

# **Collaborative Ways of Knowing: Storytelling, Metaphor and the Emergence of the Collaborative Self**

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**Abstract: This study explores collaborative inquiry as a research methodology through an examination of the processes employed by the co-researchers. The paper describes metaphor and storytelling, two heuristics that assisted in the collection and analysis of data and discusses the role of the collaborative relationship in the construction of knowledge.**

## **Introduction**

Collaborative learning, co-operative learning, team-based learning, learning organizations, community development, communities of practice: the terminology has pervaded our schools, institutions of higher learning, businesses and community based organizations. Paradoxically, we live in a culture where individualism still reigns supreme. This is especially evident in higher education. Collaborative publications are often discounted in tenure and promotion decisions. Doctoral dissertations must have a singular author in most universities. Collaboratively produced knowledge is often misunderstood, overlooked, or seen as subordinate to individually produced knowledge.

Fortunately, adult educators from a variety of frameworks have begun to challenge the dominant societal paradigm which privileges individualism while placing less value on contributions by groups. Africentric and feminist pedagogies as well as Native American traditions place high value on collective knowledge through the sharing of rich stories and the cultivation of relationships.

A primary purpose of this study was to articulate a lesser known methodology for conducting research in adult education. Through our study of collaborative inquiry we consistently made use of strategies from these oral traditions (such as storytelling and creating metaphors from our experiences) which shed light on a method of inquiry which values collaborative ways of knowing.

## **Theoretical Framework**

This study builds on the existing knowledge of collaborative inquiry process as documented by The Group for Collaborative Inquiry (1993), Kasl, Dechant and

Marsick (1993), Torbert (1981), and cooperative inquiry (Heron, 1996). The literature on collaborative learning as the social construction of knowledge (Bruffee, 1994) also contributes to the basis for this work. Freire's (1973) perspectives on the dialectical relationship between the knower and known and dialogue as a vehicle for knowledge construction significantly ground this research.

## **Research Design**

A primary purpose of collaborative inquiry is to deepen the understanding of one's experience, to gain an understanding of and from fellow inquirers, and together develop new understanding of some shared phenomena. This research asked the questions: What is the nature of collaborative inquiry, and, how do we experience and express it as co-researchers? Our intent was to understand the meaning of collaborative inquiry as a phenomenon, using our own autobiographies as a starting point (which meant we were simultaneously researchers and subjects of the research) and explore the social significance of collaborative research. Since the inquiry began with ourselves as co-inquirers we believed an eclectic approach would best serve our needs.

Our methodology draws on phenomenology; deepening our level of consciousness through seeing, intuiting and reflecting upon our everyday lived experiences, heuristic research "a research approach which encourages an individual to discover, and methods which enable him to investigate further by himself," (Moustakas, 1981. p.207) and participatory research "Inquiry as a means by which people engage together to explore some significant aspect of their lives, to understand it better and to transform their actions so as to meet their purposes more fully." (Reason, 1994 p.1)

Because we were investigating our own process, we used dialogue, or deep critical conversation as our primary data collection method. Throughout this dialogue process, ideas emerged, were articulated, shared, listened to, responded to, built upon, challenged, re-thought, clarified, validated, changed and expanded. Data collection and analysis involved several iterations of reflection and dialogue (individual reflective writing, written reflection on each other's writing and face to face conversations).

Heron (1996) discusses the use of presentational methods in the inquiry process. At times we have used graphics, drawing, photographs and music to articulate our understanding of phenomena to one another and together make sense of our experiences. We have found the sharing and creating of metaphors and stories to be especially useful tools for clarifying understanding and creating collaborative knowledge.

## Storytelling

The use of story transcends time and place. It has been vital to the transmission of social knowledge in primarily oral cultures from one generation to the next. Moreover, knowledge is created and interpreted through stories being told, discussed and told again. This section of the paper describes the role of storytelling in our process. Both individual and collaborative stories of the co-inquirers have significant influence.

Storytelling among collaborators provides fertile soil where the collective knowledge takes root. Relationship building is facilitated as co-inquirers reveal dimensions of themselves. Potential sources for new data come through incidental learning associated with the relating of and exploring the meaning contexts within the stories. (Mealman, 1993) Tacit ways of knowing are valued and nurtured.

We had prepared two proposals for presentations at an international conference on experiential learning. We felt fairly confident that we would be accepted because we had substantial experience drawing on experiential learning in cohort based learning contexts. The good news was that our 'presentations' were accepted but we were assigned round table and poster sessions rather than the workshop styles we had requested. This challenge, while initially frustrating, provided us with the opportunity to delve further into the content. What we discovered or observed from our interaction was that a new creative process or force emerged. Almost by accident we ended up understanding our material in more depth since we had to re-frame our knowledge to be shared in a context which posed new challenges.

We created a story about our experience in an attempt to understand and articulate it to others. We have since reflected on and shared this story in several presentations as a way to introduce how we began to investigate our own collaborative process.

Many times in our research dialogue we found ourselves sharing aspects of our personal lives that at first appeared unrelated to the specific project. This story provides a flavor of those moments:

Sitting at a table at Bean Wilde (a local coffee house), Craig's eyes shift to the ceiling; his attention returns to his collaborator Randee, who has waited patiently while he has taken a mental leave. Craig relates the following: "During this last drive back from Wisconsin to Illinois I stopped by a rest area. After I took care of my business, I wandered off into the woods and found a little traveled trail. I needed the exercise, so I followed the trail for awhile and it led to a rock outcropping. I found my way up and through the rocks to a place about 100 ft above the path. On top there was another, more well worn path. Towering pines graced the area. I was amazed that this place had been here all along and I had never bothered to venture here before, even though I had stopped at this place dozens of times. I continued along the upper path relishing the breath taking views over central Wisconsin. The fragrance of the pines and warmth of the rocks on my back provided a renewing and refreshing spa." We then chatted some about my find, this place, and how my experience related to my life and ultimately to our research project.

This story illustrates a common phenomena of allowing seemingly unrelated conversation to be part of our routine inquiry process. We discovered that experiences and stories have often emerged from the periphery, and as we pay attention to them we find that they have significance to our research. As Drake, Elliott and Castle (1993) related, "we soon recognized that we were talking about the fabric of our lives at the same time that we were talking about research. It became clear that our researcher selves and our personal selves were not to be separated." (p. 294)

Individual stories often evolve into collaborative stories. Randee relates:

"Two years ago, while sitting on a rock overlooking a mountain lake in Colorado, I read a book called Photography and the Art of Seeing . . . . "

She excitedly goes on to describe how the book helped her to take better photographs by immersing her total self into the experience and learning to remove barriers to seeing. At that time we were working on a project about seizing learning opportunities and Randee felt compelled to share this story since it seemed to relate to the inquiry in some way that was not totally clear. As she shared the story with Craig, he immediately was able to make the connections even from the standpoint of a non photographer. His enthusiasm inspired both of us to look deeper into the concepts which ultimately became one framework for a paper based on our research. We created another shared story which became data for our exploration into the dimensions of collaborative inquiry. We began to experiment with telling the story in workshops that we facilitated and as a way to help graduate students understand ways of viewing research. The story continued to be reshaped based upon our individual and collective telling of it and has become one focal point for expression of our research.

Collaborative inquiry as a research process is holistic in nature. The sharing of individual stories and development of collaborative stories grounds us in our humanness. The interconnectedness of our individual lives to other circles, including both people and phenomena, is crucial to our own ways of knowing. Collaborative inquiry, as we have lived it, draws freely from and is expressed through these experiential domains of being in the world. It is somewhat like crossing a veil into another world of knowing.

Through the use of stories, other dimensions of the experiential domain are tapped. Marsick and Watkins (1990) have identified this element of tapping experience as creativity "which enables people to think beyond the point of view they normally hold" and to "break out of preconceived patterns that do not allow him or her to frame the situation differently, or even to see a situation as in need of reframing." (p. 30) They go on to add that this form of creativity "allows people to play with ideas so that they can explore possibilities without censoring themselves or being censored by others." (1990, p. 30) We have found that

storytelling provides a natural way for this process to be facilitated. The meaning of experiential learning can thus be defined "as the way people make sense of situations they encounter in their daily lives" (p.15). While Marsick and Watkins see incidental learning as primarily a by-product of some other activity, Mealman (1993) strongly linked experiential and incidental learning together. Mealman discovered that incidental learning may take on a value of at least equal to or even greater than the intended formal learning. In the case of focused inquiry this may mean the value added by stories and metaphor (which often enter the process as incidental happenings) can be substantial. In our inquiry process, we have regularly made the space and time available to shift the focus to what may initially seem extraneous such as the sharing of stories from our experience. Using a hermeneutic process, we respond to one another's stories using "replies, echoes, re-creations, and reflections" (Reason and Hawkins, 1998). Meaning is thus derived through this form of reflection on experience. Storytelling contributes a vital life force in our collaborative process.

## **Metaphor**

Metaphors serve multiple purposes in our collaborative inquiry. We use metaphors to access our individual knowledge and to communicate that knowledge to each other. Similar to Deshler's (1990) model for metaphor analysis as a tool for critical reflection and transformative learning, we develop metaphors and then engage in cycles of dialogue and reflection (data collection and analysis) for the purpose of "unpacking the meaning perspectives of a metaphor" (p. 299), collectively reflecting on its assumptions and values, filtering the metaphor through our individual and collective experiences, and adapting the metaphor or creating new metaphors based on our analysis to explore phenomena together and thus deepen our understanding. This interpretation and exploration of metaphor along with other forms of communication serves to create new knowledge.

Metaphors emerge from a variety of different contexts: through our individual experiences, through shared experiences, and through our dialogue. Sometimes the metaphors come from other sources such as literature, other individuals, or observation of our surroundings. We have also discovered metaphors related to our work by looking at artwork, photography or listening to music. At times the metaphors have emerged during periods of incubation when we were not directly working on our inquiry. In the following paragraphs we illustrate the origins of some of the metaphors we have found useful. We will then discuss the roles that metaphors serve in our inquiry and describe some ways in which we work with them.

One source of metaphor comes from individual experience. On a camping trip in northern Michigan, Randee was struck by the colorful brilliance of the Black Eyed

Susans that were growing wild in the area. She wanted to photograph the flowers in as many ways as possible but realized that perception was limited, even with a telephoto lens. She found herself climbing on tables to get a "birds-eye view" and even lying down on the ground to see the underneath side of the flowers.

At this time we were involved in a collaborative inquiry project about learning in groups. We had been working with a concept called "varied vision" (Tom Brown, personal communication, 1992) which was about seeing from different perspectives. As we considered the metaphor of the Black-Eyed Susans we realized there were implications for how people could enhance their skills for learning in groups (Mealman and Lawrence, in press) by temporarily putting themselves in awkward or uncomfortable positions to understand a different perspective. We have also found this process useful in our own practice of collaborative inquiry to make sure that all perspectives are comprehended. (Mealman and Lawrence, 1998)

Sometimes the metaphors emerge from seemingly unrelated sources. As we were working on our paper on group learning at a lakeside cabin, we happened to notice a great blue heron outside the window. Instead of dismissing the heron as a distraction to our work we decided to go outside for a better view. We went for a camera in an attempt to photograph the heron; however just as we returned, the heron spread it's wings and took off in flight. The photographic opportunity was lost. We realized the importance of seizing opportunities as they occur since many such opportunities are fleeting. As we considered our work with groups and helping people to see opportunities to collaborate, the experience with the heron became a metaphor to help us understand the timeliness of relating to others' experiences in collaborative groups.

Metaphors play multiple roles in our inquiry process: Transcending mere words they assist in our communication process by deepening, clarifying, understanding and expressing knowledge. Metaphors communicate areas of interest and passion and spark shared passion. They allow us to see from perspectives previously inaccessible. They offer ways to grapple with questions that arise. Finally, metaphors help us to understand our own process of collaborative inquiry.

One strength of the collaborative process is that often a metaphor will present itself to one collaborator that would never have been evident to the other, since it is out of the realm of his or her experience. By remaining open to divergent views; acknowledging that our own knowledge base may be limited by our socio-cultural background and experiences, and becoming open to seeing from another's frame, opportunities to extend knowledge are created. For example, Craig introduced metaphors from animal tracking and his work with Tom Brown

in his wilderness and nature school. Randee would have never considered such metaphors since they were not part of her previous knowledge or experience base. Although she'd had many outdoor experiences in wilderness settings, she was raised to believe that activities such as hunting and tracking from ancient times to the present were in the realm of experience of men only. Certainly the models were all males. She probably would not have made these connections had Craig not brought them to her attention. Rather than rejecting the metaphor she began to consider its possibilities. This example clearly points out the advantage in collaborating across gender, race or other areas of postionality.

Sometimes creating a metaphor helps us grapple with difficult questions or helps to clarify a perspective that we have come to hold. One question that often arises with people who do collaborative inquiry is how they can work collaboratively without losing their individual voice. We created a metaphor of a rope to help us understand and articulate our understanding. "Like a rope made up of individual threads we can be pulled apart and retain our individual uniqueness. However, entwined together, the rope has more strength. Rather than losing our selves to the collaboration, we found a stronger self." (Mealman and Lawrence, 1998, p.138)

We work with metaphors throughout our dialogue process. By building on and attempting to understand each other's metaphors we often come to a position of greater clarity. In Craig's search to apply some of the concepts he had learned from Tom Brown to his work with students in collaborative learning groups, he introduced a concept known as "deadspace". This area of space which is present but unseen in our conscious awareness was difficult to grasp at first. Randee tried to find ways to apply it to her known experience but quickly became frustrated when she couldn't quite get it. It seems like Craig was also frustrated because of his inability to articulate it in a way Randee could understand. In dialogue, Randee began to make connections with her work in photography and how things sometimes appear in pictures that we don't see when we are taking them because we are focused only on the main subject. As we explored this idea further, it eventually led to greater clarity of understanding for both. We saw how deadspace could become a barrier to collaboration if we focused too narrowly and ignored certain contributions.

Often we incorporate a spirit of playfulness into our inquiry through our use of metaphors. We were both familiar with the expression "half baked idea" and agreed that it was an excellent way to describe how we introduce ideas into our dialogues that are only partially formed, and together work at further developing the ideas. We started playing around with notions of baking ideas, much in the same way one bakes bread: adding yeast, allowing the ideas to rise, kneading, baking and transforming them in the process.

As we work with our individual and mutually created metaphors we continue a dialogue which results in the creation of new knowledge. The result is a mutual interpretation that is shaped, molded, expanded, extended and stretched in a fluid motion somewhat like the creative process in interpretive dance.

### **Collaborative Self**

The collaborative self is our terminology for the collective identity that develops in collaborative relationships (Mealman and Lawrence, 1998). It has alternately been labeled the social mind (Goulet, Krentz and Christiansen, personal communication, 1999) or "we" defined as "a union that is greater than the two parts that composed it." (Hughes and Lund, 1994 p. 49) The collaborative self evolves through the cycles of dialogue and reflection around salient themes that emerge from the data.

The collaborative self includes our individual selves (our subjectivity). It also includes parts of ourselves that are shared, mutually known and commonly experienced (inter-subjectivity). Through the collaborative relationship a new self emerges which is synergistic. It is greater than the sum of our individual selves. The collaborative self is characterized by its own language including words, phrases, shared stories and metaphors. It holds the shared knowledge of the group.

Part of our process involved assigning ourselves sections to individually develop. When we sat down to write the individual pieces, we discovered that what we wrote, individually, came out of our many conversations which contained both of our contributions, regardless of who was putting the words down on paper. We developed a collaborative voice which was made up of our individual voices, yet had a distinct sound all of its own like singers who harmonize together. Creating a collaborative voice required that we leave open space for co-creation which often meant relinquishing individual conceptual notions. In doing so, we discovered that not only had our individual voices not been extinguished, we had found a stronger voice.

### **Conclusions**

Collaboration is central to the work of adult educators in a variety of contexts. Understanding of how knowledge is created collectively is at the very core of an emancipatory pedagogy. Incorporating the use of metaphors and storytelling in collaborative inquiry can play a significant role in the construction of new knowledge. Collaborative inquiry offers expanded opportunities for accessing and analyzing data through the sharing of the metaphors and stories. Through hermeneutic dialogue processes, we explore and probe for meaning and create new meaning. Stories and metaphors hold shared knowledge which is located in

and articulated through the collaborative self. Storytelling and metaphors express the vitality and richness of collaborative inquiry.

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