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Beautifully eclectic: Collaborative Conference Proceedings and Reflections

We are thrilled to present to you the Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education's Collaborative Conference Proceedings and Reflections – a collection of collaboratively written reports from the annual ALDinHE Conference that took place online and in person in June 2022. The conference participants this year had a unique opportunity to interact with the content of the presentations beyond the conference space, by contributing to the presenters' open documents that gathered audiences' comments, responses, questions, and suggestions the presenters considered and reflected on after the talk. In this sense, these reports are so much more than conference proceedings – they are an extension of the conference beyond the confines of the physical and temporal spaces demarcated by the event.

None of us had attempted anything like this before. To our knowledge, no one had, yet it seemed like an initiative that was too compelling not to take on. Here was our chance to create a platform for a deeper engagement with conference ideas and to see the talks and presentations as a beginning, rather than an end, of the scholarly conversations they started. We took it.

What we did

The ambition of this Collaborative Proceedings and Reflections volume, and in particular the importance of finding a collective voice that would both reflect and serve our Learning Development community, dawned on us when we first met online as a significantly expanded editorial group to discuss the approaches, tasks and timelines involved in editing this special issue. Huddled in a tightly packed screen of known and less familiar faces, and flicking between the conversations and the documents with my (Alicja Syska, Lead Editor) instructions and workflows, we all instantly realised that the word ‘collaboration’ meant many different things to us and that it would be tested on many different levels as we proceeded to understand the magnitude of what lay before us. The success of the volume would depend not only on our skills, experience and commitment, but also on the connections we would develop in the process and how these connections would then influence the negotiations around how knowledge is produced and what the role of editor is in bringing it to the reader.

Our special editorial group for this issue comprised eight editors and nine guest editors from three English-speaking countries (UK, New Zealand and Canada). While we were all experienced writers and Learning Developers, when it came to making this particular radical publishing idea work, many of us felt somewhat lost, experiencing emotions ranging from confusion to feeling ill-equipped, to finding ourselves slightly at odds with the entire idea. Everyone understood that our authors presented a paper, a talk, or a poster at the ALDinHE Conference; that their audiences commented on those presentations in an open Google document; and that the authors then had a chance to respond to these comments through their own reflections. The three-part collaborative writing format seemed simple. Nonetheless, one look at all the submissions was enough to see that in each case the discussions developed differently, reflecting the multitude of ways in which we all understand and practice collaboration. In some pieces, writers responded to one another; in others, the contributions were separate and insulated. In some cases, it was

easy to identify themes we could build on; in others, no visible thread existed and would have to be extracted from the loose collection of thoughts. Clearly, one golden formula that would allow us to impose a particular format, tone, and look across all the submissions was not in sight.

In the true spirit of Learning Development, instead of forcing submissions into the straitjacket of a particular formula, we decided to work with a set of principles. First and foremost, we wanted to ensure that the collection would be of value to our readers. To this end, we shaped the articles in a way that aimed to reveal the essence of each conference presentation, offer an insight into the discussions and responses from its participants, and allow the authors to close the presentation loop with their reflections and thus remain in control of the story. Secondly, we wanted to retain as much of the tone and voice of the individual contributions as possible in a collaborative exercise of this magnitude. Therefore, we aimed for light-touch editing and only intervened where necessary, e.g. to avoid repetitions or to clarify the narrative. Shorter pieces sometimes required editorial comment and we occasionally added references and made additional suggestions for reading or future action. In such cases, we as editors also became the contributors and added our own voices to the collective tapestry of contributions. Lastly, we all agreed that our editorial sub-groups would have the freedom to approach the submissions as they saw fit and felt comfortable with. In our struggle for meaning-making, together with the authors and contributors, we would form what Deleuze and Guattari (1987) saw as ‘alliances’ and negotiate our own collective understandings of the end product through critical dialogical engagement. The result of this negotiation would be a narrative structure and a story presented in a way that would make sense to our readers. It is now up to them to judge how successful we were in this endeavour.

How we did it

When the project was first outlined to me (Carina Buckley, Guest Editor), I was excited at the possibilities it presented for an inclusive community and I thought I could see quite easily how it would work. Putting the idea into practice soon showed me how wrong that was – so much variation! So many fragments to wrangle! So much uncertainty in what I felt I was ‘allowed’ to do! Yet the sense of excitement stayed alive, because those possibilities I’d imagined for an inclusive community remained within reach. In this way of working we were doing something genuinely innovative, grounded in community and inclusive of many more voices than those listed on the programme. Figuring out how to take some of those

voices and create a coherent narrative out of them wasn't always straightforward, but it was made easier by keeping in mind Alicja's helpful mantra, 'What adds value for the reader?' as well as by having a supportive team of co-editors to share ideas and perspectives. It was rewarding, too. I worked with three shorter contributions – a lightning talk and two posters – which had its challenges in that there was less initial material in the document, but I took this as a starting point for providing space for the authors to expand on their ideas, their rationale and their purpose, and they were all keen to take up the opportunity. I felt gratified to be a part of what was genuinely a collaborative process, and I wanted to do both reader and contributor justice through my interventions. Being able to revisit these pieces, as an editor and also as an author, has allowed me to make deeper connections and really think about a topic. And actually, once we got going, it didn't seem as difficult to achieve as I might have first thought!

I (Jim Donohue, Editor) found our debate in the Editorial Team Meeting about our sense of comfort/discomfort with intruding into the texts we are working on to be rather profound (if that's not a contradiction between adjective and modifier). I have come some way in feeling entitled to re-sequence content and change wording. It was interesting to hear how other editors' sense of that entitlement was – or maybe, wasn't – emerging.

I (Jenny Hillman, Editor) agree with Jim's point about the editorial meeting where we discussed authorial 'voices' and how we maintain the integrity of what was written, whilst also seeking to pull together a narrative thread. On reflection, I think I initially found it challenging to navigate the boundary (or very blurred line, as it transpired) between my role as editor and contributor. I thought (read 'worried') a lot about whether I might be variously amplifying/ silencing/ misrepresenting voices in our LD community. Reconfiguring my work as 'editor-contributor' made me realise that all of the editorial choices I made were legitimate when done so in the context, and spirit, of collaborative writing. It was comforting to see similar dynamics in the dialogue around the paper on collective writing spaces (in this collection) – where, similarly, 'hell' turned out not to be other people!

Contributing to this special issue of JLDHE has been quite a journey. I (Lee Fallin, Guest Editor) was excited by the opportunity and could not wait to get 'stuck in'. The reality of how this would be achieved only really hit when the work started. It was hard to have the traditional editorial role with so many authors and contributors, some of whom were anonymous. It felt strange to have so much (theoretical) control over the work and ideas of

others. I think the team has, however, done an excellent job of helping those authentic voices 'shine through'. I love how a variety of approaches have arisen from this – and how these have been allowed to take shape independently. This volume is indeed beautifully eclectic, and I hope it is of use to the community that put it together. I should also expand my reflection to acknowledge that guest editing has led me on a path to joining JLDHE as an Editor on an ongoing basis. Joining as a guest editor was a great way to get to know the team – and what I was getting myself into. I'm really enjoying it and look forward to the years ahead!

I (Emma Smith, Guest Editor) would echo the observations made by my fellow editors: this process took me on a journey. At the outset, having attended the conference and experienced the excitement of writing a comment that might make it into a journal (rather than a fast-forgotten spreadsheet of post-conference feedback comments), I was of the view that the community responses should stand largely as they were written (except for corrections of spelling or syntax and obvious duplication edited out). But reading through each text, seeing how well they worked when deep engagement or genuine dialogue infused the community response, led me to recognise that, if we're to have the readers' interests in mind, in many cases we as editors needed to intrude, to give shape and flow to others' voices. I still tried in my contributions to keep those voices intact as far as possible, but I also allowed my own to join the chorus, quietly, amplifying and connecting theirs. This guest editorial role has been my first interaction with the JLDHE and its team: I was compelled by the warm and open invitation to join this community of authors, editors and readers that came through strongly throughout the conference, so I volunteered. Just as this extraordinary collaborative writing endeavour welcomes presenters and attendees to share their ideas in new ways, so the openness of the journal team has created a real and warm welcome for me as a new editor. Editing too has been a thoroughly participatory process which we all played a part in defining and refining. Thank you all.

Seeing how the conference proceedings have changed and grown since the initial idea to publish the abstracts has been an amazing experience. When I (Melanie Crisfield, Guest Editor) agreed to be an editor following the conference, I wasn't sure how this marvellous idea would work in practice – it turns out, it worked so much better than I could have imagined! Like many others, I was uncertain about how to apply my editorial skills and voice, but when I began reading through the community discussion comments, it became clear how commentators were discussing the same themes and exploring the same possibilities. Putting those together into a thematic narrative was exciting, although I

definitely had to rein in my inclination to over-edit. Taking a step back and letting the voices of the contributors come through made all of the difference, and created insightful conversations about the presentations themselves. I'm really looking forward to seeing how this all comes together in a published issue.

And finally, we complete these reflections with Tom Lowe's (Guest Editor) commentary: Curating conference proceedings is a challenge of all academic conferences, but particularly for conferences where the presenters are of professional services and/or a mixture of academic disciplines. This process enabled participant reflections conducted live at the conference where both delegates listening, and presenters delivering, wrote reflections following the wording of their abstracts. Although many of the reflections were in note form, the editors were able to quickly synthesise these into a narrative, through adding some literature. Although the editor had to become part of the authorship, the output of presenter, delegate and editor has created a community response in a remarkably efficient time. By striking while the iron is hot at the conference, a lively conference proceedings has been written which reads in present tense to bring the reader into the room of the event.

What we achieved

The result is what we see as a beautifully eclectic collection that extends conference ideas and conversations beyond the conference space, giving those who may not have been able to either join in person or make their voices heard a chance to be part of these conversations. As such, it aligns with our belief that a conference presentation should not be the end of the scholarly conversation, but serve as an opener for something more. We hope that we succeeded at creating this space for presenters in this special collaboratively created collection.

As editors, we also learnt new ways of working and drawing on each other's experience in terms of understanding the role editors play in the publishing process. At times, we had to step outside our own comfort zones and open to the possibility that editors do not have to be gatekeepers but may play a more active role as supporters, developers, and even co-creators. While the experience was challenging and discombobulating at times, by the end of the process three of our guest editors – Carina Buckley, Lee Fallin and Tom Lowe – joined our editorial board as permanent members, which is a fantastic result for the JLDHE team!

Overall, we feel that with this collaboratively written volume, which is so much more than standard conference proceedings, we have pushed the boundaries of scholarly publishing, allowing for new voices and unexpected conversations to emerge. Our readiness to question the assumptions we bring into publishing and the traditional rules that govern it may have been radical but what we gained in the process is an authentic and empowering space that brought the community together. By inviting people to be heard in the way they want to be heard, we opened space for what is unknown and what might emerge if we are only bold enough to try. We thank you all for your active participation in it and we hope that you will be inspired enough to join us again next year.

With best wishes,

The *JLDHE* Editorial Board and Guest Editors

References

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