

Risky business: Capacity-building in collaborative research

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The concept of capacity-building, originating in studies of economic development, operates as a powerful metaphor in arguments promoting collaborative research in education. This chapter interrogates the concept of capacity-building in that context by exploring the apparent contradiction of seeking to promote collaborative research in an increasingly competitive research funding environment, and then by raising ethical questions relating to who might control capacity-building agendas, and who might benefit from capacity-building endeavours. Drawing upon our experiences together in a number of differently sized collaborative research teams, we argue against a deficit conceptualisation of capacity-building that sees individual researchers as partly empty vessels that need filling. Rather, capacity-building through collaborative research is conceptualised as a process of empowering, equipping, informing and inspiring one another to continue to explore new dimensions in one another's respective fields of interest. This view resonates with so-called capability approaches that conceptualise capacity-building as a "kind of freedom" (Sen, 1999). We contend that embracing this conceptualisation of capacity-building has the potential to enhance the quality and quantity of research outcomes, but also involves a certain degree of risk that needs to be acknowledged and addressed.

Introduction

This chapter articulates a number of the connections and potential disconnections between capacity-building and collaborative research. At first glance the relationship between these two phenomena might be assumed to be synergistic and even to approach a kind of one-to-one correspondence. When we look more closely, however, we find the association between capacity-building and collaboration in the context of education research to be complex and contested. This is partly because of ongoing debate about defining each term and partly because both terms are liable to capture and deployment by competing discourses about academic work, the contemporary higher education sector and ultimately the character and meaning of human life and the roles that economic and sociocultural activity play within it. The same questions attend the concept of risk, encapsulated in the phrase *risky business* as denoting the challenges as well as the opportunities of engaging in capacity-building through collaborative research.

A key element of these tensions and uncertainties is the fundamental paradox whereby collaboration among academics and researchers is increasingly lauded in a university system still predicated on individual and institutional competition. In many ways this paradox lies at the centre of this book. It is difficult indeed to sustain synergies in and through collaborative research and researching collaboration when evidence abounds of behaviours that are centred on the forced segmentation and personal accountability that constitute the current audit culture in universities in Australia and internationally.

In particular, the risky business of capacity-building in and through collaborate research is posited in this chapter as an effective means of developing processes and generating outcomes that are individually and collectively satisfying and rewarding, and thereby of contributing directly to the research profiles of research team members and the faculties and universities to which they belong. Furthermore, operating along the fault lines of the paradox identified above creates openings for quietly subversive actions that maximise capacity and collaboration alike while minimising the impact of competition as a dominant discourse.

The chapter is divided into the following four sections:

- An elaboration of the background to considering capacity-building through collaborative research;
- A conceptual framework for understanding different notions of capacity-building and collaboration;
- A selected empirical example of capacity-building through collaborative research from our shared experience;
- Implications of capacity-building through collaborative research for sustaining synergies in contemporary research teams.

Background

Collaboration looms large in the current context of university research teams. For instance, collaboration (alongside autonomy) is one of the generic qualities listed by the University of South Australia (2008) for its research higher degree students:

Indicators of collaboration would include the ability to participate in a research team, thereby gaining experience of working with others through taking on different roles within groups. Working with others may also be achieved by the higher degree research student preparing part of a proposal for funded research. Collaboration can be assessed by reports on the student's participation in a research team and decision making in a funded research proposal. (n.p.)

This formalisation of collaboration as a generic quality and the ways in which it can be assessed reinforces an increasingly popular discourse evident in many Australian university media releases. One example is "University of Melbourne initiates Australia's ultra-resolution global collaboration laboratory" (Computerworld, 2008), which contained the following paragraphs:

Bringing the OptiPortal and gigabit/s super-broadband networking together is the cutting-edge expertise of two of the world's leading telecommunications research units – the University of Melbourne School of Engineering's Centre for Ultra Broadband Information Networks (CUBIN) and the California Institute for Telecommunications and Information Technology (Calit2), a UCSD/University of California Irvine partnership. (n.p.)

Further:

"This is a landmark event for Australia-US research communities and represents a quantum leap in broadband communications for Australia," says Chris Hancock, CEO of AARNet. "It means research teams in areas such as medicine, astronomy, science and technology can now visualise larger, more detailed, higher resolution images than ever before. This technology opens up a world of opportunities for collaboration across the Pacific and helps to ensure Australia's place at [the] forefront of global collaborative research." (n.p.)

For us, these two examples encapsulate many of the contradictions and tensions surrounding research collaboration. On the one hand, the tone of all three quotations is affirming, signifying that collaboration and research teams have a positive valence and are valued highly by university (and by implication government) leaders. On the other hand, the clearly intended effect of the media release in the second example is to consolidate the University of Melbourne's position as one of Australia's best regarded institutions and thereby to position universities less able to initiate this kind of international partnership as less worthy. That is, the discourse of collaboration is framed by the logic of competition, so that this particular version of collaboration intentionally generates losers as well as winners.

So too with the association between capacity-building and university research teams. For instance, the University of Adelaide's (2007) strategic plan for the period 2008 to 2012 articulated the following aspirations:

The University of Adelaide will continue to play a leading role in this regard by creating an environment which will attract outstanding researchers to South Australia; by fostering renowned research teams of international standing; and by focussing our resources on developing a number of internationally recognised, strategic research capabilities. (p. 12)

While capabilities are not necessarily synonymous with capacities, elsewhere the strategic plan made clear the link between research teams and capacity-building, in its reference to "the establishment of a number of large-scale multi-disciplinary and inter-disciplinary research priority areas for strategic investment and long-term capacity building" (p. 13). Moreover, the following paragraph evoked even more starkly the intended association between research teams collaboratively building capacity on the one hand and such activities extending the institution's competitive position as a research university on the other:

Over the next five years, the University will complement its existing strategies for the creation of internationally competitive research teams, centres and institutes with the development of a series of over-arching research priority areas. These will be outstanding, large-scale research groupings that are well-placed to leverage national and international funding. By establishing new vehicles for the coordination of research activity and the strengthening of international linkages, we will dramatically increase our research productivity, enhance the external recognition of the quality and value of our research, build on research areas in which we are already strong, and diversify the sources of research funding. The University will seek continually to improve its performance in the commercialisation of its research, including growth in licenses, patents, plant breeding rights and contract research and consultancies. These strategies will underpin the long-term sustainability of our research activities. (p. 12)

We hasten to add that our own university is as concerned as any other with its competitive advantage and with its position in the Australian and international higher education marketplace. Likewise as individuals and as members of this and a number of other research teams we acknowledge that we are as involved – even implicated – as anyone else in this system and that our individual and communal interests lie in generating the kinds of outcomes exemplified by the Universities of Melbourne and Adelaide listed above. At the same time, we see this "discursive dissonance" (Harreveld, 2002, p. 105) as needing to be identified and interrogated, not least because of the potentially deleterious impact on research team members striving to negotiate pathways through or around these competing and ultimately incommensurable pressures and priorities.

Thus far in the chapter we have asserted that references in the Australian higher education sector to collaboration and capacity-building in relation to research teams are generally juxtaposed with a broader set of discourses concerned with competition and advantage. This juxtaposition raises crucial questions about which forces might control capacity-building agendas, as well as who might benefit from capacity-building endeavours, in such an environment. We explore these questions below with an empirical example taken from our experiences in writing this chapter. Before doing so, however, we present a necessarily selective conceptual framework that takes further our understandings of capacity-building and hence of research collaboration.

Conceptual framework

In this chapter we conceptualise the term *capacity-building* as an empty signifier. In the post-Marxist theoretical framework developed by Ernesto Laclau, an empty signifier is quite

simply “a signifier without a signified” (Laclau, 1996, p. 36). This framework of understanding is not referring to purely abstract concepts, but rather to differences that people experience, and therefore need to name in order to discuss. In the case of an empty signifier, the features of the phenomenon are structurally impossible to identify. The basis of the ontological status of that phenomenon is inextricably linked to the ontological status of the one experiencing the difference. As a consequence, that to which the signifier refers does not exist in any ontological sense until it is signified. The concept of an *asynchronous conversation*, for example, draws its ontological status from the experience of one who has had a synchronous conversation and who experiences the asynchronous one as different. Through the process of naming such a conversation as *asynchronous*, the phenomenon of *asynchronous conversation* comes into being, in the sense that we can now record it, discuss it, reflect upon it, theorise about it and so on. Until it is named, it remains in the ephemeral realms of ontological potentiality. As Laclau puts it, for empty signifiers “the name is the ground of the thing” (Laclau, 2006, p. 109).

Being empty does not imply that empty signifiers are unimportant. Indeed, the opposite is the case: empty signifiers are created because we encounter differences that cannot be clearly represented, and yet they are so important to us that we need to find a way to represent them in order to think about, discuss and respond to them. Therefore an empty signifier attempts to capture in a sign or symbol that which cannot be fully captured in a sign or symbol but which nevertheless our experience requires us somehow to capture in that form.

The political significance of this, drawn out in the work of Laclau (2006) and others (see for example Carlbom, 2006; Szkudlarek, 2007), is that empty signifiers, once created, are then filled with meaning. Brigg and Muller (2009) have argued that the word *culture* is one such empty signifier. In studies of conflict resolution, they argue that *culture* is filled with Western understanding based on Western political agendas. Because of this, research on conflict resolution in cross-cultural contexts tends to reinforce dominant Western ethico-political relations (Brigg & Muller, 2009, p. 133).

We assert that the concept of capacity-building is also an empty signifier. The term is used to signify something that does not have an intrinsic ontological status of its own, but rather draws its ontological status from the experiences of others who have had experiences that they call *capacity-building* or experiences that they describe in words such as *not capacity-building*. Clearly the experience is important enough to enough people that a signifier has been developed in the English language to provide a term for us to use in recording, reflecting upon and theorising about these experiences. As an empty signifier, however, the term is open to be filled with political meaning. The same would be true for related terms such as *capabilities*, *opportunities* and *sustainability* that are employed in the kind of strategic-level planning documents reviewed above.

When these strategic-level policy documents are produced and implemented, the question arises as to what exactly is meant by *capacity* and other related terms. In the context of academics and their work, does capacity refer to the ability to produce income, attract the best staff and students, enhance a corporate profile and so on, or does capacity refer to the fulfilment of personal goals and the empowerment of independent individuals? An alternative filling of these empty signifiers could include the effectiveness of engagement with community, or industry, or partner organisations. Are any (or all) of these what is meant in policy and procedural documents employing the empty signifier *capacity-building* and its correlates?

Conceptualising capacity-building as an empty signifier opens the space for us to explore our own ideas about the meaning of that capacity-building in the terms of our own experiences and aspirations; as the word has no intrinsic ontological status, it remains, in our opinion, open to contestation. Whilst there are many different ways to approach this re-

conceptualisation, we have chosen to employ a series of metaphors relating to the use of water, which we have found helpful to contrast different ways to fill the term *capacity-building* with meaning. We have chosen to use metaphors because they can operate as powerful psychological tools for mediating higher intellectual processes (see Villamil & de Guerrero, 2005) and can also be useful for exploring different aspects of complex phenomena (Ritchie, 2002).

The first metaphor envisages capacity-building as pouring water into a measuring cup. In this metaphor, an external authority (the cup-maker) has determined the size of the cup, in accordance with the guidelines set by another external authority (the International Bureau of Weights and Measures). This metaphor represents a view of capacity-building that seeks to ensure that individuals and groups meet certain consistent and measurable standards of performance. We would argue that this view of capacity-building is problematic because it represents a deficit model of capacity-building, and also because it is inherently constraining (in that the cup has a maximum capacity and continuing to pour the water after that capacity has been reached is a waste of the water as a resource). Furthermore, important political and ethical concerns arise in relation to who has the right and authority to establish the most appropriate standards.

The second metaphor conceptualises capacity-building as building a dam across a river. This seems to us to be one influential view of capacity-building in the context of collaborative work. Strategic-level decisions in academic institutions seem to be promoting the gathering together of expertise in collaborative research in order to harness the collective experience and expertise of academics, with a view to producing more or better research outcomes, just as water in a river may be harnessed by a dam in order to produce hydro-electric energy. This view of capacity-building also brings with it significant political and ethical concerns. Just as the decision to dam a river has implications for those living upstream (flooding of property) and downstream (reduction in flow), so too the attempt to harness experts in teams can significantly affect the work of other academics and institutions who do not have the opportunity to participate in such a collective arrangement. Moreover, as with the cup, the dam has a maximum physical capacity beyond which the water is at best a wasted resource and at worst a potential risk to property.

The third metaphor, which we feel represents our view of capacity-building better than the previous two, is that of a system of irrigation sprinklers. Rather than pouring water into a cup, or harnessing water behind a dam, we visualise capacity-building as spraying water over a field. When a field is watered, plants grow according to their own genetic make-up. Some plants may grow more quickly than others. Some plants may grow in different shapes from others. This view of capacity-building acknowledges that individual researchers are each unique, bringing different strengths, interests and possibilities to a collaboration. Rather than seeking to enforce uniform performance standards, we see capacity-building as a process of empowering, equipping, informing and inspiring one another to continue to explore new dimensions in one another's respective fields of expertise and research interests. This view resonates with the so-called capability approach of Sen (1999) which sees capacity-building in the context of development studies as a kind of freedom (see also Harreveld, in press; Harreveld & Singh, 2008).

This conceptual approach is not without its inherent risks and dangers. Gasper (2007) noted three in relation to the work of development:

First, fatal conceptual fuzziness may emerge as all and sundry take up and twist the approach's terms. Second, sometimes in reaction, academics far from the policy frontline can over-refine the approach and the debate, rendering it arcane and remote to potential users. Third, as 'practical men' go their own way in operationalization, the approach can become bastardized and lose its rationale. (p. 349)

We acknowledge that some of these dangers may exist as risks in our view of capacity-building. To maintain the irrigation metaphor, some of these risks may be seen as bothersome weeds that also grow among the plants. Equally, current environmental consciousness might generate concerns about the impact and sustainability of irrigation as much as about the building of dams. Moreover, evaporation can be posited as potentially running counter to the capacity-building possibilities of irrigation, suggesting the ways in which work intensification and individual surveillance might prevent the fine spray of water provided by a sprinkler from turning into a raging torrent of empowerment that institutions and systems might find difficult to control.

We see these concerns as timely reminders that any approach to capacity-building has limitations and possible side-effects. Furthermore, the basis for our selection of the irrigation sprinkler conceptualisation over the other two notions has been our own experience, which we accept is not always going to be construed as incontrovertible evidence of its utility, thereby reinforcing the status of capacity-building as an empty signifier whose meaning and acceptance vary among individuals and contexts. Nevertheless, our argument is that the most effective and productive way to build capacity requires us to take risks such as these, in order to provide the greatest and fairest opportunities for all to develop their own potential.

Empirical example

The process involved in writing this chapter provides an empirical example of how our view of capacity-building operates. Pursuing the pouring-water-into-a-cup metaphor, one of the authors of this chapter would have been expected to teach the other how to write, based on the difference between us in academic publishing experience. According to the damming-the-river metaphor, the experienced author of this chapter would have done better to work with a more experienced author, thereby harnessing a much greater potential, in terms of experience and expertise, to increase productivity. However, for this chapter we have collaborated in a different way, which we believe is better represented by the irrigation-sprinkler metaphor.

The idea for the chapter arose out of a discussion in which we both shared what we believed to be a common interest in questions relating to capacity-building. In a second, longer discussion, we shared our thoughts, ideas and reflections on capacity-building in more depth. In particular, we tried to brainstorm some key issues and concerns. Each of us contributed our thoughts and ideas, and new ideas arose from that brainstorming session that neither of us had originally considered. As it turns out, we seemed to agree on most of the issues and concerns that we both thought to be important, so we noted these for further reflection.

At a third meeting, we looked at some images that one author had collected as possible metaphors for the view of capacity-building that we were seeking to explore in this chapter. In this third discussion, we sought to bring together our previous thoughts, as well as the ideas we discussed at that third meeting, to develop a draft outline for the chapter and a writing plan. Each of the two authors elected to act as principal writer for different sections of the chapter outline, with roughly equal responsibility in terms of word length. We then began writing our separate sections, and these were forwarded to each other progressively in order to ensure continuity conceptually and stylistically. This chapter is the final product of that collaborative process.

In this research, the dynamics of our collaboration did not fit either the pouring-water-into-a-cup metaphor or the damming-the-river metaphor. Each author contributed equally in terms of creativity, conceptualisation and writing. We believe that this coming together on an equal basis contributed to an atmosphere in which we could explore creative ideas more effectively than if one author were *teaching* the other. Capacity-building, for us in this project, is better represented by the irrigation-sprinkler metaphor. Both of us gained insight

and greater understanding from working together, and the final product – this chapter – has gained from this.

What this example does not demonstrate is the risk involved in employing this kind of approach to collaboration. Serendipitously in this case, both authors found themselves in agreement on the key concepts and suggested approaches to writing the chapter, and therefore the process was both productive and enjoyable. We can only guess at what might have happened had we had irreconcilable differences of opinion on concepts or approaches. It might have resulted in frustration that the irrigation-sprinkler metaphor might describe in terms of strangling weeds. When opportunities are opened in this kind of capacity-building collaboration, there remains, in theory at least, the potential for very creative and productive synergies, but also for deep and potentially disruptive disagreement. This is one dimension of the risk to which we refer in the title of this chapter.

Implications

We turn now to consider some of the key implications of the preceding discussion of capacity-building through collaborative research for sustaining synergies in contemporary research teams. We have clustered these implications around what we see as crucial attributes of capacity-building.

Firstly, building capacity in research teams is both important and necessary. Capacity-building is a form of learning, and it is vital for team members to be continually learning individually and collectively by means of engaging in the team's activities. If the research capacity of a single team member remains unchanged during those activities, the team's learning and its overall success have been considerably impaired. By contrast, if all team members' capacities are constantly developed, they will be able to generate and sustain synergies among the team.

Secondly, research team capacity-building is directly linked with its power and influence. Both internally and externally, capacity-building constitutes a form of capital, and maximising that capital is required if teams are to see themselves and to be seen by others as effectively functioning, useful and significant entities. If team members are able easily to articulate how team membership contributes to their cultural, and sometimes economic, capital, their synergies as a group are much more likely to be sustained.

Thirdly, developing capacity among research team members is liable to spill over into helping to build equivalent capacity among participants in their other research. Collections of individuals with heightened self-esteem who feel confident and valued as researchers are predisposed to deploy the empathy and interest in others required to sustain the existing synergies in other groups and to create new ones, in the process strengthening their own. In this way capacity-building is related to community development and the empowerment of others as well as of self.

Fourthly, as we noted above, capacity-building is risky. It certainly does not occur easily or automatically. The scenario posited in the previous section, of irreconcilable differences among research team members' perspectives and worldviews, can and does emerge – for example, when the team is researching topics that are politically or socioculturally sensitive and/or when the team grows rapidly, without the appropriate time to elaborate processes and protocols that will assist its capacity-building. This kind of risky business must be acknowledged by teams at the outset and, if it develops, needs to be addressed explicitly by team members, or else further capacity-building will be put in jeopardy.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have explored the notion of capacity and different understandings of how that capacity is most effectively built (including its status as an empty signifier). The current

rhetoric about collaboration in research by means of a team-based approach and conducting research across disciplines, institutions and paradigms sits uneasily beside deeply ingrained practices of individual activity and organisational competition. In such a context, it is hardly surprising that beginning researchers often feel bewildered and uncertain owing to the mixed messages that they constantly receive.

Yet we have also presented in the chapter a particular conception of capacity-building that we have found personally empowering and that we consider is relevant and useful for other researchers. We acknowledge that the particular relationships of shared and diverse attitudes, interests and values that bind the two authors of the chapter and the research team as a whole are unique to our group. At the same time, many of the specific principles and strategies that we have enunciated here are directly applicable to other research teams grappling, as we continue to grapple, with the competing discourses attending contemporary research activities. While they are certainly a risky business, capacity-building endeavours in and through collaborative research teams are not only worth pursuing but are vital to those teams' abilities to sustain the synergies of themselves and others.

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Strategies for sustaining synergies

- Ask team members individually to identify several different metaphors of capacity-building, then as a team reflect on the merits and limitations of each metaphor.
- Include capacity-building as an explicit conceptual lens when writing about the content of the team's and/or about the team's activities.
- Conduct a risk analysis of the team's efforts to promote capacity-building among its members and, if relevant, among the other participants in its research projects.
- If the team is located in an institution, evaluate the alignment between the team's capacity-building efforts and the institution's policies and practices about capacity-building.
- Topic for debate: "Building the capacity of some team members always involves costs and risks for other team members."

Suggestions for further reading

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