

## **Researchers are learners too: collaboration in research on workplace learning**

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### **Abstract**

Research in workplace learning needs to take into account the reflexive nature of researchers' learning. The paper explores how a research team examined their own learning and collaboration through a study of transcripts of interactions between them during planning meetings and reflections upon them. It identifies implications for collaboration and learning about workplace learning. A key finding was that experienced researchers and adult educators had difficulty legitimising a focus on their own workplace learning. This points to the problems likely to arise in getting others, who do not have a discourse of learning readily available to them, to take informal workplace learning seriously.

**Keywords:** workplace learning, collaborative research, informal learning, reflexive practice.

### **Introduction**

Increasingly, workplace learning is being subjected to the scrutiny of researchers. Researchers who had once engaged in investigations of learning in courses are focusing now on learning outside formal educational settings. They espouse the values of collaboration, of reflexivity and of engagement, but they run the risk of undermining their own principles if they treat learning as if it were a property of those they investigate rather than as something they are co-creating. Taking their own learning into account is not an act of indulgence, but a necessary feature of respect for the workplace.

This paper explores a collaborative research partnership in which the authors are currently involved. The research aims to determine the extent and nature of the significance of informal learning and its contribution to organisational performance. The partnership involves two Australian educational institutions, University of Technology, Sydney (UTS) and Department of Education and Training (DET). DET is a very large state government department responsible for the state school and vocational education

system of New South Wales. Together UTS and DET obtained an Australian Research Council grant as part of the Strategic Partnerships with Industry - Research and Training (SPIRT) program.

The research is the first major Australian study into the embedded learning practices of a large organisation—the New South Wales Department of Education and Training (DET). It aims to determine the extent and nature of such learning, and its contribution to organizational performance. It is anticipated that the research outcomes will lead to a reappraisal of expenditure on learning and its impact on the performance of organizations.

In the spirit of the ‘work as learning’ focus of the research, we are collectively using the research process as an opportunity to explore the way we, as researchers, are workplace learners and the implications this has for the ways we do research with other workplace learners. This exploration, as exemplified in this paper, involves a reflexive commentary on our own collaborative research practices leading to the development of a case study on ‘real’ people doing collaborative research in a particular socio-cultural context. Our commentary is confined to the initial planning stage, where the UTS researchers and the DET investigators plan the data collection phase which includes establishing relationship with the ‘research sites’, the managers and the work teams.

Our focus on our learning about collaborative processes is timely. The drive to collaborate has become a pervasive feature of contemporary research. Collaboration is now a term that has come to have very positive connotations. Researchers are encouraged to engage with external partners and the contexts they are working in as well as their concerns and issues. With an emphasis on collaboration, research is seen as relevant and understanding of research priorities. It is within this context that we explore the reality of such collaborations, what is involved in them and how are they made to work.

In our engagement with this contemporary emphasis on collaboration, we also need to acknowledge that collaborative research is not a new phenomenon. Indeed as experienced researchers we have frequently worked collaboratively with research partners outside our own workplaces. However we have also recognised that the current discourses within which collaborative research is located signify a substantial shift in its meanings and practices. While in earlier decades the academy had a relationship with the ‘real’ world, this relationship was one of its own choosing and more or less on its own terms. As indicated by many other writers (eg. Gibbons et al, 1994; Stronach and MacLure; 1999; Usher, 2000) the political, social and economic conditions in which universities now do research is very different. These different conditions, we believe, are not a neutral backdrop to our collaborative work but contribute to the various struggles and tensions that we experience.

The paper begins with an account of how we have positioned ourselves as workplace learners as we engage in a collaborative process focusing of workplace learning. We then describe the various reflexive practices that we have used in order to ‘uncover’ our own learning. Finally we tentatively consider what we have learnt. This is in relation to a broader goal of understanding collaborative research practices in the contemporary

context as well as in terms of the way our reflexive practices have informed the research progress of our overall research project.

### **Positioning ourselves as workplace learners**

Although our research was investigating the relationship of informal learning and organisational performance, during the negotiations of the research partnership we did not position ourselves as workplace learners. Indeed there is no evidence of such a positioning in the grant application. But this was not an oversight. Such a positioning is outside the discourses that frame the writing of grant applications. Indeed positioning ourselves as workplace learners is unlikely to have supported our application. Understandably, our interest was to maximise our chances of being successful and in order to do so we needed to position ourselves within the discourses that were valued within the grant application context. This required us to take on an ‘expert’ position — in this case (perhaps ironically) foregrounding an expertise in workplace learning. To even hint that we were also learners would not have been in our best interests.

Yet once our grant had been approved, we were no longer tied into the grant application discourse. This liberation enabled us to operate within other sets of discourses — in other words we were able to think about ourselves in other ways. Indeed as we planned the initial phases of the research an interest in our learning emerged. As researchers and educators with a scholarly interest in workplace learning, we were conscious that our work in this research was to be a learning experience. Early in the process, we talked about the learning that was likely to unfold as the project developed. However we spoke about this only in vague terms. We did not articulate what our learning goals were nor what it was that we would be learning. Indeed we did not consider using the conceptual framework that we had designed for the research as a tool for investigating the learning of others. This is in spite of the fact that this framework explicitly draws attention to variations in learning practices at work, the relationship of individual and organisational learning, the social learning that occurs in work relationships and the way organisational cultures value particular kinds of learning. In other words initially we just recognised that, in general terms, our work would incidentally be a learning experience. We knew we would be learning about how other people learn and about the complexities of doing collaborative research. But we did not consider ourselves or our learning as objects of study. As practicing adult educators we did nevertheless discuss the possibility of keeping a learning journal.

Three months into the research our learning has become an object of study. While none of us kept a journal, we have moved from being incidental learners. We have consciously engaged in a number of reflexive practices that have intentionally and ‘formally’ uncovered our learning. These include:

- a critique of existing collaborative research models and the beginning of a reconceptualisation of collaborative research
- an analysis of the various collaborative layers and relationships in the project.
- the transcribing and analysis of tape recordings of our planning meetings.
- the writing of individual stories of our experiences of working collaboratively.

So what was the turning point? Why did we turn our working experiences in the collaborative research project into an object of study, that is, into learning experiences that could be organised, managed, analysed and theorised? Furthermore, have we learnt something that can inform our understandings of work as learning that can influence the progress of the unfolding project? The responses to these questions are complex ones.

As mentioned above, once we were outside the application process boundaries, we were able to enter sets of discourses that allowed us to position ourselves as workplace learners. The naming of our work practices as a learning experience signalled the beginning of the shift. It led to a brief consideration of what devices could be used to facilitate this learning. But the initial choice of keeping a learning journal as such a device was not taken up. The reason for this is that this device, as a stand alone, did not provide us with enough motivation. It was an additional individual activity that was an end in itself. It was not a performance that was directly linked to our more pressing project needs, such as, finalising the complex contractual details and negotiating our entry into the work sites. Nor was it a performance that was connected to the accountabilities related to our organisational responsibilities as researchers and educators. No doubt as a reflexive practice the learning journal could have facilitated our individual learning. Yet the learning journal, as a text without an audience or an obvious link to the research or our organisational goals, was an activity that could be easily overlooked in our already overloaded working lives.

However professional matters intervened. Two international conferences (in the UK and Canada) called for the submission of abstracts for papers. As researchers, one of our required performances is our participation in international academic and professional communities and as the focus of the research was relevant, the research team agreed to respond to the calls. In tune with the collaboration process, we, the university researchers (from UTS) and the industry researchers (from DET), co-authored this paper.

As our research was still in its early stages, the papers could not be used as a site to report on our progress in uncovering learning of the employees of the organisation we were studying. A decision was made to use the papers as an opportunity to explore the research practices involved in collaborative projects and this focus led to a consideration of ourselves as learners. The papers gave the team a shared objective – a common instrumental focus that would work towards both individual and organisational goals. We gave ourselves a project within the project – to reflect on our collaborative process, not for its own sake, but to theorise it for conference papers. As these types of performances are part of our public face, they provided a focus and motivation for investigating our work practices as learning ones. The writing of conference papers became an integral part of our work schedules. This meant that the taking up of reflexive devices that focused on our learning was no longer seen as irrelevant or superfluous to our working performances. Indeed we allocated time during our project planning meetings to ‘work’ on our learning with a focus on the writing of the papers.

An important additional factor in the writing of this paper is the fact that conference papers, as a legitimate professional ‘performance’, have provided not only an opportunity to formally consider ourselves as workplace learners, but they have also located these performances within a particular kind of discourse. The conferences are academic ones

and, conveniently, are about the new relationships between knowledge, work and learning. As such, we, the writers, have a need to position ourselves as researchers and educators engaged in these relationships as both practitioners and scholars. This complex dual role has informed the nature of the reflexive devices that we have taken on in the uncovering of our learning and the way we write about them. Furthermore this dual role has also informed our interest in using our reflections to productively assist in the progress of the project as well as contribute to the development of a collaborative research model.

The following commentary attempts to articulate the various ways we have combined our multiple roles. This has involved engaging with our own working practices to maximise our learning — this is in terms of our contributions to theorising collaborative research practices and in terms of the immediate needs of the project. The sections are organised around each of the various reflexive practices and their learning focus.

### **Critiquing existing collaborative research models**

Our efforts to develop a frame for the broad social, economic and political changes that are impacting on our work, have been accompanied by our interest in exploring the research models that support collaborative research. Our focus has been on conceptualisations that work with the complexities of government, industry and university research partnerships.

Our inquiry reveals a considerable number of existing research practices that are frequently drawn upon. These practices include participatory research, action research, collaborative inquiry and experiential research. Our initial efforts to conceptualise collaborative research has taken account of these various practices. We have drawn upon a number of theoretical understandings that position ‘collaboration’ in a particular way. One of these is the work on new modes of knowledge production where writers such as Gibbons et al (1994) draw attention to changes in researcher performances and accountabilities as institutional conditions drive cross-institutional partnerships. In this work we observe how academics now struggle with the various stakes involved in doing ‘relevant’ and ‘useful’ research in the site of application.

For our purposes another relevant theoretical framing is the humanistic approach as exemplified in the writing of Rowan (1981). In this work he argues against the ‘alienation’ of research subjects that is inevitable when subjects are treated only as fragments, particularly when only certain kinds of behaviours of subjects are counted. In his model of collaboration he rejects any idealisation of collaboration. This rejection acknowledges that in most practical situations collaboration has to take into account that all parties will have different, and at times contested, stakes in the process and the outcomes.

A third theoretical understanding that is influencing our speculations is that adopted by post-structural researchers. This approach challenges the separability of the researcher and the researched and any notion of an independence of knowledge produced from its socio-cultural site and practices (Kuhn, 1979; Usher, 1997). In post-structural terms, knowledge is contingent, contextual, and linked to power. Also relevant to our conceptual

interests is the understanding of the centrality of language, discourses and texts in the construction of knowledge (Lee & Poynton, 2000).

Drawing on these approaches a conceptualisation might be one that challenges conventional ideas about when the collaboration begins and ends (eg. in SPIRT grants evidence of collaboration that precedes the research is a requirement in the application process). Importantly also, this reconceptualisation needs to draw attention to the different layers of collaboration. That is, it needs to engage with the multiple relationships, the different stakes and the multiple points of contact, including during the negotiation of the partnership, the writing of the application, the planning stage as well as during the project itself and in the dissemination of the outcomes. And also with the various communication and planning strategies that work best given the various (and at times contradictory) interests of the partners.

In order to make the connection between abstract ideas and our collaborative research practices we began with the identification of the various layers and relationships in our own research project. In the project, in the broadest sense, the key collaborative relationships are between:

- UTS and DET investigators (the co-authors)
- UTS and DET investigators and Institute Management (the Institutes run networks of technical and further education colleges in a particular geographical area)
- UTS and DET investigators and staff at worksites (within the Institutes/colleges)

In our consideration of what collaboration means at each level, taking account of the writing of Rowan (1981) we have tentatively identified the various stakes of each of the collaborators, as follows (The descriptions of the stakes of the UTS Researchers & the DET Investigators draw on the personal narratives written by each, while the descriptions of the Institute Management & Staff at worksites are based on our interpretation of their positions):

*UTS Researchers (from the Faculty of Education)*

They want to engage in research which leads to insights into workplace learning and how it is fostered in a way which can withstand critical peer scrutiny in the international academic community as well as in professional communities. They want to maintain and enhance a productive working relationship with DET and collaboration with Institutes for this project and to enhance the standing of UTS for future research and collaboration.

*DET Investigators (from the Professional Development Network)*

They want to be involved in research that links directly to their core business of learning and professional development. They would like the outcomes of the research to better position them in looking at work-based learning strategies. They want outcomes that can be used for professional development purposes in DET. They want to form closer relationships with the institutes and to be responsive to the needs of their Institute clients.

*Institute Management*

They are likely to want to be involved in cutting edge innovations that will enhance their standing with the community they serve, the department and the vocational education and

training sector generally. They want practical outcomes that will improve learning for their staff in cost efficient ways.

#### *Staff in worksites*

There is likely to be a high variation in their motivation for their involvement in the research. We anticipate a mixture of personal ambition, commitment to their work and awareness of their positioning within their organisation. Variation will in part be dependent on the cohesiveness of the workgroup and the extent of their interests.

#### *All parties*

They will have an interest in how their participation in the project is represented to the various audiences. These include the Government and academic & professional communities. There may be some resistance if the research is understood to be one of surveillance involving excessive scrutiny.

### **Analyzing planning sessions and stories of our experience of working collaboratively**

In order to learn more about the realities of working in these complex relationships, we produced two sets of texts. These are additional to the many other texts that have been produced in order to operationalise the research project. The first set are transcriptions of tape recordings of our planning meetings (language in action texts) and the second set are texts that are reflections on our practices. This second set involved writing personal narratives on our experiences of this initial collaborative process. The production and analysis of these texts began with an assumption of the importance of the project planning process as one of the formative processes that help to bring together UTS researchers and DET investigators.

Together we negotiated the framing of the analysis around the areas that we considered to be critical ones. These provided a guide for the writing of each of our stories and included understandings about:

- how the four individuals representing two institutions build a partnership.
- the different strengths of each of the partners and their complementarity regarding the partnership and how these are spoken about
- the power relationships between the collaborators and whether or not there was any evidence of hierarchy within the partnership.
- how differences are negotiated.
- how the nature of project itself (uncovering workplace learning) influences the way researchers position themselves in the research and negotiate the planning.

An important, while not unexpected, finding in the analysis of the tapescripts was the enormous amount of interpersonal work that happens in the setting up stage of the project. These interpersonal connections are evident in the language choices that both signal and construct an involvement in shared worlds. This includes:

- the use of humour,
- the use of chat about personal details of lives outside the project,
- the constant use of 'we' foregrounding the group identity rather than an individualised one,
- the reference to our past history to suggest group cohesion (ie. raising the topic of previous joint work),

- the use of clauses that demonstrate our appreciation of others' suggestions (eg. *That's a really good point. That would be fabulous.*),
- the use of interpersonal adjuncts (eg. *I think, kind of, I am just, you know*) which indicates that a proposition is open to negotiation.

The effectiveness of these language practices (and the accompanying 'comfort' with each other) is also evident in the way the researchers take risks in raising some of the various contradictions and dilemmas of the project. For example at one meeting we remind ourselves of the risks in uncovering informal learning. We talk about the *dark side of uncovering(learning) in terms of turning it into another managed learning process ... destroying the phenomenon that we are trying to uncover ... intervention change(s) its characteristics*. We also speak of issues related to our concern with our own engagement with managerial discourses in the research proposal, particularly in relation to linking productivity gains to uncovering learning.

The tapescripts reveal interesting issues around power relations. This is evident not so much through an analysis of the clauses or phrases but rather through a consideration of the location of the meetings (at UTS) and the particular roles of the researchers in the meetings. The authority of the academics could, to a certain degree, be embodied in these structural arrangements. For example the chief investigator (an academic) chairs planning meetings, and while the agenda is discussed and open to change, the chair has formulated it and also initiates and closes each of the items.

The negotiation of differences is revealed in several places. An important example is a discussion on the wording of a post-graduate research scholarship advertisement to be placed in the media. The industry partner picks up and challenges the name of the project. The discussion unfolds into one that explores a key issue within the research, ie., whether or not it is about learning in the public sector, about learning in an educational institution and the significance of these context specificities.

In the analysis of the stories, rather than examine the grammatical realisations in the texts, we considered the similar and different ways the writers positioned themselves around the areas that we had identified as important in collaborative work — 'shared expectations of this project' and 'partnership building'.

Each researcher expresses strongly the way their involvement in the project has individual and organisational gains. In individual terms, for each researcher the focus of the project links in with their individual 'academic' interests (both workplace learning and working collaboratively with those outside their own work environment). In organisational terms, all researchers point to a number of values. There are institutional rewards for winning a government funded project and there are professional rewards for the anticipated new knowledge (*cutting edge*) to be produced through this 'complementary' partnership (ie. *the development of new ways and approaches of looking at things*). There is also a shared expectation that this project is likely to lead to further collaborations.

All collaborators expressed very strong views on the factors that contribute to the building of an effective partnership. A critical factor is considered to be 'getting on' with



people. This is confirmed in the analysis of the tapescripts of the meetings that foregrounded the role of interpersonal relationships. But in the stories ‘getting on’ is connected to the number of common characteristics of each of the institutions and the partners. This includes the fact that both institutions are in the same industry, both are large corporatising bureaucracies and the fact that there is a *multi-layered history between adult education at UTS and the TAFE part of DET* — institutionally and between individuals on this project. Reference is also made in the stories to *a common commitment to learning and professional development* where the two organisations bring together academics and practitioners, pooling their talents and resources to embark upon an investigation that would not be possible as individual organisations. Connected to the overlapping interests is a previously unstated shared goal of each of the researchers, that is, each has a desire to explore the research process and each understands themselves as a workplace learner.

Interestingly there are different views on the power relations of the DET and UTS research team and on whether there is a hierarchy within the partnership. While the DET partners feel it is not an issue, the UTS partners do suggesting that there is an implicit hierarchy in the way the academics are seen as the ‘research experts’, while the industry partners have institutional knowledge as well as a vital access and support role.

Several comments are made that acknowledge that the relationship between the UTS and DET researchers is only one of the many relationships that will be encountered. There is an anticipation that the remaining layers may present more complexity and conflict. Nevertheless it is also thought that this initial building of a ‘friendly and cooperative relationship’ will enable the ‘team’ to confront some of the ‘tricky’ issues.

### **Learning about collaboration**

What have learnt from our reflections on this collaboration? It is apparent at this stage of our partnership that any conceptualisation of collaboration in research partnership should include consideration of the following:

- The collaborative cycle builds on connections between the partners before the project.
- Collaboration is a messy business and we as researchers, should not be trapped by an idealisation of it.
- There are many layers of collaboration and there are many relationships within each. While each involves various practices, at the same time they are not discrete.
- Building collaborative relationships is an ongoing process. The building of this relationship doesn’t end with the success of the application nor at the end of the planning stage.
- Building in reflexive processes (both individual and group) can benefit the collaborative process. These processes work well when the partners are involved in common reflexive tasks – with deadlines, such as conference papers.
- Collaboration works best when everyone has a stake in it and this stake has both personal and organisational dimensions.

In summary, collaboration is a dynamic process that has to be reinvented at each stage of development. It involves attending to personal relationships, the dynamics of working groups and the stakes of the various partners. It is also highly relational: particular

strategies which work in one context will not be applicable in another. It does have its particular satisfactions though and can lead to outcomes to which all parties can subscribe. In terms of our research project we know that each layer of collaboration will involve new sets of personal relationships a

### **Learning about workplace learning**

What have we learnt about workplace learning that may influence our investigations of workplace learning and the relationship of informal learning and organisational performance?

Our first lesson was a surprising one. We discovered that we had to find a way of legitimising a focus on our own learning within our own workplace. We had to contrive ways of making our learning a serious concern. This was a shocking realisation. After all we were reputedly experts on workplace learning, we had the vocabulary of learning at our fingertips, we knew any number of strategies to foster learning at work and we accepted it as an important concern. Nevertheless, we experienced resistance in ourselves in making it a focus of attention and some awkwardness in engaging in the processes involved. While we cannot pretend that this involved a great struggle on our parts, without the legitimising device of constructing conference papers which gave us peripheral participation in it as an acceptable professional act, it might never have occurred.

The second was similarly disconcerting. It showed that the two sets of researchers held different assumptions about what it was acceptable to speak publicly about our learning. These differences arose from the different workplace cultures of the UTS and DET researchers. This meant there was some discomfort in collective reflexivity. The naming and writing down of what was revealed in the transcripts was normal business to the university researchers, but transgressive for those who worked in a culture of careful approvals of anything disclosed to the public or of anything that might disturb the relationships with their own client base.

That we were able to overcome these constraints, points to the third outcome from our self study. Talking, and especially writing, about our learning required a sense of personal safety and trust in those with whom one was working. Without that trust, this paper would not have been possible. Only a little less of it would have inhibited the process entirely at an early stage. We were able to generate safety within the team, but as we looked around at our own workplaces we could see far less scope for the building of trust than is necessary for open discussions of one's own learning at work to become normal business.

### **Conclusion**

Workplace learning is influenced by all the personal, cultural and contextual features that affect everything that occurs at work. It is, potentially, inhibited by more of these factors than many other aspects of work. It needs legitimising even in workplaces where it would appear to be the *raison d'être*. It involves reflexivity, disclosure and risk-taking, features it cannot be assumed are fostered in any given workplace.

When we enter into other workplaces we cannot expect people to be any more virtuous, committed or revealing than ourselves. Uncovering learning in the workplace, while appearing benign, is not an activity in which people will necessarily be overjoyed to participate.

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