

Collaboration or co-blab-oration

By Dr Linda Gibson-Langford

Collaboration – moving into its deeper waters

Acting on a hunch that literature can help to enrich our students' understanding of how they perceive masculinity, I embarked on an action research project with our Head of English. It was a study that not only gave me wings to work in a different environment other than the library, but it allowed me to observe the art of collaboration from an ethnographic stance. I found myself reviewing the findings from my doctoral study on creating, sharing and using teachers' knowledge, and observing how the teacher and myself interacted. Through this experience, I gained a more profound appreciation of the powerful force that collaboration can be in re-kindling the processes of imagination and creativity. I also experienced a heightened awareness of the opportunities that we have as teacher-librarians to move collaboration from the shallows of previous conceptual understandings and into the deeper waters of imagination and creativity through engagement in action research.

Our web 2.0 world begs us to collaborate. The richness of various digital tools to facilitate our engagement in creative partnerships has given us a chance to connect intellectually and socially, and to extend our learning and teaching partnerships to involve colleagues across communities, countries, and cultures. This is exciting.

It has also made possible real opportunities to engage in collaborative experiences within our own school environments.

I celebrate this idea because I believe that the way in which schools are designed, both physically and intellectually, works against genuine collaboration. Yet, with the use of social media such as wikis, voicethread, Skype, and the suite of tools on Google, we have at our fingertips the ability to break down the knowledge silos that school communities build.

Our web 2.0 world has given us the chance to re-design relationships above and beyond cooperative work toward a far more powerful force for human engagement – collaboration (John-Steiner, 1992).

But to engage in collaboration means we need to understand the underpinnings that develop creative and critical partnerships. We need to understand the HOW of collaboration. The web 2.0 tools provide the structures, but the processes inherent in the enactment of collaboration need careful scrutiny.

Collaboration or co-blab-oration

I knew I had a soulmate when I read David Perkins' (2003) work on collaboration. Like Perkins, I had been observing colleagues talking/working together in the course of their teaching day, but with little exchange of deep knowledge and little innovative thinking, and this they called being collaborative. Perkins exposed the action he had observed as co-blab-oration and I thought, *'Yes, that's it!'*

No structures or processes for deep knowledge sharing and creation, no collaboration – just co-blab-oration – each teacher trying to state their view without listening and reflecting upon what the other had to say. No wonder teacher-librarians fought uphill battles to engage and sustain collaborative initiatives. But let's step back a bit . . .

Let's refresh our understanding of collaboration; let's understand the difference between co-blab-oration and collaboration in the first instance – this we have to get right.

Collaboration

As Michael Schrage (1995) explains, collaboration is enacted in a shared space that turns talking into innovative thinking and change. He challenges us to think about the enactment of collaboration as similar to scribbling on a shared table napkin - a paper table cloth. You know . . . that feeling when you're with a mate or two and you begin chatting and scribbling ideas down, moving rapidly from one idea to another, changing the ideas, and getting excited over something you would like to try. That's powerful collaboration - when opportunities to share your tacit knowledge stimulate the processes of creating, and innovating; arguing and discarding; and taking risks and when your conversation moves from the *what if* to the *how*.

Looking back in history, collaboration was de rigueur for many artists and scientists. Consider that remarkable creative group, the Parisian Impressionists, who socialised and painted together and even exhibited together.

There was an honesty and ease in their relationships, as they shared related approaches and techniques, aired controversial ideas, debated and reworked and rethought ideas over a shared space - a shared intellectual and physical space - allowing their ideas to change, to reform and morph into new knowledge.

And this is important! They celebrated creative dissonance.

In fact, it was cultivated through engaging in critical thinking and losing themselves in deep intellectual conversations.

Their collaborative environment demanded from each of them enormous trust and restrained ego. That's collaboration - the sharing of ideas, the sharing of your knowledge, the sharing of colleagues' knowledge . . . the co-creation of new ideas without ego pushing power balances... and that's a fundamental outcome of collaboration.

But let's not gloss over collaboration. It's not easy to enact. Unfortunately, the rush of school environments militate against collaborative partnerships and, without deliberate structures and processes in place, the generative qualities inherent in collaboration are often replaced with the more collegial enactment of cooperative partnerships. Perhaps that's why the concept of collaborative program planning and teaching, for many, many teacher-librarians was not reality.

Relationships

My doctoral research considered how teachers create, share and, importantly, use knowledge. I didn't realise it at the time, but the art of deep collaboration was at the heart of sharing and creating knowledge. I understand now that collaboration has a deeper intellectual and emotional edge.

Collaboration is centred on people and how they relate to one another. It relies on transforming tacit knowledge into explicit knowledge. It has the capacity to break down knowledge silos in workplaces. It relies on nurturing both creativity and criticality. It needs time and it needs trust - trust to be able to shun the veneer of politeness and to cultivate and celebrate creative dissonance.

My study made it very clear that teachers learn best in a social context - just like our students. They learn best when learning is fun and playful, yet serious, and when critical feedback is part of the process. And again these features are part of the critical building blocks of collaboration.

In summary, collaboration is a far greater generative experience than merely cooperating on a task. For collaboration to be all it can, structures and process that place emphasis on building relationships in the first instance are essential.

Building partnerships

So what are some practical ways in which we can enable genuine collaborative partnerships, and what steps do we take to build and maintain them?

To illustrate, I'd like to use the notion of action research which I believe is an excellent process that has at its core social learning, sharing of knowledge and the co-creating of new knowledge (Gibson-Langford, 2006).

Action research

Put simply, action research is any systematic inquiry conducted by teacher researchers or, as Australians Kemmis and Carr (in Smith, K. 1996; 2001, 2007) put it: "Action research is simply a form of self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own practices, their understanding of these practices, and the situations in which the practices are carried out".

Thus, our starting point must be to believe in evidence-based practice, engage in the deep art of collaboration, and commit to transforming our intuitive and innovative ideas into intentional strategies. Believing, engaging and committing to the process of action research is a concrete way in which to begin partnership building. Like collaboration, action research is social and this is important. The process is one that flourishes in a collaborative environment. It relies on shared moral purpose, the desire to research your practice and the will to commit to a process that brings teachers and students into a shared learning experience. It is a powerful collaborative adventure.

Action research nurtures the development of collaboration, which in turn is a powerful force in enabling practitioner research. Action research deepens conversation and challenges both researchers and participants to question the way things are done and to take risks with new ideas.

Participation in action research gives energy to the developing and sustaining of strong partnerships through the co-creation of knowledge. Through action research partnerships, failures can be successes and intervention strategies can be challenges.

Of course, there are other benefits derived from participating in action research and in particular, the potential for lifelong learning. As Henry Ford quipped: "anyone who stops learning is old, whether at twenty or eighty. Anyone who keeps learning stays young". As information specialists and teachers, that's pretty much music to our ears. In a time when the baby boomers are working longer and harder, staying awake and alert can be quite a battle. But Ford says it all . . . keep learning . . . stay young!

You might consider action research as professional botox. As a colleague confesses: "It smooths out the wrinkles and makes one feel young again". Not to the point of a Benjamin Button (Fitzgerald, 2008) experience but the energy, the professional reading, daring to trial different teaching strategies and observing their effect on your students' learning – all these add up to a more rewarding work experience for you and your students and your colleagues, and in turn, a collaborative culture begins to build.

Like collaboration, action research can't just happen! You can't just rock up to a colleague with your idea, your hunch, your question and be assured that they will embrace the idea that: "hey, a bit of collaboration/research would be fun". They inevitably will see a big clock face where your face once was and, no doubt, fob you off. There is a way, however, to have colleagues buy into the process and it must begin with clarity and conviction of values; a shared moral purpose (Fullan 1999; Bezzina, 2007).

An example of shared moral purpose is well-illustrated in an action research project about which both the class teacher and myself were passionate: that literature – story – taps into our inner core.

Although the stimulation for this action research came from an outside source, the International Boys' Schools Coalition, in which I was part of an international team of action researchers, the Head of English still needed to believe in the research, in the idea and in our relationship. What was our moral purpose? Was it merely passion for investigating practice or the stimulation of critical dialogue? Or was it more the chance to develop critical thinking experiences for our students?

The shared space, the table napkin was there – action research. The moral purpose, in fact, was a shared belief that literature had the potential to transform our students' world views. Instead of teaching together, we researched together and that made all the difference between teaching in a cooperative environment and learning and teaching in one that was collaborative (see overview of research at <http://sites.google.com/site/lindaglangford/>).

From co-blab-oration to collaboration



O'Malley, Leith. *Talking to the Muses*. @ <http://www.redbubble.com/people/leith/art>

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Consider this image of Australian painter Brett Whitely, with American Jean-Michel Basquiat and, of course, you guessed him, Van Gogh [the blue suit is a giveaway] because it really demonstrates the notion of Schrage's shared napkin – three great painters scribbling away, exchanging ideas, standing on each other's shoulders, being collaborative. I think artists are like that. They find studios together and paint and talk and share ideas and allow ideas to transform them and their work.

<http://www.redbubble.com/people/leith/art/21379-10-talking-to-the-muses-about-art>

We understood that without firstly building the relationship, our level of collaboration would remain as *co-blab-oration*. Instead, as our relationship deepened, so did the intensity of our knowledge sharing and, as importantly, the co-creation of knowledge.

The collaborative partnership has taken us, as teachers, deeper into conversation, risk-taking, and trialling new ideas, and further away from co-blab-oration.

During the development, implementation and evaluation of the research project, collaboration between teacher and teacher-librarian was facilitated by respect and admiration for each other's world views/perspectives/intelligence. This led to our working more creatively, and becoming more flexible in our approach. It was not uncommon to receive late evening emails or telephone calls with changes to the next day's teaching strategy -- sometimes a complete turnaround to what had been discussed that day.

The teacher and student lines were blurred as teacher-librarian and class teacher engaged in no less a creative and challenging activity than did the boys. The action research provided an opportunity to go beyond cooperative learning and teaching and into that deeper and richer partnership of collaboration.

Conclusion

As a reflection, our pedagogy as teacher-librarians has firm roots in evidence-based practice; continuously learning, sharing and creating new knowledge in genuine collaborative experiences with both fellow teachers and students, for the ultimate betterment of student learning. It leads to the inevitable question: How will we embed action research into the natural discourse of learning and teaching?

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Dr Linda Gibson-Langford used storytelling as one of the techniques for gathering data for her PhD. As her participants were invited to tell their stories, she found it to be a powerful technique in which to tap into their tacit knowledge. Linda continues to work with stories as a rich strategy for learning and teaching. As a teacher-librarian at The King's School in Sydney, Australia, she recognises the potential of the environment she works in to engage young minds through the rich stories that surround them. A former Science and History teacher, and casual lecturer/supervisory marker at Charles Sturt University, Linda has been an invited keynote speaker, both nationally and internationally, in the areas of information literacy, collaboration, learning communities, literature and action research. She has published in peer-reviewed journals and has been a contributing author to several books. Her experience as an editor extends to *Access*, the national journal for the Australian School Library Association (ASLA), a series of texts to support the teaching of English, and her ongoing role as editor of ASLA (NSW) newsletter, info@aslansw. Linda has continued her commitment to research through her engagement as a coordinator of a research community and also as a member of an International action research team.