

Individual in a large scale collaboration – being a small piece in a big puzzle (0237)

The changing landscape of academia

This paper explores the experience of being part of large scale collaboration in the Higher Education (HE) setting in the UK. There is an increased trend of collaborative working in education, as well as health and social care settings, in UK and further afield (Sloper, 2004). Collaborations are seen as a way of overcoming economic challenges universities are facing. To understand the role individual perceives themselves to have in collaboration can be helpful in order to plan future collaboration in a way that maximises the benefit for both the individual and the collaboration.

Collaboration is both a means to addressing an issue and an opportunity to work together with people differing expertise (D'Amour, Ferrada-Videla, Rodriguez, & Beaulieu, 2005). Collaborations are encouraged by government and funding bodies, indeed they are believed to be an effective way of achieving what one could not accomplish alone. However, Stein and Short (2001) highlighted the lack of research done in a higher education setting on collaborative work; traditionally collaboration in HE setting has been largely been scholarly based research exercise between colleagues rather than institutions coming together to face the challenges of the changing landscape of academia. It is widely recognised that economic, political and professional drivers impact organisations decision to collaborate (Munro & Russell, 2007). More than ever before, universities need to be collegiate to enable them to have a competitive edge in the globalising HE. The organisation have reasons for their involvement but for the individual, who will be the face of the organisation in the collaboration, there has to be favourably balanced cost benefit relationship to encourage involvement (El Ansari & Phillips, 2001). In order to sustain collaboration all partners need to perceive to receive benefits from their involvement (Connolly, Jones, & Jones, 2007).

The study setting

My intention in this paper is to explore the individual experience in a collaborative setting. On the whole organisational theorists have focused on the big picture of what collaboration is, however there is more that can be learnt from focusing on the individual who is at the coalface of the collaboration - their aspirations, moments of ecstasy and depths of desperation.

The setting of this study is CETL4HealthNE, a multi-layered organisation with nine partner organisations from HE and National Health Service (NHS) located in the North East of England. The collaboration focused on design and delivery of innovative education initiatives across a range of health professions in the region. It was one of Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL) funded by HEFCE from 2005 to 2010.

The paper will focus on the data from the semi-structured interviews (n. 14, 9 HE and 5 NHS) conducted with members of the collaboration representing different workgroups within the collaboration. It will also draw on document analysis undertaken on the meeting minutes of the operational management group of the collaboration.

Brief findings

The participants described their involvement very much in terms of a journey. There were two simultaneous cycles happening, one was the life cycle of the collaboration, evolving from an idea to a functioning body, another individuals' own pilgrimage of growing involvement. The individuals were at one hand frustrated over the slow pace of the collaboration but on the other hand they were aware that faster pace and more directive action in the beginning would not have formed as strong collaboration. Part of the individuals' own journey in the collaboration was becoming comfortable with sharing ideas and working together with colleagues from institutions who were competing for the same students and same funding for health related courses such as nursing. Moving from a place of competition to a place of collaboration. As the collaboration evolved participants' growing levels of trust and improved relationships enabled them to focus on the bigger picture of improving education to overcome changing educational demands. The vision participants had in the beginning of the collaboration was providing innovative education to prepare today's students to be tomorrow's health care workforce. The vision was shared, but it was necessary for

the collaboration to be allowed to form organically, for the shared vision to become shared actions.

Having a platform to share knowledge and experiences was an important part of the collaboration for the participants. Participants, from both the HE and NHS, valued CETL4HealthNE's role for being outside the usual commissioning process. The participants felt that they had better understanding of each others organisation and the different time frames of HE and NHS. Participants valued the opportunity to have dialogue about improving education without feeling like one of the partners is the paymaster who needs to be pleased. Participants felt that CETL4HealthNE had created a platform for universities and health care organisations to come together to communicate with each other on an individual level as well as on an organisational level.

Conclusions

This study aims to contribute further to the body of research on collaboration in the higher education. In the light of the increased pressure for universities and other educational institutes to collaborate with each other, it is vital that the research on collaboration is also venturing beyond the traditional approach of collaboration seen purely in terms of research collaboration and focusing on bibliometrics (Abramo, D'Angelo, & Di Costa, 2009). This study gives an exploratory account of a large collaboration which enabled its' members to embrace collaboration over competition and to start working together to address issues that the HE sector is faced with.

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