

## **The Australian Traveller Education Research Team: One Strategy for Organising Academic Research and Publishing**

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The contemporary work of university academics is complex, contested and sometimes controversial. It can also be rewarding, satisfying and even transforming. These challenges and opportunities certainly apply in the case of research and publishing, one of the defining features of the work of academics.

In engaging with these challenges and opportunities, it is important to recognise the interests of different stakeholders in shaping academic work, ranging from academics themselves and the research participants to university and faculty managers to governments and communities. These interests are sometimes overt but more often implicit; they vary in the directness and intensity of their impact on academics; and they are sometimes convergent and at other times oppositional in their effect if not their intent.

There are several possible ways of navigating and negotiating pathways among, around and through these interests. One way is to create and sustain research clusters, groups or teams. Such research teams can take multiple forms: some are constituted formally, as part of a faculty or research centre strategic plan; others represent some kind of mentoring, with more and less experienced researchers working together; and yet others are informal collaborations of kindred spirits. (In part, these different kinds of teams reflect Introna's [1996] useful distinction between teleological [centralised and purpose driven] and ateleological [localised and organic] approaches to the development of information systems. At varied times and in diverse situations, different combinations of these two approaches might be appropriate.)

We seek in this paper to reflect briefly on one example of the informal collaborations in which we are involved directly: the Australian Traveller education research team ("Traveller" in this case referring to the different communities whose livelihoods require them to be mobile for some or all of the year), centred on the Faculty of Education (and Creative Arts) at Central Queensland University. We have operated continuously – with changing membership – since June 1991, when a visit by the show to Rockhampton prompted two colleagues to say to each other, "I wonder how these children receive an education". That serendipitous but not entirely rhetorical question prompted the submission of a successful application for research funding, which in turn led to several outcomes of various kinds, including:

- three distinct phases of data gathering and analysis (1992 to 1996: interviews with show people and staff members of the Brisbane School of Distance Education in several Queensland locations; 1998 to 2000: interviews with circus people in Queensland and New South Wales; 2003: interviews with show people and staff members of the Queensland School for Travelling Show Children in Brisbane and on the Gold Coast);
- intensive data gathering and analysis by one team member on study leave in 1999 with participants in bargee, circus and fairground communities and the people who teach those participants' children in Belgium, England, the Netherlands, Scotland and Venezuela;

- a large number of publications and presentations, including some co-written with the Principal of the Queensland School for Travelling Show Children (for example, Fullerton, Danaher, Moriarty & Danaher, 2004) and some with the former ringmaster and our key informant among the circus people (for example, Moriarty & MacDonnell, 1998);
- the establishment of a large number of national and international networks with other people living, teaching and researching in Traveller communities;
- the co-writing of publications with some members of those networks (for example, with the former principal of St Kieran's National School for Travellers south of Dublin [Moriarty, Danaher, Kenny & Danaher, 2004] and with the former headteacher of the Thames Valley Traveller Education Support Service [Currie & Danaher, 2001]);
- the invitation to present papers about our research at the European seminar on open and distance learning sponsored by the then European Federation for the Education of the Children of the Occupational Travellers (Danaher, 1996) and at the annual conference of the Showmen's Guild of Australasia (Danaher, 1997);
- the publication of an edited book (Danaher, 1998), which was based on the first phase of data gathering identified above and which won the 1999 Open and Distance Learning Association of Australia Award for Excellence in a Book or Non-Print Production Detailing Research;
- the publication of a special theme issue of an international refereed journal (Danaher, 2000) that brought together the work of Traveller and nomadic education researchers working in Australia, England, India, the Netherlands, Nigeria and Scotland;
- the writing and successful examination of a Doctor of Philosophy thesis (Danaher, 2001);
- participation in media interviews about our research;
- being invited to submit an article to a journal theme issue relating to the wider issue of the educational impact of student mobility (Danaher, Moriarty & Danaher, 2004);
- the broadening of our research interests into rural education, resulting in the publication of guest edited theme issues of refereed journals about rural education in Australia and in other countries (Danaher, Moriarty & Danaher, 2003; Danaher, Danaher & Moriarty, 2004; Moriarty, Danaher & Danaher, 2003);
- most significantly of all, the extended opportunity to understand, engage with and contribute to discussions and scholarship about the aspirations for and possibilities of the education of occupational Travellers.

We list these outcomes with an awareness of the following points:

- The attainment of these outcomes has been neither accidental nor automatic; on the contrary, they reflect industry, determination and goodwill in a large number of quarters.
- The field in which we research and publish has other people working from similar and different perspectives; it is an area that is popularly considered to be 'exotic' and where we have been able to develop a 'niche' that both links with and differs from the work of others.

- For a relatively long period the team had seven members, then four and currently three, owing to individuals moving to other institutions and/or retiring.
- For nearly the whole of the team's history, members have worked at three and for some periods at four different campuses (Bundaberg, Gladstone, Mackay and Rockhampton) of Central Queensland University.
- All members have been full-time academics working at the same level: lecturer and senior lecturer. Although we have benefited at times from advice provided by more experienced academics, we have seen ourselves as 'a community of equals'.
- While more senior colleagues have encouraged us at different times, there has never been an externally imposed obligation that we work together; for example, it was our initiative to submit an annual report of our activities, rather than such a report being required from us. What has maintained the group has been our own commitment to one another and our awareness of the benefits arising from doing so for individuals as well as the group. We have been animated also by the conviction that, as far as possible, both the capacity and the responsibility to shape our current and future work in research and publishing rest with us.
- The longer that we have worked together, the easier that we have found it is to write together and with other people.
- No single individual working in this field could attain the number or diversity of outcomes that we have attained together. At the same time, each person has made an indispensable contribution to the group conceptually, methodologically and in relation to data collection and analysis.
- It takes time and energy to maintain and extend relationships and networks – within the team, and also with our national and international colleagues.
- We have written elsewhere (Hallinan, Moriarty, Danaher & Danaher, 2001; Moriarty, Hallinan, Danaher & Danaher, 2000) about the features and effectiveness of our team approach to research and publishing. This demonstrates our awareness that such an approach needs careful planning and reflection, and our explicit engagement in a number of useful strategies.
- It is appropriate to ask who benefits and in what ways from our research and publications (for example, Anteliz, Danaher & Danaher, 2004; Moriarty, 2004). While it is much easier to point to direct benefits for ourselves than for Travellers and teachers, the resilience of our connections with those Travellers and teachers suggests that the benefits are not exclusively unidirectional.

Given these general features of our team, it is appropriate to make the following points about the strategies that we have used to ensure the team's continuation:

- We have drawn explicitly and extensively on the five principles of cooperative communities (Johnson & Johnson, 1998): positive interdependence, individual accountability, promotion of one another's success, interpersonal and small group skills and group processing or reflection.
- We have held regular team meetings, mostly weekly or fortnightly, using tele- or occasionally videoconferencing to link members from different campuses. These meetings have no formal agenda, action sheets or minutes; they are project-based, with discussion focused on identifying tasks needed to complete those projects. The meetings are mostly not used for undertaking such tasks,

but focus instead on who needs to be what for them to be finalised and reaching agreement on our shared approach to each task.

- Despite the absence of formal agenda, action sheets and minutes, we operate with a strategic plan, including timelines. This is a working document that is reviewed and adjusted regularly. This strategy reflects our personal and professional accountability to one another and ourselves.
- We have deployed a team approach to data collection, securing funding to travel together to conduct interviews with circus and show people and their children's teachers. We have spent nearly a week each time (including travel time), conducting many more interviews than an individual researcher or research assistant could do (we have employed research assistants to transcribe interview tapes but never to conduct interviews on our behalf) and at the same time discussing intensively with one another our developing individual and collective sense of what is emerging from the data.
- We have held regular research retreats, initially at a local convention centre and subsequently at a colleague's house. These have usually been two to three days' duration, at mutually convenient times such as the period between semesters or terms. These have been opportunities to engage in extended writing together, to plan and write submissions for research funding and to think strategically about future aspirations and goals. Each retreat has begun by our listing our desired outcomes for the retreat, and each has ended by our reflecting together on what we have achieved. Every retreat has surprised us by how much we have been able to achieve in a relatively short period of time, facilitated in part by careful planning during preceding teleconferences.
- We have considered explicitly the issue of team membership. While there is no formal process of membership application, we have reflected carefully before inviting more recent members to join us. In doing so we have given thought to what the prospective member might be able to give to the group, what the group might be able to give to the prospective member and the overall cohesiveness of the group if the individual joined. This might seem exclusionary or even elitist; on the other hand, we feel that we have invested too much individually and collectively in the team not to be careful about how a projected change of membership might affect it.
- While allowing flexibility for the busy nature of academic work at different periods, we have adopted the practice of taking it in turns to be lead author on a particular paper. This is important: we need to know that the work is shared equitably and that there are no 'passengers' along for 'a free ride' in the group. Sometimes the lead author writes a complete draft version of the text for the other team members to read and respond to; at other times each of us writes one or two sections and the lead author draws them together to ensure coherence. The allocation of writing tasks is collaborative, with team members volunteering to take on various roles and with due cognisance being taken of the times when individuals and the group as a whole are experiencing particularly heavy workloads.
- We trust one another's judgment about what is ethically appropriate, academically rigorous and stylistically clear. The provision of feedback to one another is always careful, considered and courteous; at the same time, we realise that it is in no-one's interests for any of us not to mention something that is of concern to that person. We are three individuals with distinct writing styles, conceptual and methodological interests and lived experiences, yet we

have learned the benefits of working together in ways that extend the knowledge and understanding of each of us.

- In retrospect, we can see that our team has undergone a number of significant 'key moments' or 'turning points'. One such event was the invitation at a research retreat in 1998 to the first-named author of this article to make a formal presentation to the group about the five principles of cooperative communities (Johnson & Johnson, 1998) referred to above. This presentation drew on her Doctor of Philosophy thesis (Moriarty, 1991) and provided the foundation for a great deal of subsequent thinking and writing by the team. Another such event was the application of these principles to the conceptualisation and implementation of inter-systemic partnerships, including the ethical and political dimensions of those partnerships (Moriarty, 2004) – something that increasingly exercises the minds of people working in contemporary universities.

Of course, at one level there is nothing novel or revolutionary in this paper at all; we realise that, like us, the readers of this article will belong to a wide range of teams, some of them very successful. From a different perspective, however, there is considerable evidence that many groups do not work well together and might even be considered dysfunctional. Our discussion in this paper suggests that one among several pre-requisites for the effective operation of teams is likely to be the importance of achieving coherence, consonance and synergy among the following key elements:

- values
- principles
- structures
- strategies
- tasks
- outcomes.

Our research team and all the others like it encapsulate the seemingly increasingly threatened possibilities and safeguards for achieving research and publishing outcomes in contemporary universities. If those outcomes are to be productive, sustainable and hopefully beneficial for the multiple stakeholders with their convergent and competing interests identified above – particularly the research participants – strategies of this kind would appear to be among our best hopes for bringing such outcomes about.

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