LEGO, fishbowls, and collaboration

Rebecca Edgerley

University of Exeter, UK

Russell Crawford

Falmouth University, UK

Abstract

This article reflects on what matters in collaboration. It is widely recognised that calls for 'collaboration' and 'collaborative ways of working' abound in research, scholarship, pedagogic practices, and beyond as a desirable student skill set (Veles, 2022; McKay and Sridharan, 2023), and a way to address complexity and problem-solving (Graesser et al., 2018; Scoular et al., 2020). Now, the recent iteration of the Advance HE Professional Standards Framework (2023) cites a new dimension of practice, PSF V5, that requires fellowship claimants to explicitly evidence how they 'collaborate with others to enhance practice' (p. 5). However, understandings of what constitutes collaboration remain fuzzy and—specifically in the context of university professionals—somewhat underexplored (Newell and Bain, 2019). Furthermore, collaboration often falls to so called 'third-space' professionals, as they occupy a natural (but not always comfortable) confluence between academics, researchers, professional services, and learner communities (Veles, Carter and Boon, 2018).

This article presents a session plan, which has been co-designed by two third-space professionals working within educator development. The session uses a novel assessment matrix—the 9 Domains of Collaboration—as an approach to explore and critique the defining characteristics of collaborative endeavour. The aim of this article is twofold. Firstly, the session plan and 9 Domains framework offers colleagues in higher education a tangible evaluative aid for provoking, tracing, and documenting collaborative practices.

Secondly, we offer reflections on how collaboration is expressed in ways that align with PSF V5 and that amplify the work and contributions of the third space.

Keywords: collaboration; assessment; academic development; educator development; professional standards framework; third space.

Introduction

What do we mean by the much-celebrated term 'collaboration'? In the research literature and our day-to-day practices, we frequently encounter a range of related and (often) interchangeably used terms, such as 'cooperation', 'co-ordination', or 'teamwork', and subsequent calls to distinguish between—and critique—their meaning and use in professional contexts (see, for example, Reeves, Xyrichis, and Zwarenstein, 2018; Castañer and Oliveira, 2020). Semantics are further complicated by different taxonomies of collaboration itself. For example, Graesser et al. (2018) distinguish between 'collaborative problem solving' (CSP) and 'collaborative work'. Even within higher education, definitions and understandings of collaboration may vary considerably (Scoular et al., 2020). Arguably, one of the difficulties in appraising collaborative skills and attributes is that we assume most students—and those who support their learning—already possess these skills and attributes. Freeth and Caniglia (2020) argue that we need to abandon this assumption if we are to support learners (be they students or colleagues) to work across differences. The notion that we need to do more to support collaborative skills is gaining increasing traction, most prominently in the education of students as a desirable skill set (e.g. Veles, 2022; McKay and Sridharan, 2023), but also in the context of student−staff collaborations for the purposes of curriculum development and pedagogic enhancement (e.g. Dickerson, Jarvis and Stockwell, 2016). Collaboration as a practice between academic staff has received less focus (Newell and Bain, 2019), and, similarly, there are few studies of collaboration across and between HE professionals (e.g. researchers, academics, professional services), although academic−librarian collaborations are perhaps a notable exception (e.g. Pham and Tanner, 2014; Zanin-Yost, 2018).

Notwithstanding the potential benefits that HE professional collaborations have for learner experiences (Owusu-Agyeman and Moroeroe, 2021), it is our view that all these staff are in positions to model and influence collaborative skills within student learning communities (Freeman, 1993; Dickerson, Jarvis and Stockwell, 2016). Therefore, undertaking further

empirical study into collaboration across institutional teams, roles, and stakeholders (and not just within the silos of professional or academic departments) holds great potential for enhancing our appreciation of collaborative effort and how best to support it.

It follows, then, that all HE professionals and students are 'learners' in our context and, whilst the session we reflect upon speaks to collaboration amongst university staff, we understand the session (and the 9 Domains framework, introduced shortly) as adaptable for a variety of learning contexts. To reiterate our position: although we acknowledge that collaboration is often conceptualised and deployed differently across pedagogy, research, and industry, our reflections suggest that such exercises—combined with the provocations that the framework affords—surface fundamental attributes, attitudes, and skills that constitute the make-up of all collaborative practices.

It is beyond the scope of this article to undertake a forensic review of the terms and definitions that inform our conceptual understanding of collaboration. However, to contextualise our own reflections on designing for collaboration and the application of a relevant framework, it is instructive to give a working understanding of collaboration as a skill set to be practised and measured. The 9 Domains of Collaboration were published in an Advance HE article entitled 'Is it possible to measure collaboration?' (Crawford, 2022) (see Figure 1). This work takes the concept of collaboration and interprets it as a teachable skill that can be measured and developed. The framework posits that there are nine discrete collaborative domains, each articulating a different facet of collaboration, and each therefore measurable as discrete facets of the larger collective skill of collaboration. Applied holistically, the rubric gives the educator and learner a way to evaluate these domains in isolation and measure their development longitudinally as a result. The collaboration framework takes its inspiration from the AdvanceHE Professional Standards Framework as a mainstay in higher education for its widespread use in identifying and evidencing competencies as part of professional recognition for education practice and supporting learning.

Each of the 9 Domains (see Figure 1) are defined and expanded upon in the aforementioned article. It would be cumbersome to rehearse each domain here, and in any case, we expect the finer details to be contested, debated, built upon, and adapted. Rather, Figure 1 presents nine qualities that we posit have the potential to effect change and be changed over the course of a collaboration.

It is the energy of this potential that we draw upon when we cite Thayer-Bacon and Pack-Brown's (2000) definition of collaboration:

> [T]he intellectual and emotional interaction that takes place between diverse people who are in a changing relation with each other and are able to mutually communicate through an accurate and shared verbal and nonverbal language; therefore, they are potentially able to influence each other (p.55).

Firstly, the appeal of this definition is the omission of any sense of needing to arrive at an agreed outcome or resolution. In terms of evaluation and assessment, this mitigates some of the often-cited problems that arise when the relative 'successes' of collaborative work are appraised on group dynamics and outputs alone. Indeed, whilst the skills and developmental opportunities associated with groupwork and collaboration are typically celebrated, frustration persists over how it is measured, captured, and assessed (Davies, 2009; Sridharan, Tai and Boud, 2019). Dissatisfaction tends to ensue when the output is scrutinised and judged, with negligible regard for the process, resulting in misplaced credit for the work achieved.

However, assessment and appraisal are cornerstones of education, just as much as in other professional sectors. By emphasising the processual elements of collaboration, we value efforts, but there is not much by way of tangible, measurable hooks upon which to hang a judgment. Although research into effective combinations of individual, group, and peer assessment have been trialled and recommended (Davies, 2009; Sridharan, Tai and Boud, 2019; McKay and Sridharan, 2023), what interests us in particular is the thread of research that suggests that learners' perception of collaboration is potentially a better measure of collaborative group work (Enyedy and Stevens, 2022; McKay and Sridharan, 2023). Therefore, whilst we could be accused of instrumentalising collaboration through taking a constructively aligned and quantifying approach here, the framework is intended as a complementary and ipsative form of assessment; a basis upon which to critique and develop one's practice, rather than a tightly defined set of normative outcomes and targets based solely on peer and/or teacher judgments.

The 9 Domains framework enables this critical self-awareness and self-appraisal through a nine-pointed radar chart (see Figure 2), which invites learners to evaluate each domain on

a number range from 1–5, mirroring a five-point Likert scale of: 'Very Strong', 'Strong', 'Satisfactory', 'Poor', and 'Needs Development' (outside to inside). The chart offers a visual representation of changes in the learner's sense of their collaborative skills before, during, and after interactions and over time. In other words, the framework provides a lens through which to analyse and appraise one's *potential to influence* the collaborative context, be that as part of student assessment, as a way to critically reflect on practice in the context of something like the Professional Standards Framework (2023), or even to aid in the evaluative reporting necessitated by research-funding bodies.

A second point to make regarding Thayer-Bacon and Pack-Brown's (2000) cited definition is its appeal to 'nonverbal' as well as 'verbal' languages. Indeed, collaboration unfolds beyond the words that we speak; it is embedded in gestures, glances, what we choose to wear—how we *turn up*. We do not have the scope to delve into the rich research and literature that foregrounds how the body is socialised and politicised within academe, but suffice it to say that we do not attune to our bodies as sensitively as we might in professional collaborative contexts (for a recent and illuminating critique of the body in academia, see Bodies Collective, 2023). Therefore, we invite readers to consider the embodied and physical aspects involved in the session plan that follows and how these relate to collaboration and the 9 Domains framework, even if we do not attend to this in depth ourselves.

The session presented below aims to unpick the skills, values, and behaviours associated with collaboration, using the previously published 9 Domains of Collaboration. We have delivered this session in person for academic and professional-services colleagues across both our institutions, which share a campus. Some colleagues know each other, but many do not. Whilst two institutions sharing a campus is more unusual, the mix of roles—academics, educators, and professional services—is certainly very typical in HE contexts.

Orienting: the exquisite (LEGO) corpse

The exquisite corpse exercise is similar to the well-known parlour game 'consequences', which involves a collective assemblage of words or images, with each collaborator contributing to the final piece (de la Fuente, 2020). This version is a variation on the

original, where participants are each given a pile of LEGO bricks and asked to build their ideal home or office (for example). Upon passing their constructions on to the next person, participants are asked to add something 'fun', then something 'sinister', then 'destroy' it, then 'rebuild', before returning it to the original creator. This exercise is designed, in part, as an icebreaker and orientation activity, but an overarching theme is to invite participants to consider how they feel about having their builds tampered with, as well as how they feel when instructed to tamper with the builds of others in their group. Whilst the playfulness of constructing and deconstructing LEGO models is relatively low stakes, participants are encouraged to relate this exercise to other, potentially higher stakes contexts, such as assessment or peer review (Wheeler, Passmore and Gold, 2020).

As a provocation, this exercise (as described above) enables us to contextualise some of the challenges we might face during the collaborative process: our differing capacities for giving, receiving, and building upon critique. This framing is important, given that collaboration is not an inherently peaceful coming-together of like-minded individuals. Indeed, Freeth and Caniglia (2020) consider 'discomfort levels' as an initial starting point for undertaking collaborative research, in order to recognise and systematically address challenges that, if left unattended, may later overwhelm and lead to the breakdown of research teams (p.252). In a similar vein, Light and Boys (2017) advocate that we 'start from difference as a learning strategy' (p.158). We have typically found that people's experiences range from relishing the challenge to discomfort when invited to alter/dismantle the builds of their colleagues, with some participants explaining how this iterative process of group editing is standard practice in their discipline, whilst others find such overt disassembly and reassembly quite unfamiliar.

Presenting: the 9 Domains of Collaboration

Following on from the orientation exercise, we introduce session participants to the 9 Domains of Collaboration, but not the nine-pointed radar assessment chart. We make time for participants to engage with the framework presented in Figure 1 (below)—to ask

questions, contest, and debate each of the domains (as is to be expected). We might ask participants if there is a domain that, for them, occupies more importance than others, if a domain does not belong, or is missing entirely.

Figure 1. The 9 Domains of Collaboration.
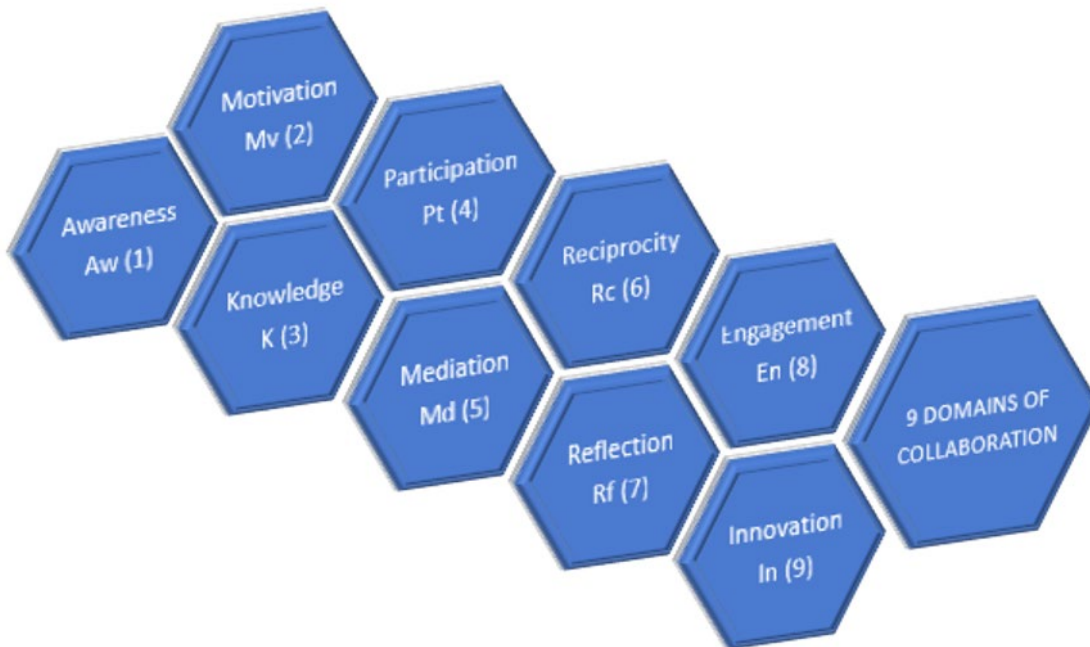
Having set the scene by introducing participants to the collaboration framework, we set up our next exercise to allow participants to apply some of the more conceptual aspects of the framework.

Apply: stirring the fishbowl

The fishbowl exercise is a commonly used teaching method for engaging learners in debate and developing argumentation and oracy skills (Tricio et al., 2019). Briefly, participants form an outer circle with a central place for one participant to hold the floor on a chosen topic. At any point, someone from the outer circle can 'tap in', exchanging places with the person in the centre and continuing the discussion. Those facilitating the exercise can choose how prescriptive they wish to be over participation, turn-taking, and time allowed for each individual to speak. With unfamiliar groups, it is usually advisable to allow participants to dictate their own level of involvement: some might choose not to enter the central space, whilst others might 'tap in' on several occasions. For participants who are

feeling less vocal, options to gesture agreement/disagreement with a speaker by wiggling fingers/wavering the hand can be an effective way to invite less overt modes of engagement.

Topics for debate can be selected according to context. We usually find that, with educators, it does not take long for discussion to veer towards the passionate, typified by rapid tags in and out, fast points being made, built upon, and challenged. Our role, as facilitators (we could tentatively say 'third spacers'), is to ensure that the format is adhered to as social scaffolding, and to keep the discussions on track and meaningful (Kaner, 2014).

After the exercise has run its course, we prompt the group to consider how they think they did collectively, if we recontextualise the fishbowl as a *collaborative* exercise rather than a Socratic exploration of a particular theme. This is often surprising for participants, who might have forgotten the 9 Domains framework presented previously, but this new line of enquiry immediately reframes their fishbowl experience. We invite post-activity reflection, facilitating another round of open discussion, as connections with the individual facets of the 9 Domains framework are made.

Review: a meta-plenary

Taking each of the activities within the session and looking across them at the meta level is the final stage of our session design. Having collaborated, discussed, negotiated, and reflected together, we lift the curtain and explore—individually and as a group—how the 9 Domains of Collaboration had been, and could be, applied in the session. The point of this is two-fold. Firstly, it demonstrates that the collaborative experience can be meaningfully articulated through the 9 Domains framework, and secondly, it demystifies the practice of collaboration systematically and authentically in front of the participants, changing the framework from an abstract conceptual one to a lived, personalised experience. To achieve this, we feel there is no better exemplar than to have our participants apply the framework in the session and use it to self-evaluate their level of collaboration from the wider set of activities (O'Sullivan, 2012). To fully accomplish this, we invite participants to complete the 9 Domains Feedback Radar Chart (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Example Feedback Radar Chart, with example domains showing 'strong', 'satisfactory', and 'poor' ratings for discrete domains.
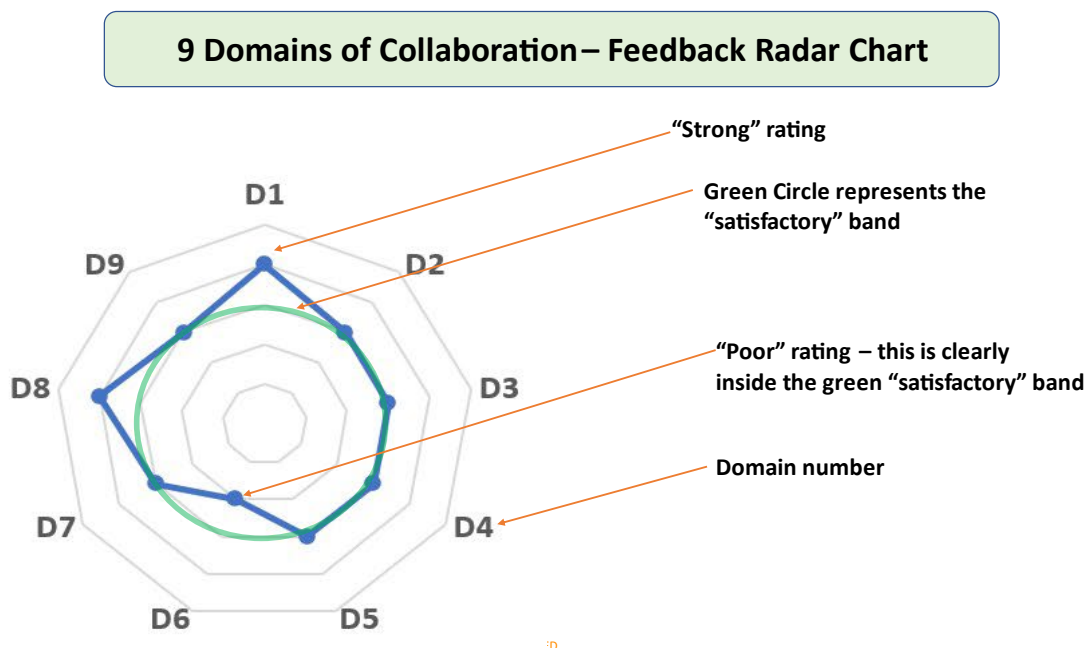
Participants self-assess their 'marks', then generate a personal radar chart that displays each domain in relation to the other 8. This means that participants can visualise the discrete collaborative skills and identify those that were strong from those that might need further development. In the context of, say, a credit-bearing module or a continuing-professional-development short course, the intent behind this visual feedback mode is to allow for the 9 Domains of Collaboration to be measured and re-measured iteratively, to observe learning gains across measurement points and over time. Moreover, the personalised nature of the charts and their visual representation typically enables inter-participant comparisons of 'what did you get?', but without the self-exposure that comes from having been judged by a peer or experienced other.

Thus far, in designing and delivering the session outlined above, two core concepts have emerged for us as educators:

1. Freedom to fail. Sometimes called 'failing forward', discussions amongst participants identified collaboration as fairly unique in curriculum-design terms, as it is not an absolute (Miller, 2015). Indeed, the iterative application of a framework like the one used here means that the engaged user never truly 'fails', but rather organically evaluates their

progress in developing key domains, whether formally or informally. Our experiences find that this creates a positive learning environment rather than a judgemental one, with the various activities and tasks being viewed as practice, whilst the application of the framework and the radar chart offer constructive engagement with personal/professional development. Where freedom to fail comes in is through treating collaboration as an evolving skill set, which, as we have shown, can be practised in a psychologically safe environment and with clear lines of evaluation (Sindall and Barrington, 2020).

2. Bad collaboration experiences can be positive. Partially linked with the freedom to fail, we typically find that those who recall 'bad' collaborative experiences usually reframe these as positive learning experiences after reflection (Robson and Kitchen, 2007). It was even offered in one of our collaborative-practice sessions that, unless an individual had experienced some challenge in collaborating, there was an argument around whether they were doing it in the first place. Therefore, whilst allowing discord and discomfort to derail a collaboration is by no means an advisable path, there is the suggestion that tensions and resistances can be harnessed in positive ways by igniting creative and innovative responses to tasks and problems. Although beyond the scope of this article, it is an interesting concept to consider whether an ideal collaborative scenario is an impossibility, purely by proxy of having communication as an essential driver of collaboration—itself a complex and higher perceptual practice (Bozeman et al., 2016).

Final reflections: the role of third-space practitioner-professionals

Third-space professionals are groups or individuals who play an increasingly important role in higher education by bringing together different areas of expertise. Third-space professionals operate at the nexus of previously discrete spheres in higher education, sitting between academic, research, professional-services, and learner communities. They rarely fit into the defined categories of 'academic' or 'professional services' but share a common set of qualities that mean they stand aligned with, but separate from, other discrete groups in HE.

A useful example of a third-space role is the recent renaissance around learning technologists, bridging the academic and technical spaces to aid learning design (Whitchurch, 2008). In the context of this article (and collaboration as a skill in both the

context of the PSF V5 and the third space specifically), one of the defining aspects of third-space professionals is a diverse disciplinary background that includes HE experience alongside other fields. This usually comes with a project-orientated mindset that contributes to their impact on others in the collaborative space (Veles, Carter and Boon, 2018). As a rapidly evolving, 'new' area in contemporary HE practices, the third-space professional is, in our view, going to be synonymous with collaboration as a practice (Veles, 2022). However, we would also like to introduce the notion of a third-space 'practitioner', acknowledging that many colleagues will often operate in the third space even when they occupy seemingly well-defined, 'conventional' academic roles; hence, we use the term third-space practitioner-professionals.

Indeed, our illustrative workshop in this article supports the notion of a third-space *practice*. We have already alluded to how our session is able to surface the skills and attributes involved in collaborative work in what are, ostensibly, not conventional collaborative tasks. Both the exquisite corpse and the fishbowl exercises surface the tensions inherent in making choices that affect both ourselves and others in collaborative work. For the exquisite corpse activity, do participants mind that their work is dismantled and rebuilt? Do participants take pleasure in breaking apart what others have built? Although the activity instructs participants to engage in these deconstructing/reconstructing acts, the extent to which we critique the work of others—and let our own work be critiqued—is part of how we mediate our position, power, and our *potential to influence* within a collaboration.

In the fishbowl exercise, some participants resist consensus-building by tapping in with counterarguments or diverting discussion in pursuit of alternative lines of enquiry. Others choose to distance themselves from direct debate, which still implicates them in what is endorsed and what is thrown out or overlooked. Self-assessing one's participation, mediation, and reciprocity within the session using the radar chart enables participants to gain an appreciation of their role in shaping the collaborative endeavour of consensus-building.

The above observations suggest that collaboration is not necessarily an innocent practice. Indeed, they serve to highlight an important ethical dimension that future work might explore more fully. As noted by Neimanis (2012):

> Collaboration demands difficult choices and sometimes a problematization of the idea of 'choice' in the first place. But it also asks that we look honestly at the matters in which we think we have no choice to follow along. Collaboration is also about refusal—a refusal of collusion, where possible, and a refusal of facilely going with the flow (p.219).

However, it sometimes takes someone on the periphery to recognise the multifaceted nature of such interactions and lay bare some of the unspoken and unexpressed moments in collaborative work. This is where the ambiguous nature of being a third-space practitioner-professional confers great benefit. In a fishbowl exercise, Educator Developers can appreciate and mediate between several perspectives, being intellectually engaged—but not as directly invested in—the task at hand (Sugrue et al., 2017). Whitchurch (2015) has articulated the paradoxes of working within and across the tensions epitomised by institutional third spaces, including safety from organisational pressures coupled with the riskiness and precarity of not being secured by regulating structures, and/or feeling one's expertise is at once appreciated *and* contested by academics and other professionals. A paradox that is not so explicitly stated (although certainly implied by Veles, Carter, and Boon (2018), building on Whitchurch (2015)), but which surfaced in our session, is that for us (as Educator Developers and third-space practitioner-professionals), occupying a *peripheral* space (i.e. outside the fishbowl), entailed a *central* role in how the collaboration unfolded.

Where, then, might the 9 Domains of Collaboration take us? With our session design and reflections in mind, there are some next logical steps to critically engage with and reflect on for those examining their own collaborative practice as part of the Professional Standards Framework. Using something akin to the 9 Domains enables educators (including third-space practitioner-professionals) to apply their collaborative skills in a tangible, measurable way and be able to offer that critical, evidence-based evaluation of influence. For example, the work of third-space practitioner-professionals is often prompted by the breakdown in collaboration between the staff they support and their learning communities. Assessment and feedback practice is a prime example of how staff and students might benefit from greater awareness of the participation and reciprocity that the process involves, as espoused by the work of Winstone et al. (2016). The aforementioned article does not mention 'collaboration', although it does lean heavily on notions of dialogue (between assessor and learner), and 'proactive recipience' on the part

of students (Winstone et al., 2016, p.17). Perhaps, by reframing assessment and feedback as a collaborative endeavour, the 9 Domains framework could foreseeably support deeper critical self-reflection that would, in turn, enable better classroom dialogues for learners and teachers alike.

Through a professional-development lens, we hope that this article and its showcase of approaches will encourage HE professionals to embrace and critique rather than dismiss and elide the discomfort, tensions, and surprises that characterise collaborations. Keeping with our meta-plenary approach above, a take-home from this article for the reader might, therefore, be an invitation to use our collaborative framework for self-evaluation; a starting point for reflecting on PSF V5 and how it is being embraced, fought for, and met in your own practice.

Finally, in the spirit of Veles, Carter and Boon's (2018) championing of third-space professionals, we take up the challenges and opportunities of collaborative practice by offering the following poetic coda—as a way to make meaning of 'the unknown territories' that characterise third spaces and to legitimise them as 'new spheres of habitation and professional activities' (p.78).

A poetic coda

The 9 Domains of Collaboration

To co-labour is not easy.

How to mediate the distance between you and I?

Knowledge without reciprocity is nothing.

But giving up ground is hard.

If you are tired of shiny success stories, try reflecting on:

- disruptive participation
- uneasy engagement
- questionable motivation and
- failed innovation.

Yet, even as I position myself on the periphery—

ready to turn away from turn-taking—

I am aware of how hard I fought.

Acknowledgements

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Author details

Rebecca Edgerley is a Senior Educator Developer at the University of Exeter, UK, where she co-designs and delivers the Learning and Teaching in Higher Education programme for postgraduate teaching associates and professional-services colleagues. She also mentors and assesses colleagues seeking professional accreditation as fellows of AdvanceHE. Rebecca's teaching and research interests include collaborative and reflective practices that involve creative methods. She is currently undertaking a PhD exploring how creative interventions shape interdisciplinary practices amongst university professionals.

Russell Crawford is Pro-Vice Chancellor Academic Services at Falmouth University, UK, with an active pedagogic research interest in gamification for learning and many years of academic development experience in implementing high-impact pedagogies. His own teaching and research background covers various educational contexts, from curriculum design, innovation in higher education, and assessment at UG and PG levels. Russell is a Senior Fellow of Advance HE, won the Times Higher Education 'Most Innovative Teacher of the Year' in 2017, and was awarded his National Teaching Fellowship in 2018.

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