin 2002) and practice architectures (for example, Kemmis and Grootenboer 2008) which shape the practices within SBED. It is therefore important to problematise these theoretical positions, and to examine them carefully in order to fully understand the importance of sites and partnerships in the Australian context. We begin with a review of emerging perspectives on learning in the workplace before elaborating on the theory of practice architectures.

**Workplace learning**

The ideas and conceptual frameworks surrounding workplace learning are complex and contextually linked, yet comprehensively account for sophisticated understandings about
the efficacy of learning in the authentic context of work. In particular, when considering working and learning in terms of partnerships between educational institutions and workplaces, it is essential to understand the key factors required and valued by each of the partners within the arrangement. To find out more about each other, discussions which are brief and semi-formal in nature help to tease out the key issues of concern to workers, managers and learners (whether these are apprentices, trainees or VET in Schools [VETiS]¹ students). For instance, a small-sized, family-owned hairdressing enterprise may have interest in a different skill set than one in the city centre because these salons tend to serve different types of clients. Likewise, the types of affordances that small salons can offer will be quite different from those that larger salons can offer to their workers or from those placed to gain practice-based experiences. Yet managing the requirements and challenges of workers or learners and managers needs to be considered around the accreditation requisites in which VET practitioners operate. This initial phase begins the AR cycle which intensifies both the partnership and the participant learning. The process enables learners and host enterprises to benefit in such a way that will maintain the sustainability of the arrangements. Barsalou (2008) explains learning in authentic settings such as workplaces in terms of grounded cognition; he argues that the social settings, which are representative of purposeful goal-directed work, present opportunities for cognition to be enacted and shaped by such learning experiences. Nonetheless, such opportunities at times could be routine where the AR cycle can be easily maintained. Yet, at other times, learning circumstances could be quite ad hoc and necessitate opportunistic access that demands flexibility in any pre-planned AR process.

The nature of settings within sites generates the type of learning required for effective outcomes such as productive work. This perspective suggests that learning in worksites is multimodal (e.g. facilitated, guided, self-directed, face to face or online), and involves dimensions of perception, action and introspection (Barsalou 2009). To illustrate this, if we follow a new waiter – a male in this example – in the hospitality industry, the waiter will be learning about ways to address customers, carry and present dishes and drinks at the table while at the same time performing tasks as a ‘bus boy’, clearing tables and cleaning up. In a large site he will be supervised by the maître d’hôtel, and in a coffee shop he will get feedback from the manager or a more experienced worker. He may also have specific training on the job but outside service hours. Ultimately, the workplace can be harsh, and if he does not learn quickly he will be ‘let go’ or replaced. All sites will have unique arrangements, different modes of learning and varied opportunities to gain the required knowledge. To try to capture the complexity of sites and participants in these sites, an AR methodology encourages voices to be heard from all members of the partnering organisations, which potentially leads to a more authentic and shared approach to setting goals and achieving solutions.

Billett (2010a) conceptualises learning as the enactment of activities and interactions during the course of everyday work tasks. He associates workplace learning with constructivism, and contends that ‘everyday conscious thought is active in seeking to make sense of what is encountered’ (2010a, 61). For instance, while students may learn standard procedures for operating a forklift, it is in the actual workplace settings that they learn and acquire skills for different models and sizes of forklifts used to lift a range of items in safe ways. Each instance of learning therefore requires making sense of the work task and how to proceed. It is through a partnership for SBED that VET teachers and workplace managers can schedule or utilise episodes for learning variations in practice.
Billett’s focus is on individual cognition, where ‘personal agency and subjectivity on negotiating between the social and individual contributions constitute engaging in and learning through work’ (2010a, 60–61). Schatzki (2012), on the other hand, advocates a more sociological perspective, suggesting that learning is a social phenomenon involving several individuals who engage in a constellation of activities. Orrell and Higgs (2012) argue that these activities situated in the workplace have purposes, so participants tend to be flexible to ensure their purposes will achieved.

Engeström (2010, 89) links learning in the workplace using Vygotsky’s (1986) theory of social constructivism – particularly the notion of the zone of proximal development – to his own ideas by redefining the zone of proximal development as ‘the space for expansive transition from action to activity’. He explains that learners in a setting such as a workplace have to make meaning out of a complex context, in which the intersection of established practices, rules and processes, individuals and groups, objects and artefacts forces learners to constantly evaluate and re-evaluate their responses and actions. Small group discussions, which form an integral part of the AR projects informing this article, afford opportunities for a range of participants (partners, learners and workers) to share ideas and opinions which are then recorded and noted.

These theoretical accounts of social practices and settings, explained in terms of social constructivism, are premised on the historical, cultural and social genesis of specialised knowledge required for effective practice. The understandings gained from these theories highlight interactivities within sites that can extend the scope of individuals’ learning. Members collaboratively conceptualise, appraise and then respond to local problems, a process described as the zone of proximal development by Vygotsky (1986) in reference to the need to progress leading to more experienced learners guiding novices. These various interpretations imply that engagement in activities necessitates appropriate ways of transforming learners into functioning members of a particular social context. AR, with its open, participatory and evaluative style, can provide a vehicle for the learning of all participants. Even so, it does not happen naturally; rather, it can be facilitated through well-designed pedagogical strategies that educational partners need to negotiate and mitigate. The dynamism is one of integrated enculturation and constructivism, and these are site specific. Such strategies can be implemented through an AR process that involves all partners.

At a more general level, learning for SBED may be mediated by situation, society and culture. This notion supports Tomasello’s (2004) argument that human learning is about cultural learning – a point expanded by Tynjälä (2008), who maintained that learning and ongoing development necessitate an integration of cognitive and social dimensions that, through contextualised reasoning, results in situation-specific responses. This understanding about the social nature of learning for SBED also aligns with Gherardi’s (2009) practice of communities giving importance to the circumstance of practice where work and learning co-occur. Nonetheless, activities and interactions that constitute a particular setting are central to understanding how learning is afforded and engaged in by individuals (Billett 2010a). These insights into learning in the authentic settings of workplaces emphasise the significance of context (the local site), as argued by Fuller and Unwin (2002).

Billett (1994) terms the significance of the context in which the learning takes place as ‘situated learning’ and these concepts link well with the idea of site-based learning development discussed throughout this article. From regular interviews with 15 employees at a processing plant to examine the use of learning aids, Billett found that ‘those aids to learning
which were not embedded in a culture of practice were not as valued’ (1994, 21). He goes on to explain that the workplace as a learning environment must be understood as a ‘complex negotiation about knowledge-use, roles and processes – essentially a question of the learner’s participation in situated work activities’ (1994, 312). The sorts of activities provided at the site influence the construction of individuals’ knowledge because those sites furnish particular types of problems and solutions, which can be investigated and explored specifically in the individual site as part of a series of AR cycles. For example, decisions about what approach to take with a work task (what happens in a particular workplace) or how well it needs to be done (what counts as a good job) are shaped by the requirements of the particular workplace. Accordingly, socio-cultural theory extends views about engagement in socially derived goal-directed activities that are proposed in cognitive psychology. Everyday activities that occur in workplaces along with the specific job-related knowledge required to be learnt – ranging from core to complex knowledge – have social and historical origins that have evolved over time. Within this view, learning is considered to be a process of appropriating socio-historically derived knowledge. Knowledge that needs to be constructed for vocational practice does not exist without its social and cultural context, or without a relationship to past events, other individuals or societal structures (Vygotsky 1986). It is held that they are embedded in the activities of a particular workplace community of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991). Pertinently, Kemmis and his colleagues (Kemmis 2011; Kemmis and Grootenboer 2008; Kemmis et al. 2014) propose that sites of learning are shaped by different kinds of practice architectures, which bind their communities together. In this theoretical perspective, the site is considered the place of learning that is shaped by practice architectures which enable and constrain practices that happen in these sites. The theory of practice architectures thus provides a way to analyse and examine what is actually happening within the learning partnerships.

**Practice architectures – a theory for understanding the enabling and constraining conditions in sites of practice**

Kemmis et al.’s (2014) theory of practice architectures explains how social and educational practices are shaped by particular cultural–discursive, material–economic and social–political arrangements that enable or constrain those practices. Particular sayings, doings and relatings make up the practice. To this end, different practice architectures prefigure, but do not predetermine, the practices at any given site (Schatzki 2012). According to Kemmis et al. (2014), prefiguration transpires in three ways: first by the sayings (and thinking) that are made possible only by the ‘given’ or the particular cultural–discursive arrangements found in or brought to a site – for instance, terms such as hairspray, perms and shampoo are distinctively associated with the workplace of the hairdresser. These sayings are shaped by cultural–discursive arrangements which exist in semantic space that make comprehending and understanding ‘hairdressing’ possible through the social medium of language. The second aspect is ‘doing’, whereby the doing of activities and tasks is possible only given particular material–economic arrangements found in or brought to the site. To continue the hairdressing example, activities such as cutting, styling or tinting are shaped by particular arrangements that exist in the physical space–time of working with a particular client at a particular salon; that is, in the social medium of activity and work, practices of hairdressing are enacted. The third means of prefiguration are termed ‘relatings’ and are concerned with relationships...
between people and things that are possible only given particular social–political arrange-
ments found in or brought to the site. For instance, at a hairdressing salon different relatings
are experienced between the hairdresser and the client, between the manager and the
apprentice or between the manager and the wholesaler. These arrangements exist in social
space, and are experienced in the social medium of power and solidarity.

So, whilst the sayings, doings and relatings are the practices that are shaped by the prac-
tice architectures, these are fashioned by the cultural–discursive world, social–political spaces
contend that practices depend on, and are enabled and constrained by, the relationship
between practice architectures, and the people operating within and across these. Schatzki
(2012) elaborates on these relationships, calling them ‘practice-arrangement bundles’. Both
of these concepts are important constructs for highlighting the notion of partnerships oper-
ating at a complex intersection of social, educational and business operations. The different
actors (worker-learners, co-workers, supervisors, teachers) who are engaged in partnerships
for site-based education and training, business enterprises and communities bring with
them their own distinctive sayings, doings and relatings, and these are mediated and nego-
tiated for distinct and intended purposes of SBED. Their distinctive sayings, doings and relat-
ings become the functional tools that influence different actors’ agency for engagement in
learning work-related competencies.

The theory of ecologies of practices (Kemmis et al. 2012, 2014) provides a useful frame-
work to elaborate on the dynamic interdependencies that exist within partnerships for SBED.
In examining the ecological relationships between what is happening within the learning
partnership, as in practice architectures, the relations between the partners are influenced
by their cultural–discursive world, the material–economic dimensions (physical space and
time) and the social–political spaces within which the partners operate. These connections
underpin how practices are related in ecologies of practices. The cultural–discursive features
comprise the language aspects – what is talked about and valued and the ways in which
this is communicated. The cultural–discursive dimension also comprises the unspoken com-
munication, and the tacit and implicit understandings that can be quite distinct and that
are better known by ‘insiders’, often hidden and not shared with ‘outsiders’. Such spaces can
be challenging for those negotiating partnerships and facilitating learning for SBED because
the material–economic dimensions are determined by the economic status of the site, mate-
rials available for and affordability of particular SBED projects. The social–political features
of the practice are developed over time, and reflect the practice traditions. For example,
within the practice architectures in a publicly (government) funded RTO – for example,
Technical and Further Education (TAFE) in Australia – the cultural–discursive dimensions
include curriculum, learners, compliance regulations and accountability; the material–eco-
nomic features include resources, finances and learning affordances; and the social–political
dimensions include the operating procedures, the union, legal requirements and manage-
ment style.

An example from the construction industry is now presented to illustrate this notion of
practice architectures. What people say in a site might be made possible by the fact that
they all speak English, or that they are familiar with concepts to do with measuring steel for
welding; what they do in the site might be made possible by the tools and materials available;
and how they relate to one another in the site might be made possible by their adopting
reciprocal roles of apprentice and trainer, or apprentice and tradesperson, or apprentice and
employer. The point here is that the practice architectures enable or constrain practice in different ways at any particular site. This argument also stresses the need to learn and understand a particular practice to appropriate knowledge for the local site. It is through participation and engagement that individual learners access knowledge that is hidden and not readily accessible. This is a chance to learn and adopt nuanced ways as they develop their habitus (being that fits in the local setting/community). Individuals also need to sustain learning so that learning remains a lifelong journey, rather than a destination. Their engagement in communities of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991) or practice of communities (Gherardi 2009) symbolises the ‘situatedness’ of learning in SBED. The site is the place and time of learning, as well as an embodiment of the partnerships arranged by the workplace and educational institution. Therefore, partnerships have to mitigate for a balance between the practice architectures of work and education.

The theory of practice architectures provides a theoretical lens through which to understand practices in the different sites, and how the SBED partners potentially enable or constrain those practices. The sites could be seen as ‘living’ – that is, neither the practice architectures nor the ecologies of practice are static or inflexible. On the contrary, there is a constant and sophisticated interplay between the dimensions of reality that make up the agreed/negotiated partnership arrangements. Hence, all elements of practice architectures and ecologies of practice regularly need to be assessed and adjusted in order to sustain partnerships for SBED. An AR approach offers opportunities to learn and adjust relations and practices, thus providing a vehicle for harmonising these dynamics.

In summary, the philosophy of site-based education transpires from emerging understandings that the knowledge, skills and attitudes needed to respond appropriately and effectively to individual and community needs are developed within the sphere of local opportunities and circumstances (Kemmis et al. 2014). The distinct practices of workplaces (like a local hairdressing salon or a construction company) and their local communities generate and support appropriation of knowledge in particular ways to suit situationally relevant purposes. While activities and interactions in these sites are not necessarily organised in educationally purposeful ways, learning experiences in workplaces can be made more effective through specific and targeted pedagogical interventions (Tynjälä, Välimaa, and Sarja 2003). However, such arrangements require partnerships between various stakeholders (beneficiaries), who need to operate within the dynamics of the local site. As argued earlier, partnership arrangements for SBED need to extend beyond the traditional vendor–client relationship. Given that partnerships are a central mechanism for successful SBED, it is necessary to theorise arrangements as a way of understanding and framing this important medium.

**Partnerships for site-based education development**

Since educational institutions alone cannot provide the types of preparations that all learners need for all dimensions of their life-worlds and community-based sustainability, the success of SBED is contingent on partnerships between agents. The partners may include learners, teachers, schools, RTOs, universities, business enterprises, communities, professional bodies and governments. The partners need to sustain gradual change through their interrelationships and achieve common goals for a world worth living in (Kemmis et al. 2014). These partners work closely to develop and implement site-based strategies through education
and training. Stakeholders such as local industry, council and families also contribute to learning for SBED, but it is through formal partnerships that SBED can be embedded within the practice architectures of the local industries and the world inhabited by learners. Moreover, it is through partnerships with multiple agencies and stakeholders that various levels of community development, renewal and sustainability are achieved. These relations for partnership can be formalised through legal agreements or contracts. Formal relations normally are supplemented by ongoing interactions that serve purposes other than those stipulated in the formal agreement (informal relations). Informal relations help extend the reach and quality of provisions – hence an AR project is useful for facilitating and achieving outcomes that extend those in the formal agreements.

The concept of partnership is not without the challenges of different interests, power differentials, conflicts, roles, aims, cultures and values. The dynamic and contextual nature of partnerships therefore needs to be understood in order to negotiate, maintain and sustain relations for SBED. It is important at this point to define what we mean by partnership distinctively for SBED. The words ‘partner’ and ‘stakeholder’ are often used loosely and interchangeably, although each serves different purposes and contributes in different ways. Indeed, the difference is more than semantic, and needs some clarification. Partners forge relations to achieve common goals through shared knowledge, skills, resources and investments, as well as associated risks. All partners stand to benefit in some way. Stakeholders, on the other hand, may have an investment or interest, or share some benefits, but these may not be tied to their contributions. They do not necessarily have any direct responsibilities for the outcomes, yet they are beneficiaries. For example, society, industry and families gain directly or indirectly without taking any explicit responsibility for SBED.

The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) definition of partnerships has been circulated widely:

Systems of formalised co-operation, grounded in legally binding arrangements or informal understandings, co-operative working relationships, and mutually adopted plans among a number of institutions. They involve agreements on policy and programme objectives and the sharing of responsibility, resources, and benefits over a specified period of time. (1990, 18)

Similarly, Lankshear et al. maintain that partnerships:

cross discursive boundaries, spanning multiple world-views, interests and value systems. They all carry positive connotations and name ideals to which people who embrace different – and often incompatible – aspirations, purposes, interests and investments claim allegiance. (1997, 88–89)

More recently, McQuaid (2010, 2) has defined partnerships as ‘a multi-dimensional continuum of widely differing concepts and practices and is used to describe a variety of types of relationships in a myriad of circumstances and locations’. He recommends that any typology of partnership should incorporate four factors:

• goals to be achieved;
• key agents and their relationships;
• types of activities and schedule for completion; and
• place of delivery.

The definitions mentioned here suggest that a coalition of interests is mobilised to achieve agreed outcomes through collaborations with partners. The agents have common goals and agree on strategies to achieve these. They share risks, resources, skills and power. Their intention is aligned to mutual benefits through collaboration and symbiotic interdependency.
These collaborations are often mediated by ‘boundary spanners’ (Williams 2002) – or those cultural–discursive arrangements that shape communication, negotiation and networking skills. Young and Guile (1997) call them ‘connective specialists’, and maintain that they have a key role in linking educational institutions and the workplace, while Piccardi (2013) describes them as enterprise learning consultants. These definitions, collectively, also suggest that the nature of partnership can vary and sometimes even be ambiguous – understandably so, because it is both situational and contextual. Therefore, to account for the various aspects of the shaping mechanisms (or practice architectures) comprising partnerships, we propose a definition here:

Partnerships are a system of formalised co-operation, legally binding and/or supplemented with informal understandings, to mutually adopt objectives, plans and strategies for successful site based education development by sharing responsibilities, resources, benefits and risks over sustained periods of time.

As argued earlier, the goals of SBED cannot be achieved by a single partner or actor operating alone. Joint efforts or collaborations reduce duplication, and enhance the impact and effectiveness of action through combined and more efficient use of resources. The relationship between actors is normally initiated by teachers or business consultants, who are the key boundary spanners and liaise with local actors (e.g. enterprises, workplaces, communities) to establish relations and negotiate a training agreement or contract. The initial contact and relationship-building can be a highly sensitive phase, where efforts are needed to build mutual trust not only between enterprises and trainers, but with trainers and their institute management. This therefore implies that these boundary spanners need to be the ‘right’ people (Harris, Simons, and Moore 2005). That is, representatives of educational institutions need to step out of a purely educational model into a workforce and community development model through SBED. SBED enables them to collaboratively develop business solutions and improve the profitability and productivity of learners, as well as local enterprises participating in the partnership. Hence shared objectives, plans and strategies are important mechanisms for achieving the goals of partnership for SBED. The AR process presents opportunities to develop such shared objectives, plans and strategies.

While equality in partnerships is highly recommended (Organisation for Economic Development and Cooperation [OECD] 1990; McQuaid 2010), distribution of power in the case of partners engaged for SBED often depends on the specific activities on which they agree. For example, the Australian VET curriculum, in the form of training packages for each qualification level, is often set by educational authorities, industry skills councils and employer groups, and managed by practitioners. This means workplaces could have little influence over or say in the changes they might be seeking. Often they are the drivers who approach others for partnerships.

Developing partnerships for action research

It is essential that all parties (including learners, workers, management and vocational teachers) are responsible for developing, explicating and understanding the conditions and expectations of partnerships if SBED is expected to be effective and sustainable. The development of partnerships usually follows five phases:

- Recognise and accept the need for a partnership.
• Seek clarity and realistic purposes and outcomes, and establish whether all actors can work together conterminously and sustain symbiotic interdependency.
• Consider clear and robust arrangements (communication, governance, accountability and risk management), cooperation and mutualism, and contributions for SBED.
• Co-construct strategies for delivery, and establish roles and responsibilities for each actor.
• Monitor, evaluate and learn to consider transformations in the relationships to improve or end the partnership (Harris, Simons, and Moore 2005).

These phases assume activities before, during and after any formal agreement is put in place. Stringer’s (2008) nine orientations (change, reflection, participation, inclusion, sharing, understanding, repetition, practice and community) can easily be incorporated into these five phases.

Overall, successful partnerships are founded on genuine commitment and ownership, necessitating the development and maintenance of trust very early in the relationship. At this point, it is also important to respect and recognise the contributions and values of each partner, and to agree on any distinct values of the partnership being developed. Appropriately, the reflective activities of AR allow identification of, and changes to, aspects of the site(s) to enable practice experiences and learning goals while also considering aspects that constrain learning activities. For example, recognition of the knowledge bases, contexts, perspectives and boundaries that each partner needs to negotiate in order to operate in the partnership will provide some understanding of the ways in which the partnership will be influenced by practice architectures.

However, recognition of the strengths and values of the different partners can vary, depending on the scope of their contributions. For instance, partnerships may only be recognised for limited, yet precise sets of goals, tasks and actions for delivery within defined timeframes. In any case, sensitivities around the structures, practices, governance, ecological and socio-cultural environments and the values of each actor are important considerations in any long-term partnership. This builds productive relationships between all and extends the benefits beyond the agreed outcomes. Key benefits of successful partnerships could include sharing of the knowledge, expertise and resources available at different sites and from different actors; pooling of resources and synergies; providing authentic learning opportunities and experiences for learners by agreeing on co-locations for services and delivery; flexible and responsive solutions to SBED; capacity-building of learners and actors; improved efficiencies; and maximised opportunities for learning, producing and achieving material goals. These and other benefits need to be assessed in the context of the partners, and their needs and interests.

We now explore who the key partners are and how they contribute to partnerships for SBED. In the next section, we also provide case examples of partnerships with peer learners, teachers, educational institutions and workplaces.

**Key actors and their roles in partnership for SBED**

The learners are central to any partnership for SBED. Other actors include educational institutions, workplaces, local communities, governments and professional bodies. They all have varying degrees of relations (short and/or long term), although it is important to remember
that their contributions enable learners to develop competencies to operate at particular sites. That is, in the best of all possible worlds, learners are positioned at the nexus of all relations in this partnership for SBED. Theirs is a learning partnership, so they are immersed purposively within the functions and provisions of education providers (e.g. schools, VET organisations, adult and community education organisations and universities) while they gain occupational experiences in different workplace environments in local community settings. They recognise and accept the need for this learning partnership, which is clearly defined in the formal curriculum underpinning courses or programmes of study that determine and direct what they are required to learn in order to achieve the intended educational outcomes for their study programmes.

In this way, the curriculum extends beyond that of their respective educational institutions, and is integrated with the formal and informal curriculum of the workplaces in which they gain practical experiences. Seeing that the workplaces are situated in community settings, educational outcomes also need to serve the needs and goals of respective communities. Hence the community also becomes an important partner, although it may have indirect relations with learners and limited pedagogical input in SBED. Learners recognise they are often temporary ‘visitors/learners/workers’ at the worksite, and may not always have coterminous relations as learners. Their contributions are often less than they tend to gain from sites where they acquire the types of experiences required to become competent workers and to develop themselves for habitus (to suit specific occupations in particular worksites). Therefore, their relationship is perhaps less symbiotic – although it is still implicit – than it is for other actors. However, the practice arrangements for their being in the worksite to learn are negotiated by their educational institutions. Specific strategies for their learning, and for their roles and responsibilities in learning and work, are mediated mainly by teachers as representatives of educational institutions, and thus learning practices are shaped by the specific practice architectures encountered in the specific site. The learning journey is monitored by the educational institution and the worksite, and ideally these are evaluated regularly.

Each actor in the partnership operates at different levels of proximity that allow learners to access, gain from and contribute to the web of relations and provisions; thus reflecting the different relatings that exist in practices. In a sense, all actors also become learners themselves as they interact to collaboratively and collectively contribute to SBED in their own ways – although their engagement may not necessarily be seen as learning per se. Essentially, the relations, dependence and interdependence between different partners in ecologies of practices (Kemmis et al. 2012) are transformational, often influenced by internal and external environments, with technologies, economics, policies and sociology being key drivers.

The learners’ most direct and immediate relationship is with their peers, agents in the form of education providers (e.g. teachers and administrators) and the worksite, which provides occupation-related learning experiences – although this varies with different individuals and cohorts of learners. For instance, in Australia, learning on the job for workers at various stages of their careers, learning for apprentices and trainees on the job and learning as a work-experience or work-placement participant are all subject to different social and pragmatic contingencies, relationships, expectations and goals. Viewing partnerships for site-based education from this core, the immediate set of dynamics resides in students’ relatings with their teachers in RTOs, and between the RTOs and the worksites (workplaces)
providing experiential learning. Education providers and workplaces are heavily reliant on each other to create and sustain learning environments for SBED. These two key players are interdependent, and their relations tend to continuously transform and mutually grow to support learning that meets individual and organisational (workplace), as well as community, goals. Each level has links to and different levels of relations with other stakeholders (government, community and professional body), yet remains a conduit between learners, other partners and stakeholders. Each stakeholder in the partnership has shared as well as distinct interests, so needs to maintain different forms and intensities of relations as they all operate in the ecological systems consisting of and influenced by their practice architectures. These relations suggest that partnerships for SBED reflect three main intentions: cooperation, mutuality and the common good (of the local community) – although McQuaid (2000) argues that a more general theoretical basis for understanding and analysing the approach is required.

Various examples of partnerships are now discussed to describe the nature of each, to recognise the contributions of partners and to identify the enablers and challenges. These examples are positioned within a framework of practice architectures.

**Peer learners as partners in action research**

Practice-based learning partnerships between peers, which can move from pairs as partners to groups of between three and five, generate the potential for rich learning. This approach is advocated by Collier and McManus (2005), who maintain that learning partnerships are important for participants deciding what to learn and how to learn effectively, and for monitoring and assessing individual learning. They argue that when learners share a common understanding about the nature and expectations of work, their learning becomes easier. The interactions between peers are powerful for group reflection and collaborative learning. However, they need a learning space or material-economic arrangements, a supportive and trusting environment or particular social-political arrangements that enable engagement in collaborative learning and problem-solving to share and also contribute to conversations that are mutually comprehensible for all. Collier and McManus caution that learning needs to be a two-way process – reciprocal activity needs to occur between peers or equals so that the partnership develops an awareness of learning – and can also be task oriented.

Nonetheless, successful peer learning partnerships rely on equal commitment and shared responsibilities for learning, time and energy, and an agreement to talk about the learning process (sharing negative as well as positive feelings and experiences). Each partner also needs to be self-directed, open to sharing and accepting new and different perspectives, a networker, supportive, reflective and analytical, trustworthy and committed to value equity, to take responsibility for their own learning and to respect the views of others. That is, participating in learning partnerships requires mutually understood and constructed cultural-discursive, material-economic and social-political arrangements that enable learning to actually take place. Notwithstanding the benefits of peer learning partnerships, their realisation also depends on each partner’s awareness of their own and others’ pedagogical skills, such as providing constructive feedback, listening, observing, verifying, questioning and explaining. Furthermore, this model assumes that each party is familiar with the sayings, doings and relatings of their field and site. Above all, partnerships between peer learners
are more successful when facilitated by other agents, such as teachers representing the education providers, who are also actively participating in the AR process.

**Learners and workers as partners in action research**

Harris, Jones, and Coutts (2010) report on another type of partnership, involving student learners and other workers in a community services and health worksite. Their case illustrates a university’s involvement in community-engaged knowledge production, using a stakeholder ethos for a work-based student learning model as an alternative mindset. Instead of a singleton model of one student and one supervisor, these researchers used a group approach with six to eight students to encourage learning. In this example, a knowledge society perspective recognised universities as important players – not necessarily as a dominant source of knowledge and learning, but rather to organise learning that contributes to an ongoing viability and vitality of social contexts. Such a partnership is mutually respectful of the capabilities and developmental potential of both partners and the student group. The learning for students and the organisations tends to be transformative, with students acculturated and socialised into the profession. The group approach offers a public rather than a private space, where one-on-one mentoring takes place. The theory-rich eyes of students become a useful resource for the experience-rich workers at the site – hence limiting the power relations between students and supervisors. The group arrangement also offers a learning community and community of practice well positioned to socially construct knowledge for the work contexts. The success of this model of learning partnership is based on the inclusiveness of all stakeholders, with mutual respect for the capabilities and developmental potential of the student body and other agents, an understanding of realistic concerns and resourcing, and stronger collaborative arrangements. It assumes shared language of reflective practice and critical reflexivity in order for the partnership to be sustained.

**Teachers as partners in action research**

Teachers play a significant pedagogical role in the learning partnership with adults engaged in SBED. However, in the case of VETiS in Australia, the teacher may be distanced from work placement details and on-the-job learning for a number of reasons. Arrangements are usually made between the school and workplace using external placement agencies, and visits by the teacher to the workplace may be limited by timetabling constraints and other teaching duties. Supervision of the VETiS students is taken on by the hosting employer and the work placement organisation. In the case of teachers who have been recruited from trades and industry, Harreveld (2011, 12) comments on the positive influence this may have on partnership arrangements because of the understanding these teachers have about both workplaces and schools. Similarly, Green (2012) found, in her study of career-change teachers from industry, that workplace involvement, arrangements, monitoring and understanding were all valued by workplace hosts, vocational learners and teachers.

VETiS teachers with an industry or trade background demonstrated a different pedagogical approach and style in Green’s (2012) longitudinal qualitative case studies of graduates from a programme for career-change industry teachers. A significant theme to emerge from the analysis was the manner in which all of the participants considered school as both a workplace itself and a preparation for becoming a well-prepared member of the workforce.
The ways in which these teachers drew extensively and frequently on their life experiences – particularly their experiences in trade and industry – also emerged as an important theme, which resonated well with the literature (Allen 2007; Halladay 2008). The workplace ethos developed by the participants and encouraged by the practical environment in the discipline area seemed to be closely linked to their identity as teachers. Because the participants themselves saw the school as both a workplace and a site for preparation of workers, they were ‘on the job’, and associated work with spending time preparing for or interacting with students. All of the teachers involved in the study formed genuine partnerships with students in their classes, particularly the senior classes, where students of the VETiS programme moved between actual worksites and the workshop or simulated workplace environments at the school site. For example, in a qualitative study of eight new teachers who had followed alternative pathways to a new career in education, Swain, Schmertzing, and Schmertzing (2011) found that the attitudes and knowledge developed by these new teachers in their previous careers influenced their approach and philosophy as teachers.

**Empirical cases of action research partnerships in workplace learning**

A longitudinal study of new teachers with a trade background beginning to teach conducted by Green (2012) found that the 12 participating newly appointed teachers transitioning from industry to school settled in quite quickly and then became active in implementing changes through which they transformed their sections of the school into ‘worksites’ as part of their AR approach to change. In this Australian study, Green (2012) gathered a range of qualitative data including interview, field observations and interviews. She found that one of the most striking commonalities shared by her 12 participants was the creation of an atmosphere reminiscent of a workplace – or, even more specifically, a workshop or work team – with the teacher identified as the team leader or leading hand. It was concluded that such a pedagogical approach underpins the notion of partnership in site-based educational development.

In one example from the Green study, industry teachers changed the practice architectures in their sites of work as mechanisms for changing the practices that historically existed there. For instance, the market garden enterprise set up at an isolated rural school by a former horticulturist, ‘Mick’ (pseudonym). Although it was flooded almost immediately, Mick used this as a lesson in coping with natural disasters – something familiar to the farmers in his region, where droughts and floods are part of their landscape. After forming a partnership and planning group with his senior Primary Industries VET classes, they moved to a different site and grew a variety of fruit, berries, saltbush and vegetables, which they sold locally to raise money for further enterprises. Student labour was bartered for stock feed during harvest season. This change re-shaped the practices that, at the same time, changed the practice architectures which were present in the site and became an authentic enterprise that worked equally well for the classes and the teacher. However, these new practices were not appreciated by members of the school management team, who were focused on the more historical entrenched social–political arrangements typical of educational institutions.

A second teacher from Green’s study, ‘Myron’, transformed a disused drama area into a working hub for computer network installation and maintenance, using job orders and work plans to allow senior Information Technology VET students to run a computer ‘shop’. As part
of the reflective phase of the AR, Myron emailed Green, as his co-researcher, his philosophy of teaching:

I believe my past experience allows me to see beyond school. Unlike many teachers I had at school (and still appear to be around), I am not interested in educating the students only to pass exams. I want them to learn things that will help them all their life; if they pass an exam it’s a bonus. It is a bit like a driving instructor. They can teach you to drive, or they can teach you to pass the driving test. My aim is to instil in the students a work and social ethic so that, regardless of what career path they follow, they will be useful members of society.

In his comment, Myron, in partnership with other co-researchers and students, shared his approach to the purposes of schooling in terms of preparing students for life beyond school. For him, that life was not necessarily linked to using an assessment system to aspire to a university pathway; instead, he saw value for many students in offering insight into other vocational pathways leading straight to the workforce. As partners with students, possibilities in the workforce could be explored by teachers such as Myron and Mick with a different set of beliefs about career options and futures. For many of the students – although by no means all – who take up VET subjects in their senior years of schooling, this partnership approach validates their own choice to not participate in the more highly academic subjects that will lead to university entrance, and to the types of careers that were once the reason for students to remain at school until senior years.

**Educational institution and workplaces in site-based education development: a discussion**

Partnerships between educational institutions and workplaces are essential to provide experiential learning for students, and to facilitate workforce development through continuing education and training provisions. The emphasis is on recognition of contributions and responsibilities, and on the appropriate curriculum design to ensure sustained deep learning and capacity-building opportunities. The facilitators of such partnerships may involve a mix of staff from both partner organisations with management and teaching responsibilities. Choy and Delahaye (2009) argued that it is important for negotiators from both organisations to share a common understanding of the learning goals and work practices, and to acquire knowledge of the needs and capacities of learners. For example, workplace managers need to be familiar with the contexts into which students are placed, and to understand what that means for the organisation. Educational institutions similarly need to become more familiar with the practices and potential for deep learning, and to see workplaces as more than sites for enacting part of an academic curriculum. They also need to understand diversities in the motivations of industry partners. Smith and Smith (2010) contend that industry partners need to value work as learning, not just as something that needs to be integrated as learning. What Choy and Delahaye (2009) and Smith and Smith (2010) propose applies not only to universities, but also to schools and VET organisations.

Harris, Simons, and Moore’s (2005) case studies of TAFE staff and private enterprises working together to develop workers’ competencies through training based at the worksite highlight the differences in contexts and cultures of the two partners. Their research stresses the expanding roles and functions of TAFE staff to successfully achieve the training goals of the enterprises. Six roles were suggested:
(1) Bearers of glad tidings.
(2) Raisers of standards.
(3) Builders of learning culture.
(4) Coaches of learning.
(5) Bridges between TAFE and industry, and models of learning.

In these cases, it was evident that TAFE staff faced a monumental practice shift as they encountered new ways to learn about the company culture and environment, responding to demands in time, energy and scheduling to suit the company, dealing with reluctant/resistant learners, being flexible and patient, delivering at work, customising materials and focusing on the relevance to work of training. The success of enterprise-based training relied on the strength of relationships that were created by particular social–political arrangements which enabled greater effectiveness in the quality of VET. The findings of this study suggested five main implications for TAFE managers and practitioners for providing practice architectures conducive for sustainable SBED:

(1) understanding how work is undertaken and managed in an enterprise;
(2) recognising that work shapes learning;
(3) understanding the tensions between different types of learning within enterprises;
(4) recognising that there are various groups with interests in learning and that they (TAFE staff) are ‘outsiders’; and
(5) accepting that TAFE practitioners in enterprises work within different parameters.

It was concluded that for TAFE staff and company members the implications for SBED include:

- acknowledging and accommodating differences between enterprises and institutes;
- allowing time to establish effective linkages;
- recognising that the private and public sectors need one another;
- acknowledging that partnerships require mutual commitment, and that both can reap benefits;
- recognising that effective linkages demand considerable new learning; and
- considering best-practice ways of working.

For policy-makers, four implications are noted:

(1) recognising the new and different space being created between the public and private sectors;
(2) dealing with perceptions about policies and practices that work against effective linkages;
(3) providing further education about how to use training packages creatively; and
(4) ameliorating negative perceptions of TAFE in industry.

All of the studies discussed here suggest enterprises need to appreciate the fact that time has to be available specifically for learning, as opposed to contributing to work, in both large and small enterprises. Employer goals may also include philanthropy, screening of future employees, the opportunity to influence training outcomes, up-to-date knowledge, stimulating internal and organisational reflection and extra hands. Interns can motivate others and add value to team skill sets. Some enterprises engage in work-integrated learning because they like to give back to the industry by offering learning opportunities for the
interns. Smith and Smith (2010) suggest that the nature and quality of partnership depends on the level of involvement of each agent and the conscious and active interactions between them. The expectations and wants of industry partners can be diverse, contradictory and contested, and success alone is not sufficient.

Conclusion

Given the significance of SBED, the central argument in this article is that the broad goals of SBED can be achieved most effectively through partnerships with stakeholders who share and develop common values and interests in education and training outcomes. Without partnerships, the process for meeting the skilling demands of individuals, enterprises and communities, and the outcomes of education and training, remain distributed and disparate. In a highly competitive environment with competition for limited and often diminishing resources, partnerships are encouraged and often supported by governments and other funding agencies. However, traditional models of vendor–client relationships – such as those most common in business environments – are inappropriate for partnerships between education and training providers and their stakeholders for purposes of successful SBED. This is because individuals, industries and communities are now interested in, and demand, educational goals that extend beyond skilling and qualifications to broader social goals relating to social issues and justice, as well as human capital and community development. New forms of partnerships are therefore necessary to enable education and training providers to both participate and contribute successfully.

The discussion thus far has suggested that successful partnerships for SBED revolve around a range of factors. We now draw on these to theorise partnerships for SBED. In theorising partnerships for SBED, we identify six dimensions that underpin successful outcomes. First, given that partners rely on shared understandings about each other’s contexts, fundamental requirements are good leadership and a work space within a site that is culturally recognised for learning as well as work. Second, an understanding of each other’s distinctive practices is necessary to help negotiate and mediate convenient arrangements. Third, partnerships need collaborative self-interest and transparency in a relationship that is explicit about what each partner expects and wants, and how they will pursue these goals. This necessitates acknowledgement and recognition of contributions from each partner. Fourth, initial development of the relationship also needs to focus on long-term partnership, possibly for collaborations on activities other than just students’ experiences in order to meet academic requirements. Integration of work and learning needs a stakeholder approach for planning and implementation that calls for clear agreement on and recognition of mutual benefits and costs. A major challenge is to achieve the right match between the needs of industry (as a helping hand) and the long-term educational needs of the learners. Fifth, partnerships insist on the skills and experiences of work supervisors to induct and mentor interns – especially in small and medium-sized enterprises. Mentoring can offer a developmental opportunity for those supervising learners, and in the process develop the leadership skills of mentors. Finally, collaborative development of a framework to measure, monitor and learn for continued partnership is essential. Each of these six dimensions can be situated within an AR cycle to successfully achieve a range of outcomes from SBED.
Note

1. VETiS refers to VET courses undertaken as part of secondary school studies.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

References


