

## Learning Together: Lessons from a Collaborative Curriculum Design Project

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**Abstract:** Based on an action research project implemented at two South African universities, we argue that content and language integration (ICL) collaborative partnerships benefit not only from collaboration between language and content specialists, but in addition, from collaboration between language specialists, general education specialists and content specialists from a variety of disciplines. However, as we illustrate below, these benefits may be accompanied by substantial challenges. We make a further claim, for the value of a transformative approach towards collaboration for content and language integration, in which the teacher/researchers engage in their practice in a critical and reflexive manner, and by so doing, foster their own deep learning, as well as the deep learning of the students.

### Introduction

Studies on the integration of content and language tend to focus on collaboration between language and content specialists, where the key aim is the acquisition of language for academic purposes. In this article we wish to take a different approach, namely, to focus on what might happen in larger transformative teaching and learning projects in which language acquisition is not an overt or key stated aim. Is it in fact possible to maintain a focus on language and academic literacy within a broader educational project with social transformation and the negotiation of difference and social inclusion as key goals? If so, what might the necessary preconditions be? And what might the advantages be of working within a broader interdisciplinary project? What are the disadvantages of working in such a broad interdisciplinary team? These are some of the questions explored in this article, based on an action research project conducted over six years at two South African universities. More detailed descriptions of the interdisciplinary research-based project and of its findings can be found in Leibowitz et al., (2007 and 2010); Carolissen et al. (2010); Bozalek et al. (2007); Rohleder et al. (2008) and Swartz et al. (2009). These sources also consider in more detail the relationship between language, *e.g.* writing, drawing and emotion. This article focuses more

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specifically on the collaborative and interdisciplinary teaching and research team process, its advantages and disadvantages, and how language issues are taken up or overlooked.

## Setting for Collaboration

A brief description of the setting for this collaboration should give the reader a sense of the motivation for this collaboration. The setting is higher education in the Western Cape, South Africa, where inequality in relation to higher education is influenced by factors such as prior education, present higher education institution, social class, race, and language. This study was conducted at two universities in the Western Cape, approximately 25 kilometers in proximity, but located in two vastly different social worlds. The University of the Western Cape (UWC) had been allocated for "coloured" or mixed race students in the apartheid era, and still draws its students from coloured or African, working class and impoverished rural backgrounds. Collaborators on the curriculum design project were a Head of the Social Work Department and a lecturer from the Occupational Therapy Department. The Stellenbosch University (SU), on the other hand, is one of the oldest universities in the country. Its student composition is currently majority Afrikaans speaking, Christian, mainly white and middle class. The collaborators in the project from this university comprise the Director of the Centre for Teaching and Learning with experience in language and academic literacy, Head of the Psychology Department, and a lecturer and doctoral student from the Psychology Department.

The concerns which brought the collaborators together were the social isolation in which their students study, and the negative impact this would have on their confidence and communicative abilities when entering the world of work in a diverse and unequal society. A further, but less articulated concern, was the social isolation of the collaborators, who felt the need to work with like-minded individuals who shared a concern for social justice and a strong interest in teaching and learning.

## Purpose of Collaboration

As a response to the above concerns, the collaborators came together to develop a joint module for fourth year Social Work and Occupational Therapy students from UWC, and Psychology Honours students from SU. The collaboration had two broad aims:

- Firstly, to develop a joint course for students to learn together about the concepts of community, self and identity across boundaries of discipline, institution, race, gender, class, and language.
- Secondly, to develop a model for interdisciplinary collaborative curriculum design on issues of difference in the health and social sciences.

## Methodology for Collaboration

The research process was informed by a participatory action research approach which emphasised research as a practical and collaborative social process. It was emancipatory, critical, reflexive, and aimed to transform both theory and practice (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005). It combined research goals with action goals (Healy, 2000). Mason stresses that research into one's own practice (and here this extends to the practice of the curriculum design team) creates a dynamic form of knowing, which should lead to the development of all participants:

We engage in activity with the intention of facilitating particular actions in ourselves and in others, known as professional development, teaching and learning. We seek to enlarge

and develop access to potential in the future, for ourselves and others, with others.  
(Mason, 2002, p. 197)

The research approach was interdisciplinary, in drawing participants from the disciplines of psychology, social work, occupational therapy and higher education/language. We saw this as advantageous, following on from the argument posited by Davidson that teaching is best professionalized via working and talking collaboratively across the disciplines in order to interrogate "discipline pedagogies and frameworks" (Davidson, 2004, p. 309), and following from the argument by Jacobs (2005) that when disciplinary and language/educational specialists come together this allows tacit understandings of the conventions of the discipline to surface.

We saw ourselves as working within a community of practice (Wenger, 1998) in that our community was spontaneously formed, it incorporated individuals at different levels of expertise and yet all of us were engaged in learning. Whilst we were all experts in our own fields, we drew from each other's expertise. For example, whilst the first author of this paper was a "language" or "academic literacy" expert, she knew less about any of the disciplines than the other collaborators. The approach could be further likened to a "community of enquiry" which Christie et al. (2007, p. 264) describe as "a means by which to engineer the meeting of minds in shared enquiry".

The dynamic learning inherent in the research methodology was enhanced by the practice of reflexivity, which we understood to imply a form of bounding back on itself. Thus, we not only evaluated the learning experience for the students, or analysed how we collected the research, but also analysed how we came to know what we know, and how we understand the world as educators with our own "troubled knowledge" (Jansen, 2009).

Crabtree and Sapp (2004) cite Fransman (2003, p. 11), that "'epistemological reflexivity' is required if teachers are to be enabled to transform existing power relations, transcend cultural divides, and undo collectively-ingrained biases". Reflexivity is important in such unequal contexts as South Africa, where all too frequently, middle class educators using dominant world languages might be teaching working class or rural students learning in what are for them additional languages. The practice of reflexivity required that our research bounded back on our understanding and enquiry. Thus we too underwent a form of learning similar to what we expected of the students. We participated in training on diversity, led by peace activists from Israel/Palestine, Ariella Friedman and Ahmed Hijazi. In this training on diversity, we too, experienced the discomforts of engaging in dialogue on difference, that we expected from our students. We, too, had to experience the unsayable, the unknowable, thus the limitations of what academic language can offer.

Dynamic learning was also enhanced by our community of enquiry approach, in that we regarded our curriculum development process as a research project, collected various forms of data and wrote thirteen articles together. In doing so, we were conscious of the claims by Lingard et al. (2007, p. 516) that "attention to manuscript production [is] a complex act of shaping knowledge production". In presentations on our project we have heard academics say that they like to innovate and to collaborate, but that they would prefer to write and publish on their own disciplinary research. We would argue, however, that to write and publish research findings forces the learning to a deeper level. This more complex act of knowledge production happened for us during the initial acts of coding data as a group or in some cases as pairs, grappling with what to say, understanding the myriad of articles we sent to each other, or by responding to journal reviewers' comments. An example of the latter was the response we received from the journal, *Race, Ethnicity and Education*, which argued that our article was superficial, essentialising of race and unreflective of our own positions. Our reworking of the article led to greater understanding not only of the data itself, but of our project itself.

## Pedagogic Approach

The module was entitled "Community, Self and Identity". The term we found useful to describe the pedagogic approach is a "pedagogy of discomfort" after the work of Boler and Zembylas (2003). This pedagogy invites students to critique their deeply held assumptions, and destabilise their view of themselves and their worlds. We saw our learning platform as a "safe space", where difference could be negotiated. This negotiation occurred at both an intellectual and cognitive as well as an affective, visceral level. Several measures were taken to ensure that power and settled communicative patterns be disrupted.

In brief, the module, which was offered three years in succession to 95 students each year, was a form of flexible learning. Students came together for three contact sessions. They were divided into groups of six, with representatives from either university and as far as possible from all three disciplines in each group. At the first session they engaged in and learnt about participatory learning and action (PLA) techniques (Chambers, 2006; Taylor & Fransman, 2004). During the first contact session students drew community maps where they showed where they grew up, and what the resources and issues of concern were in their communities. This served as a basis for a group discussion. We hoped this would provide those less comfortable with expressing themselves in academic English (or 'essayist literacy', described by Farr (1993, p. 4, citing Scollon & Scollon, 1981 as the "register of English used in academic situations") more of an opportunity to share their life experiences and their understandings about "community". Furthermore, by drawing about their own community, they would become "experts", more than if the module had begun by discussing key texts analytically.

Students' community maps and rivers of life were photographed and added onto the Learning Management System (LMS) used for the module. For their first assignment students then had to discuss what they learnt from the PLA drawings in a reflective piece addressed to another member of their group, and had to respond to an entry addressed to themselves. A second assignment required them to read theoretical readings and write about this. A third was to develop a powerpoint presentation on what they had learnt in their groups. This was presented at the final contact session, after which a final assignment required each student to write a reflective piece on what they had learnt in the module. A significant aspect of the course was the visitors of note who gave creative or theoretical expositions at the sessions, which served to elicit debate and focus students' minds on issues of difference and identity. Examples of "creative" expositions were presentations by the artist Berni Searle and poet Gabeeba Baderoon. An example of more theoretical talks were by peace activist from Israel/Palestine, Ariella Friedman, University of Tel Aviv, and writer on race and identity politics in South Africa, Kgamadi Kometsi, University of the Witwatersrand). Another significant feature was to have the sessions at both institutions, to ensure reciprocity and for the students to experience each other's institutions.

## Data Collection and Analysis

In addition to the wealth of data saved on the LMS (student assignments, the scanned drawings) students were requested to fill in evaluation forms after the first and last sessions each year. A longitudinal study has also been conducted (Carolissen, in press).

Various research questions were posed, in response to which different data analysis approaches were adopted. These were decided upon in the team, where team members would suggest questions for further exploration, motivated either by their own disciplinary backgrounds or sheer curiosity. For example, in Leibowitz et al. (2007) led by Leibowitz, who has a background in language and literacy, we considered how the students managed their interaction and what discourses and

rhetorical strategies they used to describe and to negotiate their understandings of difference with each other. This was the most "linguistic" of the analyses. Swartz et al. (2009), published in the *Social Work Journal*, also focused on how students talked about difference, but more from the perspective of social psychology. In this case the lead author, Swartz, is a Professor in psychology. The majority of the articles were more generally educational (for example Bozalek *et al.*, 2007), or educationally specific, such as Rohleder et al. (2008), which focused on e-learning, or pertaining to the social sciences, for example Bozalek and Biersteker (2009), which focused on the use of PLA techniques. The aspect of the data analysis that the group struggled with the most, by far, was how to analyse the drawings. Finally, we invited a colleague, Lucia Thesen, from a third university in the Western Cape, the University of Cape Town, to discuss the drawings with us. She brought a functional-systemic approach to the analysis, which was highly productive. This social semiotic approach to the drawings allowed a deeper analysis of the data, as it allowed us to ask not only what the students were drawing, but how they were drawing, what elements they were linking together, and how they were positioning themselves in relation to the viewers (Rohleder & Thesen, in press).

## The Power of Collaboration

Writing about the value of collaborative research in medical education, Sullivan, Stoddard and Kalishman (2010) maintain that the benefits of collaborative research are not sufficiently appreciated. Because of the value of enhancing disciplinary knowledge through interdisciplinary and collaborative research, and because this is a relatively new approach about which not enough is known, one aspect of the research should be to investigate the interpersonal interaction involved. A significant aspect of this collaboration that we investigated, was the collaborators' experience of the research process: what facilitated its work and endurance; and what were the benefits and disadvantages of working in a team like this? In order to answer these questions we conducted two audiotaped interviews with the team as a group and three sets of one-on-one interviews with team members. Two team members analysed all the transcripts using the Christie et al. (2007) framework as a basis for coding, which was then modified in the light of the transcripts themselves (Table 1).

**Table 1. Collaborators' Experience of the Research Process**

Factors from Cristie et al. (2007)	As experienced in our project
Dialogue and Participation	Reciprocity: we all participated, all felt invested in the project, but none too much
Relationships	Several friendships preceded the project; others emerged as a result of the project and all members felt committed to each other
Perspective and Assumptions	We shared a strong work ethic, a similar ideological position but drew from different disciplinary perspectives
Structure and Context	Several of us were heads of departments or centres and could thus effect decisions within two institutions which allowed us to make these decisions; our structure was loose, which suited our strongly shared levels of investment

Climate	The mode of communication and interaction was informal, relaxed, with concern for each other. We mostly met over breakfast at a restaurant, and later at one team member's house
Purpose	We shared a sense of the purpose of higher education, our careers and the project
Control	Power was distributed across the group, with different members taking control of different sub-projects
<b>Additional factors emerging from the data</b>	
Resources	We had obtained funds for this from three research funding sources which allowed us to employ minimal assistance and to travel and disseminate the findings—for four years of this collaboration, which is presently into its sixth year
Administration	One of our members was an excellent secretary and web administrator, and with our busy lives, we felt that this kept the project together
Time	We had to carve this out of our busy schedules, at the expense of other work and family commitments

In agreement with the argument for the value of collaborative and interdisciplinary research made by Sullivan, Stoddard and Kalishman (2010), we found the learning we engaged in to be deep, at both the professional and the personal levels. The advantages emerging from the transcripts are summarized below:

### **Professional/academic**

- Awareness of teaching/research link
- Learnt research methods
- Learnt about teaching practice and theory
- Learnt about theories in social sciences
- Gave opportunity to write and research
- Publications: brought credibility to individuals or units
- More aware of institutional issues
- Sense of belonging to profession

### **Personal**

- Became more self aware
- Was "fun"

A key advantage which did not emerge from the transcripts, but rather, from the writings of the team, is of the team members' gradual empowerment as change agents (see Leibowitz *et al.*, 2010). The process of planning the module as an interdisciplinary team, analyzing the data as a team and undergoing diversity training as a team, allowed us to take risks, epistemological as well as pedagogic. We did so partly because we were committed to the broader project, and partly because we were able to support each other.

However, there were also weaknesses within our approach. The composition of our group, which was majority white and female, all English speaking and of a similar political persuasion - and thus relatively homogeneous - can be seen as a limitation, given the context of diversity in which we were teaching and researching. Related to this is the hermetic nature of group as a research team: there were occasions where the strength of the group and its success led non-members, for example in the same department as members, to feel envious or othered.

The interdisciplinary nature of the group was a key strength, but it had its weaknesses. One such weakness was an occasional tendency to engage in concepts from each other's disciplines in a superficial manner. All team members shared what we were reading with each other, and one might be tempted to "dip" into articles or resources from members of the team with a slightly different background, and borrow terms or concepts not sufficiently interrogated. The interdisciplinary focus also led to an unevenness of focus. For example, the first author of this article has a background in language and academic literacy, but she found the overall findings and outcomes of the project so compelling at an affective and experiential level, that in her contribution to the overall findings of the project, the issue of language and academic literacy tended to be eclipsed. Ironically, so much research has been produced on the central role of language in the acquisition of academic literacy of non-traditional students. Lillis and Turner (2001, p. 66), for example, write that "With the potential development of new pedagogies, the role of language use should have a central place." On the basis of this project we would argue that maintaining a balance between, on the one hand, keeping language and academic literacy as a key focus, and on the other hand, not sidelining, over-emphasizing or reifying it, poses a significant challenge that we have not read about in the literature on ICL. In reflecting on this silencing of the issue of language and academic literacy, we refer to the work of Akkerman *et al.* (2006) who make the valuable point that organizational, national or disciplinary diversity in research teams has to be acknowledged and worked through. This requires, they argue, making the team members' particularities visible, "to render each other's arguments as strange and new" (2006, p. 482). Thus we would suggest that in interdisciplinary research teams where some of the members have a background in academic literacy, this be actively foregrounded, along with the other disciplinary forms of expertise brought to the group. This does not imply that the academic literacy experts feel obliged to present their language based expertise on all occasions, but that at the start of the research, all team members state their backgrounds and basic assumptions, and how they feel this could contribute to the research process.

The research and pedagogic process was also resource intensive: at any given time six or eight researchers worked on this course, which could potentially have been managed by two researchers. We contend that the course would have lost in richness and depth, what it made up in having so many people being involved in its implementation.

## Conclusion

This study has demonstrated the enormous strengths associated with interdisciplinary and collaborative teaching and research, as well as the potential to ignore the important role of language and communication. We would agree with Jacobs (2005, p. 484) that "the creation of an institutional

transdisciplinary community of practice of tertiary educators could serve a transformative purpose in HE, where academics' professional roles as tertiary educators form the basis of the community rather than their disciplinary affiliation." On the basis of our study, we go further, and suggest that inter-institutional and transdisciplinary communities of practice, working across boundaries of class and geographical location, can provide a powerful and catalytic role in transforming our identities as educators and our understanding of what we do in the classroom. Further, in order to be transformative, interdisciplinary collaborative research that is not specifically targeting language or academic literacy, should maintain a focus not only on the "what" that is taught, studied or researched, but on the "how", as well as on the "how" this is communicated. Such a research focus would include various modalities of communicating the learning experience, such that language and academic literacy would of necessity be part of the scope of the research under the guise of identity, voice and biography (Akkerman *et al.*, 2006).

It is astonishing that six years on, 285 students, five funding proposals, 31 conference presentations, 13 journal articles and many reams of paper and team meetings on, we have so much data that is still worth mining, and so many unanswered questions, still to pursue. We have pointed to some of these remaining questions in this paper. We hope that we have demonstrated through this paper, the sheer wealth that can be produced via collaborative and interdisciplinary action research.

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