This is the author’s final peer reviewed version of the item published as:


Copyright : 2002, Australian Teacher Education Association
Providing Space for Teacher Renewal: the role of the facilitator in school-university partnerships

ABSTRACT: This paper uses the process of a teacher renewal partnership program to explore the role of the university academic in facilitating change. Responses to a series of interview questions relating to change were used to explore and examine the dimensions of the facilitators’s role. Facilitators report that the role is complex, often uncertain and requires an understanding of schools and their cultures and schools’ and teachers’ previous experiences in professional development programs. The findings from this paper suggest that an effective facilitator creates for the teachers involved, a space for discussion, reflection and challenge and that this space provides for and legitimates teacher renewal.

Introduction

The Quality Teacher Program (QTP) is a three-year national program to renew and improve Australian teachers’ skills and enhance the status of teaching in both government and non-government schools. In response to this program, the Association of Independent Schools of Victoria (AISV) has developed a wide range of professional development projects to support schools in Victoria.

One exciting project that is part of the QTP program is Teacher Renewal through Partnerships. This involves more than 50 schools throughout Victoria. Each school has developed a school-based project related to a specific aspect of teacher renewal. Each school is working with an academic staff member from either Deakin University or University of Melbourne and some subject associations, who acts as a facilitator for the project. The facilitator meets regularly with the school team as a critical friend and mentor in the development of the project, providing advice on change management.
issues. Facilitators meet together within and across universities, and school teams meet in school clusters. This is a long-term program that builds on already held experiences of partnerships as a means of effective teacher professional development. In this paper, we explore a feature of this process, that is, the role of the facilitator in fostering change in a school renewal program.

The literature on teacher change focuses on teacher growth and the view of professional development as continuous learning (Clarke & Hollingsworth, 1994). There is criticism of a deficit approach to professional development that attempts to change teachers, implying that teachers have inadequate skills and inappropriate practices (Sikes, 1992; Clarke & Hollingsworth, 1994). An important distinction is made between change that is externally mandated and change teachers or schools initiate. Furthermore, the nature of change in schools has become complex:

As the kinds of changes introduced to schools have increased in complexity over the last decade - from curriculum and classroom-based innovations to ‘restructuring’ whole systems - the skills required of schools to implement them have also become complex (Fullan, 1991, p. 215).

Productive professional development is now occurring through collaborative partnerships set up between schools and universities. Some models of university-school collaboration have focussed on the relationship between the teacher and the academic in regard to teacher professional development (Groundwater-Smith & Marsh 1999; Perry, 2000). Other models focus on the relationship between the teacher in a school and the academic as researcher (Feldman, 1993; Sachs, 1997). Discussion related to both models has explored these partnerships in regard to the dimensions of, and tensions in, these collaborative relationships (Johnston, Peters & Williams, 1999; Hayes & Kelly, 2000). There has been less discussion about school-university collaboration that has focussed on the role of the university academic as facilitator in the process of change for teacher renewal.

**The research process**

Data for this paper were gathered through employing an interpretive approach to narrative inquiry using structured interviews with participants and documentary evidence. Drawing on information from the research literature, a set of questions was developed by the researchers, and used by an independent interviewer to elicit
information about the role of a facilitator and process of change. A review of progress reports completed by all facilitators involved in the project, and access to their comments at group meetings helped confirm the assumptions and perceptions of the three university facilitators in this initial study.

The Findings
What follows is an examination of the role of the facilitator as part of a school-based teacher renewal program. In this paper the focus is from the point of view of the university academic who is acting as facilitator to support a team of teachers involved in this professional development program.

Initial stages of change: uncertainty
Facilitators were asked about the initial stages of change and indicators of uncertainty in their project school. They identified their uncertainty given lack of knowledge of the school, and the school’s uncertainty about the project and role of the facilitator in the early stages of the project. One facilitator commented: ‘My uncertainty was not knowing the school, not knowing the people, not knowing how much they knew about the process that was going on’ (Facilitator 3).

School teams were hesitant about the project itself. Facilitators working with these schools commented: ‘Staff members were uncertain about what they were actually going to do’ (Facilitator 3) and ‘There was a degree of uncertainty about just what they had applied for’ (Facilitator 2). Although it was outside the control of AISV and university facilitators, there was some delay between schools’ initial applications to be involved in the project and the commencement of the program. In some cases, staff who wrote the initial application were no longer with the school or had not communicated the intent of the application with the school renewal team:

In the initial stages the curriculum manager and … offside were doing lots of things, but not communicating with the group and, in fact, they’d written the project application but not shared the application with the group (Facilitator 3).

Obviously when the coordination was uncertain, the team, the staff involved when they met were also uncertain. I’m sure they [the staff] were very uncertain as to where all this was going because they thought it was going to be one thing and they realized it was quite something else (Facilitator 2).
Schools were also uncertain about the facilitator’s role and place in the process of teacher renewal: ‘They were uncertain of who I was in my role and what I was doing as part of their project, so that was their uncertainty’ (Facilitator 3). Another facilitator identified uncertainty among teachers with regard to an academic’s role and credibility in the school situation:

I think the body language in the initial meetings of the teachers… some of them looked wary and looked like they were summing me up and summing up where all this was heading. They were quiet, they were looking me up and down, they were waiting to see what was going to come out of this. There was one teacher who has the type of personality where it was almost like … pushing the boundaries a little. So just in … interaction with me it’s almost like … somehow exploring the boundaries of me being an academic or me being there to help (Facilitator 1).

This role demarcation is also noted by Hayes & Kelly (2000) who suggest that schools often view university staff as ‘experts’ but who are not however aware of the ‘real’ life of schools. Many of the schools involved in this project had not previously participated in partnership programs where the external partner acted as facilitator of change rather than a subject specialist or consultant.

**Providing the space for renewal**

Facilitators were asked to give examples of new skills that teachers appeared to have gained as a result of the changes taking place in their schools and their involvement in the project. Given the early stage of this teacher renewal program, facilitators made general comments only. They did acknowledge, however, that some schools were well advanced in the change process. Facilitators were aware of the need for educators with a view to reform to ‘develop the skill necessary to handle the constructivist dilemma - that of fostering a sense of connectedness (ie support) in individuals while at the same time encouraging them to rethink or reconceptualise their current position (ie challenge)’ (Prawat, 1996, p. 106). Significantly, the project appeared to provide a new space for teachers to engage with one another, with support and opportunities to take risks.

In one school, the project appeared to be a stimulus to allow teachers to move from conservative views of teaching to a position where some risks may be taken:
One of the teachers is still marking work very traditionally for instance and …[the principal] has challenged …[the teacher] on a number of occasions about ‘What are you doing? Why are you taking home every piece of work and marking it and giving the kids a numerical mark, crossing through writing, spelling errors above? … [The teacher] hasn’t shifted yet, but I can see an opening, a willingness to and probably in the next few weeks or months (Facilitator 1).

Facilitator 3 commented on the opportunity the project provided for teachers to engage with one another and receive feedback about their work: ‘I don’t think they’ve had a lot of experience of sitting as a group of colleagues talking about their practice’. This facilitator saw the benefit in doing so as teachers’ growing ability to receive and provide feedback: ‘hearing feedback about what they thought the project was about and what they were doing and certainly about what they were doing in their teaching’ (Facilitator 3).

The project provided a safe space in which teachers could listen to one another … because they were valuing this time together. We had, you know, an hour, hour and a half, each time where the four of them could just talk, which I don’t think they had ever done (Facilitator 3).

… The case study is a kind of non risk situation that you can actually talk about what that teacher is doing …. [The team] started to really discuss these case studies really effectively which enabled the coordinator to bring around to issues of how this affected their work (Facilitator 2).

**Likelihood of change given organisational conditions within a school**

Support for teachers is vital if substantial change is to be introduced. The literature on teacher change points to the importance of peer relationships and leadership from school principals (Fullan, 1991; Standards Council of the Teaching Profession, 1996). Fullan (1991, p. 76) emphasises the importance of legitimising change:

All major research on innovation and school effectiveness shows that the principal strongly influences the likelihood of change, but it also indicates that most principals do not play instructional or change leadership roles…. Principal’s actions serve to legitimate whether a change is to be taken seriously (and not all changes are) and to support teachers both psychologically and with resources.

Facilitators were asked about the organisational conditions within the school that made it more or less likely that change would be successful. Responses related to the organisation of resources and role of senior management in supporting or legitimising
change. All three facilitators interviewed in this study commented on the perception held by schools that they were very busy places and the way in which programs such as this are sometimes seen as additional to, rather than integrated into, normal school operations. Although some funding for teacher release was provided in the project, some schools did not use it for teacher renewal meetings:

[The teachers] need release time, it shouldn’t be in teachers’ lunchtimes. Teachers were coming and going from yard duty, it was just horrendous. Plus they’re missing out on lunch and so this isn’t a good positive start to the project (Facilitator 1).

Johnson, Peters and Williams (1999) reported the same situation. They found that although schools had been allocated funding for release time it was often unused because teachers were uncomfortable about being absent from the classroom, other programs or special activities going on in the school at the time.

The role of senior management in the process of change differed among school sites from lack of involvement to significant support for the process of change. In one school, for example, the coordinator of the project lacked the power to approve teacher release time: ‘the coordinator has no real senior position at the school and can’t release teachers…. as a result, teachers are not being given release time [for meetings] (Facilitator 2). Despite the support of senior managers, a leading teacher in another school was left in charge of the project:

They’ve got some heavies who are behind this change … [one] is on … leave, so the project got handballed to this teacher, essentially … a teacher, doing extra things, and so that was where it started to fall down (Facilitator 1).

Generally, the support of senior managers was considered a stimulus for change:

The principal is in control of it, the principal is managing it, the principal is giving release time to it, the principal is arranging for the case studies in fact the principal is so keen and enthusiastic about it, it’s very difficult in a small school for the teachers to ignore it (Facilitator 2).

**Successful change involves pressure**

Facilitators were asked for examples of pressure - through interaction with peers and administrative leaders - involved in successful change. Facilitators noted a variety of pressures that appeared to promote change during the project. One facilitator
considered that there were instances of ‘emotional, intellectual, and social [pressures] - well that’s another one, the social pressures on each other’ (Facilitator 2).

Productive pressure was observed within one school community; pressure for teachers to shift their focus and embrace new practices. The facilitator working with this school commented: ‘I don’t think it is a bad pressure’ (Facilitator 1). In another school, there was pressure on team members to show one another that they were getting better at what they were doing, and subtle pressure to document their work and make progress because it was time for the facilitator to meet with the team.

One facilitator identified lack of pressure from the leadership team: ‘I was surprised that there wasn’t much pressure from the upper management team. In fact, there’s no pressure from the principal at all. There’s not disinterest - but certainly no pressure’ (Facilitator 3). In one school, however, professional pressure appeared to be counter-productive:

[There are] two teachers who are vying for some position [or] status in the school community and when one says one thing you are sure that the other will say the other, and you can feel that tension within the culture [of the] school (Facilitator 2).

Facilitators considered what evidence they saw that teachers understood the underlying conception and rationale for change and were able to respond to questions such as ‘Why does this new way work better?’ Generally the project had not progressed far enough to observe significant change in teachers’ understandings. In many cases, school teams were still dealing with the conceptual development and organization of the project. Facilitators observed the early signs of change:

[Conceptual breakthroughs are] just starting to happen. We’re - I’m included in this - we’re just starting to understand this is just a little project. It’s not a big thing and they’re just starting to understand, to talk in language of milestones. They’re getting better at saying we’ll just do this little bit then we’ll do this little bit, that idea of being able to see where they might be going in small steps (Facilitator 3).

I think through this focused work the principal was doing, you’re getting a lot of reconsideration of [teachers’] own practice - stuff going on - there is that spark. I can see it coming out (Facilitator 2).

In two other schools, change had not yet impacted on teachers’ practices in a significant way:
They’re asking the questions, but I think that they’re not actually seeing their power as educators to sell it to them, to the parents, to articulate it to them clearly enough (Facilitator 1).

I don’t believe the teachers have really had that breakthrough in the sense of learning. It’s happening only in a marginal way to their main program; it’s not impacting on their teaching and learning in any significant way (Facilitator 2).

The extent to which teachers embraced or resisted change reflects Johnson’s (1993, p. 7) view of the change process:

When faced with a change in teaching, the teacher is likely to see as ‘practical’ strategies that are the same or very similar to those which already exist in his or her teaching repertoire, and are worth the effort to learn in terms of the benefits that will result. Similarly, the teacher is likely to reject this innovation if there is a lack of information on how to make it work, or if it requires substantial change in his or her teaching patterns and suitable support is not available.

**Clash in expectations**

Facilitators were asked what the school and teachers expected of them and what they expected to give. It was clear that facilitators identified a clash in expectations between themselves and teachers in the school, a difficulty they sought to overcome.

In two schools, a general lack of knowledge about the project appeared to influence teachers’ expectations of facilitators. Teachers in the renewal team in one of these schools had no idea of the aims or content of the project before commencing with the facilitator: ‘They hadn’t any experience of the process and they had no idea of what the school had submitted as the project’ (Facilitator 3). Furthermore, as noted earlier, teachers had no expectation of working with a facilitator and had not experienced the involvement of an outsider in their school beyond professional development presentations. They had not previously experienced extended involvement of an outsider or having someone who would listen to and talk with them. One facilitator received constant feedback from teachers that they were very busy or did not have time for additional work, their discussion dominated by ‘big picture’ problems. The facilitator worked to overcome this barrier to involvement in the project by encouraging teachers to reconsider what they meant and considering ways of managing their time differently: reducing major projects into smaller tasks and working in incremental steps. The distance between the facilitator’s workplace and
the school had the effect of increasing the amount of work teachers faced in the project between facilitator visits, although it also meant that all teachers were released at the same time during the school day.

A difficulty faced by two facilitators was teachers’ expectation that they could draw from the facilitators’ knowledge of particular curriculum areas relevant to their priorities. In one case, the school expected the facilitator to provide ‘traditional’ professional development activities and provide them with answers:

> While it was a really good start to my relationship with them [to talk about my expertise in a particular area] it now has become problematic that they see my role as feeding in content more than the role of the project that I keep trying to come back to (Facilitator 1).

The facilitator’s suggestion to refocus teacher renewal meetings on change were met with resistance:

> They were quick to say ‘Oh no, we don’t want just that. We really want to use what you know about … [the curriculum area] and innovation in schools’ … I tried to get them … back on track, by suggesting that they do these things in the next meeting … which is a focus on change and they very strongly resisted that … I am trying to rationalise my own position here and I can almost do it (Facilitator 1).

The facilitator sought to resolve the conflict between the school’s focus on curriculum development and the project brief by reflecting on the change process going on within their discussions of a particular curriculum area. As Fullan (1991) noted, to be effective, facilitators must work with teachers to explore the meaning of their programs and effective implementation.

> They’re doing this change process in a particular context and that’s the only way we really can view it … what they are doing within … [this curriculum area] is a process of change. [There is] this struggle over what they want and what I see the project asks for, what I should be providing. I don’t think it’s resolved. In one way it’s just me getting my head around - can I live with me supporting a process of change while they are talking about … [particular] practices? (Facilitator 1).

A second facilitator also resisted the school’s pressure to provide traditional professional development activities by avoiding opportunities to be drawn into debate: ‘I had to pull back, constantly pull back’ (Facilitator 2). This facilitator felt he/she had yet to establish a real relationship with teachers even after eight months
involvement in the school. The gap between school visits resulted in the need to restart and re-establish personal and professional relationships each time.

Facilitators expected to assist schools with the process of change by being supportive, linking teachers to other resources and encouraging them to work things out themselves. One facilitator expected the school and teachers to do most of the work themselves. Another facilitator expected to be a critical friend and listener, waiting to be invited into the discussion and avoiding taking control: ‘I was very conscious of … not taking too much control … I wasn’t there to solve anything, I wasn’t there to run anything. I was there as a critical friend (Facilitator 2).

Given these expectations, facilitators were also asked what they ended up providing to teachers and schools in the project. One facilitator contributed encouragement and support to regular team meetings already established for teachers working at a particular year level in the school. Another facilitator provided an hour and a half every three weeks for teachers to discuss their projects and how they could proceed with them, less time and professional expertise than he/she expected to provide in the project. This facilitator used strategies to promote discussion, asking questions and summarizing what he/she heard. The facilitator also advised the school about access to colleagues who could provide professional development and acted as an ‘interpreter’ between the renewal group and two teachers in management positions in the school.

The third facilitator worked with two schools in the project. This facilitator ended up adopting a different role in each, the result of differing school environments and teacher readiness for change. In one school, change was more rapid and the facilitator supported teachers by providing summary statements during their discussions, and analysing and directing their progress when it was appropriate. The second school had not progressed as rapidly and the facilitator suggested establishing a focus group, to enable him/her to hear teachers’ views, not just the coordinators’. This facilitator constantly negotiated his/her role, drawing on a variety of personal and professional skills: ‘You’ve got to think at that time, well which strategy might work best here or is it time to say something or say nothing? Do I make a phone call or do I visit?’ (Facilitator 2).
Two facilitators sought to establish relationships with teachers and negotiate expectations by establishing their credibility in the school. To do so, they showed themselves as relevant and familiar with the work of schools, focusing on teaching practice rather than research practice. Facilitator 1 commented: ‘[I concentrated on] not being seen as an irrelevant academic who doesn’t know what goes on in schools … I probably de-emphasise the research part of my work … and talk more about my own teaching (Facilitator 1). Similarly, the second facilitator also commented:

I think they expect you to give them some answers but I also believe that because you’re from uni they expect that it will be mostly theoretical stuff and you won’t be very practical …. They see the university culture as one of theorizing whereas they are the hands on practitioners (Facilitator 2).

I had to explain to them that my background was in education …. I had worked in schools, I still work in schools and I was lesser a university researcher-type person than more of a practitioner … I hear teaching, learning stuff, school stuff, day in day out, and I really appreciate the pressure that they were under (Facilitator 2).

Facilitator 2 believed he/she established the credibility of university lecturers to teachers in one of the schools in the project:

I think I have probably proven to those at one school … that university people, especially in education, do know what they are talking about; they’re not airily-fairy in the clouds theoretical people. They are down to earth, very basic people [who] use theory and [can be] practical, can use both as appropriate and can make sense of bigger pictures and talk about them very, very simply and show … what’s happening.

Johnson et al (1999) found similar results in a collaborative research study with teachers in Australian schools. They found ‘the quality of … interactions with teachers was inhibited, at least initially, by the need to establish … credibility in the schools’ (p. 130). The researchers, like the facilitators in this study, presented their credentials ‘in ways that confirmed … familiarity with and appreciation of school life’ (p. 130).

**Facilitators’ knowledge about the nature of schools**

Facilitators were asked what they needed to know about the nature of schools to make the facilitation role work. They identified the importance of ‘knowing about’ schools, teachers and the nature of change.
The first area of knowledge was an understanding of school cultures, organisational structures and various forms of leadership gained from experience working in schools. All facilitators stressed the need for them and other colleagues working in schools to have experienced schools and worked in them, to know the culture of schools and how they work. Facilitators identified the need to feel comfortable working in schools and confident that they know how schools work. While recognising what schools have in common, facilitators also stressed that no two schools are the same and warned against the danger of expecting them to be the same: ‘I think that if you go in with a conception of one school and think all schools are like that, because that’s the one you know, disaster, more than likely a totally different school’ (Facilitator 2); ‘Different leadership and management strategies, different types of leaders and how they work with their staff; power relationships within the school, and between the school and the facilitator’ (Facilitator 1).

Secondly, facilitators acknowledged that significant reform will not come about if the emotional side of teachers’ work is ignored (Hargreaves, 1997). Facilitators identified the importance of understanding how teachers feel and experience their work in schools and appreciating the extent of change in their working conditions over recent years. To make further demands on teachers who already feel over-worked was seen as counter-productive. Facilitators needed to show empathy for teachers and accept that they legitimately feel overworked.

Facilitators also recognised the importance of taking time to understand where different staff where coming from in respect to the project: ‘Different people have different ways of looking at things and different attitudes to what’s going on’ (Facilitator 1). Facilitators looked for the most appropriate time to offer suggestions, challenge individuals or provide extra stimulus for change. Facilitators recognised the need to appreciate that some teachers feel powerless to change the status quo, swept up by the current innovation with little choice in what or how it is done. In one case, teachers were constrained by their perception of parents’ expectations, to the frustration of the facilitator:

I see them as professionals, who should be standing up for what they believe in. There’s this kind of ‘Oh, but it’s the parents; oh we couldn’t do that; we
couldn’t not grade it.’ So I think that they disempower themselves and I don’t agree with that stance, but I know that that’s how they feel (Facilitator 1).

Thirdly, facilitators needed to appreciate the nature of change. Some changes take a long time, some are at the conceptual level, and others may be small and not easily recognised as changes at all.

[Changes] are not linear, [but] stop-start, haphazard sorts of things over a long time. And you won’t get big changes overnight. Conceptual changes won’t come easily. You’re making little functional changes in the structures of the management or the curriculum timetable or something, but you won’t get conceptual change and that’s the one that leads to real change (Facilitator 2).

Facilitator 3 agreed, discussing the complexity of bringing about change in an individual teacher and the fact that change often cannot be seen by those working at the school level: ‘You need to know that change is very, very slow, and the word “changed self” gets in the way because you’re expecting something observable, seeable and manageable’ (Facilitator 3).

Models of change over the past decade reflect the complexity of the process and the possibility that change can be initiated at any point in a change cycle (see, for example, Clarke & Peter, 1993). The process of changing one’s teaching practices is difficult and slow (Cohen, McLaughlin & Talbert, 1993). Teachers are expected to resist changes if they require a significant change or lack support (Johnson, 1993; Komesaroff, 1998). Facilitators’ comments suggest that over the life of a project which deals with changes to teachers’ work, there are likely to be times when little seems to be changing at the individual, faculty or school level. Part of the facilitator’s role is to help teachers recognise that a project such as this runs over three years and that small, incremental changes are more likely to occur than significant alterations in work practices over the short term.

Finally, facilitators commented on the need to recognise how school systems and subsections within schools are organised and work. They need to know, for example, what is possible in government and independent school systems, given their size and organisational structures. Having a grasp of the system in which a particular school was located was one thing. It was important for facilitators to recognise, however, that
they were not dealing with a whole system or school, but a sub-section of a single school.

Key inter-personal skills of the facilitator

Asked about the key inter-personal skills needed by them, facilitators identified the importance of establishing working relationships and the developmental nature of their role. Facilitator 2 provided a good example of the way in which working relationships are established through sensitivity to other things going on in teachers’ lives:

[From] just a few little [personal] comments … you can see that there is real pressure on them - that’s a little insight that you can see - that’s why that person is quite angry at the moment or quite ill-prepared for my visit or whatever. And [you] try and judge the dynamics that people are dealing with (Facilitator 2).

Another facilitator commented on a related interpersonal skill, the ability to say only as much as is needed: ‘I’ve had to often just not say things when I really knew the answer and I really knew a better way of doing it… It’s about tying threads together, and making pathways, and directing. It’s not about knowing, being the expert’ (Facilitator 3).

Facilitator 1 talked about the supportive nature of the role, particularly for teachers who felt unsettled or challenged by the prospect of change:

I think you need to establish a relationship initially … Then there’s probably some reassurance that what they are feeling or thinking or going through is okay. Quite often I get teachers say to me, ‘Oh I should quit the profession’ or ‘Now that I know what I know, I shouldn’t be teaching any more and I should get out!’ and … they need to be reassured: ‘That’s the very reason that you probably should stay!’ It’s the teachers that don’t even question their practice that are the ones that I’d like to say bye bye to. I find that very quickly after establishing a relationship … there needs to be some reassurance (Facilitator 1).

After the relationship was established, this facilitator liked to provide some direct input, challenging teachers about their practice. Through involvement in previous research, the facilitator had learnt the importance of teachers’ ownership and control of the project or change process:

I definitely do the relationship/reassurance, challenge and push [and] provide input. That is my style … in the end I have learnt to step back … [they] own
their own work … [they] acknowledge my role in it but they own it to the extent that they don’t give me updates, they’re onto another journey - bring in another academic! (Facilitator 1)

The role for at least one facilitator was developmental, ‘learning on the job’. He/she describes it as a process: working with schools, taking notes, reflecting on the next step and seeking feedback and support from other facilitators or the project coordinator:

[A]s facilitators we are new to this too; we’ve only had a few experiences of this [facilitation role] and each time you start it new anyway. But I think you gather bits of understandings as you go along and I can’t help but impress the fact that each step of the way you have to go back after being at the school … [and think] what does this really mean in terms of my role? What does this mean? How I can support this? (Facilitator 2).

This facilitator was challenged by the slow rate of change in one school community and considered the degree to which facilitators should feel responsible for lack of progress. Ultimately, he/she concluded, responsibility for and ownership of the project remained with the school:

[S]ome [projects] will work really well and you think, gee I don’t know what I did there but it all worked. Maybe it wasn’t you at all; the school’s going to do it anyway and you were just a sounding board … You’ve just helped spark something and I reckon that’s really what you’ve got to keep in mind. You haven’t got the answers for all this. You’re not the person with all the answers. You can guide and help, but you’ve got to be asked first. And they may not be ready to ask you (Facilitator 2).

Facilitator 3 stressed the unobtrusive role of listening to teachers and moving from significant involvement to little or none over the length of the project:

The personal role in a particular project is very much watching and listening and seeing and exploring and trying a bit, and then pulling back … there are times you … need to put in more effort. You could never write … [the facilitator’s role] as a recipe: ‘First you do this, then you do that’ (Facilitator 3).

Discussion

Those participating in this project from the university side expected some negativity from some teachers, regarding the participation of university staff in local projects. Like Hayes and Kelly (2000, p.469) they were aware that “they were crossing
institutional boundaries to collaborate” that entailed negotiating a relationship “that has deep historical roots”.

Furthermore, this historical relationship has evolved with a particular form of power relation at its centre, one in which universities have traditionally enjoyed the privilege of leading education reform (Kliebard, 1986; Clift, Veal & Johnson, 1990).

Ownership of the project must remain with the school, and the outsider is always treading a fine line between helping the project to move along at a reasonable pace, providing support, finding resources, and taking control. At the early stages, this tension can be at its worst, as the team seeks ways to implement the project and looks to the facilitator to provide ready-made answers or solutions to the difficulties or challenges faced. Facilitators want to be useful and to do a good job. They also want to be liked and appreciated. However, it is recognised that they are there to support the local team over the long haul, that they will come and go, and that the project is but a small part of a much bigger picture. Their primary role is to be available, to be responsive, and to help develop effective working relationships to accommodate the needs of the schools they work in.

Facilitators in teacher renewal projects such as the one discussed here must be aware of the dimensions of change processes. Effective change in its initial stages appears to involve uncertainty. This uncertainty must be dealt with productively. In these projects teachers were uncertain about how they would proceed. It appears harder for teachers to deal with change related to the process of teacher renewal than to deal with the products involved in change, for example curriculum renewal.

A significant finding of this research was the uncertainty on both the part of the school team and the university academic about the expectation of the role of the facilitator. Many schools had not worked in this way before. New skills had to be learnt on both sides, skills that required practise and feedback.

The inter-personal skills of the facilitator are diverse and challenging. Those taking part in this study believe that the capacity to quietly and calmly take the time to relate personally to the staff involved is often central to the success of facilitation. Staff need time to understand the role and to develop realistic and consistent expectations
of the facilitator. A central interpersonal skill involves establishing credibility, without presenting oneself as an academic with all the answers.

**Conclusion**

The findings of this preliminary research endorse the importance of the role of the facilitator and the problematic nature of working with schools on projects that are, in part, conceived from the outside.

As norms of collaboration and continuous improvement become embedded in more schools, seeking assistance to solve complex problems is perceived as a source of strength and wisdom rather than as a sign of weakness (Fullan, 1991, p. 226).

These findings also indicate that not all collaborative partnerships can overcome the institutional and cultural perception of the role of the university facilitator held by some teachers in schools. These expectations involve an asymmetrical power relationship but as Hayes and Kelly (2000, p. 469) note:

The question, then, is not how to overcome or share power in an effort to adhere to some utopian vision of equitable collaboration, but how power and cultural differences be appropriately managed so that a fruitful and productive space can be carved for individuals to work together within a shared vision.

It is the creation of that legitimate space that is the most important aspect of a facilitator’s role in supporting teacher renewal programs such the one described in this paper.

**Acknowledgement:** This article is based on a paper presented at the Australian Teacher Educators Association conference, 24-26 September 2001, Melbourne.

Correspondence: Chris Perry, Faculty of Education, Deakin University, 221 Burwood Highway, BURWOOD, 3125, Victoria Australia.

**References**


