Chapter 8
Collaborating in Writing: Crossing the Threshold

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Abstract The purpose of this chapter is to make visible and appreciate the transformative possibilities of collaborating, and how to work together in a liminal space. In this meta-reflective chapter, we collaborate to demonstrate the argument that collaborative writing can achieve much more than the simple goal of producing an article or book chapter. Collaboration provides rich opportunities to develop new understandings and deeper collegial relationships. Entering a collaborative relationship requires stepping over the threshold between familiar, discursively produced positions and entering new, unfamiliar epistemological and ontological frameworks. Developing collaboration means always 'becoming'. Gaining new understandings is an ongoing connection-oriented process, so collaboration requires an ethic of care, and valuing rather than tolerating alternate perspectives. Learning from each other demands a willingness to explore different meanings and in the process to find common ground with language that appears to be stable but is itself always shifting and changing. Collaboration for us is not simply the coordination of efforts towards a common goal, but is dependent on our differences and the interactions they foster. Furthermore, we suggest that by privileging equity over equality, we can avoid quantifiably measuring individual contributions. Participation and interaction are valued as well as sharing existing knowledge, for the challenges and the rewards come into being through working together in gaining new insights.

Keywords Collaboration · Collaborative writing · Reflexivity · Epistemology · Ontology · Ethics

Prelude

First through experience, then in discussion, and always theorising as tentative connections: the structure of this chapter in many ways resembles our weekly encounters. Our agenda was always indeterminate and negotiated, pointing now in this

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direction, and now in that. It was based on developing and strengthening connections between us. In collaborating we remain enmeshed with our ways of being in the world, our beliefs about ourselves and our contextual realities. The embedded discourses that shape us as individuals also shape the ways in which we relate and collaborate. Wittgenstein's words resonate: "My own relation to my words is wholly different from other people's" (1953, p. 163), as we struggle to find the right words to make our differences intelligible to each other, yet ever seeking to bring greater clarity to the understandings we share.

Understanding the Context for Collaboration as a Liminal Place

Collaboration is essentially an exercise in navigating complexity. There are rewards for doing so: it becomes possible to construct new knowledge, and personal growth is more likely to occur. These rewards are important because it can be tricky to navigate the complexity of the unknown, and it also requires commitment and perseverance.

A complex interplay of contexts continually shapes and reshapes our perspectives, as we find ourselves somewhere in transition, in a liminal place betwixt the old and the new, between the known and the as-yet-unknown. Context is also always '*under erasure*' or 'sous rature' (Derrida 1967; Parker 1997), always subject to the interwoven past-and-present, influencing a present-and-possible-future. That is why we need to collaborate: to better appreciate differing perspectives on our understanding, on our contexts.

A common ground of shared discursive positionings can obscure the vistas seen from different perspectives, and it is easy to forgo the struggle of navigating such territory in favour of more readily accessible paths. It is, however, the struggles with difference that yield the greatest rewards. Despite being influenced by the pervasive discourses of individuality and using one's own understanding to gain enlightenment with the injunction '*dare to know*'—or as in the original Latin: "*sapere aude*" (Kant 1784)—we prefer the alternate position that "enlightenment must be considered both as a process in which [people] participate collectively and as an act of courage to be accomplished personally" (Foucault 1984, p. 35).

In order for different perspectives to become intelligible to us, they must first be positioned relative to existing understandings. An ongoing process of collaboration that promotes an appreciation of differing perspectives is therefore essentially a spiral: an alternate perspective is outlined, the aspects that are not understood are reframed until there are sufficient mutual understandings, and then the implications and consequences of the newly-added perspectives can be the basis for further sharing of differences. Such a spiral is both the justification and the reward for collaboration, which would otherwise be simply circling through already available knowledge.

We wish to emphasise that collaboration is much more than coordination: "*Collaboration requires the generation of some concept that was not there previously*

and that could not have emerged if both parties did not interact" (Majchrzak and Malhotra 2020, p. 101, emphasis in original). Majchrzak and Malhotra (2020) also take the position that *coordination* is essentially organising around a task-orientation. From that perspective, coordination is simply working together to present existing shared perspectives, whereas collaboration has the effect of strengthening community from sharing *different* understandings to create new knowledge. The most significant new knowledge that we discovered as we collaborated to write this chapter was that building relationships of trust and equity was an ongoing requirement for successful collaboration.

Achieving Shared Understandings: What Is Needed

Our voices were at times in discord and at other times in harmony as we struggled with the practical aspects of St. Pierre's question: "how does one learn to hear and 'understand' a statement made within a different structure of intelligibility?" (2000, p. 25). Obviously we needed to understand enough of our differences to be able to work together in this writing endeavour, but the collaboration required was only possible because we had weekly meetings and almost a year of engagement—initially in order to discuss our individual research projects. One of the difficulties we struggled with was that the three of us brought such very different perspectives, but together we learned about the iterative development of shared understandings, and that "collaboration … is about unity and working together for the collective good" (Ka'ai 2008, p. 67). Presenting our story of working together is therefore intended to serve two purposes: firstly as an example of how collaboration can occur, and secondly to serve as a reference point to elucidate process—the difficulties that can be encountered and how those might be addressed. It is also intended to emphasise the view that we gain most from collaborating by paying attention to differences and valuing them. That is where each of us stands on the threshold with the potential of gaining new insights.

When we pay attention to others while collaborating in research and try to notice the impact of what we say or write, what we are noticing is clearly connected with how we are relating. Our understandings of self and other shape the perspectives that are available to us, so in the dynamic of conversation we are both performing and audiencing (Gergen 2011b) in relationship with each other as well as with the topic. "Traditionally, we view meaning as the possession of the individual mind. We use language, as commonly put, as a vehicle for expressing this meaning to others … [recognising] that meaning resides within neither individual, but only in relationship" (Gergen 2011a, p. 208). The words and grammar of our communication display both who we have become and who we are becoming. Collaboration in research is essentially meaning-making located in an ontology of always-becoming: a researching of what is possible, building on the personal histories of who we have already become.

Collaboration can be viewed as active engagement with others that creates new shared meaning which can then be refined and distributed to an even wider audience. Such a view expects collaborators not only to expand their individual conceptual maps to include those understandings, but also to re-situate themselves within their maps and accordingly within the maps of others. It thereby effectively creates a place to challenge some of the various conceptions different participants bring into the collaborative workspace, that clouds their ability see the perspectives of others.

Collaborative places necessarily involve different understandings of shared realities. Indeed, it is a key strength of collaborative activity that dissimilar perspectives are revealed and tensions in perception arise. Developing common understandings and harmonisation of conceptual frames is important, but resolving the tensions in the process of finding such commonalities is where growth occurs, where collaboration iteratively enhances our insights and appreciations.

It might seem obvious that the goal of any collaborative activity shapes the direction of the engagement. Initially, we discussed the goal only superficially in terms of the direction that was set according to the outcomes desired and the tasks that were to be undertaken as part of reaching those outcomes. It is worth noting that the same task orientation that affords a clear direction for collaboration typically brings an emphasis on the more measurable aspects rather than encouraging a greater appreciation of alternate perspectives and the intellectual growth that is thereby made more possible.

Such growth of understandings involves grappling with the challenge of developing mutual comprehensions from disparate positionings. Consolidating shared perspectives may serve as one purpose of any collaboration and is probably vital for writing up research, however, when that consolidation marginalises the other purpose of gaining new perspectives and considering alternate insights, then such collaboration carries a high opportunity cost.

Indeed, achieving shared understandings is not a one-time event (and was not, in our case), but rather an ongoing, struggling, 'messy' process of questioning, responding, interpreting, clarifying, and absorbing that lead to deeper discernments. Our questioning directly connected to developing relationships of trust and appreciating the value of our different ways of knowing, while also coming to challenge the traditional scientific epistemology that guided, restricted or distorted our thinking. "Epistemology raises many questions including … the assumptions that guide the process of knowing … and the possibility of that process being shared" (Vasilachis De Gialdino 2009). We had many questions about how we might contribute to the process of creating shared knowledge despite our differing assumptions. For example, in our early meetings it was apparent that we were experiencing different realities in working together, that we had different interpretations of what we could call mutual understandings, and that those differences from our distinctive background contexts would continue: "any word exists … as an *other's* word, which belongs to another person and is filled with echoes of the other's utterance" (Bakhtin 1986, p. 88). Our response was to not attempt to deal with those differences but to simply continue on our separate-but-connected journeys, trusting that over time we would better understand. Indeed, collaboration was not the immediate topic of our concern.

Instead, the context of our developing understandings of collaboration continued as the evolving partnership that was built, piece by piece, through sharing our distinctly individual learning pathways. Collectively, we trusted that we would learn more about collaborating in this context even as we recognised that the context itself might be insufficient to theorise collaboration. Gradually, we nevertheless developed common understandings.

Collaboration invites involvement in ongoing reflexion. Such reflexion demands further engagement, introspection combined with looking outward, attending to and participating in the dynamics of interaction as well as the internal patterns of deliberation. Collaboration occurs at the language nexus of engagement with our perceptual maps each time we take a step towards another's understandings in the liminal place of becoming-known, for "language enters life through concrete utterances … and life enters language through concrete utterances as well" (Bakhtin 1986, p. 63). The willingness to allow curiosity the freedom to explore possibilities of different significations can open new possibilities for collaborative reflexion.

Collaborative Writing Within a Broader Contextual Frame

As "everybody lives in a world of some sort. … [so] the sociology of knowledge must first of all concern itself with what people 'know' as 'reality' in their everyday … lives" (Berger and Luckmann 1967, p. 15). Thus, for our collaboration in writing this chapter, we found it helpful to develop a shared appreciation of the theoretical framework that has been described as Social Constructionism. This paradigm provided us with alternative lenses for understanding the other, and to appreciate dissimilarities in values and beliefs of others.

With such a shared appreciation of 'reality' came an understanding that our values and perspectives, both those that were shared and those that were dissimilar, are all discursively produced, arising from our cultural, social, and experiential backgrounds. Where there was a mutual appreciation of contrasting views, then our explorings of difference could be valued rather than simply tolerated. Therein lay the paradox of collaborative writing: successfully bringing distinctly different perceptions to a shared task was critically dependent on having sufficient common understandings.

"Positioning … is the discursive process whereby selves are located in conversations as observably and subjectively coherent participants in jointly produced story lines" (Davies and Harré 1990, p. 48). Working together positioned us as collaborators not only in relationship and the discourses of self-other, but also influenced how we could together approach what we conceived as the task and how to navigate the context within which we were working. We came to the conclusion that whatever words were written, the final phrasing of a piece of collaborative writing was inviting the reader to engage with a perspective that had been shaped and reshaped by the workings of the authors.

All the phrasing in our collaborative piece of writing was crafted by agreement, and the totality represents input from all of us. Some perspectives were confidently offered, others were withheld, all in response to our distinct perspectives on the nature of the task and influenced by the relationships that developed between us. This was a reflexive learning process of give and take, of noticing, of actively listening, and of giving others space to engage and consolidate their thinking. Gradually, we found the voice to express and to confirm our understandings of our different perspectives.

Each of us contributed to this collaboration in different ways, each of us learned something about the difficulties and compromises involved in collaborative academic writing. We had our individual beliefs and assumptions challenged in ways we did not expect but also realised the strength of shared values that enabled us to persevere. The distinctive frames of reference which encompassed our separate realities shaped what each of us offered the others in terms of new insights. Those offerings extended from our conversations into our contributions to the writing. Throughout the entire writing process we continued to learn from each other, questioning and seeking deeper understanding of our differences. That we could do so was only possible because of the strength of trust we had in each other and the feeling of safety in the group.

On Individualisation, Classification, Commonality, and Discourse

"Objects are *distinguished and known* by classifying them methodically and giving them appropriate names. Therefore, classification and name-giving will be the foundation of our science" (Linnaeus 1964, p. 19, §10—emphasis added). We found the taxonomic approach which Linnaeus established and promoted, and which found favour in Western natural sciences, shaping our ways of focusing on individually differentiating features more than on appreciating our similarities. It was noticeable that, even in this collaborative project, discourses of individuality and distinctiveness influenced and dominated. At the same time, however, until we accepted that our thinking and indeed our very sense of reality had been created with this discursive backdrop of science, it was difficult to jointly reflect deeply on the idea that differences are produced by different discursive contexts—an engagement that can leave one feeling inferior or insecure. Our default was to view differences through the frames of individualism and competition. We found tensions in our collaboration inevitably occurred from exploring differences where the emphasis was on the individual rather than on the discourses that produced that sense of individuality. Simultaneously, we were experiencing tension arising from the influence of the scientific paradigm that regarded objectivity or impartiality as fundamental to all research.

Of course, when our individual differences were viewed through a lens of social constructionism, the notion of individual identity could be understood differently,

as the outcome of the interactions of discourses—the unseen constructors of our sense of reality. From this perspective both our collaboration and positioning could be understood as the result of an ongoing interaction between underlying contextual forces. Such contextual elements included the shared values and understandings of living in the same community, being subjects of the same academic discipline, and finding ourselves influenced by the prevailing technologies.

As individuals we now accept the paradox that we represent the expression of different discourses that have constructed what we interpret as right or wrong, familiar or unknown, important or trivial. Such categorising illustrates which discourses have captured our worldview, shaping how we perceive, interpret and react to the various contexts within which we move. This chapter is itself such an illustration. From this perspective, collaboration encompasses the acknowledgement of both shared understandings and different viewpoints. At a discursive level it involves individuals being subject to change through encounters with others, for such encounters in an ongoing dynamic dance both strengthen the centrality of shared discourses at the same time as diminishing others where little overlap is apparent.

Examining an Ethics of Collaborative Praxis

Our starting point for defining what was a good fit for us ethically was agreeing that writ large, ethics was always situated in a liminal place. Collaborative writing located us in an ethics of participation where caring for each other was essential to maintaining and developing a relationship where it was safe both to acknowledge differences and to accompany the others in directions which we might not claim as our own. The inherent tensions in such positioning demand trust, commitment to more than an individual good, and a willingness to explore new pathways: an ethics of collaboration is essentially a social commitment.

Collaborative praxis involves both deeper and wider considerations of what *equitable* and *contribution* mean. Discourses of fairness underpin a sense in which there might exist expectations of equal contributions to a collaborative endeavour. For example, this chapter was the result of collaborative engagement, and that engagement was spread over most of a year, even though it was not our original intention to allow it to take so long. Collaborating as authors required different things of each of us, including finding consensus about the appropriate level of contribution to accept claims of part-authorship. That consensus involved finding common ground on the ethics of collaboration, for our collaboration was not to be measured in equal shares. This required confronting the discomfiture arising from the fact that each of us differed in age, experience and level of knowledge. Yet, a focus on equity rather than equality meant that our differing levels of academic knowledge were not as important as the different perspectives we were able to bring to the conversations. Our alternate perspectives gave each of us the richness of new understandings. Valuing the perspectives of the other, even if strange, was central to the ethic of caring we were striving for.

Our contributions were in different forms, but we recognised that without those variations this chapter could not have evolved in the way it did. Even as we acknowledged our different priorities, we trusted that at the same time as we were pursuing our separate goals we would also discover more about the processes and benefits of collaboration. What became apparent to us in our ongoing reflections was that expectations of equal contributions were being discursively produced by an ethic of individual effort that engagement with university studies made readily available as the most contextually valid and appropriate. We became more aware of the power of those discourses through the very fact of feeling compelled to revisit this topic from time to time. Despite this, or maybe even because of becoming aware, we were able to improve our understandings as well as better value our different contributions. In doing so we gradually developed an alternate ethics of collaboration that acknowledged both the different contexts and perspectives that informed our group praxis. It was our ethic of reciprocity that eliminated the hierarchical power imbalances created by the differing experience and ability of our group. Commitment to the collaborative process and its attendant value and richness was greater than comparing how many words we contributed to the final result.

The ethics of our collaboration were particularly important because for each of us this was unfamiliar territory that we were venturing into and we wanted the journey to be satisfying as well as productive. We simply accepted that our struggles were needed for us to achieve such satisfaction. It was only towards the end, in the last stages of writing the chapter, that we found an explanation of the struggle that made sense to us: "'ethics under erasure' reveals that … the perceived universal and unifying position of metaphysical and normative ethics is constantly being undermined, is shifting and forever changing" (Anderson 2012, p. 86). We understood the notion of collaboration as being similarly 'under erasure', for while we needed the word in its normative sense, we could also see that for us there were additional meanings available that rendered the normative sense quite inaccurate.

The Spiral of Divergence and Convergence

Collaboration is a participatory co-creating of understandings, essentially a methodology that connects researchers in the topic of inquiry (Baldwin 2006). The relationships between collaborators defines what realities will be perceived and how those will be interpreted. Our experience of shared realities was that these were never fixed, but always changing along with our perspectives. Although some degree of convergence is necessary for task completion, the richness and benefits of collaboration depend not only on shared understandings but also on differences, on divergence. Making convergence the goal can produce premature closure, especially in terms of relationship-building. Having some values and perspectives that are shared is helpful bedrock upon which to build, but differences are also necessary to avoid the effects of an echo-chamber. Engaging with differences, particularly those that are

harder to articulate, is foundational for developing greater resilience and strengthening relationships. Strong relationships are essential to opening space for new understandings.

Something similar applies when the short-term benefits of task completion come at the expense of medium- and long-term development of contradictory insights and knowledges. Deadlines for completion and pressure-prompted expectations readily invite convergence on discourses of premature agreement. Finding common ground becomes the primary focus, and grappling with the implications of different perspectives a secondary concern. Where expectations of timeliness and quality are forced to uncomfortably co-exist, there can be tensions and discomfort in resisting task-oriented pressures. We found this particularly true for our different priorities and how those differences positioned us in relation to the task of writing this chapter, for each of us had other urgent and important demands on our time. Despite those demands, our commitment to the common goal surfaced in our conversations every time we met. To us, that surfacing was a clear illustration of how we understood collaboration. Of course, it also presented us with an ongoing temptation to avoid our divergent understandings and simplify the shared task by simply focusing on areas of agreement. Despite the attractiveness of this option, we maintained our interest in valuing our differences, since these were illustrated each time we met together.

In our weekly meetings we typically reflected on what we were learning from each other, and this contributed to strengthening our trust, our mutual understandings and mutual perserverance. Genuine interest in the each others' differences, and patient support of each other's consolidation of thought was critical. We were typically drawn to assisting each other to address difficulties or gaps in understandings, helping each other to notice where our thinking had been colonised by normative discourses of schooling.

Our collaboration illustrated the "paradox of différance [that] … allows for a … reconceptualization of subjectivity" (Anderson 2012, p. 73). On the one hand we voiced our differences, our perspectives from separate vantage points. On the other hand, we worked to 'trouble' (Davies 2000, p. 14) or deconstruct our understandings that changed as a result of making those differences available to each other. In that respectful troubling of assumptions, we were able to integrate them as knowledge that was new-to-us but already present in the group. That integration illustrated the spiral of divergence and convergence.

Where Collaboration Might Fit in an Ontological Framework

"Language is a labyrinth of paths. You approach from one side and know your way about; you approach the same place from another side and no longer know your way about" (Wittgenstein 1953, p. 69e, §203). Collaborative writing is like separately

navigating a language labyrinth as part of a team. It demands an acceptance that what we see from one position is unlike what others see from somewhere else. That is both the challenge and the reward of working together: to make sense of different perspectives so as to better appreciate the design and texture of new co-creations.

Language is at the centre of any collaboration. In language we are placed and positioned by traditions of being and becoming, of subjectivities co-constructed (Davies et al. 2006; Foucault 2000; Jackson and Mazzei 2012), of "making propaganda for one style of thinking as opposed to another" (Wittgenstein 2007, p. 28, §37). Language is instrumental in constituting us through discourse, in shaping our perceptions, in enabling us to recognise within our subjectivities the processes of our becoming (Davies et al. 2013). Yet language is also a maze where we cannot see our context while we are immersed in it, unaware that we are also part of it. Our cognition is formed by language nuances that are both agreed and distributed between us—although awareness of these nuances depends on language fluency. One of us has English as a second language, so to have us all understanding those English-language nuances added another layer of complexity to our engagement. Navigating that complexity validated for us an understanding that "much of human cognition is distributed across many minds" (Bostrom and Sandberg 2009, p. 321) and afforded us ongoing opportunities to make connections between our disparate understandings.

Over time, we may become aware that "the relationship between linguistic forms and their sequential interactional context is reflexive" (Barth-Weingarten 2008, p. 82), and that our language and our context are interpreted according to our distinct subjectivities and the different discourses that are available to us (Richardson and St Pierre 2018). We also recognise that context, under erasure, is subject to the discursive frameworks that represent our understandings. Collaborating links language and discourse in a dance of performativity and context with meanings both evident and hidden; including "the unstable state and instant of language wherein something which must be able to be put into phrases cannot yet be" (Lyotard 1988, p. 13, §22). Our beliefs and emergent subjectivities are continually reconstituted in relationship to language, to each other, and to place. Collaboration illustrates how we are always-becoming, always-being (*under erasure*) (Anderson 2012), our subjectivities created in relationships by language that is "ineradicably metaphorical" (Sarup 1993, p. 46).

Conclusion, Where Some Strands are Interwoven, and Others are Not

At the beginning of our work together we saw ourselves as three disparate individuals with different ideas about knowledge, writing, and what might constitute an ethos of collaboration. As we progressed, we developed mutual understandings of those differences and found common ground. Then the process repeated, with new differences emerging, being understood, and then resolved. At each stage there were

moments of clarity as one or other of us gained new insights, yet we also became aware of how those insights took time to become consolidated into our individual repertoires of thinking. All these changes were held within the safety of our ongoing relationship where we experienced an ethic of care (Noddings 1986) for each other, and recognised the process of collaboration to be greater than completing a writing task. Together, we learnt to recognise difference and divergent thinking. Collaborating in academic writing is about more than just producing a journal article or book chapter. It is also about growing as individuals by being open to new learning and growing together through sharing understandings. It can be challenging, it can be testing, but it can also be extremely worthwhile because of the always-present opportunity for direct peer-review. That is perhaps the greatest reward.

Afterword

As at the beginning, we stand each of us now in different places, each on the threshold of understanding the other through dialogue. "There is neither a first nor a last word and there are no limits to the dialogic context (it extends into the boundless past and the boundless future)" (Bakhtin 1986, p. 170). We have experienced each other's company on a philosophical journey, even as we have followed different paths on that journey. In some places we walked together, at other times we journeyed apart. Our travels were through territory that was new to us, even as along the way we found places that evoked a sense of recognition, of previous encounters. We meandered along the paths less travelled, but those paths have lead us to others that are well trodden. The call now is to understand the territory of collaboration through the perspectives of those who have made it their focus for much longer. That is not to diminish the call of the wild or to seek to impose structure for its own sake. Rather, it is an acknowledgement of where we have come from: embedded in our experience, guided by a spirit of inquiry, and tentative in our judgements. Throughout, our sense of self-other has been reinforced and at the same time placed under erasure as we journeyed from place to place. Where we stand now is not where we were before. That underpins what we have been learning through collaborating.

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Maurice Alford has an ongoing interest in teachers' experiences in schools and the underlying philosophies that such experiences reveal. His current focus on the mechanics and discourses of collaboration is informed by complexity theory and social constructionism. Maurice is currently researching constructs of wellbeing and sustainability as expressions of social realities that have been relocated into increased global uncertainty by the Covid-19 pandemic. Having retired from paid employment as an educator, he is now active in various projects at a community level and maintains engagement with academia primarily through working as a reviewer for the *EPAT* and *PFIE* journals.

Emma McFadyen is a primary school teacher currently completing her Master of Education at Auckland University of Technology. Her research explores a notion of place through the insights and perspectives of educators who partner with schools, and the relevance of their insights and perspectives to school curriculum design. She is interested in ecofeminist pedagogy, which calls for a relational shift in schooling contexts. Emma has worked in a number of innovative learning environments, involving collaborative teaching in New Zealand and China.

Akiko Nozue is an immigrant from Japan and a research student at Massey University in Aotearoa New Zealand. Her current research explores inclusive practice in a Japanese school that is endeavouring to bring an unconventional approach to a traditionally structured context. Having taught in both Japan and New Zealand, she is interested in the discursive influences on educational arrangements, power relationships and anti-determinist pedagogy. Akiko's interest in collaboration extends to facilitating children's cross-cultural communication experiences between several schools in Japan and New Zealand.