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Collaborative research: If we had the time to do it all again, tell me... would we, could we?

Dawn Garbett

Auckland College of Education, Auckland, New Zealand
d.garbett@ace.ac.nz

Belinda R Yourn

Auckland University of Technology, Auckland, New Zealand
Belinda.yourn@aut.ac.nz

***Abstract:** This paper draws on our experience of a collaborative research project. We suggest that collaborative research projects can promote quality research outputs and assist in developing a research culture - even for heavily loaded new teaching academics. Collaborative research can enhance research skills in this time of 'unknowns' especially as the New Zealand Tertiary sector acts upon reforms such as PBRF. As a framework to reflect on and to analyse our lived experience as co-researchers we have used a qualitative design based on McDrury and Alterio's Learning through Storytelling model (2002). From the evidence presented in our stories, we have made some suggestions for developing successful collaborative research partnerships.*

***Keywords:** collaborative research, reflective practice*

Introduction

From 2004 funding for research in tertiary institutions will no longer be allocated according to student numbers. Rather, research funds will be allocated from the Performance Based Research Fund (PBRF) according to the quality of the research produced in each institution. Essentially the newly established Tertiary Education Commission (TEC) will promote and reward system-wide quality that includes the standardising of information on research outputs. Other objectives include rewarding quality in research and research degree completions.

In the Consultation draft Guidelines for Joint Research (Tertiary Education Commission, 2003), collaboration is recognised as commonplace within institutions and between institutions both inside and outside New Zealand. While the evidence portfolio on which PBRF will be determined appears individualistic, research outputs of individual academics can and will take into account co-authored publications. Information will be provided by each author as to their relative contribution to the paper and research outputs can be noted on more than one evidence portfolio.

New academics are important for developing the research capacity of any university. However, they can find themselves in a particularly vulnerable space and require mentoring and encouragement to undertake or continue research. Many arrive to find themselves initially loaded heavily with teaching and an expectation from the university that they will undertake research. They are yet to establish a research reputation and find themselves working at 'double pace' to prove their capability. Some cope and others who are probably very talented do not manage the expectations and fall to the side.

Heavy teaching loads have been often blamed for dampening research pursuits. Academics exclaim that there is little time to develop ideas into research projects. Jennings (2002) acknowledges in the recent Research Audit of New Zealand universities that the matter of ensuring "fair distribution of workload to allow adequate time for research is recognised by universities as a matter to be urgently addressed." (p.2). New academics say that they are exhausted and just do not have the mental energy to undertake serious research after teaching for long hours. There is also the issue of access to financial resources and some researchers who lie outside of established research units find it difficult to gain access to the funds that would provide, for example, time release and general staff research support.

Having introduced the current political context in New Zealand for this paper, what follows is a description and explanation of the collaborative process as we experienced it as 'new' researchers. We have written from the 'first-person' perspective as the story and journey reported is of ourselves as both the researchers and researched. We have used storytelling as a means of reflecting on the experience. We describe why and how we chose to work together to counter the minimal research culture, loneliness of researching on individual projects and to support one another in developing research skills. We have included a list of themes that others may also find useful when using a collaborative research approach and ways in which the institution could support collaborative research undertakings. We have found that the list of themes is not dissimilar to earlier work undertaken by Eisenhart and Borko (1991), Fox and Faver (1982). Our suggestions contribute to the literature and propose that collaborative research partnerships when managed appropriately can increase research capacity amongst new academics for the benefit of their own development as researchers and of their home institutions.

A brief overview of collaborative research

The research literature reveals a diversity of investigations resulting from the collaborative endeavours of researchers. Some of the issues to emerge include discussion of the ethics of conducting collaborative research with participants (Kyle & McCutcheon, 1984; Lindsey, 1980; Skau, 1987) and the assigning of authorship, particularly in the sciences (Lindsey, 1980; Over & Smallman, 1973). Other studies detail the perceived quality of collaborative research in relation to citation measures (Bridgestock, 1991; Lindsey, 1980). Many studies outline ways in which collaborative research could be undertaken. They describe what seems to work and what does not while providing useful lists and measures (Eisenhart & Borko, 1991; Fox & Faver, 1982). Collaboration also demonstrates the benefit to the careers of early or new researchers of pooling expertise and energy to work on a problem (Dunkin, 1992).

Collaborative research is characterised as a relationship between researchers where the partnership ensures decisions and outcomes are not only shared and discussed, but are also a group responsibility (Bond & Thompson, 1996). The researchers become co-investigators where they communicate ideas about the research fully and equally with each other.

The concept of collaborative research can be approached from two perspectives. The first is characterised as ‘additive’, where researchers often work on discrete parts of the project and each contribute their part to the collated final product. The second is ‘integrative’ where researchers work together to develop shared understandings and outcomes (Eisenhart & Borko, 1991). Such a distinction is useful in helping to clarify the differences in collaborative research but, as this paper details, it may be artificial since we have found good collaboration requires both elements of addition and integration.

Our collaborative context

As is typical of most academic research, the context is embedded within a university setting. In this particular case, a strategic move by the university into teacher education created new positions, new programmes and research possibilities. We were both, at about the same time, appointed to tenured positions to lecture across the diverse early childhood and secondary education sectors. We had different areas of expertise and broadly differing backgrounds before meeting in the same department. Belinda, with a specialist knowledge in music education, had recently moved to New Zealand and was experienced in working in a research-driven university culture. Dawn, with specialist knowledge in science education, had worked for ten years in a teacher education institution where research was primarily to inform practice.

On the face of it, we collaborated because an opportunity arose to initiate a research project based on our mutual interest in the issue of content knowledge, confidence and competence of beginning early-childhood teachers. We explored possible research questions, such as what was ‘important’ general knowledge for early-childhood teachers and what were the most appropriate ways to teach in this programme. We agreed from the outset that there was little point in undertaking research that was going to be of no consequence for the students or for our practice. Since we were both new to the field of pre-service early childhood teacher education we sought to understand the context together. We developed a short-term project to review the literature in this area which was intended to underpin a long-term research project. The review of the literature was duly carried out, written and reported in appropriate forums collaboratively. We then pursued the collection of more data which we have analysed and reported in other forums.

Told like this, the story of our collaboration is typical of most qualitative and quantitative research. When reporting research the focus is mostly on the subtleties of the research phenomena and the outcomes of the analysis. This can involve description and explanation. The lived experience of the researcher is supposed to fade into the nondescript concept of being “detached” or “neutral”. The collateral outcomes that occur for the researchers usually remain private and unreported. However, our experience of doing the research revealed to us that there were elements that required a second look. In addition to benefiting from getting our research published there have also been other intangible outcomes such as a strengthened confidence in praxis and a warm, professional regard for each other.

In order to better capture these alternative outcomes we have turned the focus on ourselves and the research process so that we might better understand the lived experience of undertaking collaborative research. Telling our story together has enabled us to take a closer look at the process and to highlight some of the issues which we believe need to be considered before embarking on collaborative research. Telling our story was one way in which we could reflect on our current research practices and demonstrably put improvements into action. There is much in the higher

education literature to support the view that the work of academics who investigate their own problems and issues has transformative possibilities (Harvey & Knight, 1996).

Method for understanding our experience

We found the collaborative experience to be mutually productive and rewarding. In informal conversations we sought to understand why this particular partnership in research had been so beneficial. In writing this paper, our aim was to capture some of the complexity of working collaboratively in a research project. We wanted to relay a feeling for the lived experience of the project, but realised a simple re-telling of our stories would be incomplete without some analysis. In order to analyse the links between learning and storytelling we found it useful to follow the *Reflective Learning through Storytelling Model* as outlined by McDrury and Alterio (2002, pp. 47-50).

In McDrury and Alterio's model, five stages have been identified as story finding, story telling, story expanding, story processing and story reconstructing. Using this framework our stories of collaborating in and on research could be told, discussed, and analysed in order to deepen our understanding of the collaborative process. Data was produced in the form of the written stories (story finding, story telling) and notes made as we discussed our process together (story expanding and story processing). During the story processing stage we asked for the perspective of a critical friend. The questions he asked following his reading of our stories and analysis introduced generative themes and helped us to uncover other layers of meaning. Our stories were then re-written in light of our discussions to highlight what we considered to be the salient points (story reconstructing).

Submitting this process of telling and reconstructing stories to the critique of our peers, an unknown audience, is fraught because of the honesty and openness with which we have explored our lived experience. The power of working in this way to uncover deeper meaning can also be potentially difficult for the participants as we, and others, see quite clearly aspects which we may have preferred to hide. Egos, personal ambitions and insecurities were laid bare when we wrote our stories. What follows is a description of our processing of the five stage reflective framework.

Story finding and story telling

Learning about our collaborative process through storytelling involved the telling or writing of stories. Originally these stories were written using Haug's (1987) "Memory work" guidelines. We had intended to explore this avenue of feminist research further and so the stories were written with as much description as possible, without conscious interpretation or explanation. We agreed on a broad framework of what content should be included before writing to ensure focus and coverage. The writing was done in isolation so that the memory of our stories was not contaminated by each others' memory and was undertaken within a one-hour time limit. Although we had imposed a time and word limit, this was unnecessary. Retrospectively, we both agreed the writing of the initial stories was personally confronting and overall, an unsettling experience since neither of us actually knew what the other had really thought about the process of collaboration.

Story expanding and story processing

We put the stories aside for a week following the initial writing since neither of us felt prepared to share our raw feelings and memories. It was difficult not to discuss how cathartic the actual process of writing it all down had been and how good that had felt. As McDrury and Alterio (2002) highlight, the intensity of feelings that are associated with the stories as they are told, listened to and discussed, can point to issues that contain deep learning opportunities for those involved. This was the case for us. When we finally read each others' stories and reflected as both the researched and researchers

we were able to distance ourselves emotionally from the work. We shared, interpreted and clarified feelings in our stories to identify common themes and meanings underlying our process of collaborative research. As we reflected on our own and each others' actions we formulated an emerging list of themes. These are listed in Table 1. As we were both telling and listening and engaging reflectively we were, as McDrury and Alterio suggest, linking our new ideas with existing knowledge and past experiences. In this stage of our reflective discussion we invited a critical friend to read and comment on the stories. This allowed an alternative perspective which was removed from the lived experience and clarified issues of method. The result was a deeper appreciation of the collateral outcomes that are connected with effective collaboration.

Story reconstructing

With a sense of shared understanding about how each person had viewed the process, we were able to return to the stories and edit them. While they are beyond the limits of this paper, our reconstructed stories serve to remind us of the journey we have made together through the collaboration. In this final stage there was opportunity for us to bring new insights into our own research practice. Belinda has realised that she casts into the dark, trawling to see what she finds in a new area that is of value to investigate. Dawn's concept is more pragmatic and she sees research primarily as a means of improving her practice.

While this section has focussed on the framework for describing and explaining the process that we undertook to explore the collaborative research approach, what follows is a discussion of the issues that emerged as being critical to the success of the collaboration. While we do not claim that the issues that have been identified are generalisable in a quantitative sense, they may however 'ring true' (Burns, 1994) and therefore be transferable to similar contexts.

Issues which emerged from our stories

One of the main aims of this paper was to suggest that collaborative research was a strategy by which academics, and particularly new academics, might develop essential research skills and quality research outcomes. We contend that the sole researcher can be a 'lonely space' and that collaborative research can contribute to establishing a research culture. Belinda's story told of enormous personal change and in this vulnerable position she sought friendship. Dawn's began with the need to do research in an academic setting, which for her was a challenge. There were, within the department, other colleagues who became our friends and others who had research experience. Our collaboration was based on more than these needs.

Another area to emerge was how we balanced each others' areas of uncertainty. Where Belinda had some experience of research processes Dawn was a relative neophyte. Our stories told of intrinsic drive and confidence to establish a research profile in a new field while Dawn felt external pressure to become involved in research. A further area of uncertainty stems from our differing perspectives about early childhood. Belinda's story speaks of uncertainty in the field, of stumbling across ideas and 'luck' while Dawn's has a more grounded view and a more pragmatic approach tempered by her own experience as a mother/client/consumer in the field of early childhood education.

There are also areas where we had the same expectations and key elements are congruent. For example, we were both committed to the project which was equally beneficial to us. We were both well organised as is illustrated by our ability to set and meet deadlines. One of the most important aspects that we both admired and represented in similar ways was our willingness to be non-possessive about the ideas and interpretations that were written.

In the early sharing of our stories we simultaneously formulated and progressively refined the list of themes (found in Table 1) which we considered to have been important in our collaboration. The themes emerged during the story expanding, processing and reconstructing stages. Table 1 provides a brief description of the issues which academics and institutions who wish to support collaborative research might find helpful. Again, it must be stated that we do not claim that the themes we present are definitive or applicable in all contexts. They were the ideas that emerged for us as contributing to our successful collaboration. We would suggest however that other academics may find that they have had similar experiences and as such the presentation of the themes find credibility and perhaps transferability to other contexts.

Table 1: Collaborative research themes emerging from our stories

Congruent research principles	We both thought it fundamentally important that our research would inform our practice. We had a common purpose.
Establishment of ownership and equality in authorship	Ownership of research is a potential area of conflict and we agreed at the outset that any publications would be co-authored. This, however, is problematic since authorship is usually hierarchical or at times alphabetical. To overcome this we decided we would include a statement acknowledging joint equal authorship and reverse name order on alternate publications.
Time management and deadlines	Negotiating and establishing deadlines was a way of acknowledging commitment to the process and also respect for each other.
Creating and guarding a space for collaborative work to occur within the institutional framework	We diarised appointment times to work on specific aspects of the research which we guarded. This was necessary to ensure that we prioritised and managed our time effectively. Interestingly, this was perceived by some others as though we had 'extra' time to do research so we were cautious about discussing our plans too candidly.
Critiquing our work and removing 'selves' from the product	We did not feel threatened when receiving critique from each other and quickly removed any personal ownership when writing. At this stage in the process it is not unusual for us to write and then delete large tracts of work and laugh about it. We also have lost our own individual words in the completed whole. This is not felt as a personal loss but celebrated as real collaboration.
Respecting differences in working styles and using those to our mutual advantage	We understood each others' ways of working and focussed on the complementary aspects. Understanding commitments outside of our working lives deepened our appreciation of each others' contribution.
Similar conceptual world	Our research paradigms connected and on a personal level we

view	agreed on the many roles of teacher educators.
Intuition, empathy and friendship developed as we collaborated	We developed a healthy respect for each others' personal and professional lives. The time spent together writing and discussing our ideas has been a time of synergy.
Intrinsic and extrinsic motivating factors	Research to inform our practice has been a guiding principle in our endeavours. We wanted to contribute meaningfully to the discourse of our discipline. There was opportunity to publish and present at conferences and the scope to apply for institutional funding. Further research was an expectation within our job descriptions. An international journal article was accepted for publication in 2002 A group paper and four further 'individual' papers are in the planning stage. Our enthusiasm and the momentum the project gathered contributed to the emerging research culture.
Including critical friends and expert others	It was important to us that we could share our work with other colleagues for critique and perspective. Working as a team gave us both confidence to approach others for their input.
Collaboration has a life of its own and has spawned new projects.	We will continue to work together even though our paths are diverging because we have established a history of successful collaboration. The collaboration has momentum and new ideas, individual and joint, continue to be discussed.

Final reflections from 'new academics'

In the reconstruction phase of our storytelling we have discovered contradictions, similarities, conflicts and hidden meanings. There were issues, which could have been addressed, and questions raised that will remain unanswered for the time being. What we have remembered and chosen to represent, the language we have used and the different aspects we have focussed on, highlight what has been essential for us as individuals in the collaborative process. Our deliberation leaves us with many questions that snowball from each other. For example why was this partnership so successful and complementary? Was it that different needs were fulfilled to a greater or lesser extent by the other- what were these needs?

It appears as though the combined congruent elements and the *complementarity* of our needs and areas of uncertainty combined to produce a synergy which resulted in a mutually beneficial collaboration. As we continue to work together, our understandings of our effective collaboration will become clearer. We will continue to develop new perspectives as our analysis continues.

Academics in tertiary settings often have heavy teaching loads and finding time to build a research portfolio or even to meet university expectations to undertake research can be frustrating and a daunting experience. Consideration of a collaborative approach may be prudent in these 'unknown' times as tertiary reform advances in New Zealand.

When we consider the starting point of this paper – Collaborative research: If we had the time to do it all again, tell me...would we, could we? – the answer for both of us is an emphatic Yes!

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