

Women's experience of academic collaboration.

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Abstract: This study examines the experience of collaboration for women academics in adult education. While the women describe a range of collaborative experiences, they place the greatest value on more complex forms of collaboration in which the self, the partner(s), and the work exist in a highly dynamic and interactive relationship. This study suggests that collaboration provides one way in which women are creating life-giving spaces for themselves within the masculinist culture of the academy.

In the opening scene of *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf (1929) has her narrator sitting on the banks of the river that winds through Oxbridge, reflecting on the topic "women and fiction." Deep in thought, she gets up and begins to walk across the campus towards the library:

Instantly a man's figure rose to intercept me. Nor did I at first understand that the gesticulations of a curious-looking object, in a cut-away coat and evening shirt, were aimed at me. His face expressed horror and indignation. Instinct rather than reason came to my help; he was a Beatle; I was a woman. This was the turf; there was the path. Only the Fellows and Scholars are allowed here; the gravel is the place for me The only charge I could bring against the Fellows and Scholars of whatever the college might happen to be was that in protection of their turf,' which has been rolled for 300 years in succession, they had sent my little fish [of an idea] into hiding. (p. 6)

Woolf's image vividly captures the idea of women's outsider status within the male-defined and male-dominated world of the academy, and many scholars have since explored the various dimensions of that outsider reality and its implications for women academics. Within that literature we were particularly impressed by the work of Aisenberg and Harrington (1988), whose study of tenure-track and nontenure-track women faculty illuminates the special challenges faced by women in being accepted within the academy. They argue that women, socialized to play a subordinate role and lacking the same degree of social and financial resources available to their male colleagues, are multiply handicapped in their professional development in academic life. While not chased away from academe by indignant Beatles in cut-away coats, women faculty are forced to adapt to male norms and standards, and few alternative models of academic work are considered legitimate.

We were curious about women's efforts in this context to explore alternative models of functioning, particularly in their role as scholars. While collaboration in research isn't a new modality, it is one which seems to be occurring with more frequency in recent years (Baldwin & Austin, 1995), and it is beginning to be an object of study in its own right (see, for example, Ede & Lunsford, 1990). The research on women's development (Caffarella, 1992) suggests that relationship is of central importance to women. We wondered what meaning academic women give to the collaborative relationship, and it is that question that became the focus of this study.

Methodology

We interviewed eleven women academics, all of them professors of adult education who are well established in their careers. All have collaborated with various partners, both with other women and with men, yet there is also significant variation among their experiences. Two of the women have a longterm collaborative relationship, having written together for approximately ten years. Two others are in the early stages of an extensive research project together. And four of the women are exploring the boundaries of collaboration itself by experimenting with new forms of epistemology; they have worked together for about six years. The interviews were open-ended and were conducted with small groups of the women, a process which enabled them to reflect together on their various experiences.

For our purposes here we will focus on two aspects of our findings: the nature of the collaborative relationship these women experienced; and the meaning they give to it--what we came to think of as the inner logic of the collaborative experience for these women.

The Nature of the Collaborative Relationship

We began each of our interviews by simply asking the women to describe their experience of collaboration. Consistently they responded by saying, "It depends In other words, they began by describing a range of experiences of collaboration, one that can be characterized in terms of the complexity of the relationship. At the low end are those collaborations which involve simple division of labor--the partners divide up the work, each taking responsibility for particular components of the research project. While there is a shared purpose and a degree of interaction with one another's work, authorship remains distinct over the separate elements. Midrange on the complexity continuum are those collaborations that have a higher degree of interaction, both conceptually and in the actual writing. Steed (1994) refers to "the multiplier effect" of this type of collaboration, where the relationship "pushes our personal understanding of the topic, and our ability to articulate that understanding, further than we might normally or reasonably do by ourselves" (p. 146). All of the women we interviewed spoke at some length about the enrichment of working with others at this level, experiencing the synergy of having their ideas expanded and creating something together that they never could have created working alone. Finally, at the higher end of the continuum we found a still more complex level of experience, what one of our women called "pushing the boundaries of what knowledge-making is about." This existed only among the groups with a longterm commitment to working together and it had a clear epistemological focus. At this end the collaborative relationship moves beyond synergy and towards developing new modes of intellectual engagement. Significantly, while all the women described collaborative experiences of various levels of complexity, what they talked about in

the most detail and with the greatest intensity were those experiences that fell at the mid to higher levels of complexity. Clearly they place a higher value on these more advanced modes of collaboration.

In searching for an image or metaphor to describe the experiences these women academics shared with us, we were reminded of how Aisenberg and Harrington (1988) described the relationship of their women faculty to their research projects. In contrast to the instrumental relationship characteristic of male academics, where the research is used to further their careers, Aisenberg and Harrington found that women academics tend to identify personally with their research, often speaking of it in passionate terms as a love object, and they have difficulty "using it" to advance their careers. We were struck by that idea of personal engagement in the ways our women spoke about the collaborative experiences that meant the most to them, and we began to think in terms of a tripartite system to image that relationship. It consists of the self, the partner(s), and the work, linked together as a highly dynamic, fluid, and interrelated system. The women consistently spoke of their collaborations in ways that supported this idea of a living system, one with a life of its own, requiring nurturance and constant tending. As the relationship becomes more complex, the system seems to become more tightly interwoven.

There are essential elements that make up the women's experience of academic collaboration at different stages of development. For the relationship to be initiated, several factors have to be present. The women spoke first about what we would call personal attractors: an affinity for one another, and shared academic interests. One dyad recounted their first meeting and their immediate connections in terms of personal backgrounds and research efforts. A certain chemistry seems operative in both domains. Also significant, though, are the differences between the women who collaborate, and that openness --even eagerness--to embrace difference seems to characterize them. Those differences included personality style (introvert/ extrovert), cognitive style (linear/global), and working preferences (systematic/emergent). Another factor is personal readiness for the collaboration. One woman noted: "It just depends on ... where you are as a person. I think that's real important because where I am as a person is real different right now from where I might have been five years ago. Now I'm interested in a different kind of collaboration, if that makes any sense." Finally, a bottomline concern for them seems to revolve around ego issues: all spoke about the necessity of sharing power and recognition. All of these factors seem to be required before the collaboration can even be initiated.

In the early stages of the relationship, several elements are evident. First is establishing what one of the women referred to as the "start-up thing.", This reflection came from the dyad that has been working together for more than 10 years and was elicited in the portion of the interview where they each talked about writing with others:

One of the things I remember thinking with [my new partner] was, I would realize that I was taking things for granted that [my stable partner] and I had worked out years ago So there's a way in which you almost forget--all the agreements, all the insecurities about getting started, learning another voice. So there's a start-up thing that you have to do and you have to do it fairly well or it doesn't work as well. I haven't found that any other collaboration has been as smooth or as comfortable or as equal.

There is also the issue of what one woman called "mastering the rhythms" of their interaction--becoming sensitive to the needs of the partner(s) and to their ways of working together. Over time we also saw attention being given to clarifying the purpose of the collaboration. This was especially clear for the group of four women; they had initially come together to write a book, but gradually moved from that goal to the broader purpose of forging new epistemologies in the academy. Finally, the women often spoke of playing together, but doing so in order to engage the work in new ways; the stable dyad referred to this as "breaking the frame" and for them it meant going to museums or taking other side trips that would move them away from strictly linear thinking about their work.

In the more longterm collaborative relationships there were several elements that characterized the later stages of development. The location of the self becomes more indeterminate, and we see a kind of fuzzing of the self. This involves more than a blending of voices; it seems more like the creation of a new voice. The stable dyad illustrated this when they described their evolution into a new way of writing together. They began their second book by each writing separate chapters, sending them out for review, then coming together for a week to work on the whole text:

We took our two power books, set them up side-by-side on the counter, and we decided that we couldn't continue to try to solve the problems in our own chapter. Instead what we needed to do was to take each other's chapter and completely rewrite it, then give it back to the first author to now wordsmith it after it had this major, major rewrite. And that just turned out to work incredibly well. And we did that yet again a third time That really became what I would call the real first draft.

Authorship in such a relationship must be constructed in a radically new way. Similarly we also saw conscious innovation at the level of epistemology. The group of four women were explicit about this when they described their work as "pushing the boundaries of what knowledge-making is about," and for them that includes developing new language:

One of the things that happens in working collaboratively like this, as intensely as this, is that we begin to develop new language to express new reality.... For anybody who's been "othered" out of the academy, there is an absence of language to be able to bring your particular knowledge into the academy. And the role that [our collaborative group] plays, I think, is to provide a place to start building that language.

Clearly these more advanced collaborations are intended to challenge the current norms of academic work.

It would be deceptive if we discussed these women's experience of academic collaboration without also addressing the difficulties they faced in sustaining those relationships. All of them spoke about the hard personal work required; as one woman said, "It's not all glorious." What is striking, however, is their willingness to do that relational work, even when it means putting the final product at risk.

The Inner Logic of Women's Academic Collaboration

Having examined the inner workings of the collaborative relationship these women academics experience, it's important to ask the wider question of its meaning for them, and to do that we need to situate their discussion within its context. If we consider again the masculinist norms of the academy, the choice to do collaborative research is, on the surface, illogical. Certainly the academy places the highest value on individual productivity, so collaborative work has less legitimacy. Why then would these women academics, who are already extremely busy, choose to take on more work--work which takes more time and effort and emotional attention than any research they do on their own--when the academic rewards for that work are limited?

In part the women explain this choice in terms of the quality of the work they are able to do collaboratively, and their arguments for this are persuasive. However, we think more than outcomes are at issue here. We believe these women are making a values statement through their countercultural choice. They are demonstrating in an academic context what we know to be true in other contexts--the central importance that connection has for women. Even more significantly, these women seem to see collaboration as one way to create a life space for themselves in the otherwise inhospitable environment of the academy. It may be that the inner logic of women's academic collaboration is the desire to make a room of their own in the sacred grove where they can live--and thrive--as scholars on their own terms and not on the terms set by men.

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