Cross-discipline collaboration – don't care and don't want to know

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Abstract

This paper investigates cross discipline collaborative methodologies and protocols that are necessary for first time collaborators. Two situations are examined, one with first year undergraduate students that had never experienced cross discipline collaboration, who 'don't care and don't want to know' and the other with professionals from different disciplines. These were mostly face-to-face rather than online projects. What I am referring to when using the term cross discipline collaboration is collaboration across several disciplines working toward a common purpose: problems of common language - where not only are we unable to communicate across disciplines, but calling it something causes confusion.

In spite of this, cross discipline collaboration is a term often heard these days. *Filter Magazine* (Issue 68), was overflowing with encouraging words about collaboration. Quote: 'This process of collaboration is essential in our new world order. It is from collaboration and the cross fertilization of ideas that new discoveries will come'. Another quote from the same writer:

> 'So what do we do about it and how can we make a difference? Well, to borrow a term from science, one way of influencing change is to introduce a catalyst to the system, an enabler with an agenda for change. Such a catalyst paves the way, breaks through structural boundaries and brings groups and cultures together to design and pilot new ideas and programs'.

However unless participants are sufficiently skilled to launch and then sustain successful collaborations, then things can and do go wrong.

It is necessary to implement learning systems for our young people. Programs do exist in some countries and this paper gives some indication of ours.

Background

In 2004 I wrote and delivered a two-year program titled, 'Collaborative Art' to undergraduate students at Wellington Institute of Technology, New Zealand. As the students progressed through the programme, gaining experience and knowledge, they were encouraged to test and evaluate new, strange and unlikely collaborative methodologies as a means of discovering different ways to successfully traverse collaborative territories. These methods were then incorporated back into the program. Then in 2007 I wrote a three-year cross discipline collaborative programme, which was delivered at the beginning of 2008 and 2009. This is a core program, meaning all students are required to enrol in it.

Over and above the aims and learning outcomes of the course is one important objective; that is, for students to gain a worthwhile experience, to value that experience and have a desire to continue exploring cross discipline collaborative practice. In order to provide structure to the delivery of content, collaborative activity is broken into 3 practice arenas: Year one students examine participatory collaboration; year two examine industry based collaboration and year three focus on conceptually driven collaboration. While collaboration learning transfers easily across borders and can be communicated globally, there is also the necessity to adapt to local contexts. In my country, New Zealand / Aotearoa, the challenge is to engage with the *Treaty of Waitangi* which is an agreement signed in 1840 for the Maaori and pakeha (European) to work and live harmoniously together. 'It was a broad statement of principles upon which the British officials and Maaori chiefs made a political compact or covenant to found a nation state'. (New Zealand History Online).

First time student collaboration - examples

1. An assignment involving first year undergraduate students from Animation, Visual Art, Film and TV, Audio Engineering, Print, Packaging and Interior Design. They were required to research, develop and present a project based on the theme, 'Sustainable futures – employing Interventionist strategies for positive change'. This could be online, digital or a physical manifestation. One team produced a found object installation that commented on consumption and waste. Another made an animation about a bunch of wild animals that take over a city in order to retrieve their hunting grounds. The third team's final work was in the form of a presentation. They developed an idea about recycling, which was pitched to our city council.

2. Second year students were required to collaborate with staff from a local museum to produce a public exhibition. The idea, generated by students during a brainstorming session, was to create a fictional history that would raise questions about the way history is recorded. They proposed to display 'artefacts found' under a new and controversial bypass in Wellington. The museum approved the idea and assigned three staff. Public feedback to the exhibition was generally positive, with most enjoying the joke. Seeing their work in the public realm, and being able to compare their efforts to other displays in the museum, did much to raise the student's self-esteem.

Observations

Safe, non-hierarchical learning environments are vital to success. Creating a common language is a double problem at 1st year because students have very little language about their own disciplines, let alone other disciplines. Resistance and investment are possibly the biggest problem that is usually reported at length in their evaluations. Creative icebreakers can help a lot. For instance, student teams were asked to create subtle inventions in the school environment. One team put a notice in the lift which said,' to ensure smooth operation of this lift, optimise weight distribution by the following: if you are alone, stand in the middle; if you join someone who is standing in the middle, stand as close to them as possible. Distribute the weight from the centre out'. Randomised teams are preferable to letting students choose their own, but are tough for the students to adjust to. Teams formed from friends are no guarantee of success. Random teams can be a positive opportunity for students to expand their networks and learn new skills. Students benefit from collaboration with unknown individuals by gaining appreciation of other discipline / skills / creative processes and also increased knowledge about interpersonal skills.

Establishing communication and behavioural protocols are essential: in a workshop situation students create guidelines based on what they expect of each other. Student made comments such as, 'its annoying working with others but I learnt animation skills'; 'I didn't come to art school to learn to write'; 'students from other disciplines have been giving me feedback on my other assignments'; 'working without choice of team, I had to get to know them first - others had to explain their skills and interests'; 'once we got a good idea things picked up'; 'the process we went with was whatever was fun or made us laugh'. Students form new connections/

friendships; learn how someone else would approach the problem, gain awareness of other disciplines and get introduced to new skills.

First time professional collaboration examples

1. My first experience of cross discipline collaboration was in 1986. I joined a pre existing group called, 'Clean water Campaign'. The group formed to make the Wellington City Council – where I live, put an end to raw sewage spilling in the sea by committing to the construction a quality sewage treatment plant. At that time I couldn't see what use my skills as a painter would be within a group consisting of a lawyer, a Maaori activist and concerned locals. I also wanted to avoid doing mail drops, cold calling, licking stamps and ringing politicians.

By the end, we produced masses of posters, banners, billboards and an installation for the International Festival of the Arts titled, 'Moa Point in the Key of P'. While it is impossible to judge the exact effect, the imagery played a significant part of informing the public about the issue, forcing the council to hold a public referendum, and when they ignored the results, pollution became the focus of the council elections. They lost and the new council committed to the construction of the plant, which is still seen as a high quality treatment centre.

2. 'Dressed to Kill – this town ain't big enough for the two of us', began when I was invited to submit a proposal to a touring show called, 'Jewellery Out of Context'. I suggested it to a theatre designer whose work I liked and we began with random conversations about all sorts of things while writing the proposal. The conversation that stuck was one about our mothers and how they would make cowboy and soldier costumes on the sewing machine for us as kids. The concept that emerged from this was the interrogation of the relationships between jewellery and violence. The work involved sensor driven light boxes, sound and turntable displays as well as photographs and objects. It was exhibited in New Zealand, Australia, Canada and the Netherlands. We had agreed on one rule, 'if it ain't fun, don't do it'. Due to the enjoyable process, we produced twice as much as we needed to fill the exhibition space.

3. 'EarThed' began as a cross discipline workshop organised by a computer scientist for staff of my institution. The aim was to teach us how to employ pickaxes and micro servers in team based projects. After a technical skills workshop we broke off into

teams. Uncertainty and discomfort created a retreat to familiar hierarchical structures. Those staff who had experience of cross discipline projects immediately began to agitate for change – to deconstruct the structure and replace it with a more fluid process. Ructions destabilized some individuals but excited others. Working relationships unravelled, and reformed with new purpose. A chaotic research material gathering, followed by a construction phase took place. Due to other commitments, the artists in the group were unable to install the work, and it was left to an electrical engineer who asked, how shall I arrange this?' We replied, 'whatever you like', and he took that as permission to have some fun. Personally I was over the moon with what he did.

'An Intelligence for Cross-World Collaboration, Real and Virtual', came out of EarThed when we decided we wanted to work together again. Five professionals, including myself (art, VJ, computer science and electrical engineering) collaborated to address the question: can objects/events in Second Life affect/ infect first life? This work was presented at ISEA 2008. Four were able to meet face-to-face, the fifth communicated via Second Life.

During the process it became apparent that we were working with more than one concept. An idea about the ghost in the machine 'appeared' (metalogic - a mediating influence in the membrane between realities). As well, a 3D camera was introduced and a virtual nightclub, 'Temp'. So without any assistance, a dialogic process (that is, the integrity of everyone's input remains integral to the final work) was employed. It was a very difficult process due to unreliability, poor time management, conflict and a lack of patience. Too much time passed before we got together - so we had to work under pressure. At a crucial time, one member's grandfather died and had to leave us for a week.

To give an indication of how difficult it was, the room in my house that we used to create the work was left untouched for seven and half months.

What can we conclude from these examples?

Collaborations begin for me when I become familiar with, and interested in, the work of another professionals. And how do they end? Mostly, they don't. When employing a dialogic process, they usually have after-lives, either as friendships or in future collaborations.

At the beginning of a project the collaborative environment may be inhabited by conditions of uncertainty, misunderstanding, under investment, marginality, instability, risk, blind alleys, dead ends and disorientation.

Then, on the point of collapse, the extraordinary appears. This is why, my co-collaboraters tell me, they want to work in a cross discipline team: it's the revealing of ideas and then observing the unpredictable and exciting journey the team takes them on. More understanding is required about the dynamics within this intersubjective space, especially as it opens up insights into the physiological and philosophical area where agency and responsibility meet other mental realities (such as memories and dreams).

Heidegger wrote, 'We understand the end of something all too easily in the negative sense as a completion, an end is the gathering into the most extreme possibilities'. Of all the projects I have been involved in, few have been easy. But I have learnt something quite profound from each and it has been the attractiveness of that learning, combined with a belief that we have to find ways of re-connecting and getting along, that make me come back for more.

Authorship has been an issue when money was involved. When working in the conceptual arena, where no money is involved, the issue is more about research outputs i.e. choosing an audience/destination for a cross discipline project that fits all professionals involved has been a problem. For example, when collaborating with a web designer his interest was very high in the beginning but waned when the project was destined for an art space.

It is interesting to think about collaborative processes as a model that could be applied to other situations, particularly if you think like I do that learning to work together and to get along is vital to our futures. In a recent *Guardian Weekly* there was an article about a survey carried out by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, asking the British public to describe 'the social evils of today'. Quote, 'There seems to be a remarkable degree of consensus about a definition of today's social evils. Individualism is top of the list, closely linked to greed and the decline of community'.

Guidelines for creating successful collaborations:

1. Act with kindness. Create goodwill and try to maintain it throughout the project.
2. Bring out the best in others.
3. No conflict, even better - be nonreactive. Think before you act:

> 'George: we don't argue, but even if we did we wouldn't tell. We believe that the world is one big argument, and we think we at least should try to keep away from that.
> Gilbert: if we started to argue, everything would fall apart very fast. Because it is based on accepting the two, the view of two people together. If not, you are finished immediately. It wouldn't work. It wouldn't work.
> (Rosenblum 2004).

Whether or not it's a team of friends or individuals with the required skills, tension, stress, argument, conflict are likely to happen. Most advice suggests that conflict can be worked through, and the ship righted again. However I'm of the firm belief, that in collaborative teams a policy of no conflict is required. I have debated this with both colleges and students and while they find this policy somewhat extreme, they can see its merits. Some suggested 'keep calm' as an alternative. When conflict occurs, it usually leaves reside, no matter how much it is worked through. If the situation is dire, almost at boiling point, walk away. Its often the last thing I want do to, because my position and my intended reaction seem right. However, after a night's sleep, my take on the situation is invariably changed to something conciliatory.

4. If it ain't fun, don't do it i.e. find another way.
5. Prescience: find out what makes your co-collaborators tick.
6. Patience – collaboration slows everything down.

In conclusion, in the context of our contemporary world and the unstable future, cross discipline collaboration could prove to be an effective survivalist strategy when underpinned by patience, kindness, prescience and of course without conflict.

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