

Reflecting on state-voluntary sector relationships: agency in interactions in an HE teaching workshop

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This paper reflects on an experiential student workshop focused on state-voluntary sector relationships. This event was held as a part of a post-graduate voluntary and community sector studies programme and involved some 20 students. A group relations consultant from UWE, Bristol led an exercise on commissioning, followed by plenary discussion. Students formed different groups, one group taking on the role of public sector commissioners, the others different voluntary sector organisations. The behaviours adopted by different groups, including the commissioners' decisions on allocating the contract, were instructive in reflecting how students, all working in third sector or local authority related fields, perceive and have assimilated the demands and practices of the external environment. Students remained critical of ways in which commissioning processes are generating competitive divides between local agencies but their assumptions about the behaviours they needed to assume in order to compete successfully for contracts, dominated how they acted in this workshop.

The pervasive ideologies associated with managerial cultures permeated even classroom settings, despite in this case, a predominantly critical discourse. The paper therefore questions the extent to which the behaviours visible in this workshop will be exacerbated in the external environment, as recession exerts pressures on local authorities to reduce costs and funding. Will smaller organisations be increasingly at risk?

Introduction

As voluntary and community organisations (VCOs) take on a growing share of welfare services previously delivered through statutory agencies, the changing nature of inter-agency relationships have become a focus for renewed research interest. Study of changes in the voluntary sector resulting from the initial policy shift to outsource public services in the 1990s (Harris and Rochester, 2001) highlighted the new, often uncomfortable, organisational arrangements into which community organisations were drawn, affecting their work and their roles in relation to service users and community stakeholders. New Labour's 'Third Way' agenda and the 'community turn' in recent policies have significantly raised the profile of third sector¹ organisations: small and large, locally and nationally based. These policies, including principles espoused in local and national Compacts (Home Office, 1998), promised greater respect in relationships and improved communications; and fairer treatment in contracting services (Craig et al., 1999; DfES, 2004).

However, improvement in contracting practices has not been the experience of many local providers (Milbourne, 2009), although experience varies widely in different areas and between different commissioning organisations (IDeA, 2008). Smaller voluntary organisations have been marginal to consultations on planning and designing services and commissioning processes (ibid), and large surveys of the sector (Audit Commission, 2007; IDeA, 2008) indicate that smaller voluntary organisations perceive commissioning as a considerable threat. They feel disadvantaged in competitive tenders in which their strengths and local expertise appear discounted. As widespread procurement of services – with increasingly larger contracts and more sophisticated processes - is rolled out via local authority Area Agreements and Primary Care Trusts, such information, together with the increased emphasis on community level involvement in decision making, has triggered renewed efforts among national agencies to identify and disseminate successful consultative models (IVAR, 2008).

The nucleus of academics studying the UK voluntary sector has been relatively small until recently with research focused in a few key UK institutions. New areas of specialism are developing in voluntary and community /third sector/charity studies; and specialised research centres have been established with recent government funding, following an acknowledgement of significant gaps in research information (OTS, 2007). An increasing number of academics previously concerned with social policy and public sector provision, welfare economics and administration, and organisational and management studies are developing teaching and research which include this field. In parallel with the growth of research interest, there has been a growth

in third sector studies within academic programmes. Until recently, only a few institutions offered specialised study in this area. Now a growing number of HE institutions offer, or are planning, programmes linked to voluntary agencies, third sector, charities and community studies, some as a part of wider programmes in Social Policy or Business and Management. It is within this context that our UK focused postgraduate programme in Voluntary and Community Sector Studies has developed, with the aim of offering critical and reflective study relevant to students engaged in a growing third sector.

This paper will focus on how state-voluntary sector commissioning relationships are played out in the classroom in order to explore questions around contracting behaviours. A workshop event which is explored in the paper followed two terms of study on our programme. Several discourses have informed our thinking. Firstly, the student programme is inter-disciplinary, drawing on social policy and social and organisational theories relevant to understanding the voluntary and community sector and the changing nature of its roles. The workshop was framed within these debates but secondly, it drew on group relations theory to design and analyse a learning event in which students would enact and subsequently reflect on cross-sector relationships. This discussion also encompasses our knowledge of experiential learning as a valuable method for promoting student reflection and reflects our interest in 're-asserting a relational understanding of teaching and learning' in higher education (Murray, 2009).

The paper will consider transitions in the policy and organisational environment for voluntary and community sector organisations. It will then explore ways in which an understanding of the emotional and power dynamics of groups can shed light on relationships that characteristically underpin state-voluntary sector relationships, exacerbating the effects of structured competition. Briefly reflecting on educational learning theories, the paper will then outline a specific model of experiential learning based on group relations thinking which underpins the design of the workshop, examining its relevance to organisational learning. It will subsequently describe the student workshop event, exploring some of its outcomes, in particular, ways in which competitive values and managerial ideology pervade behaviours in practical classroom settings, even where the dominant discourse is critical of such arrangements. Our analysis of this event highlights the consensual pressures exerted by large statutory bodies which serve to silence conflicting views (Hoggett, 2004) and marginalise smaller, less powerful community groups (Milbourne, 2009), raising questions about current cultures and arrangements surrounding voluntary-public sector relationships. While national strategies identified above seek to promote more intelligent commissioning, this paper questions the extent to which the negative contracting

experiences reported can be remedied without a closer analysis of the culture of inter-organisational relationships.

Changing state-voluntary sector roles

State-voluntary sector relationships are in transition, with substantive changes over two decades, from a period when grant funding, small scale donors and diverse fund-raising activities were norms for small voluntary organisations. However, the ways in which these changes have affected the core values and activities of VCOs – often described as distinctive characteristics of the sector (Kendall and Knapp, 1996) – are less apparent. The long-standing confidence in the public welfare settlement of the 1950s ceded to criticisms of bureaucratic inefficiency, opening the way for ideologies premised on new public management and market competition (Clarke and Newman, 1997). Fundamental shifts in operation including widescale outsourcing of public services and increased accountability, regulation and performance measurement followed throughout the 1990s; and were argued as a means to improve public service quality, to reduce costs and wastefulness, while also offering consumer choice (Butcher, 1995). In parallel, these shifts provided considerable scope for re-engineering public services (Le Grand, 2003), a process which has continued under Labour governments since 1998. Change has neither been uni-directional or without resistance (Clarke et al., 2000) but has gradually resulted in a significant transition in organisational activities and values for public service professionals that has been damaging to previous trust relationships between the local state and voluntary sector providers. Instead of contracting relationships based on sharing risks between contractor and provider, studies suggest that many statutory agencies have sought to transfer risks to providers, increasing pressures on voluntary providers (Scott and Russell, 2001; Milbourne, 2005).

Labour's adherence to market ideology and managerial culture (Clarke et al., 2000) have continued despite its Third Way agenda, which promised a shift away from the dichotomy of state or market as ideological foundations for welfare policy (Deakin, 2001), to emphasise the important roles of voluntary organisations and civil society. While from 1998 new policies have significantly raised the profile of the voluntary sector, alongside community engagement policies which have highlighted an increased role for civil society (Taylor, 2003), overall growth in the share of service delivery taken on by the sector appears to have benefited larger rather than smaller organisations (NCVO, 2008). Discussion of the reasons for the competitive advantage of larger organisations is limited but dependence on market mechanisms to determine services for groups in society with little voice or influence is arguably inappropriate, since the rationale for

markets is premised on consumer power to choose or influence the shape of provision (Le Grand, 2003).

Recent national policy (Home Office, 2004; OCLG, 2006; OTS, 2007; Ministry of Justice, 2008) has recognised third sector expertise in reaching marginal groups of people and for their successful work in deprived neighbourhoods, often the work of small, community-based organisations. However, despite rhetoric which welcomes autonomy and innovative approaches, dominant managerial ideologies embedded in contractual relationships undermine more flexible and values-driven models of working, by shaping service activities and their outcomes. There is a gap between the ‘rhetoric about innovative practices and the reality of provision typically enabled by the funding environment,’ (Mills, 2009: 2). Furthermore, the powerful agencies enacting this culture are able to define and allocate contracts to the providers who best match pre-described criteria, necessarily disadvantaging smaller organisations, which least resemble those making decisions. These organisations are often closest to disadvantaged social groups (Milbourne, 2009). Exacerbating this culture in the process of commissioning, statutory agencies have compelling short-term interests in maximising the transfer of risks and reduction of transaction costs, as recession grows and the public purse diminishes.

For the last decade, whilst markets have continued to underpin political ideology and core funding strategies, there has been a marked public policy shift towards networks and partnership working (Rummery, 2006), or New Localism (Aspden and Birch, 2005). The growth of partnerships and numerous short-term, multi-agency initiatives have characterised recent aspects of UK state voluntary sector relationships, often increasing voluntary sector dependency on unstable project funding. This emphasis on cross-sector, ‘joined-up’ working, which aims to engage community representatives alongside private and public sector agencies has been perceived as contradictory to the structurally embedded power in parallel contractual relationships. However, research also points to the mismatch between the rhetoric and practices of apparently collaborative working, highlighting differential power relations and the relegation of smaller organisations to outsider status (Taylor, 2003; O’Brien, 2006) while powerful agencies determine the rules of play (Clegg, 1989) even in collaborative work.

There has also been an emphasis on user involvement and wider community consultation in guidelines for recent procurement processes, in the drive to promote locally responsive services (ODPM, 2005). The Office of the Third Sector has stressed placing, ‘users and communities at the heart of public services’ (Miliband, 2007), highlighting the importance of collaboration with a third sector, able to contribute locally, to planning and shaping services and to addressing

social needs. New commissioning processes are also premised on aims to support collaboration across traditional service and sector boundaries, and to develop creative work in areas of particular need. Positively, the move to longer-term contracts commissioned through mainstream agencies is intended to address longstanding criticisms (Harries et al., 1998; Geddes et al., 2000) that a surfeit of short-term project funding is often damaging to the continuity of services and developments which could make a difference in poor areas.

Despite recent government intentions to improve commissioning processes through disseminating models of good practice (see for example, IVAR, 2008), there is little to demonstrate that earlier recommendations for improved contractual practice have been widely observed. For example, Compact guidelines exhorted local public agencies to operate fair practice and good communications in contracting relationships, and to resource community providers properly (Home Office, 2004). However, the Compact Voice consultation with voluntary sector organisations (Grotz, 2007) reported mixed messages, with some providers reluctant to use Compact principles to challenge unfair practices because of fear of losing future funding. As indicated above, in IDeA's (2008) study, the experiences of many smaller voluntary organisations in commissioning processes to date have been negative, including perceptions of marginalisation. Similarly, other factors identified as inhibiting good cross-sector relationships persist, continuing to exclude smaller organisations. These include: unrealistic or unfunded expectations by statutory organisations; differential power relations; competition for funds; the dominance of quantifiable performance measures; and mistrust of larger agencies and partnerships (Kimberlee, 2002; Milbourne et al., 2003; Tett et al., 2003).

Voluntary organisations are now providers of services from early years to old age, especially in socially deprived neighbourhoods but in order to meet needs for funding and survival, many have been drawn into delivering activities which have been closely defined by statutory agencies and associated performance frameworks. As Power (1999) argues, audit shapes organisational activities and priorities, privileging those required by funders. Similarly, Mills' recent study (2009) points to voluntary and community organisations being manipulated by both policy and funding environments. In the longer term, this re-direction encroaches on core goals and purposes, undermining organisational values and meanings. This potentially de-stabilises organisations; and the greater the ambiguities within the organisations, the more effective externally imposed arrangements are likely to be in shaping what happens and the behaviours that are adopted. The spread of commissioning, with associated competitive and performative cultures, coupled with the voluntary sector's survival needs, intensify managerial pressures to

change modes of operation. Paradoxically such shifts are damaging to the flexibility, local expertise and creative approaches for which community providers have been sought in providing services which will be effective in tackling entrenched social problems.

Integrating theory and experience: organisational learning

The paper will now consider how we drew on both organisational theory and that of group relations to design a learning event in which students would enact and subsequently reflect on cross-sector relationships.

A wide literature on organisational learning theory, such as Argyris (1989), Issacs (1993) and Stacey (2003) is valuable to understanding the impact of change and the dynamics of competition on organisations. More specifically, as Larsson et al. (1998) argue, strategies through which organisations are encouraged to seek competitive advantage (albeit for purposes of survival) are likely also to obstruct shared, as well as individual, organisational development. In public service work, therefore, especially in projects aimed to address social problems, a competitive organisational environment is counterproductive to finding and sharing creative approaches to entrenched problems. In that environment small organisations find themselves at greater disadvantage, and have few opportunities. Overall, the culture mitigates against admitting to, and therefore learning from, failures.

A lack of trust, suspicion and competitive envy can grow to dominate inter-organisational relationships, rather than collaboration or the application of a creative, collective intelligence. In a context which is constantly seeking more for less with public finances this balance is unhelpful. A competitive and inadequate funding environment and policy dependency on partnership working sit together uneasily, as illustrated in a typical commentary on the relationship between local authorities and primary care trusts (PCT's): that 'they do not enjoy good relations' (Smith, 2009). This partly results from a reassignment of costs by PCT's onto local councils which 'has not been forgotten' (ibid). Shaped by communitarian thinking (Etzioni, 1995), partnership is consistently construed in consensual ways. Newman (2000: 57) points to the language surrounding partnership as peculiarly devoid of context, ungendered and unraced. It presents cosy images of community in which 'competing publics are rendered invisible'. Discourse around social inclusion similarly ignores how exclusion is actually constitutive of community. Communities exclude and include; they are also excluded, as well as forming a platform for new activities (Brent, 2009); but as both Brent and Simmel (1955) emphasise: conflict often underpins enduring social solidarities.

This rhetoric of partnership continues to ignore the absence of the skills and capacities to make partnerships work well and the complicated reasons for conflict, which stem from more than the

contradictions of promoting collaboration and competition as simultaneous policy strands. Hoggett (2004: 124-125) describes how groups will engage in 'relations of mutual misunderstanding' rather than engage in conflictual dialogue. He also points out that while conventional social sciences and organisational studies provide us with objective knowledge they offer little which leads to change in our pattern of relatedness, 'because they provide understanding of about our external constraints rather than internal resistances' (ibid:124). Overcoming these involves not just learning *about* the other but also learning *from* the other (ibid:123), and it is problematic to integrate the two. Learning *from* the other calls for a reassessment of the self, and an encounter and engagement with real, rather than imaginary dialogue. However, renegotiation of how we view ourselves and others, challenges identities and potentially opens fields of difference and conflict over material resources. Relating to others then involves more than a new or better skill-set (Jankel, 2009) and may trigger more fundamental change. This demands an organisational learning approach which both supports openness and can also contain the anxieties generated when deeply embedded ways of thinking are challenged, thus enabling people to learn from the experience.

Integrating theory and experience: learning from experience in higher education

While theory underpins academic learning, it can also act as a defence against thinking without the work of engagement and meaning making on the part of individual learners (Page, 2008: 192). Making sense of the experiences of partnership working and the competitive environment for contracts were themes prompted by lectures and discussion during the term. Recognising that teaching and learning 'does not take place in a vacuum, but in organisations and social contexts that shape and give meaning to interactions within the classroom (ibid: 200), we aimed to use these themes in a way which would enable students to integrate theory and experience. Mature students inevitably bring both the dilemmas and instrumental thinking of their organisational contexts into the process of learning and our purpose was to introduce an innovative context through which they could reflect on this lived experience.

The module readings included a developing psycho-social discourse which introduced students to thinking about emotional life as part of social policy and organisational discourses (French and Vince, 1999; Hoggett, 2000; Cooper and Lousada, 2005). This also included recent research on the experience of community based workers in negotiating everyday ethical dilemmas (Mayo et al., 2007; Hoggett et al., 2008). Drawing on this research in a more practical setting we could illuminate the tensions and emotional relationships that operate 'under- the-surface' both within and between organisations, helping to explain processes of inter-agency working, where differential power relations and vested interests influence actions and outcomes. This focus on group dynamics, an aspect often missing from analysis of state-voluntary sector relationships,

led us to organise an inter-group experiential event as the final module session, constructed around the theme of ‘The dynamics of collaboration and competition in the community and voluntary sector’.

French (1999:1220) argues that currently there are two fundamentally opposed ways of conceptualising learning in education: learning as ‘skill acquisition’ or ‘competence development’ and ‘learning from experience’. He notes that the first is expressed in the omnipresent phrase ‘by the end of this module, you will be able to...’ while the second understands development as a broadening, breaking through, deepening and growth’. It is multi-dimensional including ‘not only the intellectual but also the emotional and the actual or political’ (ibid: 1220); and emphasises the development of capacities rather than skills.

Many business schools typically adopt an instrumental approach towards teaching and learning but several now provide group behaviour conferences using the Tavistock model as a part of core learning at post-graduate level. The Tavistock model involves building a temporary learning institution (Obholzer, 1994:46; Ramsey, 1999) and utilises the concept of ‘valency’ (Bion, 1961), which describes how the tendency of each individual to respond to groups in a highly specific way is revealed through social interaction. Depending on the scale and type of event, individuals have the opportunity to study the nature of intra- and inter-group processes (Stapely, 2006). Adopting roles in different situations or events reveals emerging patterns of power, authority and leadership, and makes available a form of learning which is highly applicable to organisational settings and to managing change. Staff facilitators enable conference members to reflect on their behaviours, with opportunities to consider its application to individuals’ organisations. Central to the process is coming to understand the presence of irrational and unconscious processes that interfere with attempts to manage the group, the task and individual roles and actions in a conscious and rational way (Bion, 1961: 48).

The gradual development of group relations approaches demonstrates a recognition that management and organisational issues are emotional, as well as rational processes (French and Vince, 1999), which also involve significant ethical concerns (Stacey, 2003). While group behaviour programmes are commonplace in training for counselling professionals, they remain sparse in fields, such as social policy and politics, outside interdisciplinary centres of psycho-social theory and practice.

The experiential event

In designing this experiential event we specifically wished to draw on this group relations approach and adapt it to the constraints of a part-time higher education programme, which demanded a small scale and time-limited event. Although some examples of similar initiatives exist, this event was

innovative in its specific focus on voluntary sector - local authority relations. The event was led by Paul Hoggett² who has a longstanding involvement in community-based and public management research and also in group relations consultancy. Four experienced tutors from the faculty took on facilitator roles for the event, receiving a short briefing prior to its start.

The event was prefaced by a lecture and discussion session which raised themes around the changing modes of control in public and voluntary sector organisations; barriers to collaboration; collaborative advantage and disadvantage; and the related consolidation of power differentials. The session also considered the meaning of 'dilemmatic space': the constant dilemmas in community-based work for which there are often no simple answers. This was then followed by the experiential event and subsequently by a large group plenary reflection. The latter also incorporated a brief explanation of analytical material aimed to help interpret experiences of the group dynamics which participants described. This addressed themes such as group identity formation; the dynamics of splitting; the way trust collapses; the impacts of envy and jealousy; and individual and group exclusion and self-exclusion.

The boundaries: time, territory and task

The event involved some twenty students from faculty programmes, including in voluntary and community, youth, local government studies. Overall, around half the students were working in a local government environment and half in voluntary or community sector organisations.

The territory of the event involved one plenary room plus three reasonably accessible adjacent rooms. Following the lecture and initial discussion, students were invited to form four groups with roughly equal numbers, opting either for a local authority commissioners group (remaining in the plenary room) or for one of the three voluntary sector groups based in three separate rooms. A member of staff allocated to each room had the role of informing the group of its tasks at set points and then mainly observing. The workshop leader remained free to move between groups throughout the session and had authority to adjust the timing. The experiential event was planned for one and a half hours but was deemed too short as events unfolded and was extended by a further fifteen minutes.

Once formed, groups received the first task from facilitators, which involved ten minutes spent on deciding a name and the nature of their work with young people and then to report this back to the commissioning group. The commissioning group were informed of a new government initiative to tackle gang crime and their task was to commission 18 month projects from the statutory and voluntary sectors with a budget of £1.5 million. They needed to invite bids from the three voluntary sector groups after ten minutes and consider how they would make this announcement.

Once informed of the new funding initiative, the three voluntary sector groups would be advised that they had 30 minutes to prepare a bid and to select someone to make a three minute presentation of this to commissioners. Following the presentations, a tea break and subsequent plenary reflection and discussion were planned.

What happened next?

The students were informed of room numbers and were asked to self-allocate to a group/room. One tutor promoted her room number and encouraged 'her group' (not yet defined) to follow her. A second tutor simply announced the room number she would be in. A third tutor chose not to do this. The three voluntary sector groups did not split evenly and this resulted in one small two person group being formed. The group facilitator tracks what happened next in this smallest group.

When I arrived in my allocated room, only two students had 'joined' this group and they initially wondered whether all the other students knew each other and they were therefore outsiders to existing group networks, which was not really the case.

The initial brief was to discuss a name and identity for the group, that is, the nature of the organisation and its purposes. As seemed fit for the actual size of the group, the students identified themselves as a small community based organisation (C) with one part-time worker and heavily reliant on volunteers. Its longstanding expertise was in working with young people who were often seen as challenging at school and to older people in the neighbourhood. They discussed pressures through lack of resources and the inability to appoint a full-time worker, as well as constantly changing initiatives. There was a sense of being somewhat cut off from other students and what was taking place elsewhere, effectively feeling marginalised by being such a small group. This was exacerbated when a member of the group decided to go and to find out what was happening, only to discover that other groups had already received information on a new funding opportunity from the commissioners' group.

As this small group was last in receiving any information, and commissioners met them somewhat briefly and reluctantly, this meant designing a bid for the service with insufficient information, in a constricted time frame and with fewest resources in terms of people to share the work. One option discussed was not to bid, but the service outlined was highly appropriate to their expertise with young people. Nevertheless, it was a large piece of work and implied taking on several staff, and as they discussed the implications, they considered that working with another larger organisation with more experience of managing staff and resources might be mutually beneficial. Gaining

access to the other two voluntary organisations proved problematic in the time frame, with only two working representatives. If they were rejected they would have wasted precious time needed for preparing the bid; on the other hand, this seemed a way to share experience and resources, as well as to be taken seriously by commissioners, which they doubted would be the case otherwise.

With the resourcefulness and multi-tasking assumptions of small community organisations, the students asked me to take on a volunteer role for their organisation, with the brief to ask the other two groups if they would collaborate on a bid. The first group (A), which identified itself as a large service provider, rejected the request without discussion and seemed disinclined to share any information. One or two members of the group of approximately seven suggested that I should explain the advantages to them of collaborating but were overruled by a member apparently leading their work. The second group (B) (also about seven) had mixed views but after a short discussion asked for the whole group (C) to meet them. The decision to collaborate was eventually taken because group B considered that the small organisation brought the particular expertise and local knowledge of working with the kind of young people required by the tender, while as a medium size organisation, they brought better skills in terms of managing larger projects, staff and premises.

However, after this decision, there was insufficient time to work through some of the issues needed to plan a coherent bid and presentation for commissioners adequately, or to work through some of the implications of joint working. The smaller group felt a strong need to maintain their local identity which they regarded as crucial to reaching young people in the area, whereas Group B was concerned to explore Group C's fit with their organisational aims and values. While in theory they had identified some of the advantages of working collaboratively, there was inadequate time to resolve issues of trust and potential disagreements of approach which effectively weakened their bid.

The commissioning group formed from two people with voluntary sector backgrounds and two with local authority backgrounds (one a councillor). What happened next is recorded by the group facilitator.

The group stayed in the plenary room for the entire session. No attempt was made to divide up the tasks and allocate roles in order ensure that the voluntary sector groups were individually told about the bids so there was no face to face contact with the three groups in their territory. The commissioning group launched itself immediately into defining criteria to

decide between bids placing quite a lot of emphasis on assessing the potential risks involved. Prompted by me to consider their task of informing the three groups about the tender, one person responded that the voluntary sector groups ‘could read about the bids in the local press’. After ten minutes their deliberations were duly interrupted by the stream of groups coming to announce their name and functions. This meant repeatedly informing each group about the initiative. It inevitably became somewhat chaotic and meeting the groups was an interruption to the tensions and pressures of their primary focus on resolving the criteria for deciding between bids. These criteria were not shared with the voluntary groups. There was no suggestion to visit voluntary sector groups to either inform them of the initiative, to learn about them or to build a relationship. The plenary room had become the embodiment of the ‘civic centre’. Leaving the room also carried a risk of losing a role or power in the group.

The bids eventually presented were markedly different. Group A presented a very thorough and systematically constructed bid, in terms of figures, performance outcomes and risk assurances. It discussed targets, milestones, impacts and outputs, reassuring commissioners by using the language of the tender. The style was ebullient and hard-hitting, and knowingly anticipated all the boxes that the funding body would expect to tick. However, it lacked an essential quality which two of the facilitators afterwards considered would have engaged their interest, that is, a sense of commitment to the work with young people. With a few phrases changed, this could have been a bid for several other services. The whole of group A attended the presentation rather than selecting representatives as instructed, suggesting a lack of trust in delegating this task.

In contrast Group B/C delegated the presentation to two representatives. The bid was clearly values led, based on knowledge of the field and a good local track record in this kind of work. However, Group B/C’s presentation was neither as coherent as Group A’s, nor as well worked through. It seemed characteristic of a community-based voluntary organisation in style, conveying a thoughtful approach to the way they would approach the community interests involved. The style was modest, competent and innovative but more a work in progress and less polished. The facilitator for the commissioners’ group reported imagining how she could work with this group to develop the bid and build in some safeguards. The presenters included one person from each of the two original voluntary groups (a voluntary sector worker and a local authority worker).

The plenary session immediately prompted a demand to know what decision the commissioners had made. The decision reported was that the commissioners would have agreed to allocate the full funding to the first more corporately styled group. Commissioners explained that this was because group A presented a lesser risk, even though they liked the local expertise that group B/C’s brought to

the bid. This decision illustrated a commissioning group that seemed to have lost their capacity to think critically or innovatively about their commissioning role. French and Simpson (1999: 2) argue that repeatedly in the heat of the moment, 'what we know' is 'simply not available to us; what we thought we knew, or did indeed know once, disappears in action'. Thus under pressure, this group modelled themselves on a stereotypical commissioning style despite previous critical reading. They seemed unable to acknowledge the value of the more nuanced, creative and human style of the second voluntary sector group's bid. Why was this? Group B/C communicated well but their language and presentation were located outside a dominant managerial discourse, and instead acknowledged the challenging nature of work with disengaged young people. This left the decision makers bearing the uncertainty around outcomes and a sense of risk. In the absence of an alternative model, the commissioning group clung to familiar ground, conforming to the need to keep things under control. Yet it would also have been possible to think laterally and fund the second group to some degree, using their power to support developments, if commissioners had been willing to open the debate about risk and alternative approaches. Reflecting back on this decision-making process, a commissioner with a voluntary sector background said 'I feel ashamed'.

It was noticeable how a power dynamic was established within and between groups within minutes. As group identities quickly formed, they were permeated by real feelings of inclusion and exclusion, superiority and inferiority, triumphalism and alienation. That the commissioning group was allocated the plenary room, budget and decision making powers conferred an immediate status which reinforced the local authority voice, apparently silencing legitimate voluntary sector experience being introduced into the discussion on decision-making criteria. This debate could have been pursued but was rapidly overtaken by a rational task-focused approach to setting funding criteria.

Seemingly small events also had significant consequences. By announcing which room they were going to, two staff members unknowingly introduced their own dynamic into the formation of the voluntary sector groups, as by implication they invited members to follow them. Losing one's identity in a large group and being asked to join a small group in an unfamiliar situation can generate anxiety, resulting in a need to quickly find a familiar base, and not be left out. Despite instructions to form groups of equal size, a group of two resulted from the initial melée suggesting that people moved towards a self-organised group to be with a known person. The small group experienced feelings of rejection in their subsequent failed attempt to combine and collaborate. Their sense of mild paranoia from being isolated and rebuffed was conveyed in the facilitator's report in the reflection session and was surprisingly strong considering the circumstances, underlining how little anxiety it takes to evoke these feelings. It was, after all, only a short time and a classroom setting.

The event was intended to enable members to explore inter-group dynamics but it was clear that the competitive instinct overrode co-operative values. Despite the well received lecture just prior to the experiential event which had emphasised issues around collaboration and competing external demands, participants gave primacy to consolidating a group identity of which exclusion was a powerful part. The pressures of completing the task in the limited time frame contribute to this dynamic. However, in the reflection session, participants commented that 'Room 313 closed their door' and the rebuffed overtures to the smallest group had been keenly felt. Group A chose to protect their competitive advantages (of size, resources, ability to articulate managerial discourse) rather than to enter into a collaborative process with a group that ostensibly had better access to the hard-to-reach client group intended for the service. From a wider perspective collaboration would have improved their bid and mellowed its technicist approach. In emphasising competition and successful task over relationships, this group set in motion the eventual outcome: the 'hoovering up' of the funding by the more corporate group (Harris and Schlappa, 2008: 139). Their style corresponded with that of the commissioner group. Their strategy reinforced their competitive advantage, closely reflecting recent experience in the voluntary sector, described earlier in the paper.

Ongoing meaning making

Students' feedback afterwards was overwhelmingly positive: 'the inter-group event was illuminating and thought provoking, it allowed me to experience in practice the theory that had been discussed on the course'; 'the event was a good experiment to get us thinking about the lots of dynamics'; 'it was brilliant in challenging how we are encouraged to operate' (student from a large national VCO). A staff member commented, 'I thought it was quite uncanny how many of the dynamics present in the sector got played out. I was surprised by this as I had been more anxious that there wouldn't be any strong dynamic to speak of and everyone would sit around wondering what the point had been.'

As this event was the final session of the Module for the voluntary sector studies students, no further intensive reflection was possible. However, it was suggested that they reflect on the event and their own interactions with others in the heat of the action. They were encouraged to write up notes in their learning journals, examining their own (and others') behaviours as a potentially rich pool of experience to tap into for future insight about their capacity to adopt varied roles and behaviours.

Questions touched on in the plenary were also highlighted for ongoing reflection and are outlined below. For example, why there was such a strong divide between a critical awareness of commissioning processes in classroom discussion and workplace operations, and the influence of these on group behaviours under pressure. How did participants choose their groups and the extent to which this was affected by knowing individuals or perceptions of new people or simply joining

neighbours from the original large group. What fantasies developed about other groups? Why did the commissioners stay in the 'civic centre'? What roles and power imbalances were apparent in individual groups? Could they as individuals access an inner 'authority' (Obholzer, 1994) to speak out or were they swept along by the isomorphic group behaviour. What were the anxieties in the group and what intensified or modified these? A series of small decisions by many different people may have resulted in the formation of a group of two, who subsequently felt marginalised. How might different individuals have contributed to this happening and more generally to actively shaping the dynamics of collaboration and competition?

The event as a microcosm of the voluntary sector?

This short experiential event mirrored patterns of change in the voluntary sector as a surprisingly close microcosm. It provided insights into the under-the-surface influences around behaviours and less rational moments making these available for reflection. In these unfamiliar circumstances, individual valencies (or tendencies) were revealed in heightened ways. The degree to which relevant critical theory was marginalised in the heat of the action was surprising. Patterns of action and interaction could not be blamed on forces 'out there' because they were constructed within the event. This helpfully underlines the importance in learning, of 'taking one's own experience seriously' (Stacey and Griffin, 2005: 23). The capacity to take up appropriate roles and find an inner authority under pressure are key capacities for community-based workers, who as research shows, have to navigate the ethical dilemmas and contradictions of public service modernisation (Hoggett et al, 2006; Mayo et al, 2007; Hoggett et al, 2008). The event emphasised the relevance of bringing this psycho-social theory into teaching and learning in higher education, as well as its contribution to understanding state-voluntary sector relationships and the complex nature of cross-sector and partnership working.

The event also signalled the need to consider alternative ways of approaching voluntary-public sector relationships if we are to address some of the issues raised around winners and losers and the potential demise of some community-based organisations. As this event and research critical of the mindset embedded in commissioning processes (Mills, 2009; Weaver, 2009) indicate, bidders who have become proficient in articulating a managerial discourse are more likely to emerge as winners, while organisations concentrating on their core values and activities may well be losers and ultimately fail to endure this environment. Risk containment figured in our event as a prominent component in the commissioners' reasons for selecting the group they would fund and is also reflected in research. However, how risks associated with different kinds of providers are assessed may have more to do with commissioners' comfort zones and

expectations around contracting behaviours than any rational evidence that providers will be able to undertake more effective work. Bidders being able to share or operate within a dominant organisational language and culture, reassures commissioners and constructs a potentially false empathy and predictability, implying less risk in the contract. Thus the smaller group (B/C), although offering a more committed way of working that was missing from the winning bid and demonstrably more knowledgeable about relevant fields of work, failed to reassure commissioners of their management capabilities with assured statements about costs, milestones and targets. Under pressure, the commissioning group had no reflective framework within which to 'risk' choosing this bid but allocated the full funding to the larger apparently, more certain organisation over a smaller community-oriented provider. They chose the 'smart' bid over a less polished presentation; and effectively discounted good local experience in the field of activity - in this case, with disengaged young people.

Analysis of our workshop revealed some shared assumptions that a larger organisation was likely to pose fewer risks in terms of financial survival and the ability to deliver the required outcomes required. Research and students' wider experiential knowledge add to the view that the need to manage risks often underlies the approach that both larger VCOs and local authorities take to funding, resulting in the deselection of smaller organisations, despite their specialist expertise. Such decisions, however, presume that the ability to articulate and present material for a bid, within the frame of dominant organisational behaviours, correlates with the ability to deliver an efficient and effective service. Presentational factors are privileged over a track record of local knowledge and engagement, which might more logically appear as better predictors of long term efficacy and the successful ability to address problems identified in the tender. Implicit in these decisions which surround 'unintelligent' commissioning are misplaced assumptions about risks based on an application of apparently rational, often economically biased judgements to essentially complex and subjective situations.

Planning and decision-making criteria have thus replaced learning about and from other organisations (or providers) as frameworks for allocating funding, but these are inevitably proxy indicators, significantly influenced by management and performance cultures and government led targets. At the same time, among local commissioning groups such criteria will also be subjectively derived. What is visible here is a managerial decision-making process surrounding state-voluntary sector relations, which instead of generating good will and learning about organisational differences to benefit improved services, promotes coercive means to behave in ways defined by powerful organisations, in particular, those determining allocation of funding.

In terms of organisational sense-making (Weick, 1995), managerialism offers an apparently rational approach to public accountability and strategies for coping with complexities and uncertainties in the rapidly changing environment of inter-organisational relationships. As such, it has appeal for both local authority and voluntary agencies. However, it encompasses models of recognised behaviours and associated organisational arrangements which constitute dominant rules of play (Clegg, 1989), producing powerful isomorphic pressures (Di Maggio and Powell, 1983) on outsiders to adopt the behaviours of insiders, that is, the behaviours of powerful larger agencies. This pervasive culture dominated ways in which some two-thirds of our workshop students felt they needed to act in order to compete successfully for funding. Their convictions were reinforced in the winning of the contract.

However, alternative approaches to voluntary-public sector funding relationships, such as allowing a greater focus on building trust within and across sectors would need a greater statutory willingness to be more open to risk and to relinquish adherence to market and managerial ideologies as the only bases for distributing funding and services, and managing accountability. Faced with reduced spending powers, a belief in market forces as a means to drive down costs continues to dominate state operations, rather than concerns about the efficacy of services or the professional values of providers. However, market mechanisms are embedded within the dominant managerial environment, and as we identified in our workshop, easily reinforce competitive characteristics between potential providers, reinforcing power differentials. These work against collaborative arrangements among voluntary organisations to deliver services jointly, and these are only likely to flourish if groups are able to identify collaborative advantages, such as through exchanging expertise. Nonetheless, successful collaborative work demands significant time and effort (Huxham and Vangen, 2004), rarely available in the current voluntary sector environment.

Building trust in inter-organisational relationships, as this paper illustrates, is more complex than sometimes acknowledged in literature (Lane and Bachmann, 1998). Research often conceptualises trust as resulting from predictability or as goodwill between participants, without exploring issues around power differentials or more open communications. Trust, as Hardy et al. (1998: 71) argue, 'results from a communicative process in which shared meanings either exist, or are created through a reciprocal relationship.' This necessarily involves all participants, ideally on an equal basis, and would be underpinned by ethical forms of communication which make space for examining differences and conflicts, as well as consensus (ibid). Essentially, power within communicative processes needs to be explored for shared meanings to emerge, in order that meanings are not simply managed in a way that maintains or increases power differentials to

the detriment (in this context of this paper) of the least powerful or smallest voluntary organisations. Where predictable (that is, based on assumed cultures or sets of arrangements) but imbalanced relationships are maintained, meanings may be managed to reach consensus but those with lesser power may increasingly mistrust or become disillusioned in the process.

The paper draws the negative conclusions that pervasive 'real world' ideologies associated with managerial cultures and exacerbated by recent procurement processes outweigh the critical thinking which students had engaged in during the course of their programmes. While students remain critical of the ways in which commissioning processes are generating competitive divides between local agencies, their actions reflected the pervasiveness of the external organisational culture. As the size of contracts grows, there is encouragement for small community organisations to collaborate but in this context, as in the external world, there is rarely enough time to reach the shared meanings and trust needed for effective joint work.

Our argument is not that competition and conflict over resources can be removed from state-voluntary sector relationships, nor that inter-agency collaboration is without risks and costs. It is that acknowledging the potential benefits of collaboration and the time and effort it involves to establish trust based co-operation need to be appropriately understood and given a structured focus within any commissioning framework. Good practice in commissioning would share risks between purchaser and provider, allowing for greater flexibility and an extension of trust to the provider's expertise. There is little evidence that such practice as yet has been widely embedded in public sector contracts. Similarly, intelligent commissioning needs to pay more than lip-service to the less tangible, difficult to measure outcomes and values-driven approaches which may prompt uncertainty, if small organisations sought by government (rhetorically) for their innovative approaches in addressing social problems (Mills, 2009) are not to be sidelined. This means understanding and challenging the powerful management impetus for control and certainty (Stacey, 2003: 394) and a greater openness to learning from 'outsiders' and alternative approaches.

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¹ UK policy has recently shifted terminology from Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) to Third Sector, including social enterprise and hybrid organisations. This paper refers to third sector organisations to encompass this wider frame of organisations, otherwise using the terms, voluntary and community organisations rather than Non-Government Organisations and Non-profits which have more frequent use internationally.

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