The Lives We Want
conversation series

Brief 2:

Partnerships with purpose:
channelling Richard Branson
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Presented by
Professor Greg Marston,
Head of Department,
School of Social
Science,
The University of
Queensland

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Partnerships with purpose: channelling Richard Branson

"To be successful in business, and in life," says Richard Branson, "you need to connect and collaborate".

Business partnerships are by no means new. In our increasingly complex environment, however, there are novel and innovative relationships emerging that cross traditional sectoral boundaries. Initiatives such as Brisbane's Trinity Commons offer benefits not just for business, but for the community as well.

In this report, Professor Greg Marston explores the opportunities, challenges and benefits of 'connecting and collaborating'.

About our presenter

Greg Marston is Professor of Social Policy and Head of Department, School of Social Science, at The University of Queensland. Prior to entering academia Greg worked in the non-profit sector at the local, state and national level. His research interests include poverty and inequality, the politics of policy-making and social service delivery models. He is presently undertaking Australian Research Council-funded research into conditional welfare, climate change and social policy, and employment pathways for people with disabilities. His most recent books are a co-edited collection on *Basic Income in Australia and New Zealand* (2016)*; Work and the Welfare State: Street-Level Organizations and Workfare Politics* (2013)*; and The Australian Welfare State: Who Benefits Now?* (2013)*.

About The Lives We Want Conversation Series

The Lives We Want conversation series provides a twice-yearly opportunity for senior business leaders to engage on social justice issues, providing a channel to voice their concerns, opinions and experiences of social justice issues in the corporate environment. The series is a joint initiative of Anglicare Southern Queensland and the Anglican Church Southern Queensland Social Responsibilities Committee, with sponsorship from Consolidated Properties.

Introduction

We learn to collaborate as kids. As a social species we need to collaborate to survive. We eulogise the ethic of competition in modern societies as driving human progress and achievement, but it is the ethic of cooperation that makes the world go around, and it is the kernel of social innovation and the foundation of social citizenship. One only has to look at Jacinda Ardern's approach and the response in Christchurch to see how humans can come together for change.

Working out what we can do for each other — how can I be of use? — is, according to many religions, the essence of happiness. It is in service that we both forget ourselves and recognise ourselves as individuals, with a range of talents, passions and gifts.

My first memorable collaboration was one of my many childhood misadventures with my best friend … where I realised the sum was greater than its parts. He lived a few doors up and we were partners in life and occasionally even in crime.

At the age of 10 or 11, we hatched a money-making scheme where during the week we pinched the odd pot plant from houses up and down our street, from front lawns and patios, and on the weekend we loaded up my parent's wheel barrow with the pot plants and went door-to-door in the next block selling the plants for 50 cents or a dollar.

I think we made a grand total of $2 before high tailing it with the wheel barrow when we saw one of our prime suppliers of

pot plants walking their dog towards us on the footpath. My collaborations since then have all been above board, but not all of them have been successful.

I am here this evening to channel Richard Branson on this theme of collaboration. Richard Branson said: "*To be successful in business, and in life, you need to connect and collaborate*."

Sir Richard's first money making venture at the ripe old age of 16 was a student magazine called *Student*. In 1970 he set up a mail order record business, followed by music stores, followed by a chain of music stores – and then in the 1980s he got into the commercial air travel game in a rather large way.

Richard gives a lot of credit to collaboration for his success as an entrepreneur. He even has his 10 top quotes on collaboration. Here are a few from his top 10:[1]

> *"No matter how brilliant your mind or strategy, if you're playing a solo game, you'll always lose out to a team." Reid Hoffman*

> *"No matter what accomplishments you make, somebody helped you." Althea Gibson*

> *"If I have seen further, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants." Isaac Newton*

> *"If everyone is moving forward together, then success takes care of itself." Henry Ford*

You get the picture. We are always more and can achieve more when we recognise the benefits of working with others.

I would add to Richard's memorable quotes that public recognition of Individual success hides a lot of unacknowledged collaborative effort, the invisible 'heavy lifting' which all too often has a gendered, class or racial element.

But let's not get too heavy just yet. I will have to restrain myself although it's probably pretty clear I am a social scientist, not a billionaire.

So back to humble beginnings and local contexts. I want to discuss collaboration using some examples from the large public university in which I currently work, to highlight what is possible in terms of collaboration and particularly, what is possible when universities work in the public interest with long-term partners.

The examples illustrate the questions of scale and collaboration. Sometimes the hardest collaborations can be on a small scale.

At a broader level, it is clear it is going to take a lot of us working together from very different quarters to address major societal challenges like climate change, or growing income inequality within wealthy countries.

This will need to be a coalition of the willing on a grand scale. Commentators like George Monbiot would say:

> *We need a new political story that must privilege belonging above all else. We need to feel we belong to a particular place and a particular community, with whom we can achieve common goals. We need to combat the epidemic of alienation with a new set of institutions, through which individuals can collectively shape their own lives and environments.*[2]

He might just be right, but let's provide some context on what we might do from where we are, as that is always the place to start.
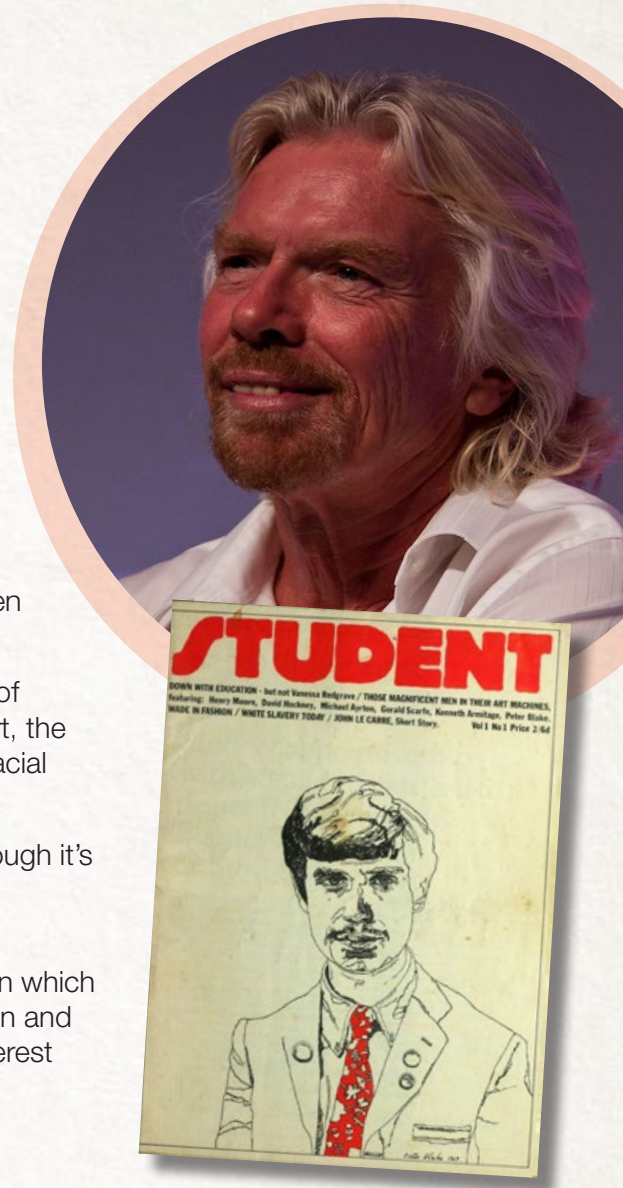
Starting from where we are: experiences of collaboration

I have worked in universities for the past 15 years, for the last 4 in the position as a Head of School. Prior to universities I worked in non-profit organisations, as a Director of the Queensland Public Tenants Association, as a policy and research officer in National Shelter in Canberra and as a youth worker working in a residential setting. I have also job-shared community development roles.

The collaborations I enjoyed in the non-profit sector were varied. In peak bodies I would work with state organisations to develop policy submissions to government, and we would collaborate on campaigns. In these contexts I learned **the value of working in teams** to accomplish goals. Yes, it took longer but the result was always better, and the **shared values and shared laughs** helped make the work 'flow'.

Moving into the academy in the early 2000s I found myself faced with a different meaning of collaboration. Certainly there were teams, but the aim of some of these teams was to pool resources and be the best in the global market of higher education, and in league tables like the one on research excellence in Australia.

Like everyone else I learned the rules of the game, won grants, published and taught well. I brought my collaborative and inclusive ethos from the community sector with me, and I enjoyed working with others. I developed **relationships of trust and credibility** with long term partners on a series of Linkage grants.

We **co-designed problems and solutions**, attended community forums, industry conferences, and we wrote in a way that made sense to governments, funders and the public.

In my research I kept **a focus on where the rubber hits the road**, the difficult space between clients and workers in places like Centrelink, contracted employment services, and payday lenders. For the most part, we avoided blaming individuals for bad practice, and we looked for systemic reasons for policy and practice failure. Sometimes we had wins with our partners, and policies and practices were changed. In other cases, the 'win' was at the very least a level of public accountability that had been hitherto absent.

Fast forward a decade and here I am in the role as Head of Department. In my first week on the job in 2016, the Executive Dean came to my office and told me my remit was to get the four disciplines of archaeology, sociology, anthropology and criminology working as one school, and to **build bridges** across UQ with research institutes.

I knew this would be no small challenge. As we all know **strong cultures are the most resistant to change**. And this was a school with a 50 year history. I started by listening and observing. It became apparent that I worked with some very talented, smart and capable people, but the disciplinary silos meant that opportunities for teaching and research synergies were being missed. I started making changes, aligning governance structures and systems to achieve a more coherent school. Of course there was some resistance, but through all of it I kept on **communicating, getting feedback, working together** with a leadership team and we have achieved some results. But there are some bigger issues that I have found get in the way of sustaining collaboration. I want to outline a couple.

What works against collaboration?
A culture of speed

I'm not talking about the drug! *Hyper efficiency is the enemy of serendipity*, those moments when we connect in corridors or water coolers. If we are all occupied with 'busy work' we have no time to cultivate ideas and understand how people might connect. Time poor workers create a transactional culture, rather than genuine reciprocity.

Technology

Technology enables lots of connections, but does it enable genuine collaboration?

People sit in offices shooting off emails, rather than getting up and seeing someone in the next room. The internet and social media platforms are making us less social and more confrontational — learning new things requires patience and listening to other people.

As Tom Nichols puts it in his book *The Death of Expertise*:

> *When we are unable to sustain a chain of reasoning past a few mouse clicks, we cannot tolerate even the smallest challenge to our beliefs or ideas. This works against the ideal of collaboration and democracy because it undermines the notion of shared knowledge.*[3]

There are of course two sides to the internet connection story. Platforms can enable a genuine sharing economy in regard to goods like tools and bikes. A programmer can post a problem and have it answered by 100 other programmers. Free and open source operating systems like Linux were developed in exactly this way. 'Citizen science', which has been particularly successful in regard to astronomy, also works in this way.[4]

Despite the challenges, when there is enough good will collaboration can be achieved, as in the following examples:

Some examples of collaboration
Automation, ethics and society network

Societies face many challenges, some of which are happening so quickly that we barely understand their implications. Artificial intelligence (AI) and automation, smart machines and machine learning are doing much to change how we work and live, and we are only at the beginning of this transformation.

New technologies are fusing the physical, digital and biological worlds, impacting all economies and industries, and even challenging ideas about what it means to be human. The resulting shifts and disruptions mean that we live in a time of great promise as well as great peril.

At the heart of this debate are critical social, legal, political and economic questions that we can only grapple with if we work together to provide possible regulatory and ethical answers, and to ensure that everyone understands what is at stake.

At UQ I am leading the development of a research network called 'Automation, ethics and society'. My interest in these issues is on the social policy responses:

- What do we do as paid work becomes a less reliable source of income, rights and belonging?

- How do we maintain a decent standard of living when, as the IMF states in a recent report, automation will be great for economic growth but will exacerbate inequalities unless the transition is managed well?[5]

This grand challenge is not something that can be left to the technical sciences and economists. There is great value in the diversity of teams:

- We know that less than 10% of computer science students and designers are women, even fewer go onto work in the industry. How do we change workplace cultures to remedy this?

- We need political scientists to understand how to govern and regulate tech companies. How can we break them down when they get too big?

- What do we do about biases and automated decision-making tools that entrench social inequalities, with recent examples like 'Robodebt' in Australia?[6]

Citizens are also fighting back. Anti-poverty networks are showing how to get change; and there are activists in the US who forced Google to change their algorithms so that the first images and pages that come up when searching for black girls are NOT pornographic sites tied to advertising income.

Only people working together across disciplines, across industries and businesses, across sectors, joining forces with ordinary citizens will be effective in pushing back against global companies like Google, that are valued at more than $700 billion.

Turning paranoia about technology into power takes courage and a moral imagination to see a different future. This takes us back to Monbiot's point about the importance of framing and narrative, and also brings me to Trinity Commons.

Trinity Commons

Trinity Commons (trinitycommons.org.au) is a collaboration across multiple sectors, with a shared value base and common goals.

It's the use of our imagination to be more than the sum of our parts; and a desire to resist the encroachment of private interests, social isolation and the marginalisation that so often accompanies gentrification in the inner city.

Our vision is to co-create a research and social innovation laboratory to address community challenges and realise greater social inclusion, to promote diversity and equity in the inner-city area around Fortitude Valley and New Farm — an area that has been dealing with rapid gentrification for more than two decades.

Trinity Commons is the use of our imagination to be more than the sum of our parts

That vision will be realised through a partnership between The University of Queensland, Holy Trinity Anglican Parish, Anglicare Southern Qld, and a broad coalition of organisations and individuals, including local community members, Brisbane City Council, the Queensland Government, the private sector, non-profits and other stakeholders.

We want ultimately to realise the public value of 'The Commons'. We're not sure exactly what this will look like just yet. The collaboration and Trinity Commons itself is an evolving thing, but we know that we'll have the best chance of making a difference by building trust, sharing values and working closely together to promote diversity, equity and social justice.

Take home messages

Collaboration is not novel, but it is necessary if we want to address societal challenges and 'wicked problems'.

It can be unpredictable and sometimes uncomfortable.

'Slow ideals' (slow food, the slow professor, slow travel) restore a sense of community and conviviality, of friendship and joining forces.

Sometimes the change you want to see moves at a glacial speed and other times you have quick, multiple successes.

We have to remember that social justice is the distant horizon. We have to keep putting one foot forward ahead of the other, walking together.

All successful collaboration needs small victories,
symbolic and material. Sometimes this might be as simple
as feeling connected, a sense of belonging to something bigger than oneself.

Collaboration does not mean eradicating alternative points of view or values. It requires negotiation and accommodations, but you have to agree on enough to get the results everyone wants.

'Friction' in collaboration can spark progress, so we shouldn't fear our differences, as long as we handle them appropriately.

Resources and links

Lee, Alycia and Glad, Tatiana 2011. Collaboration: The Courage to Step into a Meaningful Mess. At: https://berkana.org/berkana_articles/collaboration-the-courage-to-step-into-a-meaningful-mess

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References

1   For the other six quotes on collaboration, see www.virgin.com/richard-branson/my-top-10-quotes-collaboration

2   Monbiot, George. 2017. *Out of the Wreckage: A New Politics for an Age of Crisis*. London: Verso.

3   Nichols, Thomas, M. 2017. *The Death of Expertise: The Campaign against Established Knowledge and Why it Matters*. Oxford University Press

4   See for example, hubblesite.org/get_involved/citizen_science

5   Berg, Andrew, Buffie, Edward F.; Zanna, Luis-Felipe. 2018. *Should We Fear the Robot Revolution? (The Correct Answer is Yes)*. IMF Working Paper, 21 May. At: www.imf.org/en/Publications/WP/Issues/2018/05/21/Should-We-Fear-the-Robot-Revolution-The-Correct-Answer-is-Yes-44923

6   See also Hinton, Theresa. 2018. *Paying the price of welfare reform: The experiences of Anglicare staff and clients in interacting with Centrelink*. Canberra: Anglicare Australia.

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advocacy@anglicaresq.org.au

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