

# Communities of Interest: Three Unique Case Studies in Wider University and School Partnerships in Australia

M. Zeegers, D. Barron

**Abstract**—In this paper we canvass three case studies of unique research partnerships between universities and schools in the wider community. In doing so, we consider those areas of indeterminate zones of professional practice explored by academics in their research activities within the wider community. We discuss three cases: an artist-in-residence program designed to engage primary school children with new understandings about local Indigenous Australian issues in their pedagogical and physical landscapes; an assessment of pedagogical concerns in relation to the use of physical space in classrooms; and the pedagogical underpinnings of a costumed museum school program. In doing so, we engage issues of research as playing an integral part in the development, implementation and maintenance of academic engagements with wider community issues.

**Keywords**—communities of interest, universities, schools, partnerships

## I. INTRODUCTION

THE concept of indeterminate zones of professional practice [1] will not be new to academic educators who explore the idea in their considerations of communities of practice as part of their professional activities. They look to the suggestive possibilities of communities of practice and, perhaps as we have done, see Lave and Wenger's [2] notion of Legitimate Peripheral Participation as providing useful models to explore [3-5]. Within communities of practice, roles of various members at various stages of their activities and progress may be systematically supported, with good theory to underpin the communities' endeavours. In this paper, we take a step beyond such concepts of communities of practice, and focus on what might be termed communities of interest [6], which we consider a part of indeterminate zones of professional practice. Taking up this concept in relation to academic engagement in wider community interests, we are drawn to the work of Boyer [7] and his concept of the Scholarship of Application. He makes an important point in informing the sort of work we consider here. As Boyer [7, pp. 21-22] puts it, modern universities were initially founded on, and continue to be based '...on the principle that higher education must serve the interests of the larger community'.

D. Barron is with Swinburne University of Technology, Prahran, VIC 3181 Australia (phone: +61 3 92146019; fax: +61 3 9521 2665; e-mail: dbarron@swin.edu.au).

M. Zeegers is with the University of Ballarat, Mt Clear, VIC 3363 (phone: +61 3 53279327 fax: +62 3 53279717; e-mail: m.zeegers@ballarat.edu.au)

M. Zeegers is with the University of Ballarat, Mt Clear, VIC 3363 (phone: +61 3 53279327 fax: +62 3 53279717; e-mail: m.zeegers@ballarat.edu.au)

D. Barron is with Swinburne University of Technology, Prahran, VIC 3181 Australia (phone: +61 3 92146019; fax: +61 3 9521 2665; e-mail: dbarron@swin.edu.au).

He does go on to distinguish between university academics 'doing good' in what might be considered citizenship-focused activities, going back once more to the notion of scholarship as research-based underpinning all such activities. Thus, as he says: "To be considered scholarship, service activities must be tied directly to one's special field of knowledge and relate to, and flow directly out of, this professional activity. Such service is serious, demanding work, requiring the rigor [sic]—and the accountability—traditionally associated with research activities" [7, p. 22].

This concept, of course, goes beyond notions of serving on committees or councils, or organising relief funds and so on, worthy as such activities may be, and into the heart of what we do as part of our work in universities. It also goes beyond notions of 'applied knowledge', which would again suggest some sort of dichotomy involved as a sort of creation of new knowledge which is then applied to given problems. It is the very fact of the problems being addressed with this new knowledge that is the generation of new research, as existing knowledge is applied to generate new knowledge. As with the other Scholarships he proposes, those of Teaching, Research, and Engagement, it is research-based.

In engaging the Scholarship of Application, then, we turn to that useful OECD definition of research to guide our efforts; research as generating new knowledge or using existing knowledge in new ways (thus creating new knowledge). It is what Boyer [7, p. 23] refers to as 'scholarly service—one that both applies and contributes to human knowledge—...particularly needed in a world in which huge, almost intractable problems call for the skills and insights only the academy can provide'. In the following three cases, we explore some of the possibilities that an engagement with this Scholarship suggests. Both Zeegers and Barron are academics with a primary concern with education, but both have particular interests that sit alongside this, and which have been drawn upon in their work with the schools in each of the following cases. Zeegers has a particular interest in literature and history; Barron has particular interests in design and design education.

## II. BUNINYONG PRIMARY SCHOOL: CASE 1

The unique project, The Story of Buninyong, had its fourth birthday in 2011, having developed into a prominent feature of the Grade 4 local history unit. In each of its four years, the project has culminated in the performance of an original school musical as the annual concert. In 2008, the Acting Principal of the school approached Zeegers to conduct systematic research on the project. The Story of Buninyong has grown out of a 2006 project that established an Indigenous Australian artists-in-residence program to foreground the school's Indigenous Australian history.

The principal at the time, Dennis Chamberlain, wanted not just a one-off experience for the school and the children involved, but one which would establish a basis for embedding the Indigenous Australian perspectives on the history that would inform this aspect of its curriculum. The teachers and parents who have initiated and developed the project have themselves taken up this idea. Then, as now, teachers, parents and children have worked with a Community Advisory group made up of the local Indigenous Australian elders and community representatives, volunteers and artists and craftspersons in the region. This is the community of interest that has made this set of activities possible in this case.

Drawing on the expertise, knowledge, and skills of the members of this community of interest, the project has been designed to enable children's authentic engagement with issues, features and understandings that are particularly pertinent to their developing knowledge of what it means to be Australian in this place at this time. Children's fiction and non-fiction literature texts have been used in discussions to explore issues of traditional Indigenous Australian custodianship of the land on which the school is placed and, through this, to gain Indigenous Australian perspectives on Australian society as informed by the community of interest. Indigenous Australian storytellers, artists, dancers, musicians and craft experts have helped to develop a critical appreciation of ways in which the school has been positioned in the physical and historical landscapes[8]. What is more, *The Story of Buninyong* explores suggestive possibilities of pedagogies for effective teaching and learning underpinning all of the features upon which successful outcomes are based. What has been produced has been based on positioning the school and its wider community in the historical, physical and cultural landscape in which it operates [9].

The community of interest, in guiding the project, have taken the unique step of basing children's activities on artists-in-residence programs, a practice where children's critical engagement with what they develop with the artists, that is, non print-based children's literature texts, enable them to explore the ramifications of the Indigenous Australian history connections of every Australian. The project acknowledges that the school is built on traditional custodians' land, and children engage this basic principle as part of their activities to expand the dimensions of their understandings of this aspect of their history. This sort of engagement tells a bigger story than any that might be written by non-Indigenous Australians, and provides more than European perspectives for the children to consider.



Fig. 1 Learning to read the landscape

There is a further dimension to this as well. There is not just the knowledge that is generated; there are also values that are engaged. There is that respect for culturally valued and valuable ways of knowing and being. Sue Deans, Assistant Principal at Buninyong Primary School, succinctly describes the vision that underpins *The Story of Buninyong* as 'a community building initiative, aiming to collaboratively build understanding of the place where we live, its past, present and future'[10]. In her presentation for the successful nomination of the school's program for the 2008 Department of Education and Early Childhood Development's Victorian Education Excellence Awards, she stresses the importance of this focus, saying, 'We can't do the job that we have to do without having everybody on board to support it'[10]. Any audience member of any of the productions over the last three years is immediately struck by the enthusiasm and the dedication of all involved. The outcomes of Zeegers' research suggest that it is not just the parents of the children who perform, or the teachers involved, or the children themselves; it is the whole school and its wider community, supported by the rigour of academic research.

### III. BIALIK COLLEGE SCHOOL INITIATIVE: CASE 2

In a similarly community-based engagement with the Scholarship of Application, this project is being funded by the Australian Research Council Linkage grant scheme. A major feature of this grants scheme is its requirement that an Industry partner be committed, financially and with in-kind support, to the research. This is a project in which a whole school and its wider community are engaged in a change in its pedagogical approach to teaching in a spatial environment that will enable a Reggio Emilia philosophy. The school has also drawn on the professional services of designer, Mary Featherston, to assist in their project. It incorporates systematic and orchestrated research in its work with a group of university researchers—Deirdre Barron, Denise Whitehouse and KelleeFrith—to investigate its activities in this regard. The detailed examination of the collaborative design processes and the day to day functioning of the physical settings in the school, with a focus on stakeholder needs for 21st century success, has been designed to identify the role of intelligent design in assisting a school to deliver desired learning outcomes. The role of Barron has been to provide a research-informed approach to this project. Given this, teachers, parents and children have constituted a community of interest which has been extended to include a furniture manufacturer, the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, a professional designer, and an academic. This is the community of interest that has made this set of activities possible in this case.

In designing the research, Barron has proceeded on the understanding that there is a need to move forward from a model of education as a linear, lock-step process in which students are the passive recipients of information to a more interactive, experiential, and collaborative process in which students are active drivers and participants in their own learning [11].

Co-incidentally, these are the very functions offered by the new media of digital information transfer that increasingly are being embraced by children and adults [12].

This understanding of learning and teaching has informed the activities of the community of interest to engage new forms of knowledge and skills for an innovative reworking of the design of the physical learning environments that is still called the classroom. The data generated have indicated that those design disciplines that are engaged to deliver the physical spaces in which teaching and learning is to take place have little understanding the role of the learning spaces as a teacher in itself [13].

Taking up the argument by Washor[14] that there have been many plans and theories about what an innovative learning environment should look like but that there is little to show for this in practice, this research has engaged that very problem. To date, educators who wish to develop innovative learning and teaching practices are constrained by the limitations of stereotypical cellular spaces within traditional facilities or open, undifferentiated spaces in new school buildings. There is also a widespread misconception that pedagogical innovation can be architecturally led. This research been grounded in the principle that design has a significant role to play, but to be effective it is to have a basis in contemporary pedagogical theory and practice.

Barron's research indicates that the effects of the physical learning environment on behaviour and attitudes of both teachers and students is well documented, but that the focus tends to be 'on pedagogical and interpersonal issues, ignoring the physical-spatial context in which the teaching-learning process occurs'[15]. This research has proceeded on the basis that the physical setting of the technology and instruction in schools may serve to impede rather than enhance the desired learning outcomes of the schools concerned, with resulting conflict of the educational program and the setting of that program. What it has found is that the space design alone cannot produce the desired pedagogical outcomes. On the one hand, where the spaces were used in line with pedagogical theory that underpinned their creation, student academic outcomes were measurably improved. Where the spaces were not used in such ways, Barron found that actual physical damage could result as far as the students were concerned. She argues that teachers' understanding of the theories would have to be revisited through professional development programs in order to maximise the benefits of the spaces created; that the design of the spaces alone is not enough to rely upon.



Fig. 2 Example of the classroom design

From this project foci it is possible to see ways in which research on the nature of design and the nature of education and ways in which children are taught in educational institutions may be linked to industry, government planning and community needs through the collaboration. These are the architects and designers, certainly, but they are also the builders, furniture makers, glaziers, electricians, plumbers, and so on. When one considers the Scholarship of Application in regard to schools, a whole wider community is involved. This would mean research as socio-cultural, covering not just technical and mechanistic needs of the potential of design on students and educators, but also their social, cultural, cognitive and developmental needs, through in-depth qualitative study of needs. The research suggests that the well-designed school physical environment of the 21st century is one which facilitates ways of simple and effective integration of contemporary pedagogical theory and technological change in order to facilitate individual and collaborative learning that is grounded in school communities. Working with a concept of communities of interest, outcomes of the research have established a model of collaborative practice that involves school communities, education theorists and designers, and constructed much needed principles and guidelines for the design and redesign of schools in order to meet the demands of changing worlds.

#### IV. SOVEREIGN HILL MUSEUM SCHOOLS (ZEEGERS): CASE 3

In 2008, the Principal of Sovereign Hill Schools, Mr Michael Ward, approached Zeegers [16] to conduct research on its costumed school experience provided for over 6,000 Grades 4-6 primary school children, noting that in all of its 32 years of existence, no research had been done on its operations, in spite of its status as the only school of its kind in the world, and its being in operation in a city that is home to the oldest university in Australia. This program of undoubted popularity had had no systematic research-based evaluation of the pedagogical underpinnings of its success, or otherwise. The report has made visible what those involved in the program had guessed, but could not substantiate in academically or professionally acceptable ways. The teachers in the program, visiting teachers and children, Museum administration, the Department of Education and Early Childhood development, the Catholic Education Office, and the University of Ballarat, in their various ways of supporting the program, constitute the community of interest in this case. The role of Zeegers has been to design and conduct systematic research into pedagogical underpinnings of activities engaged. The Sovereign Hill Schools Web page [17] succinctly describes its program: "Students attend the schools for two days of costumed role-play, which highlights the vast differences between schooling on the Victorian Goldfields of the 1850s and education today. Students are taught from the Irish National System of Education, which was used in mid-19th century Australian schools. They use slates, sandboards, dip pens, copybooks and facsimile editions of original textbooks. Sitting on wooden benches at long desks, the students must observe the manners and demeanour of young Victorian ladies and gentlemen. Visiting teachers are also costumed and given a role to play—much to the delight of the children".

The Sovereign Hill Museums Association supports the program down to the last details of its operations, such as providing authentic reproductions of costumes made from the patterns of the era and providing staff to perform the roles of extras in the program. Around six Museums Association staff members are trained for the role of the District Inspector, and a similar number for the Vicar, Priest and Doctor who visit the classrooms to 'inspect' the children in attendance. The community of interest basis for its operations has been carefully established from the outset. The program is not only a costumed experience, but also one of role playing of characters developed by children themselves. This happens over two days on an historically accurate set in the form of the Sovereign Hill Outdoor Museum itself, built across 25 hectares for the purpose. The children interact with others similarly role playing the characters that they have developed, without any scripts, creating the dialogue as they progress, and performing this in front of an audience of visitors from all over Australia and the rest of the world.

Children in the Sovereign Hill Schools program do not only engage primary sources of the letters and diaries of the time, and the school history textbooks; they also engage the historical fiction written for children and young adults as part of their regular classroom preparations for their Sovereign Hill visit. They have made their own preparations that are consistent with current Australian curriculum documents in relation to History as 'a disciplined enquiry into the past that develops students' curiosity and imagination' [18]. Each child writes a narrative, incorporating an historical fictional character who has arrived at the diggings in Ballarat, and who will attend school there. Not only that, but they will play this character, appropriately costumed and positioned in the classroom hierarchy, for the whole time that they are at the school.



Fig. 3 Playing the roles within the hierarchy

The data have generated a picture of affective engagement by children in a teaching and learning program offered to them by more knowledgeable adults scaffolding their learning. The data included written responses to their experience of the program, which have indicated what children felt throughout their two days at the school. Given the pervasive nature of objective testing, measurement and grading in the pedagogies of the humanities, as Shepard [19] points out, educators find it hard to move from and into areas of enjoyment and pleasure, let alone the affective areas of understanding and empathy, in such things as History.

The research has been designed to explore these last dimensions, and the data confirm that in relation to the learning of the Sovereign Hill children, the emphasis is on affective dimensions of teaching and learning. In this, the program has anticipated emerging current thinking about that teaching and learning. A view of learning as described by Emmitt, Zbaracki, Komesaroff, and Pollock[20] as 'a process of making connections, identifying patterns, and organising previously unrelated bits of knowledge, behaviour or activities into new (for the learner) patterned wholes' has emerged as underpinning the program. The data indicate that the teachers in the programs—the 1850s role-playing Sirs and Ma'ams—work with conceptualisations of knowledge as being quite distinct from concepts of information, that is, knowledge as intensely private and meaningful.

The research has made visible the pedagogical basis of the Sovereign Hill Schools program, and has put into effect a child-centred basis for its program that has been canvassed in a body of professional literature which has grown enormously since Rousseau's[21] Emile centred the child in theories of education. The theory drawn upon is the metacognitive dimension of professional practice that grounds it firmly in the context of relevance, timeliness and appropriateness. By such means is children's understanding expanded, deepened, and enhanced. The program builds on cognition-based engagement to develop the affective dimensions of their learning, and the research has made this aspect of the program visible. As the Deputy CEO and Museums Director of Sovereign Hill, Mr Tim Sullivan, says in his Foreword to the Report [in 16. p. iv]: "This study will provide us with the tools to better communicate the unique attributes of learning that underpin the success we observe."

It will enrich the discussion to include not only the charming insights of students and teachers, but also an intellectually rigorous framework for appreciating the innovation in learning outcomes"[16, p. iv].

This is what Zeegers' contribution to the Scholarship of Application has produced. It is also what Barron's contribution has been. It is the sort of outcome that is consistent not only with the Scholarship of Application as contributing to success of the work of communities of interest, but also in relation to what may be made visible by academic research into the indeterminate zones of practice described by Schön[1]. The research in each case suggests that the resulting increased levels of student engagement, parent participation and community involvement that the concept of communities of interest implies have meant a more solid positioning of each school, each of which had already established strong links, within its wider context.

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**Dr Margaret Zeegers** is Associate Professor in the School of Education and Arts at the University of Ballarat in Victoria, Australia.

**Dr Deirdre Barron** is Associate Professor and the Associate Dean Research in the Faculty of Design, Swinburne University of Technology, Prahran, Victoria, Australia