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# Afterword: Collaboration, Community-building and 'Brokering'

Debbie Holley

*In this Afterword, Professor Debbie Holley reflects on her own rich professional practice which across the years has involved working with students as partners, collaborating with staff and external stakeholders and innovative and creative (digital) practice. Debbie offers a powerful collaboration from the very beginning of her teaching career, and one from the Covid-19 pandemic. This personal reflective narrative draws together the themes of the book as a whole in a very human and accessible way, providing additional insights and inspiration on how readers can enhance their own practice.*

## Reflections on Collaboration: An Opening

As Professor of Learning Innovation at Bournemouth University, UK, I lead on innovation in research, teaching and professional practice within the Faculty of Health and Social Sciences. Joining academia from industry I approach much of my work as an academic outsider, sustained through friends, allies and networks. I have had an interesting and varied inter-disciplinary journey: working in a Business School; being a Reader in a Teacher Training department; running a central education unit; and now working with colleagues in Nursing Sciences. To build community through collaboration has been the essence of my work, and this chapter shares examples of what I term 'brokerage' (Outram, 2009).

Actively engaging with others means co-creating and sharing, and also participating as equal partners. We all have something to offer. At the heart of my teaching practice is 'working with others' – in particular with students – to motivate and include them in a meaningful dialogue. Speaking but also really listening as we act together. This encompasses the blend between learning inside the classroom, learning within professional practice placements, and scaffolding informal learning outside the university. It is also at the heart of the various research projects in which I have been involved across the years – collaborating with diverse colleagues to produce innovative practice and resources for students. I extend this collaboration, taking real pleasure in sharing educational networks and resources with peers and fellow practitioners, developing their 'circles of influence' as they progress on their own career paths.

When hearing about *Collaboration in Higher Education* – as a book and a wider project in which the editors have engaged – I thought how strongly this reflects my values, and values are an essential part of what it means to be an educator in these challenging times (see Advance HE UKPSF, n.d., the benchmark for educational excellence). The book highlights how staff work with staff – and with students, how students connect with other students, how universities partner with other universities and beyond, and how staff and students connect with other stakeholders. In this *Afterword*, I map my own collaborative journey as an educator and professional, linking it to wider arguments of an HE system that has been increasingly marketized and commodified, becoming more individualistic and competitive, rather than a collaborative or collegiate endeavour. This HE rarely responds positively to the challenges – or opportunities – of Digital Education and WP. I begin therefore with a brief outline of my journey into academia that was always fuelled by my passion for the ‘other’. The key message is the importance of ‘connection’ in challenging university environments, before arguing for more liberatory practice through the collaborative: the genuine value of HE.

## The Business School

My first academic post was within a Business School at a post-92 inner city university dedicated to WP and seeking to improve the experiences of ‘non-traditional’ students. My pedagogic approach was – and still is – to establish a learning environment within which all students can collaborate – inside and outside the classroom. This journey begins pre-entry, continues in induction and goes beyond the first year. Positive initial student experiences are central to retention and completion – they can change lives.

With a predominance of WP students at the university, most combining complex home/work/study lives, our students were offered a skills-based module to help orientate them to HE and academic success. This HE orientation module was often equally loathed by staff and students alike and it was important to reimagine our version into something challenging, creative and inspiring. I also wanted the course to blend face-to-face, online and extramural activities designed to pique student curiosity and motivate them to learn how to learn as they navigated their first assessment challenge together. This not only supported and empowered students but also connected them with each other. Student curiosity was for example raised when, instead of a printed module guide, they were offered a business card in the genre of a ‘Cluedo’ board, which seeded the blend of formal classroom, informal group and online activities that supported the development of cohort identity and active, interactive learning and teamwork.

Further, the assessment strategies and tasks were adapted so students could work together to showcase their learning (see Biggs, 1996, principles of constructive alignment). The final assessment further piqued student curiosity, requiring a visit to the Tate Modern (London, UK), based on which they had to cooperatively design and present an art-based artefact to the rest of the class. This was a new, joint learning

experience for many students, most of whom had little of what academia considers cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986):

Before coming to class, I had never heard of the Tate Modern or Salvador Dali. I really didn't want to go and visit the gallery, but when I got there, I was amazed ... there's a whole world I knew nothing about. Now, coincidentally, I hear about the Tate Modern in the newspapers ... and I also read a novel that mentioned Salvador Dali. It was probably there all the time. This made me wonder how many other things just go right over my head because I don't know about them.

The shift from a teacher-centred to a student-centred set of learning activities transformed the unit. I worked with thirty-five staff to redesign the HE Orientation module for 1,000+ students experiencing narratives of difficulty, isolation and compromise in the 'new cold climate' of HE (Sinfield et al., 2004). We moved large lectures to smaller tutorial groups and engaged students in creative, collaborative, problem-based learning. All this required a shift in staff attitudes. Encountering staff more used to traditional models of delivery as well as those unwilling to deliver 'remedial' programmes to students, I designed and led staff development sessions for colleagues, bringing them on board with the project that collaboratively reinvented the learning, teaching and assessment practices of a previously unloved 'study skills' module:

It was such a joy working with a member of staff who wanted to redesign teaching, learning and assessment for student empowerment.

I loved the creativity, who would have thought a first-year skills unit would now include a staff and student trip to the Tate Modern!

The values underpinning my work with staff and students in the Business School are reflected in the body of work in this book and can particularly be found in the section on *Decolonising Relationships and Partnership for Social Justice*. The case studies, as with this example, reveal educational development as collegiate practice. They bring together new, radical collaborative approaches to teaching and learning, uncovering the development of collaborative pedagogy that enabled authors, students and external entities to position themselves powerfully within academic discourse. These chapters actively connect their ostensibly isolated stories into powerful narratives of inclusion. As with my own experience some twenty years before, other examples constitute staff and students co-designing previously unloved modules and courses into creative and invigorating capstone projects that have impact beyond individuals and university programmes, rippling out locally, nationally and globally.

### Digital Collaboration: Learning Technology, Connection and Humanity

There is a Zulu proverb called Ubuntu that says: 'I am a person through other people. My humanity is tied to yours.' Archbishop Desmond Tutu explained it this way: 'One of the sayings in our country is Ubuntu – the essence of being human.

Ubuntu speaks particularly about the fact that you can't exist as a human being in isolation. It speaks about our interconnectedness ... We think of ourselves far too frequently as just individuals, separated from one another, whereas you are connected and what you do affects the whole world.'

(Archbishop Desmond Tutu from Metz, 2017)

HE is always changing but in 2020 everything changed radically with the emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic that moved university teaching, learning and assessment online, overnight. Whilst previously the 'digital revolution' was driven by policy and management, and thus perhaps was treated with caution (see for example Morley & Carmichael, 2020), suddenly there was a distributed network of academics playing, experimenting and challenging what Digital Education could and should be. There are now many examples of how wonderfully designed, collaborative and shared technologies offer students those liberatory places and spaces we wish for them, without the 'technostress' baggage that our standard/normative practices often unknowingly design in (Holley & Biggins, 2021).

This was crowd-sourced experimentation for empowering technology enhanced learning at its best: building a vision from the ground up. Unfettered by the limitations of policy drivers and strategic goals, academics just had to get on and do it, and share it. For example, the Covid-19 Higher Education Literature Database (CHELD) became an open access repository for 138 manuscripts published between 1 January 2020 and 30 June 2020 (Butler-Henderson et al., 2020; 2021). This collection set out to map an emergent field and capture the contributions academics were making to our understanding that Covid-19 brought about the real potential of Digital Education, and to highlight cross-cutting themes. This open-access sharing of 'best practice' and current research brought not only researchers together but academics more generally: a network was created (Castells, 2004; Wenger, 1997).

This rapid and collegiate response to the digital reality and innovation launched by the pandemic is exemplified within my work in Nursing Sciences. Here we also needed to move our dedicated nursing academics, and our students, online 'in a hurry' and this ahead of the rest of the University. In this medical emergency, our student nurses were in demand, with requests to graduate and enter the workforce – immediately. The potential conflict was that high-quality nursing teaching that is typically developmental, taking place over time and in various collaborative ways was 'fast tracked'. Despite the challenging situation and calls for changing our training, we wanted to maintain high teaching standards for the students – those nurses – to ensure exceptionally high quality for their patients. Our staff pride themselves on delivering a high level of content knowledge and skills to trainee nurses, with an approach very much in Wenger's (1997) Community of Practice model and founded on a 'humanization' curriculum led by BU Nursing academics (Todres et al., 2009).

The faculty learning technologist and I collaborated to identify potential solutions. We wanted to offer a safe hybrid 'place' where staff could come together overcoming their own apprehension through collaboration and 'place-binding' at the intersection of the paths people create and follow in their daily lives (Ingold, 2011, in Ellis & Goodyear, 2016; and also Cook & Holley, 2022). Thus the daily *Coronavirus Teachinar* was launched. The *Teachinar* adopted a radio chat show format, with participants free

to listen, share or contribute – and again, at a place and time of their own choosing – to podcasts and recordings designed to share good digital practice and enable access to critical information. A different kind of collaborative network was born. Pandemic, or no pandemic, technologies offer us different options, and this very much echoes the *Creative and Digital Partnerships* section, with students and faculty supporting each other online, building community for well-being and sharing stories and histories of success and resilience. The interconnectiveness of a network developing, flowing humanely, especially in a time of crisis, embodies the ethos of Ubuntu, the humanity towards others – something we all need to consider when working with others.

## Concluding Thoughts

Learning is often presented as an individualistic and even competitive pursuit, much like university teaching, and a wholesale switch to online can exacerbate this. However, learning and teaching with others, no matter the circumstances, is empowering when collaboration is the starting point. My ethos is both student- and staff-centred: I celebrate students (and staff as students) and what they bring. I aim to empower students in and out of the classroom; my practice considers lifelong learning as a process supported by practice that lights a spark in the heart of the learner. I work with colleagues to develop communities of practice across the university and beyond: my urge to network and act in a collegiate manner brings together learning developers, discipline academics, librarians, technicians, members of the public and other ‘stakeholders’ to co-create spaces to co-explore with students, and for all of us to travel the journey together.

As exemplified by the stories of hope in *Collaboration in Higher Education*, the ‘brave new university’ would benefit from exploring its own practices through a collaborative lens. There is potential when we work together, when practice emerges from ground up experimentation, when we embrace collaborative multimodal interaction and mixed social networks, and all with a truly student-centred focus. The supercomplexity of the world, of our students’ lives and of the problems that we need to face and tackle together requires a humanizing approach to ‘scaling at speed’ (Holley et al., 2020) requiring:

- Staff collaborations to enhance teaching and learning
- Students as partners
- Collaborations with stakeholders
- Creative and digital partnerships
- Decolonizing relationships
- Reflections on collaboration.

Exactly what this inspiring book offers to its readers – illuminated and highlighted by all the case studies and shared through the local, national and international mutual learning projects they represent. This book clearly articulates the ways in which we can all – student community, discipline staff, learning developers, technologists, artists and beyond – come together to reframe these as spaces of agency and power.

Collaboration is always important in teaching in a humane context; we are interdependent beings. It is especially important to nurture collaborative working practices when developing teaching and learning online. As mentor, the advice I offer students and staff ‘on becoming’ an academic can be summarized as:

You learn how to become academic over time and through the range of practices that you engage with through your time in university, developing competencies that you only become aware of and recognise at the end of that journey.

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