
Collaborative research in contexts of inequality: the role of social reflexivity

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Abstract

This article reports on the role and value of social reflexivity in collaborative research in contexts of extreme inequality. Social reflexivity mediates the enablements and constraints generated by the internal and external contextual conditions impinging on the research collaboration. It fosters the ability of participants in a collaborative project to align their interests and collectively extend their agency towards a common purpose. It influences the productivity and quality of learning outcomes of the research collaboration. The article is written by fourteen members of a larger research team, which comprised 18 individuals working within the academic development environment in eight South African universities. The overarching research project investigated the participation of academics in professional development activities, and how contextual, i.e. structural and cultural, and agential conditions, influence this participation. For this sub-study on the experience of the collaboration by fourteen of the researchers, we wrote reflective pieces on our own experience of participating in the project towards the end of the third year of its duration. We discuss the structural and cultural conditions external to and internal to the project, and how the social reflexivity of the participants mediated these conditions. We conclude with the observation that policy injunctions and support from funding agencies for collaborative research, as well as support from participants' home institutions are necessary for the flourishing of collaborative research, but that the commitment by individual participants to participate, learn and share, is also necessary.

Introduction

As a group of researchers and authors of this article, we use our experience of collaborating on a large, national multi-site education research project to reflect on the conditions that influence the outcome of collaborative research. We draw attention to how working across geographical distances amidst contextual conditions of educational, social and institutional privilege and inequality, may influence the collaboration, and to how what has been termed 'social reflexivity' (Donati, 2010) or 'corporate agency' (Archer, 2000) may mediate these influences. We discuss the benefits as well as difficulties associated with collaborative educational research, how social reflexivity and corporate agency are discussed in the literature, before presenting the educational research setting in which an overarching educational research project and a sub-study on collaboration

I am tentatively exploring the possibility of a discourse regarding the valuing of collaborative research that draws attention to the divide between HBU's (historically black universities) and novices [on the one side] and HWU's (historically white universities) and experienced participants [on the other side]. Members in the team from HBUs and PhD students [from both HBU and HWU institutions] make reference to 'growth and developments within the collaborative research process' ... Whereas members in the team from HWU's and experienced and established AD practitioners and researchers are more critical of the collaborative process whilst also appreciative of the collaboration in learning collaboratively about a new theoretical framework. (8)

There is a suggestion in comments like this one that access to dominant, powerful or current theory may serve as a fulcrum around which dynamics around power and privilege in collaborative research revolve. We have not given this matter substantial attention and this could be a valuable line of enquiry for our group in the future.

Given the way our varied contexts impinged on our participation in this research team, how did it occur that the project enabled people to learn from each other and to publish together? We would argue that this is an effect of individuals' agency, influencing their participation and willingness to learn, and of their deliberate support for the emergence of corporate agency or social reflexivity, as will be discussed in the next section.

Individual and corporate agency

Our reflective pieces illustrate how as individuals, we chose to remain involved in the collaboration, or even to become more involved over time. Our participation was strongly influenced by our commitments, concerns and investments in the project. Emphasizing the role of commitment and concern driving a mode of behaviour (Archer 2007) was the idea repeated by several of the team members that we all subscribed to similar values regarding the importance of higher education and of lecturers learning to teach: 'There is a sense that we can have an impact, and make a difference to staff development through this work. It feels important.' (14)

Many of us saw the project as a 'natural extension' (1) of our work, with the potential to contribute towards the advancement of academic development, both at our home institutions and within the larger national context. One participant had an 'interest in the strategic way in which the project could be used' (1) at her institution. Another noted the 'desire to keep in touch with national level and a commitment to my colleagues, especially those with whom I have worked more closely' (12). Generally, it was felt that the project had reinforced 'growing beliefs in the value of collaborative work across disciplines, faculties, higher education institutions, geographical locations, etc' (1).

Team members explained how we were motivated to participate by the sense that we would gain something of benefit to our professional practice:

Through sharing with colleagues, going through institutional reports and data collected from fieldwork, I have been able to glean useful information on how I can develop a staff development agenda for my university. (9)

It is because I participate in research projects like this one that I am able to contribute to my institution in a considered, consistent, research- and theory-informed as well as hopefully constructive way. (14)

Kezar (2005) writes that collaborative groups take a while to consolidate norms and values. Despite common concerns and commitments, for some, participation was initially difficult. Especially amongst all the PhD students, there was a sense of hesitancy and reserve in the beginning:

... my own lack of knowledge about research and its processes caused me to feel unsure and sometimes even feeling totally stupid or ignorant which then kept me from participating or saying something. (4)

Each of these students became more comfortable and participative over time:

I do feel more confident in sharing my ideas compared to the beginning of joining the project. This has to do with the manner in which my ideas have been accepted by the larger group as well as my own reading and understanding of the literature. (2)

All three PhD students attributed their increasing sense of comfort, to a certain degree, to the collaborative ethos in the group:

My earlier reserve was attributable perhaps to my positioning myself in the project as an unseasoned PhD candidate, and influenced by childhood directives of 'listening rather than speaking in the company of the accomplished' ... I note happily, a change in this earlier reserve, with increased personal interaction with members in the team and developing a sense of ease enabling me to 'share my piece'. (8)

These comments suggest that a sense of corporate agency (Archer 2007) emerged, arising out of social interaction (Kahn et al. 2007) that was consciously constructed in order to generate 'operative capability creating new social forms with self-steering competences' (Donati 2010, p. 145). Three features common to the group that could have helped generate this degree of corporate agency are: the commitment and belief in the importance of academic development, belief in the value of collaborative research, as discussed above, and a conscious sense of sharing and collaboration, as described by a seasoned researcher on the project:

I think this, for me, has been one of the most astonishing characteristics of this group of colleagues – their spirit and willingness to share resources, intellectual property, and give generously of their time. I have really appreciated that – and found it unusual in the often ungenerous and competitive university environment. (7)

The existence of novices as well as experts who shared their knowledge is typical of communities of practice (Wenger 1998). It could be argued that this spirit of generosity and the appreciation thereof is evidence of the bridging capital referred to by Kahn,

Petichakis, and Walsh (2012), and that this capital resides in those who have expertise to share, as well as those who are willing to take advantage of this.

The PhD students' observations about their participation and the support for their involvement attests to the manner in which corporate agency emerges out of social interaction where there is conscious attention to this interaction, leading to new and valuable forms of interaction and valuable outcomes, as suggested by Donati (2010).

Conclusion

In this article we have written about our experiences as researchers in the academic development field to shed light on the opportunities and joys, as well as challenges and threats that may be encountered in large group research collaboration. Many of the challenges and threats are more visible in settings of evident educational inequality, especially when interwoven with the stresses and strains generated by the instability and lack of academic identity that many academic developers experience. This does not imply that power issues and resource imbalances are unique to this setting. It is arguably the case, however, that where these inequalities are more stark, the need for collaboration, corporate agency or social reflexivity are more challenging to cultivate – yet more necessary, if not essential. Our collaboration took place in South Africa, but we believe our experiences are relevant in any setting that involves social as well as geographical distance and inequality.

Our reflections highlighted many of the structural and cultural features emanating from the institutional contexts in which the researchers worked and from the collaboration itself, that were discussed by Brew et al. (2012) and Kahn, Petichakis and Walsh (2012). In our case the structural inequalities relating to our post-apartheid reality and differently resourced institutions, aggravated by the status and work identity of academic developers at these institutions, was more apparent than in either of these two studies. We are aware of reflective writings about collaboration that do refer directly to power relations, for example the work of Griffien, Hamberg and Lundgren (2013) and Lingard et al. (2007), where the tensions and power differences were strongly influenced by differences in disciplinary allegiances, but have not found other studies in which institutional inequalities are as apparent as in our case.

Our experience of collaborative educational research lends support to the notion that structural and cultural conditions impinge on the work of a research team, and further, that they shape the 'action contexts' (Archer 2010, p.12). It also lends support to Archer's observation that 'agents are active' (Archer 2010, p.12), and thus, mediate these influences – both as individuals and as a group. This is indeed significant for educationists who seek to work towards positive educational outcomes, as it suggests that whilst individuals are not totally free from the constraints of their institutional contexts, they do have an ability to influence the outcomes of their projects. This also suggests that it is worthwhile to pay attention to how collaborative work is structured and supported, both by individuals working in teams, and by policy generating bodies and research support agencies. The modus operandi of collaborative educational research teams should not be left to chance. Donati (2012, p. 144) expresses the concern for reflexivity to become 'an operative *capability* creating new social forms with self-steering competences'. A

deliberate cultivation of a sharing approach by both experienced and novice researchers is an important goal for collaborative research teams.

Appendix: Co-writers' biographical information

Participant Biographical Information					Description of Participant's Institution			
No	Gender	Race	Position	PhD Student on Project	Historical legacy	Focus	Classification	Urban v. Rural
1	female	white	director		disadvantaged	teaching	traditional	urban
2	female	coloured	advisor	✓	advantaged	research	traditional	urban
3	male	White	ass. prof		merged: disadvantaged and advantaged	teaching	university of technology	urban
4	female	white	senior advisor	✓	advantaged	research	traditional	urban
5	male	white	assoc. prof		advantaged	research	traditional	urban
6	female	white	director		advantaged	research	traditional	urban
7	female	white	assoc. prof		disadvantaged	teaching	traditional	urban
8	female	Indian	advisor	✓	merged: disadvantaged and advantaged	teaching	university of technology	urban
9	male	african	director		disadvantaged	teaching	traditional	rural
10	male	african	advisor		merged: disadvantaged	teaching	traditional	rural
11	female	white	director		advantaged	research	traditional	rural
12	female	white	deputy director		advantaged	research	traditional	urban
13	female	coloured	senior lecturer		advantaged	research	traditional	rural
14	female	white	director		merged: disadvantaged and advantaged	teaching	university of technology	urban

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ⁱ The figure in brackets refers to the unique identity of the team member. The biographical information of team members is contained in the appendix.