

## ***Researching the development of transnational education partnerships: an activity theory approach.***

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### **Abstract**

The development of transnational education (TNE) partnerships in higher education are significant contributors to the expansion of higher education internationally. However, there is little evidence available which reveals, beyond the business set-up, how they are developed, how challenges are overcome, the significance of organizational cultural contexts on progress, the development of relationships and so on. For growth to occur, it is important to get in touch with ‘the vibe’ of a particular context, which can only be achieved through close-up knowledge and engagement.

In universities close-up knowledge is most likely to be achieved by those appointed for the oversight and management of individual partnerships. Often termed academic liaison or link tutors, these university academics are an excellent example of the ‘third space professional who undertake the complex boundary spanning activities that make partnerships work. Existing research identifies that TNE link tutors need to have experience of working in complex environments, in-depth understanding of organizational procedures, the ability to manage power differentials, sophisticated communication and interpersonal skills, the ability to create and lead a cultural context for learning and development, change management and the ability to resolve difficulties.

This paper relates to research carried out by a third space professional, a TNE link tutor responsible for a TNE partnership which demonstrates successful growth over the past seven years, with notable development in the quality and range of provision. The research adopts an ethnographic approach with multiple forms of existing and newly collected data being used to explore significant factors influencing the development of the partnership through reviewing three different undertakings; a staff development programme, the annual performance review and student records administration. Undertaking this type of research presents the researcher with significant challenges with regard to transparency and reflexivity if the result is to be regarded as trustworthy and useful to the higher education community. Having an authentic approach to reflexivity associated with the subject and the process of the research is important to note, especially in these complex contexts. This has been enabled by taking a socio-cultural perspective of partnership development and of research, and in particular, the diagramming facility of Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT).

### **Keywords**

TNE, partnerships, third space professional, activity theory, reflexivity