

## ***So they can fly... building a community of inquirers***

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Collaboration is a promising mode of human engagement but in order to become more than a passing fad a theoretical structure and framework are needed to guide individuals and groups towards successful collaboration (John-Steiner 1992).

John-Steiner cautioned us over a decade ago to consider the framework in which to enable collaboration to be all it can be, while Fullan (1999) has written evocatively on the meaning of collaboration as a force for renewal; a force for change. Their wisdom, for the most part, has not been integrated into successful structures and processes that facilitate the transformation of teachers' learning communities from knowledge confusion to knowledge fusion. If we are willing to heed the lessons of collaboration, then the re-imagining of schools as knowledge-oriented cultures, as collaborative cultures, is ready to soar with a little help from Web 2.0 social technologies.

This paper will explore the notion of collaboration as a deeper concept than the more superficial enactment of working together in cooperative partnerships. It will consider the factors that work against a deeper commitment to the collaborative process and suggest a framework for developing a community of practice - a community in which collaboration is fundamental to innovation and change. The paper will situate collaboration in a knowledge construction environment, on the premise that a knowledge-based community is a collaborative community. Finally, acknowledging the doctrine of shared creation as posited by Schrage (1995), this paper will provide an example of a community of practice developed along guidelines that ensure cognitive and affective concerns are fundamental in building a knowledge-oriented culture - a collaborative culture.

### ***Collaboration - shared creation***

Collaboration is a powerful force - a promising mode - for human engagement. For Michael Schrage (1990 p6), it is 'an act of shared creation and / or shared discovery' involving significant cognitive involvement including the acceptance of others in contributing toward the creation of shared

understanding. He emphasizes, as a critical factor in collaborative cultures, that collaboration is a process of shared creation generated within a shared space; that part of working together when talking turns to innovative thinking and change. Whether the shared space be virtual or physical, without it, he warns, shared creation is lost. As Avery (2006) notes, '... collaboration doesn't happen in a vacuum. It happens *about* or *on* something and that something is the shared space'.

Collaboration has earned a popular culture status in our contemporary world of unbounded social networks filled with promises of generative knowledge creation and knowledge sharing. Education systems, for example, have promulgated collaboration as the mode in which students and teachers will gain maximum learning and teaching outcomes (see IARTV's *Professional development: A great way to avoid change* 2004, the New South Wales Institute for Teachers *Continuing Professional Development Policy* 2005, DET (NSW)'s *Quality Teaching in New South Wales* 2003). Entering the brave and exciting Web 2.0 world of enabling social technologies, the pressure to *go collaborative* - to get on board, to collaborate or perish - is even stronger. As Thomas Friedman explains (2007 online), 'We are going from a world of vertical silos of command and control to a world where value is created horizontally by who we connect and collaborate with'. *By whom we connect and collaborate with!* Think about this. Two words - connect, collaborate! One needs the other but which one? You can connect to things without collaborating but you cannot collaborate without connecting. It just does not work! Unless we can learn the lessons of collaboration and get them right, it doesn't matter what technology can offer us.

As we jump onto the Web 2.0 bandwagon of social technologies, we should also consider that we have been brought up competitive - to compete, to get the best results, to have the brightest ideas, to hoard our best practices and to copyright everything we have ever given out (Todd 1999). Not only does the flat earth concept put pressure on us to *go global* but it also forces us into knowledge commons where what we know can potentially be owned by anyone. Today we are teachers and leaders in a *copyleft* world of open

learning spaces, open communication modes, open sharing opportunities and - who owns what anyway!

But let's get serious here. Collaboration is a deeper concept than hooking into the nearest blog, sharing ideas on a forum, jointly planning an assessment task or transferring information from me to you. It has a deep intellectual and emotional edge. It relies on the art of transforming tacit knowledge (that which is buried deep inside each person) into explicit knowledge (that which can readily be documented) and this relies on relationships (Nonaka & Takeuchi 1995; Prusak 1997, Tsoukas 1996)!

Relationships centre on people - the one commonality across any interpretation of collaboration. Little people! Big people! Pimple-faced people! Plugged in people! Unplugged people! Bookish people! Myspace people! Facebook people! People! The funny thing about people is that every single person wants to know something yet at the same time wants to rely on their own thinking and ideas and opinions. Every single person wants to share their knowledge in some way; yet they also want to protect their ideas for a number of reasons of which fear of ridicule is often cited as the more pressing (Gibson-Langford 2006). Herein lies an important lesson wrapped around two powerful words - *human emotion*; the heart of collaboration. Sensitivity is required in order to discern the difference between collaboration and its shallow partner, cooperation and this requires partnerships steeped in empathy.

### ***Collaboration - lessons to learn***

Cooperation or collaboration? Mistakenly enacted as collaboration, we tend to plunge headlong into cooperative partnerships with colleagues, assuming we can collaborate because *we* have something to share. In our endeavours to cultivate the collaborative ground, so needed to transform our deeply buried knowledge into a generative and creative sharing of ideas, we fail to focus on human emotions as we develop structures and processes for professedly bringing the dynamism of learning together. We fail to develop that deeper insight necessary in leveraging our colleagues' professional knowledge; we fail

to be sensitive to the collaborative moment. In fact, so often we confuse collaboration with what Perkins (2003) coins *coblaboration* [co-blab-oration] characterised by chaotic patterns of conversations such as over talking, talking because we are near someone, giving information, repeating the obvious for the sake of being social, groupthink or at best, dialogue with no action or new ideas being generated and trialled.

Teachers learn best in a social context. As identified in the research into how teachers' learning communities create, share and use knowledge (Gibson-Langford 2006), it was clear that teachers want to make sense of ideas, to construct real meaning from the information they are viewing, hearing and reading; they want to share, create and use their knowledge; they want to talk - to communicate, to participate in critical dialogue, to cross that first intersection from independence to interdependence toward shared creation. Crossing that first intersection, turning down a different avenue, trying a different boulevard - that's risk taking for many teachers! Thus, the quality of that first experience will in turn determine if the collaborative moment is alive, transforming the relationship from coblaboration to cooperative sharing to collaborative intent. Unfortunately, as Huberman notes (1993, p34), despite this desire to collaborate, the co-operative work amongst teachers is sparse because 'collaborative planning and execution [are] not grafted onto a pre-existing web of dense social interactions'. For teachers to move from coblaboration to collaboration requires planned structures and processes that are dedicated to facilitating shared creation. They need, as Schrage (1995) describes, a table napkin on which to outline, imagine, design, change and work on ideas that matter to each partner. In schools, this requires a belief in teachers' knowledge as valued and valuable (Hord 1997). It requires a safe crossing of that first intersection toward the sizzling potential of shared creation.

That collaboration requires an element of safety begs the question 'Are there rules enabling successful negotiating of that first intersection?' Perhaps there are no rules but certainly there are guiding principles in transforming a person's tacit knowledge into community knowledge. The literature tells us that collaboration is about community growing and that community growing

is based on common principles of engagement (Senge 1990; Shaw 1999). At the intersection between independence and interdependence, there is that quintessential moment where community building and knowledge building intertwine and collective capacity develops as the community grows (Gibson-Langford 2007 in press).

### ***To firstly understand***

As discussed previously, before we can benefit from the richness that a collaborative culture offers, we need to be sensitive to our colleagues as well as to ourselves. We need to understand that colleagues do not want us teaching to them, we do not want colleagues teaching to us. Ideally the boundary between the creation and sharing of knowledge is blurred with egos being subsumed for the greater good. With the understanding that human behaviour is pivotal to the concept of collaboration, we need to focus on the quality of our social interactions and herein lies the hardest part of the collaborative journey. As noted earlier, collaboration requires dense social interactions. If the organisational structure of the school does not work against knowledge silos, an organisation-wide mentality that is counterproductive to the sharing of knowledge (McHugh 2002), the journey toward a collaborative culture will be thwarted.

Perhaps if collaboration was thought of as an art, it would be given serious consideration as a force in shaping the processes and structures in learning communities. It would be regarded as the highest form of human engagement supported by a charter that frees it from destructive and debilitating elements such as groupthink and manipulation as well as from the disconnection and incoherence that arises from poor communication structures. It would be free from the crunch of time stacking up against the drive for productivity (Fullan 1999). It would be understood, not as a *how* thing but as an empathy thing, a faith thing, a trust thing, a genuinely mutual respect thing - as shared creation (Senge 1992, Schrage 1995).

In its purest sense, collaboration is what we humans should be capable of building into our social experiences through sensitivities to and deep

understandings of, the *conditions/principles* that lead to the transformation of tacit knowledge to explicit knowledge. What seems simple to enact, however, is not.

### ***The knowledge reservoir - at capacity or incapacitated?***

What then constitutes a collaborative culture? Leonard-Barton envisaged collaborative cultures as knowledge reservoirs where tacit knowledge transforms to explicit knowledge on a continuous and renewing basis; where the flow of ideas form wellsprings 'constantly replenished with streams of new ideas ... constituting an ever-flowing source of corporate [school] renewal' (1995, p3). This ideal of corporate renewal rests on successful processes and structures that encourage and reward shared creation, the central tenet of learning communities (Senge 1992, Shaw 1999).

In schools, teachers are also learners - they have to be. Whether learning experiences are outside the workplace or within, whether teachers work in close proximity to each other or through the myriad of digital opportunities offered, without a deep analysis of the processes of collaboration, the transformation of knowledge from the personal to the explicit remains at best a cooperative transfer of information with no generative or creative input into the school's knowledge reservoir.

Until such time as we learn the lessons of collaboration, we will continue to teach in cultures that express the dynamics of collaboration as cooperation and collegiality. Whether we are Web 2.0 savvy or remain in our traditional hierarchical structures, professional knowledge will continue to remain buried deep inside each teacher. Dewey (1915) passed the baton up the years, Vygotsky (1978) transformed our understanding of how we learn with his emphasis on knowledge construction, business re-imaged our thinking about schools as learning communities and now our digital natives are more influenced through collaborative learning: they seemed to have learned the lessons we are still struggling to learn. Can we re-image the workplace as a knowledge-oriented culture of shared spaces through integrating social technologies and face to face learning, being mindful of the lessons in

developing a collaborative community? Can we break through the geographically isolated work units and begin to develop those dense social interactions that are the precursors for a strong and vibrant knowledge-oriented culture? Can we replace the knowledge silos with a school-wide knowledge reservoir?

### ***Theoretical structure and framework***

Research on teachers' learning communities (Gibson-Langford 2006) clearly identified the development of a collaborative culture as having deep intellectual and affective dimensions. It sustained the notion that a collaborative culture is deeply rooted in empathy, giving rise to a community of dialogue, which actively works against forces such as groupthink and hierarchical decision making. It endorsed the enactment of deep collaboration as a foundation for not only refreshing the community's wellspring of knowledge but in strengthening community capacity through:

the knowledge, skills, norms, habits and values necessary to adapt, renew, rethink and inform ... [through] sustained, rigorous enquiry and dialogue with curious and committed colleagues leading to informed strategic thinking and action. In short, it [building community capacity/ knowledge flows/] is the enactment of a learning community Shaw (1999, p150).

The research, underpinned by the notion that knowledge creation and knowledge sharing is a mutual quest for *shared creation*, emphasised the position of the individual in collaborative cultures as having little regard for promotion of self and full regard for promotion of the community as a knowledge-oriented culture.

### ***Establishing CAR-TL – lessons learnt***

In working towards the development of a knowledge-oriented community, the journey of collaboration was deeply felt by both authors. We shared a belief in evidence-based practice as being vital to our professional engagement in learning and teaching. Guided by the literature focused on collaborative communities, we posited that a community of practice will evolve if teachers experience working in a knowledge-oriented community. We envisaged our

community as being constructed in such a way that each member would find their own wings to fly. Using the analogy of the barnyard duck leaping a foot or two into the air in an attempt to join the wild migrating birds (Saint-Exupery 2002, p108), we believed that we could *grow* a collaborative community through applying guiding principles of knowledge creation and knowledge sharing (Gibson-Langford 2006). This gave us a theoretical framework on which to build the community, one that recognised both affective and cognitive dimensions of human engagement (see Appendix 1 Table 1).

### **CAR-TL**

Named the Community of Action Researchers - Teacher Librarians (CAR-TL), our community's purpose was to explore, engage in and enjoy action research with the intention of developing intuitive knowledge of practice into intentional evidence-based practice. The notion of shared creation (Schrage 1995) would be pivotal to our construction of this community of researchers because at the back of our minds hung Schrage's (in Connor 2000-2004, online) comment that the 'properties of the shared space shape the quality of the collaboration'. We adopted a clearly defined set of rules governing the shape of the shared space (see Appendix 2 Groundwater-Smith and Sachs). As the community co-ordinators - the lynch-pin to the successful 'planning, building, launching and nurturing [of] virtual learning communities' Nussbaum-Beach (2007 online) - we needed to ensure that our leadership of the community was itself based upon a genuine collaborative relationship (Perkins 2003).

Expressions of interest to join the community were called for and to our surprise we had replies from across Australia as well as internationally. This seemed a clear indication that teachers want to share and want to create knowledge when moral purpose is strong. But now we seriously needed to consider the question 'What type of shared space will enable shared creativity/shared discovery for a community that crosses geographical borders and time zones?'



## **Lesson 1 Constructing the community's infrastructure**

Schrage (in Connor 2000-2004, online) cautions that the infrastructure for developing a collaborative environment needs to be tactically and strategically managed. Consequently, and encapsulating Gibson-Langford's (2006) findings that teachers like to learn together through informal knowledge creation and sharing opportunities characterised by critical dialogue, frequent feedback, critical reflection and appreciative behaviours, we were encouraged to consider a variety of digital and real life environments. We chose a mix of Web 2.0 social technologies and real life events where members could share ideas, comment on each other's work, share images, listen to interviews, upload resources and basically contribute to the knowledge pool of the community. We trialled an infrastructure that relied on a wiki, a blog, group email and face to face events in hope that this mix would encourage intellectual discourse and shared creativity, always mindful of the lesson of informality preferred by teacher learners (Gibson-Langford 2006). According to Haythornthwaite et al. (in Johnson 2001 online) 'the use of a variety of Internet technologies simultaneously [will] help minimize [the] ubiquitous problem' in virtual communities of members fading or withdrawing.

Well aware that an open community can easily corrupt into *coblaboration*, we set up a blog as a space for 'chatting' and organised the wiki as a focus of intellectual endeavour. As a more ubiquitous tool for direct communication with our mostly digital migrants, group email was chosen in which to post invitations to face to face events and to assist those in need of supervised support in using the social technologies. Such an offline facility; a social technology at the 'lowest level of abstraction', was deemed important for individuals as they were able to share their early concerns and build their sense of self-esteem (Gibson-Langford 2006, p199).

Just as we perceived the need to create a shared space for the community where 'collaborators must feel free to play at their activities, to explore and to experiment, without the constraints of a more formal commitment to their positions and ideas' (Schrage in Connor 2000-2004, online), we recognised the need to create a similar space for ourselves, outside the CAR-TL

environment. Because of its versatility, we chose to use another Internet social networking tool to create our shared space. Skype allows synchronous communication via live chat (with text, audio and visual options). The provision of a chat history allowed Skype to become our table napkin and the emoticons, which unbelievably, have the power to express more than words at just the right time, helped us to seek that sense of play, that sense of meaning making, during our deeper conversations. Here, in an environment that grew out of dense social interactions, mutual trust and respect blossomed, rich discussions in which knowledge was shared and created ensued and led to the vision and values on which the community was to be founded. We trialled *Google docs* as a collaborative writing tool and are convinced that both these social networking tools will also prove invaluable to our community of researchers. Bearing in mind teachers' uptake of new ideas is higher depending on the level of abstraction at which they are introduced, all these experiences were critically analysed in terms of the medium and the input/output potential as possible structures to include in our overall infrastructure.

Through serious consideration of the infrastructure for shared creativity and through applying guiding principles in developing collaboration, our community began to fly.

## **Lesson 2 Not everything happens to plan**

Sending an invitation to join in a community does not guarantee participation and even if it did, there is still no guarantee that the participation will be collaborative rather than *coblaborative*. Our blog was the first technology to be jettisoned. Despite our purposeful designing of our community to include a place for chit-chat, we found that our members were gravitating to our wiki space, perhaps because this is where their intellectual artefacts were housed. The informal structure of the wiki could serve as an information commons, where resources are shared across a community, or as a knowledge commons, where the knowledge of the community is not only created but shared. The wiki has now become our community's main communication and working tool, once again supporting the principles of knowledge creation and

knowledge sharing in that the wiki has been accepted by our members as their knowledge commons. They respect their wiki as a non-threatening environment where they can view others' work in progress, make critical comment, add value through helping each other problem-solve, whilst at the same time take advantage of the open pathways for critical dialogue, reflection, praise and a bit of chit-chat.

The entire environment of research creates, for many teachers, a sense of trepidation. Of the twenty-nine members who initially professed a commitment to the community, considerably fewer actively developed their member pages, while many lurked or never did enter the wiki zone. This lack of involvement is something we understand as part of the developing phase of a collaborative culture. The notion that teachers must feel safe, must feel that they have something to contribute, must be able to access ideas at the lowest level of abstraction is well documented in the literature, as is the need for teachers to de-privatise their practice (Louis, Kruse & Marks 1996): hence the decision to choose, as our main medium for shared creativity, our wiki. We were also aware that we needed to continue to encourage our 'less public' members and hence we included several face to face events as well as simply supporting the individual via email. Johnson (2001, online) indicates that a face-to-face component in communities of practice is essential 'especially for initial contact between members' and to maintain rapport between members in a web-based environment that often runs the risk of becoming impersonal.

It is also noted that some of those that committed to the community but have failed to engage with it, did so possibly out of an eagerness to be involved or to be recognised as part of a community of researchers. Our response thus far is to understand, to encourage, and to remain patient as these members eventually buy in or choose to leave, thus giving support for the understanding that collaboration begins with a big measure of empathy.

### **Lesson 3 Serious Play**

At the heart of knowledge-oriented cultures is an appreciation of human nature. Consequently we felt the need to infuse the community with a sense of

play - a sense of fun - as an important ingredient in the human experience toward understanding; in bringing knowledge out into the open. At one of our face to face events, therefore we presented our motif, in the form of a wooden duck, to each participant. It was a surprise that brought smiles to all of us. We began to see duck images populating members' pages and indeed saw evidence of their duck's pride of position in their offices - a symbol, perhaps, of their determination to fly.

Play comes into its own as a powerful socialising process for not only making sense of experiences (the internalisation process of knowledge creation) but as a way of combining new ideas with prior understandings to develop better insight and deeper knowledge. Within the wiki, we uploaded meaningful images, stories and podcasts to engage members through playing, through doing and through reflection in hope that such activities would empower them to lead discussions, demonstrate an exciting idea or share their writing. Increasingly, as this happens, the individual voice in our community is becoming as valuable as the collective voice.

Serious play is also a motive behind planning our forthcoming annual weekend residential research retreat at a location free from the interruptions of daily life; interruptions that all too often blunt our intellectual edge and stifle the flow of creative juices. With the bush at our front door, the retreat will interlace a number of informal, but intensive workshops led by our researcher-in-residence with periods of camaraderie over a glass of wine and a chocolate or two.

#### **Lesson 4 Tyranny of time**

Throughout the development of the community, we have been conscious to ensure that our teachers receive timely and critical feedback, an important principle in developing a collaborative culture, whether online or other. We have modelled our own discourse in the wiki - clearly articulating our thoughts, our changes of plan and even our disagreements – to demonstrate the creative abrasion so necessary for innovative thinking.

We also appreciate the tyranny of time for our members and so we have set no deadlines in which our members must have, for example, their research question developed or their research proposal completed. As long as they are committed to the learning of each other, their membership in our community is welcome and valued. The openness of our online community allows teachers to dip and dive when the time is right for them. It gives us a sense of warm amusement to see our teachers getting really active over two days and then disappear for weeks. Like the migrating duck, we know they will return - with new ideas and ready to share again.

### **And the wonder of it all...**

The critical dialogue between members is producing what Nussbaum-Beach (2007 online) refers to as *knowledge capital* where 'the community becomes a sort of an online brain trust, representing a highly varied accumulation of expertise'. In our community, the development of a brains trust has resulted in the beginnings of a flat community. At the inset, the coordinators initially set up the structures for bringing together a coherent and connected community, provided resources, encouraged participation and interaction. Now the members, feeling respected and empowered, and using their wings to fly are now perhaps taxiing across the knowledge pool, preparing for their first flight.

### **Conclusion**

Collaboration is a deep intellectual and emotional endeavour. It draws its strength through structures and processes that transform tacit knowledge into explicit knowledge. It empowers a community of learners to enter an enriching zone of shared creation/ shared discovery through an understanding that collective capacity relies on the leveraging of tacit knowledge in a spirit of co-creation of knowledge for the greater good: the school's knowledge pool. Learning is an outcome of collaboration and hence the more emphasis on the social nature of learning and the cultivation of a spirit of inquiry, the greater chance that collaboration will foster innovative thinking. Sergiovanni, in describing communities, remarks that:

If our aim is to help students become lifelong learners by cultivating a spirit of inquiry and the capacity for inquiry, then we must provide the same conditions for teachers (1996, p52).

A strong collaborative culture will ensure that leaders invest in the structures that focus on socially shared learning, where each teacher is supported emotionally and intellectually, where unsafe ideas can be expressed in a safe environment, where teachers work interdependently, where a knowledge pool replaces knowledge silos and where teachers feel and are valued for what they know.

The lessons learnt from our establishing of CAR-TL are transportable to a school community in that the infrastructure for creating and sharing knowledge rests on building social relationships through de-privatising teachers' work and developing structures that incorporate a mix of communication media to enable critical dialogue, feedback, encouragement, appreciative behaviours, reflective practice. Oh yes, and of course it rests on the nurturing of sensitivities to the collaborative moment! Collaboration is a powerful force. It is worthy of intense analysis because it has the potential to change the way in which teachers create, share and use their knowledge. It brings to the surface a belief in each teacher that what they know is valuable to the learning community. It is the flight path toward a knowledge-oriented school.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1

**Table 1 Guiding principles for Building Teachers' Learning Community**  
(Linda Gibson-Langford 2006 p. 219)

#### **Knowledge creation**

- Knowledge is created when teachers learn together.
- Knowledge is created when teachers are involved in critical dialogue.
- Knowledge is created when teachers further their study.
- Knowledge is created when teachers are appreciated.
- Knowledge is created when teachers' moral purpose is strong.
- Knowledge is created through serious play and through reflective practice.

#### **Knowledge sharing**

- Teachers prefer to share their knowledge in a social context.
- Teachers share their knowledge with reflective/ critical friends.
- Teachers share their knowledge when feedback is frequent and critical.
- Teachers need time to share their knowledge.
- Teachers' credibility influences how they share their knowledge.
- Teachers prefer informal structures when sharing their knowledge.
- Reflective practice enables knowledge sharing.

#### **Knowledge use**

- Teachers commit to new ideas that demonstrate relative and economic advantage.
- Level of abstraction is important to the adoption of new ideas.
- Teachers adopt new ideas through trialling.
- Observing new ideas in action influences how teachers' use knowledge.
- Teachers use new ideas that are deemed effective

### Appendix 2

#### **Desiderata for Practitioner Research**

(Susan Groundwater-Smith and Nicole Mockler, AARE Conference 200)

- Be prepared for disputation and vigorous debate.
- Shun the veneer of politeness.
- Take the time to take risks.
- Be bold.
- Trust and be trustworthy.
- Seek for action which transforms rather than that which reproduces.
- Remember that there may be more power in critique than in celebration.