

‘Empowered Empathetic Encounters’: a key success factor in the building of effective international inter-institutional collaboration

In this brief article we propose the idea of ‘Empowered Empathetic Encounters’ as a foundation and maintenance factor for building successful, sustainable international inter-institutional collaborations. Our work has its origins in a research project in which we as colleagues from South Africa, Ireland and the United States met as partners. Our research method and contribution to the literature in this regard is a combination of personal and collective experiences and the analysis of these in the context of the existing literature. In this way, we wish to engage in a process of ‘thinking the cultural through the self’ (Probyn, 1993) and draw on Couldry (2000), Probyn (1993), Blake and Masschelein (2003) and Mann (2008), who describe what we are trying to do as ‘thinking theory *through*’ one’s own experience (Mann 2008, 10 - emphasis in original). We define ‘empowered empathetic encounters’ as the supported pivotal occasions where one meets with colleagues, with whom one wishes to collaborate, in face-to-face settings to try to understand, in a meaningful way, each other’s concerns and what it means to live and work in each other’s contexts. We suggest that engaged encounters of this nature can provide the bedrock for successful, long-term collaboration and particularly for any international partnership attempting to address histories of asymmetrical power relations.

Starting point: our concerns, lives and work

As collaborators, we first met in 2011 at a research seminar in the United States where we worked on a secluded university campus living, eating, and socializing in the dormitories for one week each summer over a three-year period. We discovered that our three institutions - the University of Johannesburg in South Africa; George Washington University in the United States; and the National University of Ireland, Maynooth in Ireland - were very different in scope, scale, resources, staff, student

numbers and stakeholder demands. All of us had worked on various international collaborations prior to this meeting; however, this encounter was significant in several ways which led us to reflect deeply upon it and to enquire into its nature.

Collaboration in higher education globally, nationally, and institutionally

Collaboration is an increasingly prominent feature of contemporary higher education for a variety of reasons, including financial incentives, prestige, increased course offerings, additional research opportunities and national and inter-governmental policy (Flora and Hirt, 2010; Stein and Short, 2001; Eckel and Hartley, 2008; UNESCO, 1998; European Commission, 2013). In Southern Africa, international partnerships are recognized as important sources of “revitalization” of the higher education sector (SARUVA Vice Chancellors Leadership Dialogue, 2012) and South Africa has a strong tradition of using partnerships to overcome challenges and achieve goals and growth (Maistry, 2008; Ilemobade and Ballim, 2005; le Grange, 2000; Mwaniki, 2010). Synthesizing some of the literature in this area, albeit inadequately in this short piece, characteristics of collaboration emerge which include, amongst other elements, its essential, challenging, time-consuming, values-driven, person-dependent, goal-orientated nature (Stein and Short, 2001; Louie et al., 2003; Creamer, 2004; Cassidy et al., 2008; Bozalek et al., 2008; Christie et al., 2007; Pretorius, 2001; Leibowitz et al., 2010; Furco and Moely, 2012; Mahlomaholo, 2010; Boyer, 1990; Waghid, 2007; Carolissen et al., 2011). We add to these our voice.

Empowered Empathetic Encounters – key principles

We believe that human relationships are at the centre of collaboration and these are built through encounters which are empowered and empathetic. With regards the former, while the values of liberation and freedom are inherent, we focus here on the pragmatic nature of the term i.e. where one is

enabled in a variety of ways to achieve a specific shared purpose or goal e.g. through financial support; time; space and conducive environment; support from senior management; logistics support; authority and access etc.

The second element of our approach is its 'empathetic' quality where we viewed our work through the lenses of Rogers (1983), Dewey (1963), Ramsden (1992), Noddings (1992) and Blackie et al. (2010). We see empathy as the point in the collaboration where we try to understand, build solidarity with, and internalize the perspectives of colleagues living and working in very different contexts. An empathetic approach is crucial for those collaborations that hope to bridge north-south divides where careful listening, questioning, conversation and reflection, a desire to understand, and ultimately friendship help us to know what it means to live and work in each other's context.

These are the qualities of our 'encounters' which are, in turn, of the face-to-face variety in this model. The choice of term is deliberate and designed to encapsulate that almost magical quality of collaboration which arises from meeting with like-minded individuals to discover a way of working which is enriching personally and professionally, rich with conversation and laughter, and alert to articulated concerns and our emotional and intellectual reactions to them.

Why 'empowered empathetic encounters' might matter

Margaret Wheatley advises that those who want to affect change have to be 'be brave enough to start a conversation that matters' (2002: 116). In what Barnett calls a world of super-complexity 'the way forward lies in construing and enacting a pedagogy for human beings' (2012: 65). For us, Barnett reinforces the importance of empowerment and empathy by emphasizing the value of qualities such as carefulness, thoughtfulness, humility, criticality, receptiveness, resilience, courage and stillness. When

one is considering relationships and action towards change, how one feels about such work cannot be ignored.

In our contexts, we are attempting to address problems, local and global, which are complex. We understand that collaboration offers greater potential for us to find solutions through the transformative potential of education and that the urgency of the situation demands that we respond collectively. We join in chorus with Wheatley who urges us to: 'Trust that meaningful conversations can change your world' (2002: 116). We add our voices to those of others through empowered empathetic encounters and suggest that meaningful collaboration is more than agenda driven or strategically significant; it is a demonstration of who we are, what we believe and how we wish to be counted.

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