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# PARTNERSHIP AS CONVERSATION: WHY PARTNERSHIPS ARE CONDEMNED TO TALK AND WHAT THEY NEED TO TALK ABOUT

JAMES CORNFORD

UNIVERSITY OF EAST ANGLIA  
j.cornford@uea.ac.uk

ROB WILSON

NEWCASTLE UNIVERSITY  
rob.wilson@ncl.ac.uk

SUSAN BAINES

MANCHESTER METROPOLITAN UNIVERSITY  
s.baines@mmu.ac.uk

## ABSTRACT

*Participants and observers regularly complain that multi-agency partnerships are “talking shops,” engaged in constant discussion which gets in the way of “doing” the work of partnership. In this paper we engage with and criticize this characterization. Drawing on ideas from the Cultural Theory of Mary Douglas, we argue that true multi-agency partnerships are structurally condemned to talk. Instead of criticizing this talk and contrasting it with “doing” we should see it as a critical part of the doing of partnership. We should therefore concentrate on organizing and structuring partnership talk in order to move things forward rather than trying to minimize it. In the second half of the paper we therefore put forward a proposal for how partnership talk should be organized into five “conversations” concerning the principles, policies, processes, practices and politics of partnership. While we can make no predictions for the outcome of these conversations in any given case, we can, we believe, establish some necessary preconditions for effective interaction. We illustrate our arguments drawing on a range of empirical work in education and wider public services reform.*

**Keywords:** Partnerships, Cultural Theory, Grid and Group, Conversations

## INTRODUCTION

There can be few collaborative partnerships between dissimilar organizations that have not been criticized for being ‘talking shops’. Practical minded people with a desire to get on and do something, the very people partnerships often rely on for success, are often alienated and irritated by the constant meetings and volume of communication that always seem to be generated by partnerships and partnership working. They implicitly contrast such talk with the partnership’s ‘real work,’ and see the former as a substitute for the latter. This paper will try to reframe this common perception arguing that talk is not always an alternative to doing partnership but is a necessary part of that very task. We do however, meet these critics of talk half way in that we also argue that such talk can be better organized to make it more productive by avoiding certain ‘bad assumptions’ and by ensuring that appropriate spaces and occasions are made available to partner organizations to conduct a set of conversations which are necessary, but not sufficient, for the success of the partnership.

A first point we need to make is that we take partnership to be a broad term which characterizes some but not all Inter-Organizational Relations. Drawing on Daft et al.’s useful distinctions, summarized in figure 1, we see partnerships as characterized by dissimilar organizations working in a broadly co-operative relationship – in their terms a collaborative network. In this sense, then, we are concerned with IORs which are characterized by the search for Collaborative Advantage (c.f., Huxham and Vangen, 2005; Cropper et al., 2009). While the distinctions that are implied by Figure 1 may not be as cut and dried in practice as they appear on paper, this is an important limitation on the claims that we will be making.

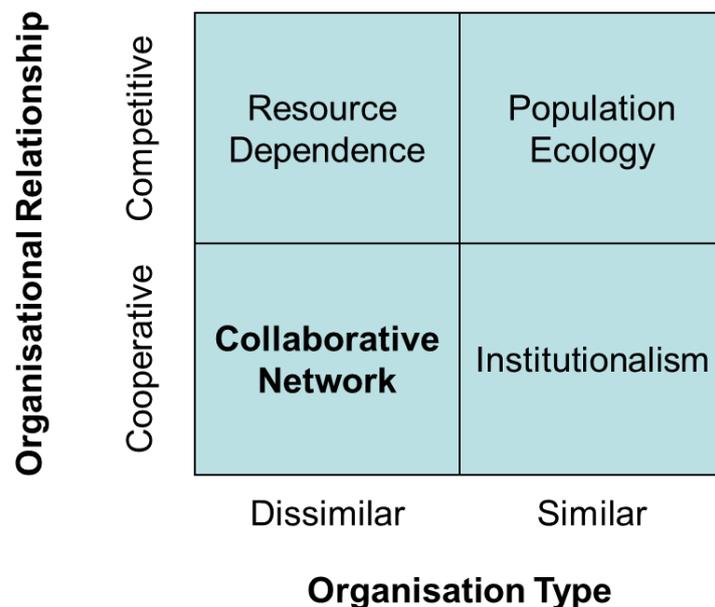


FIGURE 1 SITUATING COLLABORATIVE NETWORKS IN THE IOR SPACE. SOURCE: DAFT, R.L., MURPHY, J. AND WILLMOTT, H. (2010) *ORGANIZATIONAL THEORY AND DESIGN*. ANDOVER: SOUTHWESTERN CENGAGE, P 187.

## CULTURAL THEORY AND THE TALK IMPERATIVE

Our theoretical position is based on what has come to be known as Cultural Theory – capital C, capital T – derived from ideas originally proposed by the British anthropologist Mary Douglas (1992, 1996) and subsequently developed by Douglas’ collaborator Aaron Wildavsky and Michael Thompson (Thompson, Ellis, and Wildavsky, 1990). (Douglas gives an interesting account of the development of the theory in Douglas n.d). More recently Christopher Hood (1998) and Peri 6 (e.g., 6 et al 2002), among others, have drawn on the concepts of CT, in rather different ways, for work on public services in the UK.

Douglas was influenced by Durkheim (and hence this approach is sometimes described as neo-Durkheimian theory) and specifically the idea that that ‘the basic myths and tropes by which people classify their environments and organizational processes are driven not so much by accurate or distorted perceptions, as by the basic forms of social organization or what Durkheim a called “solidarities”’ (6 et al 2002: 77). In particular Douglas identified three, later four, such forms of organization. It is perhaps this simple yet flexible structure, which encompasses the classic markets-versus-hierarchies spectrum but goes beyond it in important ways, which makes CT so appealing.

The key elements of CT are summed up in one of its alternative names, grid and group theory. Douglas’ identified two key dimensions in terms of our orientation to the world: grid – the extent to which the world is naturally well ordered and structured, devoid of ambiguity; and group – the extent to which successful action in the world is achieved through collective as opposed to individual effort. Using these two dimensions Douglas creates a classic two-by-two matrix with the four cultural archetypes (See figure 2)

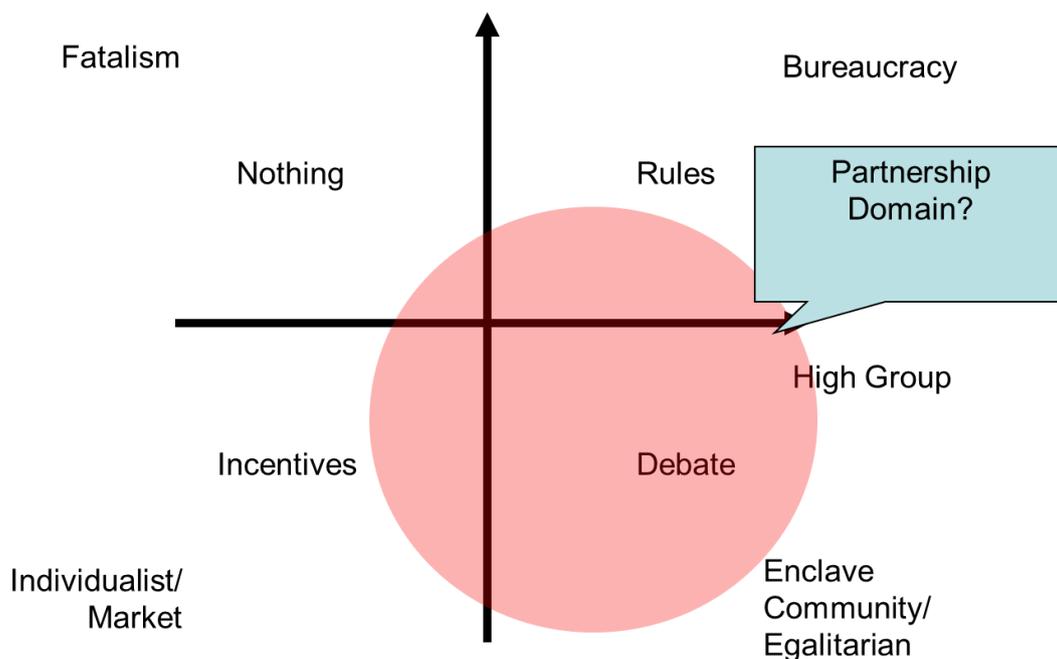


FIGURE 2 GRID AND GROUP AFTER MARY DOUGLAS

Using the grid and group dimensions, Douglas distinguished four stable cultural paradigms. A high grid, high group construct (a stable and knowable world and a collectivist vision of effective action) generates a classic Weberian bureaucratic framing of problems in terms constructing, implementing and enforcing appropriate rules. The antithesis of this perspective is the individualist or market perspective founded on low grid and low group (an unstable and ambiguous world and an individualist vision of effective action). So far, Douglas mirrors the conventional distinction between markets and hierarchies. The quadrant which is defined by high grid and low group (an epistemologically stable and unambiguous world and the futility of collective action) generates a fatalist position. The most interesting quadrant for us is the final, low grid and high group quadrant. From this perspective, our knowledge of the world is fragile and much is ambiguous but we can only effectively proceed if we work together. This is the quadrant that is variously labeled the enclave (because Douglas claims that it tends to create a strong in-group/out-group dynamic), egalitarian or community position. Within this culture the focus is on a discursive process of “sensemaking” through dialogue and debate. In her original research, Douglas was quite dismissive of this position – perhaps echoing the concerns about “talking shops” we noted above. However, we need not see the various positions in any kind of value hierarchy.

Importantly, Douglas and other writers in this tradition argue that each position forms a coherent and stable culture that militates against any effective mixing of cultures, pushing societies or organizations out from the center of the space represented in figure 2 towards the corners of the square. Where there is interaction between these cultures, it generates the classic ‘dialogue of the deaf’ (Douglas, n.d.). Christopher Hood (1998) has used this feature of CT to provide an explanation of sudden paradigm shifts in public policy as the weaknesses of a particular approach to a problem build up and become apparent and eventually the solutions associated with that position are abandoned and a new culture comes to the fore with new approaches and solutions. The example of policy relating to climate change might give us a recent example where market solutions have been tried and appear to be failing leading to renewed interest in bureaucratic, communal and fatalist approaches to the issue (see e.g., Hulme, 2009).

For us what is important for IOR research, we would argue, is that partnerships, as we have defined them above, appear to map more or less precisely onto the enclave/egalitarian/community perspective. Let us justify this position. Firstly, in a partnership between dissimilar organizations there is typically a high level of ambiguity about the epistemological stability of the world – the grid dimension. What for one partner is an established fact or stable assumption is for other organizations a shaky assertion or a wild surmise. What is more, partnership tends to be applied to difficult, wicked or otherwise complex problems (because the simple or benign problems can usually be effectively addressed through other means) and a degree of epistemological ambiguity is usually identified as a characteristic of these problems. At the same time, partnership must be

predicated on a group perspective on effective action. Almost all writers on the subject include the injunction to avoid partnership approaches if there are other ways of achieving organisational goals that do not require working with other agencies (see e.g., Huxham and Vangen, 2005).

**Central argument 1: where a partnership is comprised of diverse, dissimilar organisations in a co-operative relationship seeking Collaborative Advantage, they are condemned to talk because they must be, at least initially and probably chronically, in a low grid high group situation.**

#### PARTNERSHIP AS A STRUCTURE OF CONVERSATIONS

Organizations are the on-going patterning of conversations so that changes in conversations are changes in organizations. (Stacy, 2007: 317)

Studies of Multi-agency or partnership work always emphasize the importance of communication. For example, Williams (2002: 115) describes this common sense well from the perspective of the 'boundary spanner' role.

The value of basic and effective oral, written and presentational communication skills cannot be overestimated. The ability to express oneself, and one's position with clarity, is considered to be essential, as is the choice and use of language. The problem associated with the use and interpretation of 'professional' languages and jargon is recognized as an area in need of sensitive management in order not to undermine, patronize, mislead or give offence to others. The search for shared meanings is particularly acute in partnership arenas. Communication is also a two-way process and receiving information – listening – is considered as important as information giving. References are made to 'active listening' which is expressed as a willingness or openness to be influenced by the views of other people. (Williams, 2002: 115)

Clearly, these competences are critical to our argument. If conversation – talking and listening – is necessary we need partnership managers to be good at doing it. OK, so they have to talk and listen, and they have to be good at doing that. But what is a good, productive conversation? How can conversations be made more effective? How can they "move things on?"

Socio-linguists such as Paul Grice (Grice, 1975; 1989) and Harvey Sacks (1992) have provided a strong basis for the retrospective analysis of conversation. Conversational Analysis (CA) focuses on the joint production of meaning and order in conversation, on the work done by both speakers and listeners. CA has been developed in linguistics into a highly technical form of analysis. It has been carried across into management by a few writers (e.g., Boden, 1994). It has sometimes been linked across to work on the uses of narrative in organization (e.g., Shotter, 1993; Boje, 2001). More specific work on "translation" between social worlds

(e.g., Callon, 1986; more generally see Freeman, 2009) and the use of boundary objects (Star and Griesemer, 1989) provide the basis for further work on specifically inter-organizational conversations.

While we do not have space here to explore the implications of these bodies of work for IORs, we will sound a brief note of warning. We must guard against the common assumption in much management practice (and not a little theoretical writing) that emphasizes clarity and transparency above all other values in communication. We have long known that ambiguity can be strategically useful (Eisenberg, 1984). Stacy (2007: 283, drawing on Shaw 2002) makes the point well:

Shaw argues that the widespread demand that management meetings should be carefully planned actually kills the spontaneity of ordinary conversation in which new meaning can emerge (Stacy, 2007: 283).

This is not to deny that clarity is not sometimes desirable. Indeed, what is particularly valuable about the focus on conversation is its open ended, but rule governed nature. It is open ended in that the outcome cannot be predicted at the start. It is rule governed in that it has a basic set of shared assumptions about, for example, turn taking. Thus Stacy describes conversation as ‘sophisticated, associative turn-taking’ in which ‘participants... co-create meaningful patterns over time’ (2007: 279) and which can be ‘paradoxically repetitive and spontaneously transforming at the same time’ (2007: 284).

#### STRUCTURING PARTNERSHIP AS 5 KEY CONVERSATIONS

If partnerships are condemned to talk, and talk takes a range of basic conversational forms, how should this talk be organized? Our response to has been to identify five classes of conversations, or conversational threads, focused around particular content and drawing on specific knowledge-bases within the partner organizations, which we believe are necessary, but not sufficient, for successful partnership working. These five foci can conveniently, if a little artificially, be labeled with word starting with the letter P: Principles, Policies, Processes, Practices, Politics (summarized in figure 3).

We will briefly outline what we take to be the agenda for each of these conversations, the most likely and useful protagonists and some of the useful information or other tools that could support a fruitful conversation in this domain.

The need for conversations about **principles** might appear to be an obvious point, but in our experience these are often skimmed, if not avoided altogether. The fundamental values of the partner organizations, both espoused and practiced, are seldom placed on the table and fully discussed. Discussion of principles can appear abstruse, recondite or impractical and thus be dismissed as irrelevant or timewasting. While formal documents can give some insight into this domain, there appears to be no substitute for well structured, facilitated,

face-to-face conversations. Methods for externalizing assumptions about partners and their values and motivations are needed.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Principles</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Why are we each doing this? What are our values? Where are our boundaries?</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Policies</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– What basis are we acting on? What rules do we want to govern the partnership?</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Processes</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– What processes and systems underpin the partnership? What is the workflow?</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Practices</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– How is partnership working integrated into regular working practices?</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Politics</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– What is the political support for/opposition to the partnership?</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

FIGURE 3 THE FIVE PS OF PARTNERSHIP WORKING. SOURCE: THE AUTHORS

Conversations about **policies** are familiar to most partnership working. Policies include the various rules and regulatory principles that are laid down and which govern the partners' activities. Policies range from the legal status of the partners or their foundational charters or documents of incorporation, and the specific powers and responsibilities that those documents prescribe or imply) to the rules which cover routine processes such as expenses. What appears as a perfectly viable or legal action for one partner may be explicitly forbidden to another. Because organizations come from a heterogeneous set they will tend to have a variety of legal forms – companies, partnerships, local authorities, NHS trusts, charities, Universities founded by royal charter, etc. – and there is often little understanding among partners about the specific regulatory frameworks under which their partners work. Key players in such conversations are clearly those with legal or regulatory compliance responsibilities – the company secretary, the clinical governance lead – and conversations will be more effective if they include individuals with those roles. Finally, this conversation can appear, or be framed as bureaucratic (in a bad sense), pedantic or nit picking.

Conversations about **Processes**, by contrast focus on the operations of the partners. The focus here is on the workflow within and among partners. This is often seen as the nitty-gritty of partnership working. Tools such as business process mapping and artefacts such as process maps can provide useful boundary objects around which conversation can be organized, if there is also a danger of mistaking the (process) map for the territory and ignoring undocumented or emergent processes. Key voices in the process conversation need to include operational and IT managers providing the supporting infrastructure or buildings, timetables, machines and information. If the previous discussions can be dismissed as abstruse or pedantic, this conversation is sometimes dismissed as unnecessarily technical and “over-practical,” missing the bigger picture.

If partnership needs to be inserted into organizational processes, it also needs to be incorporated in organizational working **Practices**. Partnership working is sometimes seen as an almost costless activity that can be absorbed into the existing workload of managers, professionals and support staff. This is not just a matter of finding time for partnership working but also one of incorporating the other demands – cognitive, political, emotional – that partnership working creates for individuals. Conversations about practices need to have the participation of, at a minimum, those professionals and support workers who actually have to deliver the partnership and give life to the processes. Perhaps because of the focus on frontline work, this conversation can be dismissed as special pleading or even resistance from professionals and other workers.

Finally, the **Politics** of partnerships is critical. All projects need support, allies within their sponsoring organisations. All partnership projects need to overcome naysayers and opponents. For some practitioners, politics is a grubby, negative element in partnership work, to be seen in failure, obfuscation and distraction. However, both experienced practitioners and academic commentators have successfully challenged this view. Keen, writing in the context of information systems, is to the point:

Unfortunately, 'politics' have been equated with evil, corruption and, worst of all, blasphemy in the presence of the Rational Ideal, but politics are the process of getting commitment, or building support, or creating momentum for change; they are inevitable...It is absurd to ignore it (Keen, 1981: 31).r

The political dimension of partnership working does include what Huxham and Vangen (2005) have described as 'Collaborative Thuggery' and the "dark arts" but is not restricted to them. Academic work that is relevant here might include the political process work associated with Dawson, and Badham and Buchanan. Practical tools that can facilitate the political conversations might include stakeholder mapping. Spaces and occasions for political conversations need to include both frontstage and backstage locations. Practical tools to help to plan for these conversations might include stakeholder mapping.

We want to be clear that we are not attempting to specify the specific outcomes of these conversations, just that they appear necessary (if not sufficient) to effective partnership working. However, we can be a little bolder. Perhaps the most important practical implication of our work is that it can help partnership managers and leaders to avoid certain bad assumptions that we have often observed being made in the field (these are summarized in Figure 4). Noticeably they tend to take similar forms: partners assume that their way is the 'normal' way to organize the specific matter and do not bother to check that this is the case or that, where a partner is aware of heterogeneity they assume that it can be resolved by other partners adopting their norms and practices.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Principles <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– We <b>all</b> have the same values/principles</li> <li>– You <b>will</b> roll over accept my values</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Policies <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Your policies <b>are</b> much the same as mine</li> <li>– You <b>will</b> accept my policies</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Processes <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Your process <b>will</b> interface with mine</li> <li>– You <b>will</b> change your processes to interface with mine</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Practice <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Partnership working <b>can</b> be costlessly integrated in working practices</li> <li>– You <b>will</b> change your working processes to fit with the new partnership arrangements</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Politics <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Everyone <b>is</b> in favour of the partnership</li> <li>– The partnership <b>would</b> work if it wasn't for all the politics</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

FIGURE 4: SOME BAD ASSUMPTIONS IN PARTNERSHIP CONVERSATIONS: SOURCE: THE AUTHORS

We can also identify some of the arguments that can be used to dismiss, downplay or disparage discussion and debate relating to each of the topics (See Figure 5 for a summary). While we don't want to dismiss these arguments completely, being aware of them can help managers to devise spaces and occasions which can help to meet the concerns that they raise.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Principles <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Abstruse, high flown, unrealistic...</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Policies <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Bureaucratic, nit picking, pedantic....</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Processes <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Overly technical, narrow, missing the human element ...</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Practice <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Special pleading, subjective...</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Politics <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Negative, divisive...</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

FIGURE 5 TYPICAL ARGUMENTS AGAINST CONVERSATIONS: SOURCE: THE AUTHORS

**Proposition 2: Partnership talk can be usefully organized into five distinct strands: principles; policies; processes; practices; politics.**

#### A BRIEF EMPIRICAL ILLUSTRATION

This framework was originally developed from work on a shared e-portfolio that would link schools, colleges and universities, enabling students to build and maintain a portfolio as

they transition across institutions although we have used this framework in a range of other contexts. The e-portfolio project had a strong technical dimension and technical leadership from the university partner and was funded by the Joint Information Systems Committee of the Higher Education Funding Councils. However, the focus was on working together. The Final Report of the project stated that:

The overall approach was collaboration, collaboration, collaboration among the regional Universities and FE Colleges, and within these groups among learning technologists, educationalists, administrators, executives, managers.....

The project therefore matches well with our criteria for a partnership.

What we observed, as we worked with the project over a period of 17 months, was that certain conversations were well supported while others were marginalized or only addressed when it became apparent that their omission was creating an obstacle for the project.

Perhaps unsurprisingly given the technical leadership of the project, the best supported conversations related to the domain we have labeled **process**. The technical partners enjoyed a relatively well established set of tools – process mapping, a technical language interfaces and standards – that facilitated their interaction. The project was successful at creating a process for moving portfolios between institutions. In some other domains, however, the project struggled.

In terms of **policies** – covering data protection, ownership of portfolios and copyright as well as the precise institutional regulations on computer use – the project regularly “discovered” new complexities and new information. The legal status of portfolios and the ownership and control of data and information in them was not as straightforward as the original plan had expected. The project needed to bring in a lawyer to advise on these issues and a considerable amount of “repair” work was required.

With regard to working **practices**, there was little attention paid to when staff in organizations, especially schools and colleges, would work with students to populate their portfolios. Basic understandings of the curriculum, both official and “hidden,” and the working environments – classrooms and computer labs – in which teachers, lecturers and students were expected to operate, only emerged in the course of the project. The central questions of when and where portfolio work would take place were only addressed when the project was significantly advanced and were never really resolved.

The **politics** of the project also represented a challenge. The project did have some planning in this field from the start but the main concern was with holding the partnership’s sponsors together at a time when there were a range of other struggles going on among the various institutions. However, what emerged from the project, and was less foreseen, was that individual and collective (group, department) project participants would need political

support *within* their institutions where portfolios were not widely accepted and in which their advocates often saw themselves as ‘isolated.’

The biggest issue, however, was that of **principles** – it emerged through the project that there was no real agreement at an operational level on the value of the basic model that the project was promoting. The underlying conception of education as a smooth and progressive acquisition of skills and knowledge, with each partner building on the work of the lower levels, turned out to be substantively false. In practice, each level of education saw its role as, in practice, the partial undoing of the work of the previous level. Rather than a smooth progression we saw a series of more or less violent transitions or transformations. A good college student was not just a good school student ‘but more so’. Rather, they were a different entity entirely and the successful school student identity had to be partially disassembled in order for a ‘good’ college student to be formed. A similar transition was also noted at the boundary between college and university. From this point of view the merits of carrying information over from one institution to another, in the form of an e-portfolio- are much less clear. Indeed, such a carryover might well help to sustain old identities that the new institutional context was trying to rebuild. These concerns effectively remained hidden because the fundamental conversations about educational principles remained un-discussed and everybody accepted the “progressive” model of education rather than the transformational model.

We need to be clear that this was in many senses a successful project that achieved many of its goals and was instrumental in creating a mixed technical and pedagogic community around e-portfolios in region. However, the final report of the project was clear:

The project was much too short to bring all the necessary negotiations and relationship-building required to deliver a project of this magnitude... There was insufficient, and insufficiently effective, engagement with FE partners, with their very different needs and worldviews.

By planning for, and facilitating, effective conversations, we believe, the project could have achieved more, even in its relatively short time-span.

#### CONCLUSIONS AND NEXT STEPS: SPACES AND OCCASIONS TO TALK EFFECTIVELY

In this paper, we have used Cultural Theory to argue that partnerships are condemned to talk and we have proposed that a good and productive way of structuring the content of that talk can be captured under the five P headings: principles; policies; processes; practices; politics. We haven’t tried to specify what the outcome of the conversations identified here should be, only that they need to be organized and facilitated and that ignoring, suppressing or delaying these conversations is likely to be counterproductive . This is a highly pragmatic attempt to address what we have found in the field to be a perennial set of issues. We have aimed to develop a theoretically informed but practical set of guidelines that make sense to

partnership managers and which help them to make sense of their task. There is always the risk of the platitudinous in such an endeavor. Hopefully, we have avoided that.

The limitations of our approach should be clear. We have no real evidence that this approach is as fruitful as we claim and elements remain underdeveloped theoretically and practically. We do have some partial validation of the approach through regular work with MBA students taking the Partnership Working Option on the Newcastle University Business School, but we clearly need to develop and test the framework proposed here in a wider range of contexts. Theoretically, we need to develop a clearer understanding of what a productive conversation that can 'move things on' sounds like and how we can effectively facilitate such conversations. Elsewhere, we have worked with the notion of creating both spaces (which endure in time and which may not require co-presence) and occasions (which are time limited and face-to-face) to support multi-agency working and this provides a basis for taking this work forward.

The key point we want to make here, however, is that in a partnership context talking is not an alternative to doing partnership working, it *is* partnership working and therefore something that partnership managers need to become skilled at organizing, facilitating and supporting.

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