

## Chapter 10

### Considering collaborations in writing a research book: Implications for sustaining a synergistic research team

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*This chapter elaborates possible implications of the experiences of writing this research book for the development and sustainability of the authors as a productive and supportive research team. The preceding chapters have explored several different dimensions of research collaborations and in the process have enacted specific elements of collaborative research. In doing so, they have provided a means of sharing understandings and engaging in dialogue about the pressures and possibilities of contemporary education research. At the same time, they have highlighted the difficulties of bringing together seven distinct personalities with varied interests and circumstances and melding a dynamic team where all members feel valued and recognised. The approach taken to writing the chapter is used as a reflective device both for articulating these broader issues and for suggesting a practical strategy that other research teams might find relevant and useful. The authors conclude by proffering their collective prediction about the team's capacity to sustain synergies and their associated positions on the strengths and limitations of collaborative research and researching collaboration.*

#### **Introduction**

As we noted in the first chapter of this book, we have sought in the intervening chapters to present multiple explorations and experiences of our sustaining synergies as a research team, and in the process to write specific accounts of collaborative research and researching collaboration. We have also been keen to provide information that can be distilled in this chapter in response to the three key questions posed at the beginning of the first chapter:

- What are the different forms that can be taken by effective, efficient and ethical collaborative research?
- What does researching collaboration demonstrate about the character and effectiveness of that collaboration?
- How can collaborative research and researching collaboration generate sustaining synergies for Australian university researchers?

Chapter 1 also introduced a number of principles and associated mooted practices that we consider crucial to sustaining and transforming collaborative research and research teams. We return to those questions, principles and practices later in the chapter. In the meantime, we present seven individual reflections on the processes of writing this book, followed by a collective synthesis of those reflections and a consideration of what they might mean for sustaining synergies in education research. In important ways this mirrors the approach that we took to writing our respective chapters and then the first and final chapters, thereby maximising individual voices while also facilitating collective thinking and shared understandings.

#### **Individual lessons and reflections**

This section of the chapter begins with our seven separate reflections on writing the book, which was an exercise that we set ourselves after a research team meeting. The requirement

was to explicate the lessons that each of us had learned as a result of being involved in planning and writing the book.

### ***Mark***

For me, one of the lessons associated with this joint project of building and making operative this research team was around the importance of being there and experiencing the richness of understanding that comes from face-to-face opportunities to engage in collaborative exercises. For too long, we academics have hidden behind the closed doors of our very busy working lives. We have relied too heavily upon the supposedly enhanced communication tools of e-mail and the occasional videoconferencing session (if it works!). Through this team's face-to-face engagement I believe we began to experience strength in the real connections among members. We also took risks. The biggest risk for all was to let down our facades and attempt to be ourselves. My view is that we made a healthy start on something that will always be a process of becoming (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) – the building of identities that are open-minded and respectful, yet with an integrity that asserts our own voices, but not to the detriment of others.

Along with this step into the unknown, not only had we begun the process of building knowledge about other colleagues that led to a joint acknowledgement that trust had utilitarian value in enhancing our working relationships (see the chapter by Linda and me), but another kind of development resulted. Myles Horton, in a discussion with Paulo Freire in 1987, spoke of a “circle of learners” (Horton & Freire, 1990, p. 156). I think that this is a characterisation of what was also constructed within this research team. We came together, primarily to appease bureaucratic pressure and process, yet together we morphed into a group of academics who created something that hadn't existed before. This was the new knowledge generated through our various co-written chapters aimed at articulating our research interests anchored within a collaborative theme: research identities, social action, concept mapping, co-authorship, doctoral supervisory relationships and ethics.

### ***Karen***

The lesson that I have decided to include for this chapter is centred on the notion of mindfulness and the building towards collective mindfulness as a research group. Mindfulness here is defined as “a state of mind or mode of practice that permits the questioning of expectations, knowledge and the adequacy of routines in complex and not fully predictable social, technological and physical settings” (Jordan, Messner, & Becker, 2009, p. 468). The importance of the social in terms of interaction and social practice (see Barton, 1994; Gee, 1996; Street, 1995) cannot be overlooked as we grapple with the development of a collective identity. Throughout this initial building stage of the relationship, it has been interesting to identify instances where I have personally struggled to identify with the larger collective.

While all members of the group have well-established smaller working groups, the collaboration in writing the book has been our first whole-group experience and for some of us the first time of working together. To build a collaborative culture within the broader group, the notion of “sharing understandings, knowledge, symbols and experience [to] guide actions” (Godfrey, 2008, p. 1) needed to be made explicit. Each of us as individuals brings a range of skills, knowledge and previous experience to the group, and the various ways in which these “multiple, simultaneous and sequential narratives ... interweave, harmonize and clash” (Currie & Brown, 2003, p. 566) is very interesting. I argue that, while all members of the group have good intentions and may individually be aware, or mindful, of personal research goals and expectations, we are still working towards the development of a collective

mindfulness where individuals become more aware of the ways that they can contribute to the achievement of others' goals and not just their own.

### **Warren**

For me, the process of writing and editing this book has serendipitously coincided with the process of transitioning from doctoral student to early career researcher. As I begin to emerge from the cocoon of my dissertation and stretch my wings into a professional research career, I am somewhat startled at how strongly the wind blows at times, a little frightened at how far down the ground seems to be, but mostly intrigued and inspired by the vast expanse of blue sky – possibilities waiting to be explored. In the process, I have learned much from my more experienced colleagues about how to plan, how to write, and how to edit and produce a book. More importantly for me, I have had the opportunity to participate in a process of collaboration that seemed far more powerful and significant than simply working together. Reflecting upon the nature of this magic spark, how it is ignited and how we might keep it burning has been a recurring theme throughout the book. Whatever else it might be, I am pretty sure it involves more than just policy or procedure. Personal qualities such as creativity, determination, patience and goodwill seem to be very important also.

If personal qualities are in fact such important contributing factors to successful collaboration, then I wonder why the significance of personal qualities is so rarely acknowledged in academic work. “We like each other”, remains in the closet as we enunciate more quantifiable and professionally respectable factors such as common research interests. I wonder whether sometimes we might not be engaged in highly elaborate rituals to maintain a conceptualisation of academic integrity that, in the end, draws our attention away from other things that are also really important. If personal qualities are significant contributing factors to successful collaborative research, then rather than deny or disguise them could we not productively focus our attention on how we might foster and promote such qualities? Can we learn to be more creative? Can we develop more determination, or more patience? Does goodwill develop over time? These are the kinds of questions that come to my mind when I reflect on this collaborative experience. If my wings will stretch that far, I am interested in exploring them further.

### **Robyn**

In reflecting on the first year – albeit not a full year – of operating as a research team, I am drawn to Stephen Covey's (1996) work on *The seven habits of highly effective people*<sup>®</sup>. It was purely by accident that the title of our team's book, *Sustaining Synergies*, reflects Covey's Habit 6: Synergize<sup>®</sup>. Nevertheless, Covey offers considerable food for thought about how teams might operate and how they might be effective, even though his work focuses on individuals.

Covey (1996) suggests three main points about synergising, which seem to relate to the what and the how of being effective. He argues that synergy means that “the whole is greater than the sum of its parts” (the what); that the process of synergising allows a “win-win spirit” whereby the members of a team “must communicate in a cooperative way and work towards a common set of goals” (how); and that it is necessary to “create the climate in which synergy thrives” (another part of the how) (p. 165). These ideas seem to resonate with the way that our team decided to focus on the how of operating as a team and our aim of transforming our discussions into a research product – an edited collection of chapters about research collaborations and collaborative research.

In thinking about the lessons I have learned from being involved in the research team, I am drawn in particular to Covey's (1996) discussion of Abundance Mentality<sup>™</sup> – the belief that “there is plenty for everyone” (p. 114). I think that, as a team of seven researchers, we have

succeeded in demonstrating how a win-win situation can be achieved for everyone in a team. Our focus on research collaborations was a move towards working beyond our individual interests and our areas of expertise. In this way, we did not end up with team members engaging in competition, but instead we were working towards shared goals that encompassed a win-win for all. Abundance Mentality™ was evident as each member brought strengths to the team and was able to utilise those strengths for achieving the team's aims. From working as a *we*, there were multiple benefits for each *I* (team member), ranging from the learning that occurred as part of building collaborative relationships to gaining insights into other ways of working, achieving enhanced research outputs and so on.

What I would hope, however, is that the effects of our efforts can go beyond the context of our team, especially since Covey (1996) reminds us that “scripts that are not win-win are ineffective” (p. 120). In today's climate of compliance, scarce resources, heavy workloads and little time to conduct research and to do the thinking that should define our roles as academics, we operate within an environment of constraint. Competition appears embedded into the bigger picture that describes our university work and there seem to be pressures for us to operate outside the characteristics described by Covey as defining those with a win-win character: integrity, maturity and an Abundance Mentality™. What I see as an important result of our team's collaborations so far is that we have demonstrated the potential of a collaborative approach that results in a win-win. The challenge, of course, is to move that approach beyond the situated and contextualised experiences of the team and to encourage the wider research community to consider the benefits of Abundance Mentality™.

### ***Linda***

Our research team is multidisciplinary and multidimensional, comprising education researchers who are diverse with regard to discipline background (e.g., further education and training, psychology, literacy, linguistics, social research, early childhood), research experience (from neophyte through to expert), and personal experiences and characteristics. The value of this diversity is the broad range of conceptual and experiential perspectives the team has been able to draw upon in understanding and enacting collaborative research. On the other hand, a potential challenge for me when joining the team was how we would balance our heterogeneity with sufficient unity of purpose and practice to enable the development of a cohesive identity as a research team. The book that we have co-authored and co-edited is the tangible evidence that we have met this challenge, or rather that we have completed our first iteration of this balancing act. In reflecting on how we have achieved this in less than 12 months, I have learned the lesson of the value of collective reflexivity (Orr & Bennett, 2009) as a synergising force for our research team.

More specially, at the same time that we have been indirectly developing a collective identity through engagement in team tasks and operational processes, referred to by Gherardi and Nicolini (2001) as “knowing *a* practice,” we have also engaged collective metacognitive processes to enact “knowing *in* practice” (cited in McCarthy & Garavan, 2008, p. 514; emphasis in original) or joint reflection-on-action (Schön, 1983) about our team structures, processes and norms. The latter has been evident from our first meeting, where we shared our views about why we joined the team, our expectations and goals, the strengths we believed we brought to the team and notions of shared leadership, through to chapter teams negotiating roles and tasks when researching and writing together, and the team collaborative concept mapping process facilitated by Mark and me about how we team. For me, moving forward and building on the successes of the team requires, at least in part, an ongoing team commitment to taking the time collectively and consciously to reflect on our identity as a research team, and the processes and practices of our operations. In other words, sustaining the synergy involves collaboratively researching and reflecting together.

### ***Patrick***

The two lessons and reflections that I have selected to contribute to this section of the chapter constitute a tension, even a contradiction, that evokes deeper dissonances in the broader context of the contemporary higher education sector, both in Australia and internationally. The first of these is the confirmation of the rich diversity of experiences and ideas available to education researchers, and of the consequent opportunity for those researchers to play important roles in adding to, contesting and disrupting current understandings of particular phenomena. Specifically in relation to collaborative research and researching collaboration, in this book we have explored different dimensions of our chosen topic and we could have articulated several more. We have done so based on our shared and separate lived experience and framed by several useful conceptual and methodological resources. In doing so, we have highlighted some of the many synergies that can and do help to sustain research teams in the contemporary environment.

The second lesson and reflection that I bring to this discussion is the observation of a continuing ambivalence among ourselves and within the faculty to which we belong about the initiative of establishing official research teams and to some extent about the focus of our particular team. I have been surprised by this response, although on further examination I can empathise with some elements of it. Within the team, I have been additionally and pleasantly surprised that in less than a year of formal existence we have succeeded in melding more effectively as a team than I had originally thought possible, and the initiative and exigency of writing this book have undoubtedly contributed to that positive outcome.

Outside the team, I have observed a number of reactions that again illustrate the unstable foundations of the contexts in which we work and research. These have ranged from interest and encouragement to demands for scrutiny to a statement that what we have researched and written about here is what other groups in the faculty are also engaged in. My response to the latter reaction is one of agreement and affirmation: as noted above, there is a rich diversity of approaches to collaborative research, and in no sense are we seeking to position the principles and strategies outlined in this book as superior to other approaches (although we contend that they are currently effective for us for the reasons presented in the preceding chapters).

On the one hand, these ambivalent and seemingly contradictory reactions can be seen as uncomfortable, counterproductive and potentially destructive of relationships and resolve – the negative and unpleasant face of competition. On the other hand, they can be useful in prompting further thought and consequent action, whether to embrace some or all of the expressed concerns and/or to strengthen our adherence to what brought us together in the first place and our commitment to achieving outcomes that it is hoped are of mutual benefit to ourselves, the other participants and stakeholders in our research, our faculty colleagues, our university, the higher education sector and the fields of scholarship in which we locate ourselves.

### ***Catherine***

As our first year as one of three faculty-supported research teams draws to a close, this writing project presents an opportunity to reflect on and analyse not only the factors that have contributed to sustaining synergies in collaborative writing and research, but what I have learned during the year as a member of this research team that might help to take me forward in my development as a collaborative education researcher. What have been the challenges? What has been surprising? Why? What are the lessons to be learned?

In a year punctuated with personal and professional challenges and opportunities, my capacity to sustain commitment to the team and its projects – and to make a valuable contribution – has been tested. The willingness of fellow team members to step up to the mark and enact leadership in different ways and at different times, committing personal and

professional resources and supporting one another in the interest of achieving shared goals, has proved to be sustaining, and is one of the characteristics that differentiates a loose coalition from a collaborative team. This level of leadership and support within the team – though positive, pleasing and important – I don't find surprising.

What has surprised me is how uncomfortable the processes of collaborative writing and collaborative reflection on shared experiences can sometimes be, and how we can fall into the trap, perhaps through carelessness, vanity, insecurity or ambition, of positioning ourselves and one another in ways that might be harmful and could undermine the development of community. In my experience, a university faculty can be a highly contested, hierarchical and competitive environment not at all conducive to genuinely collaborative endeavour. Interestingly, it may be competition – rather than conflict – that can serve to undermine the building of our research team as a learning community. Palmer (1998) describes competition as “a secretive, zero-sum game played by individuals for private gain,” whereas conflict is a “communal ... public encounter in which it is possible for everyone to win by learning and growing” (p. 106). I have learned that through collaboration involving engagement in dialogue, at times uncomfortable and sometimes in conflict tempered with mutual respect and a commitment to learning, significant new insights can be generated. Indeed, it is the commitment to learning that enables and empowers us and those around us. I have also learned that this commitment sometimes requires courage.

### **Synthesis of the individual lessons and reflections**

Some readers of this book might find it a little difficult to believe the single most common theme uniting the individual lessons and reflections in the previous section of the chapter: the strong and growing sense of mutual trust, responsibility and accountability. We can certainly attest both to its accuracy and to its centrality in our efforts to sustain the synergies of our research team. Probably this is the most significant outcome of our activities as a team in the past nearly 12 months that we have operated. It is also the outcome that to varying degrees we doubted could be achieved; while we had strong ties with one or two other team members, we knew that extrapolating that strength to the whole-team interactions and relationships was not an easy or automatic process (Danaher, Moriarty, & Danaher, 2006; Moriarty, Hallinan, Danaher, & Danaher, 2000; Siltanen, Willis, & Scobie, 2008). Moreover, the project of writing the book was inextricably linked with that extrapolation: writing with new collaborators helped to maximise respect and understanding, which in turn fed into the subject matter of several chapters in the book.

Some readers of the book might also be struck by something that has become apparent to us only after reading one another's contributions to the previous section. This is that, albeit in different ways with diverse metaphors, we have remarked on the potential dark side – if not of collaboration per se, then of the way that our particular collaboration has been constructed and positioned in a broader faculty and university context. At one level this is to be expected: that collaboration has to be set against the backdrop of a system that is predicated on competition among individuals, faculties, institutions and nations, a phenomenon that applies to Australian (Harreveld, Danaher, Alcock, & Danaher, 2007; Marginson, 2006) and overseas (Horta, Huisman & Heitor, 2008; Kehm & Teichler, 2007) universities alike. At another level this politicisation of research collaborations and research teams (Baarts, 2009; Jones, Wuchty, & Uzzi, 2008; Malacrida, 2007; Stahl & Shdaimah, 2008) can be stressful and unproductive, and can potentially make the difference between a research team's survival and its premature closure.

What this suggests for sustaining synergies in research teams is that team members need to be aware that their work is enacted in terrains that range from the supportive and appreciative to the hostile and even destructive. That awareness should raise consciousness but not stifle

activity – that is, team members need as far as possible to feed competition and opposition into positive energy that facilitates productive outcomes, rather than being sidetracked into negative conflict. Something that we have found is that the competition and opposition have strengthened our regard for one another, not least because we have been forced to think more carefully about what we are seeking to achieve together and why.

In some ways it is not immediately clear why and even how we have been able to move from a collection of seven individuals to a functioning and, it is hoped, effective research team. Certainly our prior experiences of one-to-one or one-to-two collaboration have helped significantly – a very different scenario from putting together seven relative strangers and expecting them to perform as a productive team from the outset. Also no doubt similarities of outlook and values are important, despite the differences of discipline, methodology and theoretical orientations noted earlier. Yet there is something intangible, even mysterious and ineffable, about our sustaining synergies that we find difficult to identify and analyse, let alone have a prescription for replicating for other teams or for ourselves in different contexts from the current ones.

At the same time, the preceding chapters have outlined techniques that we have implemented with reasonable effectiveness to maximise our energy and to sustain our outcomes. These have included collaborative concept mapping, audiotaped conversations, particular approaches to co-authorship, examples of theoretical and methodological synthesising, and applications of that synthesising to contemporary research issues that as individuals or smaller groups we would have been unlikely to attempt. Likewise the suggested strategies for sustaining synergies in each chapter have been attempts to operationalise particular forms of collaborative research and researching collaboration that we have found relevant and useful across the range of our endeavours.

These techniques and strategies have constituted many of the practices of envisioning and developing a research team alluded to in the first chapter. With regard to the underlying principles also outlined in that chapter, we proposed nine: *solidarity*, *emotional energy* and *stratified interactions*, all borrowed from Ritchie (2007), as well as the contention that collaborative research needs to be *ethical*, *reflexive*, *scholarly*, *sustainable*, *synergistic* and *transformative*. The intervening chapters have explored those principles with varying degrees of explicitness, in addition to the associated practices required to bring them into existence. For example, all chapters have engaged with our research team's efforts to be both sustainable and synergistic, two chapters have focused on questions of ethics as their major concern and others have taken up ethical issues in particular ways, and different chapters have elaborated how the team has been fortified by feelings of solidarity and emotional energy, as well as how interactions have sometimes been stratified in order to build on individual members' diverse contributions and situations.

The intervening chapters have also taken up in varied ways the three key questions posed at the beginning of the first chapter. We have provided brief, synthesised responses to those questions here, on the understanding that the detailed information framing each response is to be found in Chapters 2 to 9 inclusive.

- What are the different forms that can be taken by effective, efficient and ethical collaborative research?

Even though we are a single research team, we have portrayed a number of different forms of collaborative research in the preceding chapters. These differences have derived from variations on the backgrounds, personalities and temperaments of the individuals making up the smaller groups within the team, as well as diverse concepts, methods and topics. For example, the collaborative concept mapping conducted by Mark and Linda involved all team members, while the selections from audiotaped conversations involved two sets of three members each (Karen, Robyn and Patrick; and Warren, Robyn and Patrick). Yet we contend

that each chapter in the book exhibits a concern with engaging in effective, efficient and ethical collaborative research, and also discusses strategies that have proved to be helpful in such an engagement.

- What does researching collaboration demonstrate about the character and effectiveness of that collaboration?

We see the preceding chapters and their respective examples of approaches to researching collaboration as demonstrating several features of the character and effectiveness of that collaboration. In particular, to be effective over the long term collaboration needs to be predicated on *affective*, *behavioural* and *cognitive* dimensions. That is, there must be strong emotional bonds of affection, respect and trust among team members; their actions must reflect those bonds in action; and their thinking must enable clear-sighted understanding of the links between their emotions and their actions, by means of such principled strategies as reflexivity. The discussion in this chapter has also highlighted that effective collaboration is often politicised and must encounter forces of competition, thereby strengthening or weakening the collaborative team members according to their success in building prior effectiveness.

- How can collaborative research and researching collaboration generate sustaining synergies for Australian university researchers?

Central to the generation of sustaining synergies for Australian university researchers are the identification and implementation of particular principles and practices of research team operations. Across the preceding chapters we have identified nine such principles and examined their implementation. The suggested strategies at the end of each chapter are also efforts to demonstrate our specific approach to collaborative research and researching collaboration. At the same time, we have cautioned in several places in the text against seeking to extrapolate what we have done to other research teams, just as we have avoided a wholesale adoption of certain practices by other teams into our operations. We have also avoided implying that our practices and strategies are inevitably and always successful. More broadly, we have emphasised that these are the early days for our team, and that much hard work needs to be done if we are to continue to function in three to five years from now.

## **Conclusion**

This book has investigated multiple experiences of sustaining synergies, by means of exploring different manifestations of collaborative research and researching collaboration. This chapter has sought to bring the discussion to a provisional and temporary close by returning to the principles and practices, and by providing synthesised responses to the three key questions, elaborated in the first chapter.

The chapter began with each of us identifying the lessons and reflections gleaned from writing the book, followed by a combined reflection of those lessons and reflections. We proffer that textual strategy as one among several useful reflective devices that we have found effective in the book's earlier chapters and that other research teams might also find relevant. The interplay among several voices has sometimes been challenging to facilitate but it is crucial to ensuring the team's effectiveness and success.

We conclude by making a collective prediction about our team's medium- and long-term prospects of continuity. It is clear from the individual lessons and reflections outlined above that we are all cognisant of the politicised and sometimes hostile landscape in which our and other research teams operate institutionally and nationally. This cognisance inclines us to avoid making naïvely optimistic claims about what we shall be achieving in a specific number of years in the future. This avoidance is based on a recognition of the fragility and vulnerability of research collaborations (see also Danaher, 2008; Harreveld & Danaher,

2009), and that research teams are not always strong or committed enough to resist the forces of competition and capture.

On the other hand, we have achieved more in our nearly first full year of operations than many of us expected, and there are certainly grounds for cautious – rather than naïve – optimism, at least for the medium term. Already we are working through a process for identifying our research team's principal collaborative project once this book has been published. Writing the book has undoubtedly enhanced our understandings of and regard for one another, as well as heightened our awareness of the multiple contexts in which we are functioning. Certainly we are even more convinced than at the outset of this stage of our collective journey that the strengths of collaborative research and researching collaboration far outweigh the limitations. Accordingly, we remain committed to the principles, practices and possibilities of sustaining synergies, both our own and those of other individuals and groups.

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### Strategies for sustaining synergies

- Construct a table with two columns listing the pros and cons of writing this book as articulated by the authors in this chapter.
- Compare those pros and cons to an equivalent list if your research team wrote a research book.
- Reflect on what the similarities and differences between the lists for your and our research team demonstrate about the particular character of your team.
- Consider if anything surprised you when reading this chapter and/or this book and what that response might mean for your team's future actions.
- Topic for debate: "Our research team is more likely to survive and thrive than the team portrayed in this book."

### **Further reading**

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