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Critical reflections on international collaborative research

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Abstract: The excitement and challenge of undertaking research is an integral part of an academic staff member's role. There are a multitude of reasons which encourage academics to undertake collaborative research. These range from the enthusiasm that arises from particular discipline interests, through to the pressure from tertiary contexts to be actively engaged in research and to produce research outputs. This paper uses the experiences of an international academic research team to explore the nature of the collaborative academic research process, including the perils and pitfalls, as well as the joys and enthusiasms. The three researchers are convinced that there are many positives to be gained from international collaboration. By critically reflecting on the dynamics of the research process employed by the tri-national team, (as against the research project itself), and identifying 'lessons learned' by the researchers themselves, suggestions for productive and enjoyable research relationships are offered.

Keywords: academic research; international collaboration; research alliances

Introduction

Academics undertake research for a variety of reasons. Their interests and passion for their subject encourage inquiry that extends personal understanding and provides additional knowledge to the discipline, while their educational context requires a commitment to research that informs the practice of teaching and produces reputable research outputs. When embarking upon research, academics use their knowledge of the subject and literature to construct and develop feasible projects. These projects may be individualized or involve several researchers who share the same interests and provide collaborative input into the project. However there is limited research that provides guidance on how to undertake research collaboratively across international boundaries (Morrison, Dobbie and McDonald, 2003) and facilitate constructive working alliances with successful project processes.

The authors have been part of a research team since 2004 and are all experienced researchers in the field of educational leadership. Whilst we keenly set out to work together as a team in a tri-national project, we did not anticipate some of the working challenges that we encountered. This paper aims to use our experiences to identify those issues and challenges that can make or break a project and recommend processes to ensure effective collaborations.

Academic inquiry is an accepted part of an academic's role in any tertiary institution and research is seen as "core activity in higher education" (Smith, 2001, p. 131). This paper, while

not based on a research project's components, but rather the *collaborative processes* that support a project, offers the opportunity to recount some of our reflections as members of one collaborative research team. Initially, we outline the rationale for international collaborative academic research and its anticipated positive outcomes. Issues surrounding the initiation and implementation of the project are discussed and the dynamics of the research process explored. Whilst it is accepted that international collaboration offers clear benefits to all parties through the use of collective expertise and skills (Lucas, 2005), research can falter through design or relational issues. Finally, suggestions for others engaging in similar research are offered.

Researching in higher education

In the current challenging environment of higher education, academic staff have a multi-faceted role that involves the competing demands of teaching, academic development, management, mentoring, student supervision and individual research. Undertaking research is not the lowest in priority as it is deemed to underpin effective tertiary teaching (Conrad, 1998), add to current knowledge, and develop the individual's academic capacities. In addition, institutions are increasingly requiring academic staff to engage in research in order to produce research outputs that generate governmental funding. This has been argued by Smith (2001, p. 131) as creating a context in which "(c)ollaboration in research activity is now the rule not the exception. It is encouraged by government, funding bodies and research councils".

Higher education institutions have varied mechanisms for evaluating and rewarding staff performance (Meyer and Evans, 2003) and actively researching is one way of meeting those criteria. Given that research provides academic staff with higher status and recognition through publications and other research outputs, it may also enhance possibilities for tenure or promotion. Court (1999) has commented upon the individualised credit that is derived from publications of research findings, but Coffin and Leithwood (2000) emphasise the positive spin-offs from collective researching for institutional relationships and academic partnerships.

In this environment it seems natural that many will work in the company of peers in order to benefit from the "sum (being) greater than the individual parts" (Smith, 2001, p. 135). This leads academics to search out compatible and complementary colleagues with whom to work collaboratively, in order to fulfill a research capacity with broader outcomes than if they had worked alone.

Researching collaboratively

Collaboration is seen as an effective method of researching (Katz and Martin, 1997), especially when trying to juggle other academic responsibilities. Working alongside colleagues encourages the sharing of knowledge and skills and can be more enjoyable than working alone (Smith, 2001). As collaboration is now a "pervasive feature" of the contemporary academic field (Solomon, Boud, Leontios and Staron, 2001, p. 135) academics not only initiate projects with peers within their own institutions, but use electronic communication to structure and implement projects transnationally. Communicating with partner researchers through collaborative alliances can broaden and develop alternative perspectives, develop individual confidence through peer support, enhance research skills and use of methodologies, and increase research outputs. While there are implications for inter-

institutional relations through academic collaboration, the research process and interactions are still focused on the individual researchers (Smith, 2001).

In any project the working alliances are crucial (Stead and Harrington, 2000) as the relationship between partners is core to project success. In the case of academic research the primary focus is on the project itself but collaborative projects do need guidance (Lucas, 2005; Roberts, 2003; Smith, 2001). The development of the working alliance, the issues of aims, commitment, expectations and the processes of communication and negotiation, are often dealt with as they arise and in a manner that does not preclude their recurrence.

The research team and project

Three researchers living in Auckland, New Zealand; Brisbane, Australia and Calgary, Canada constitute the research team. We came together in a fashion that is not uncommon for academic projects. The New Zealand researcher had worked on a project for two years with the Queensland researcher and had met the Canadian researcher when presenting at a conference symposium in the USA. She identified common interests and contacted the other two researchers. Funding for the project was provided by the New Zealand institution and whilst it provided an impetus for the project and limited financial support for transcribing and research assistance, it did not allow for travel or meetings. Subsidy from the other two institutions did not eventuate.

The project objective was to make a tri-national comparison of school leadership in ethno-culturally diverse contexts and early discussion centred on the core concepts of the subject matter. Initial communication was by email but it became obvious that closer dialogue between the team was needed. The different contexts for the three researchers presented dissimilar educational sectors influencing educational leadership and there were obvious variations in the interpretations of basic concepts. We needed the opportunity to 'brainstorm' and engage in debate around core concepts which could not be discussed satisfactorily by email. Telephone conferencing only supplemented this to a degree and at a significant cost. Whilst technology aided communication, it was only fruitful for shorter conversations with the result that some personal and philosophical issues were not identified at the outset, which proved to be an omission that needed later attention. The project design was eventually agreed upon, data collection planned and previous literature sourced.

Each researcher worked alone in their own country and communication was spasmodic and relied on one of the three emailing about their progress. Whilst this could be attributed to the individuals involved rather than the lack of availability of communication media, it did mean that we were not fully aware of the pressing demands of the commitments of research partners that pushed the research project down the individual priority lists. In addition, the education year differed between the north and south hemispheres causing the data collection to occur at different times. The time zones also prevented ease of telephone communication. Personal knowledge of the other researchers assisted the New Zealand researcher with communication, but the lack of such knowledge between the other two researchers proved to be a handicap. The New Zealander, as principal researcher, also felt tentative in pushing the other two researchers to set and meet deadlines, as they appeared to be heavily committed in their institutional roles. In effect the project began to lose momentum.

During this time the New Zealander had applied for and received external funding that would allow her to visit Canada and have face-to-face meetings with the second researcher. This was

the catalyst for a change in tempo for the project. Whilst in Canada, the visiting researcher gained a greater understanding of the Canadian context and the ways in which it differed from those of New Zealand and Australia, with which she was already familiar. This was invaluable for later communication between the two researchers and the comparative writing within the papers. The two researchers drafted a timeline and two papers for publication and spoke with the Australian researcher by phone to discuss the progress of the project.

Reflections from the research team

Reflection is a potent mechanism and allows us to review what we did and identify how we could construct, design and implement the research project more effectively at another time. However it should be noted that looking back has the advantage of assessing planning in context, whereas in reality any project design can only anticipate the possible changes in circumstances. Whilst acknowledging this consideration, we offer our critical reflections of our own research alliance and the impact of the initial planning on later outcomes.

Our original intention was to investigate a topic in which we were all interested, while at the same time developing a comparative analysis of the topic across three countries. The team members came together more by coincidence than intention and therefore did not take into account the relative and complementary strengths and skills of each researcher. From that perspective the project did result in institutional relationships being forged and research contact developed across international boundaries. The facilitation of the project itself encountered initial difficulties of consensus on objectives, core concepts and methodological issues, but once discussed the researchers were left to work individually in their own locations.

Contact during the data collection time was irregular and depended upon individual initiatives. Differing sequencing of school terms meant that observance to a timeline was more complex with the result that the project became elongated as we waited for all data to be collected. In retrospect, commitment to a more definite timeline should have been made at an earlier stage. In reality, we kept making allowances for each other to find the time to complete their own part of the project.

The research alliance was challenged by the lack of face-to-face meetings of the research team, primarily due to the high cost of travel necessitated by such a meeting. In effect the funding for the project was more suited to a national study rather than an international one. This presented a major challenge to the researchers, initially in the scoping and planning of the project and later, when discussion of data collection and drafting of papers could have been achieved. This was also exacerbated by two of the researchers not having met at all. The potential limiting impacts of the funding constraints were not fully realized at the outset of the project but became more apparent as time passed. In hindsight, we could have worked around these limitations, had we realized the repercussions of the omission of an early scoping meeting. Whilst financial constraints existed, they may not have been so significant if we had all known each other and previously worked as a team. The eventual visit of the New Zealander to Canada was the means to finalizing the project, through the creation of time deadlines, drafts of papers and suggestions for further research outputs.

Suggestions for effective collaborative research

Stead and Harrington claim that “(s)uccessful research collaborations are fundamentally based on the meaningfulness and strengths of the relationships between the researchers” (2000, p. 325). Our experiences as a tri-national research team indicate the veracity of this claim and whilst we provide a number of suggestions for successful research alliances, we emphasise the significance of procedural planning and team relationships and how they interface with the project design. If objectives and outcomes are clearly formulated and circumstances change for the researchers, then the project can still proceed.

Our initial research project is completed and we believe that we have made a worthwhile contribution to research on school leadership. We worked as a team to overcome the challenges as they arose and provide valuable peer critique and support during the later stages of the project. We have increased our understandings of different national contexts and participated in dialogue (albeit electronically) that challenged our assumptions and perspectives. This sharing has been an affirmation of academic collaboration. It has also been of great interest to us to critically reflect on the how we facilitated the project. The future of this research team is now uncertain, with one researcher withdrawing from a second phase, due to other commitments. This will reduce the possibility of a coherent comparison of issues that were identified in the first project, and would be the focus of a second phase. Clearly this highlights the need to identify and state individual commitment to the project at the outset, in light of possible future project developments. As this was designed as a tri-national study, a withdrawal reduces the resultant value of the effort put in by the researchers to develop a working relationship. In effect, unambiguous individual commitment and open communication go hand in hand with explicit project objectives, design and planning.

Our suggestions for research collaborations emphasise the significance of relational and planning parameters, which in our case were core to the progress of the research project. There are many others that could be cited from other experiences, but the focus here is on those that we believe to be core to effective international collaboration. It is a given that the researchers will share the topic interest and have experience in the area on which to draw and that the project objectives have currency and application in the discipline. These suggestions are particularly pertinent to researchers who come together from varied global locations and have little prior experience of working together as a team.

Relationships

Relationships between researchers need to be strong and meaningful and initial meetings are crucial to facilitate their development. Relational parameters need to be clearly articulated from the outset.

Commitment

Each team member needs to overtly declare any reservations about commitment to the project and any likely hurdles that could interfere with future work. Negotiation around these commitments can then ensure that the project does not falter.

Objectives/timelines/milestones

Objectives for the project need to be clearly negotiated and committed to by all the researchers. A meeting in the early stages of planning ensures that other commitments for the team are appropriately woven into timelines and agreed milestones.

Researcher capacities

Researchers complement each other in terms of their skills and capacities. Early declaration and acknowledgement of these competencies provides scope for allocating tasks and responsibilities and keeping each other on schedule.

Expectations

Researchers should have common shared expectations of the research outcomes which are agreed upon from the outset. This ensures that the project has collective input and satisfies all collaborators.

Communication

Guidelines for communicating with each other need to be agreed to by all of the research team. This allows for open dialogue, whether it is by electronic or verbal means. It also prevents the concerns that arose in this study about pressuring fellow academics or conveying covert criticism.

Conclusion

Collaborative research is challenging and exciting and the obstacles identified here do not detract from an experience which can be constructive and productive. Being aware of each researcher's positionality and context (Staeheli and Nagar, 2002) as well as their likely contributions to the project, enables the team to work within identified parameters. Collective endeavours to identify and plan for issues that are more procedurally and relationally based (as against project topic based) can assist in creating an alliance in which the researchers form constructive relationships, an effective learning environment and a mechanism that facilitates institutional connections and researcher partnerships. The researchers gain experience from such ventures and develop skills and expertise that can fuel further research. In effect, it is the way in which the project is structured and designed, the procedures clearly articulated and the personal parameters negotiated and constructed, that results in positive research outcomes.

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