



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

Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning and identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.