

Greater than the sum of its parts: the role of collaboration in building an innovative and compassionate higher education

Book review: Abegglen, S., Burns, T. and Sinfield, S. (eds.) (2023) *Collaboration in higher education: a new ecology of practice*. London: Bloomsbury

Carina Buckley
Solent University, UK

Keywords: collaboration; community; partnership; connection, trust.

Why do we collaborate? The obvious answers are because we can't physically do everything by ourselves and because we don't know everything (even if we have all at some point worked with that one individual who presents themselves as the exception to these rules). Beyond the practical, however, lies the creative: it is with others that our imaginations can most effectively fly further than the limits of our own experiences, boosted by alternative perspectives and the knowledge earned on diverse paths. Yet achieving this is not always easy; the difficulties of collaboration are well documented (for example, emotional ownership of resources and emotional attachment to a community (Pirkkalainen, Pawlowski and Pappa 2016)). Moreover, there is no single recipe for creating an enriching collaborative partnership; Griffiths et al.'s (2021) systematic review marks the first attempt to identify the key ingredients for collaboration in an education setting. In one sense this may present a difficulty, particularly in a high stakes environment like contemporary higher education where so much rides on results and impact. However, this variety nevertheless has at its heart the central importance of open, trust-based and authentic relationships. If we understand collaboration to be two or more people brought into relation with each other, then that group is bounded by social connections and the emotional responses that entails, creating a sense of structure and belonging (Ahmed, 2014). That process and its outcomes are illustrated to great effect in this new and comprehensive volume.

Following a welcoming and accessible introduction that sets the tone for the rest of the book, the editors present an extensive and appealing tasting menu for collaboration across six broad sections, giving the reader the opportunity to sample many dishes they wouldn't or couldn't necessarily choose as a main course, inevitably rejecting some but ultimately finding more than enough to be satisfied. Some of these are structurally organised as standard fare: collaborations with staff, with students, and with stakeholders. Later on, the scope broadens out thematically, placing collaboration in the context of creativity, social justice and experience. The huge number of contributors (over 100; chances are you know, or know of, at least one) suggests the boundless scope of collaboration – role, location, position, qualifications pose no barrier, and therefore provide no excuse to the reluctant collaborator. The weaving together of these voices adds to the overall sense of collaborative endeavour; the relatively informal style of the writing does much to emphasise the 'life affirming' (p.3) human element of collaboration that is the strength of this collection.

The book opens with a 'choose your own adventure' account of a real, albeit fictionalised, collaboration to design an online escape room for new students. Gröppel-Wegener, Johnston and Bales' innovative and ingenious way of covering all the issues involved in collaboration exemplifies the chaos and uncertainty that can ensue, as well as the engagement and fun that a good collaborative experience can generate. By participating actively in the story, the reader can feel their way through a hypothetical situation that depends on their own choices and illustrates the emotional complexities of working with others: a merging or a clashing, a blending of minds, the joy of meeting a like mind and the challenge of sharing and letting go.

Each of the following chapters builds on this opening as a series of case studies that offer diverse examples of collaboration, all highly contextualised but with recommendations for practice. The result is a well-drawn picture of higher education, its challenges recognisable to anyone regardless of their setting and the solutions to tackle them theorised in a way that renders them easily transferable to new contexts. Amongst the multiple explorations of co-creation, inclusion and digitally driven initiatives, the authors present a range of outputs and purposes of collaboration, including writing retreats, a skills programme, a teaching resource on EDI, a digital support network and a volunteer scheme. These are achieved through an equally wide range of collaborative methods, such as general project planning, the development of sub team roles and responsibilities, planning and running workshops,

using mentor-mentee relationships as a foundation to build upon, and the deployment of an intern to act as a liaison between stakeholders.

Amongst that, the reader may be glad to see case studies that deal directly with environmental sustainability (Hřebačková et al., p.224) and the sustainability of new approaches (Arm, p.154), and a wealth of storytelling, for example as used by Barclay et al. (p.49) and Kalume and Moriarty (p.177). There are also a few surprises to discover: Supple et al. configure paper as teacher through origami (p.131) while Sum gets to grips with an elephant on p.146, and Pulker and Nerantzi's (p.207) collaboration generates a picture book. Perhaps the most pleasant surprise, and a testament to the deep emotions that good collaboration can elicit, is the appearance of love on p.185, presented by Hill and Taylor as part of a powerful triumvirate alongside respect and esteem. Even when familiar concepts appear several times, such as communities of practice, peer learning, equity and interdisciplinarity, they are dealt with in a unique way on each appearance, the literature bent and sculpted into new forms that will add to the reader's own knowledge and understanding of it.

How, then, to make best use of this book? Like any good collaborative partner, it is there to refer to, to provide stimulation and inspiration, and to guide. Dip in and sample these experiences and share in the delight of engaging in a common goal with other people. Look around at the people you know and the problems they are trying to solve. Consider what you'd like to achieve, and who might help you get there. Above all, take flight and see what collaboration can do for – and to – you.

Acknowledgements

The authors did not use generative AI technologies in the creation of this manuscript.

References

Ahmed, S. (2014) *The cultural politics of emotion*. 2nd edn. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Griffiths, A. -J., Alsip, J., Hart, S. R., Round, R. L. and Brady, J. (2021) 'Together we can do so much: a systematic review and conceptual framework of collaboration in schools', *Canadian Journal of School Psychology*, 36(1), pp.59-85.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0829573520915368>.

Pirkkalainen, H., Pawlowski, J. M. and Pappa, D. (2016) 'Educators' open educational collaboration online: the dilemma of emotional ownership', *Computers & Education*, 106, pp.119-136. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2016.12.005>.

Author details

Carina Buckley is currently Instructional Design Manager at Solent University, responsible for the development and implementation of Solent's Learning Design Framework, which integrates the classroom and the VLE into a student-centred, active and inclusive learning space. Her research interests broadly connect to collaboration and community with an emphasis on the importance of writing in building an academic field, and she also explores ideas around leadership and professional identity. She is treasurer for ALDinHE and sits on the steering group for the International Consortium of Academic Language and Learning Developers (ICALLD). She is an Advance HE Principal Fellow and co-host of the Learning Development Project podcast.

Licence

©2023 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>. *Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education (JLDHE)* is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by the Association for Learning Development in Higher Education (ALDinHE).