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## Editorial: Collaboration in higher education: Partnering with students, colleagues and external stakeholders

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## Editorial: Collaboration in higher education: Partnering with students, colleagues and external stakeholders

### Abstract

Welcome to this Special Issue of the Journal of University Teaching and Learning Practice (JUTLP). This editorial provides an overview of Collaboration in Higher Education. Humans are social, inter-dependent beings, needing to be and communicate with each other. Being with other people provides an opportunity to grow and develop, creating a sense of self and identity. Together we construct, structure and restructure the stories that build the larger narratives of who we are, what we do and how we live, act and behave as people, professionals and larger communities. It is through our collaborations that we come together, and construct meaning and ourselves. As Higher Education continues to exclude and sideline, as it constrains and removes spaces and places for collaboration between service staff, faculty and students within institutions, between institutions, and with other stakeholders, there is a need to rediscover the power of collaboration. The articles included, build on practical experience, research data, personal and collective reflections, to outline how the contributors have navigated this tension to create spaces of voice and hope. Presented are case studies that are boundary crossing: across disciplinary boundaries; cross-institution collaboration; cross-boundary working; pedagogical co-creation and the re-conceptualising of learning; and students as partners, co-researchers and co-authors. Together they showcase refreshed notions of collegiality and collaboration in Higher Education that support new and more nuanced, and dynamic models of co-creation. We hope the Special Issue helps seed an ecology of collaborative practice for social justice – a more humane academia.

### Practitioner Notes

1. Humans are social, interdependent beings – humane collaborative practices enable us to make space for ourselves as we strive to co-create a humane university.
2. Working with other people provides an opportunity for both a recognition of the self – and for joint growth and development.
3. Beyond the transactional: collaboration in Higher Education creates opportunities not for 'best practice' but for refreshed notions of collegiality and partnership.
4. Working together in academia and with external partners implicitly challenges the managerialist imperative of the neoliberal university.
5. An ecology of collaborative university practice supports social justice.

### Keywords

Higher education collaboration, co-creation, boundary crossing, partnership, being with

## Acknowledgment of context

We, the Guest Editors of this Special Issue of JUTLP, would like to invite readers to take a moment before they delve into the pages of this journal to reflect on the context they are situated within. In Canada, this includes the acknowledgement of Indigenous presence and land rights. In the United Kingdom, this means a recognition of a colonising past. If we take these territorial acknowledgements as sites of disruption, they can be transformative acts that can bring people together. It is in this spirit that we would like to show honour and respect to those past, present and future – to move forward in a good way.

## Higher education collaboration

This Special Issue focuses on the opportunities (and challenges) created by working in collaboration and partnership in Higher Education (HE). While HE Institutions (HEI) become ever more competitive to sustain their place in a global, neoliberal education market, students and staff are confronted with alienating practices that create a managerialist, audit and surveillance culture (Giroux, 2018). It is in this climate that we have curated articles that advocate for a more inclusive and more empowering education, a vision of education that advocates for teaching and learning that is more than a means to an end but rather a practice that enables personal and societal growth. The human element of education is therefore at the core of this Special Issue: the things we can do and achieve together, both students and (academic) staff.

Our argument is that collaboration is or creates a ‘third space’ (Soja, 1996; Shields, 2004; Lefebvre, 2003, 1991), an in-between space, facilitating deep and meaningful practice and useful reflection, to give focus and generate new meanings and potential solutions. Webster (2018) describes this as a space where boundaries are fuzzy and malleable, and hence a space that can expand and morph to accommodate the needs of those involved as well as of the broader environment. It is a space ‘occupied with’, defined by joint goals and outcomes. It is a space where the negative striations of normal academic power relations can be swept away (Burns, Sinfield and Abegglen, 2019) as together participants can (re)define the space and inhabit it more powerfully.

Given that the third space is the space of potentiality, of the liminal and the unmapped; given that it is the street fighting and nomadic space (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987) of education, we would argue that it is essential that all those in academia are given the sorts of third space opportunities that we have described here and that are discussed in this edition. Education for action depends on more than structural processes (Hall, 2021) and the banking of information (Freire, 2007), we need authentic curricula and practices that, rather than promote competitive individuality or reductive ‘skills for business’, emphasise the social nature of teaching and learning, the co-construction of knowledge (Lea and Street, 1998; JLDHE, 2019) and empowering knowledge exchange. As we strive for education for social justice, there is a need to develop programs and courses that better welcome and ‘hold’, sustain and support both those that are learning and those that are teaching. A humane academia requires methods and methodologies that offer multiple, non-hierarchical entry and exit points (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987) that embrace uncertainty (Cormier, 2012), creativity (Sinfield, Burns and Abegglen, 2019) and cooperative ‘third spaces.’

As collaborative academics, we advocate for praxes and habits that allow for cooperation both within and out-with academic institutions, that enable the formation of diverse Communities of Practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991) and the development of heutagogic networks that create those very human interpersonal spaces for growth. Such liberatory spaces need to be supported by critical (Freire, 2007) and democratic (Dewey, 1916) pedagogic practices that create a more welcoming university that acknowledges the super-complexity of people’s lives (Abegglen et al., 2020). As argued by Bhabha (2004), it is in a collective ‘third space’ (Burns et al., 2019; Gutierrez, 2008) whereby ‘being with’ (Nancy, 2000) individuals start to ‘become’, together. Where:

*everything comes together . . . subjectivity and objectivity, the abstract and the concrete, the real and the imagined, the knowable and the unimaginable, the repetitive and the differential, structure and agency, mind and body, consciousness and the unconscious, the disciplined and the transdisciplinary, everyday life and unending history.* (Soja, 1996, p. 56-57, emphasis in the original)

In this issue we explore what is possible when students, staff and institutions work in partnership and constructively co-create the spaces and places they inhabit. We showcase theoretical and practical explorations of how students and

staff can take control of where and how they work; finding their identities in ways that are recognised by the academy and those outside of academia, but which they negotiate more on their own terms. We share examples of a range of inspiring practices (rather than ‘best practice’) and also open up the discussion of what it means to co-construct learning, teaching, research – and a humane academia.

## **The many facets of co-creation**

The Special Issue offers a series of case studies that are all boundary crossing in one way or another: working across teams, across disciplines, across institutional and national boundaries, and across staff/student boundaries: working together with each other – as partners in curriculum change, as co-researchers and as co-authors. The first set of articles explores how faculty worked together across disciplinary boundaries to collaborate on curriculum design and delivery to enhance student learning and experience: cross-team working. The second set of articles looks at cross-institution collaboration within and out-with national boundaries, and presents case study examples of how institutions – and those within those institutions – came together to achieve a common goal. The third set of articles focuses on the notion of cross-boundary working. The articles outline how third space professionals, academics and practitioners came together, virtually and in-person, to decolonise contested academic spaces and places. The fourth set of articles outline pedagogical co-creation and the re-conceptualising of learning. Articles included provide examples of how to re-think pedagogy and practice together with and for students to de-territorialise education. The fifth and final set of articles included helps in rethinking faculty and student relationships providing concrete examples of how students and staff can work and research together to enhance learning: students as partners, co-researchers and co-authors.

### **Cross-team working**

The article by **Buckley and Heard-Lauréote** provides a case study of how a university in Southampton, United Kingdom prepared 1100 modules for online delivery in September 2020 via a uniquely non-hierarchical institutional cross-team collaboration to ensure success within a narrow timescale. The outcomes of this project highlight what brings worth and value to all collaboration work: challenge, agency and being valued.

Another example of cross-team working that serves to promote inclusion, social justice and anti-oppressive practice is detailed by **Smith et al.** Here a joint research project between staff and students at DeMontford University, Leicester, United Kingdom led to the co-creation of a Level 6 (third year undergraduate) module on Special Educational Needs and Disability. The module emerged from staff and student co-designed research that explored the lived experience of neurodiverse people, their families, practitioners and academics. The collaboration itself harnessed and valued the voices of ‘non-professionals’ to develop and embed socially just practice in course design and delivery.

The article by **Mfundo Makhanya and colleagues** also calls for non-hierarchical collaboration between faculty to foster student success. It outlines a unique fusion of a collaboration between academic departments and university writing centres at a South African university to help undergraduate students develop their abilities to write for academic and research purposes in their discipline of study. The article reflects on the success of the non-hierarchical collaboration and outlines recommendations for future practice.

### **Cross-institution collaboration**

**Walker and colleagues** explore the experiences of organisations participating as community partners and co-educators in a service-learning module in a HEI in South Wales, United Kingdom. The article outlines the opportunities and challenges faced by community organisations when working within the service-learning model, and the relationship with the university and the students, including issues of expectation, assessment and identity.

The article by **Weakley et al.** outlines how a team of academics, professional staff and students from a Scottish University in the United Kingdom worked with ‘third sector’ partners to achieve civic and social purpose goals. The paper is written by a team of academics, professional staff and students. The group outlines important considerations for university initiatives aiming to improve academic and student engagement with community partners for social change and the anchor role HEIs can play in this.

**Buchmüller et al.** present a case study about a research and teaching collaboration between two HEIs, one in Germany the other in India. Harnessing Feminist Science and Technology Studies and user-centered and participatory design

methods, they created an online course where students with different disciplinary backgrounds collaborated in cross-cultural teams. The goal was to propose design interventions for particularly affected social groups, for a post-Covid future – and make recommendations for future researchers, designers and engineers as to how to act responsibly in a globalized digital world and how to work together to achieve a common goal.

The article by **Koris et al.** argues for the capacity of cross-disciplinary virtual collaborations to prepare students for the complexity of working in today's interconnected world. The project implemented by students and faculty at one European and two US universities, brought together three disparate disciplines in a single project, where one team created a website for the proposed business of another team with accessibility advice from the third. Pre- and post-project surveys revealed that students demonstrated increased awareness of cross-disciplinary learning as well as improved effectiveness while collaborating to create cross-border solutions.

### Cross-boundary working

The first article in this group is written by a collective, the **Bickle et al.**, that consists of geographically dispersed third space professionals. Together, these individuals have formed a research-based virtual community of practice (vCoP) to enhance professional collaboration, visibility and identity of practitioners who are often side-lined by their contractual or spatial placing within HE culture. The article illustrates how collaborative writing activities, including the authoring this paper, helped the vCoP members retain elements of traditional academic identity, such as independence and purpose, whilst drawing out a clear appreciation of a lack of hierarchy and a focus on a supportive environment in the vCoP. In the process they offer a model of collaboration that could help groups in similar situations.

The second in this group is also written by a collective, a multi-disciplinary group of Australasian academics and practitioners, **Lucas et al.**, that was established as a Small Significant Online Network (SONG). The SONG group reflects on work integrated learning (WIL) using a collaborative ethnographic approach. Together, they have developed a HUMANE framework to enhance relationships with stakeholders that are central to the formation of a successful WIL experience.

The final article in this group is inspired by a shared vision of reconciliation. **Poitras Pratt and colleagues** explore practical ways in which heterarchical collaboration can serve to decolonize university teaching and learning. The indigenous and non-indigenous author team proposes ensemble mentorship as a collaborative education practice that allows the creation of an ethical space in universities where relationality is prioritised in service of social justice. They argue for decolonising pedagogies and education practice for collaboration.

### Pedagogical co-creation and the re-conceptualising of learning

In **Marrs and Mattingly** work across teams to both decolonise ballet pedagogy and traditional approaches to scaffolding writing with ballet students. Ballet itself is typically individualistic and trauma-filled. The expectation is of endurance and suffering - as it often is when arts-based students face academic writing. In this collaboration the emphasis instead is on play and the play mood, revealing ballet technique as an emergent strategy, a way of understanding how complex systems and patterns arise from multiple simple interactions. Alongside this emergent, playful strategy, writing practices are scaffolded by simple prompts for free-writes – progressing to more structured and complex essays. In this way they subvert habit and ignite curiosity, revealing writing and ballet as repeated and iterative practices that emerge from their own individual and collective perspectives as writers and dancers.

**Bustillos Morales'** work on de-territorialisation for pedagogical co-creation is both an action research project designed to re-think pedagogy and practice together with students and an exploration of the expectations that students bring with them to university. Conversations with students revealed very traditional notions of a hierarchical, transmissive classroom with students individually filled with knowledge by the tutor. Morales' collaborative and progressive pedagogies allowed students to co-create an alternative emancipatory vision of education as together they re-negotiated normative pedagogies and disrupted traditional power relationships.

**Pavlov et al.** explore how the video camera, traditionally seen as a surveillance tool, can be turned into one for interaction and collaboration in the online classroom. The article uses a foreign language class in a Russian University to examine whether learning and a learning community is facilitated by the use of cameras. In the process of conducting the case study they noticed that students, rather than turning cameras on as a proximity tool, were turning

them off to concentrate and study alone. This reveals the work that has to be done to build new understandings of learning as the co-production of knowledge and that being close in a digital sense can help develop a virtual ecology of collaboration.

### **Students as partners, co-researchers and co-authors**

**Keeling et al.** exemplify a delightful faculty-student collaborative. The article illustrates what partnership between students and faculty can achieve as they redesign a course that was initially stultifying into an energising and creative capstone project. The article demonstrates that together both students and faculty can serve as active agents in curriculum development, redesign and assessment.

**Peseta and their student-colleagues** offer a less common account by the student partners themselves of what partnership and power feel like in the neoliberal university. They are a group of staff and student partners at Western Sydney University, Australia, engaged together in the 21C project to transform curriculum, teaching, and learning. The article itself is a reflexive interrogation of their involvement with a new elective unit: *We are the University: Students Co-creating Change*. Offered as a fictional account, their multi-voiced experiences reveal partnership as forms of power over, as permission-giving, as sharing (or partnership), and the power to act (agency).

### **Coda**

As an editorial and research collaboration, we the Special Issue editors, break down, and out of, silos; avoiding the pitfall of navel gazing by having others to pull us back to reflect collaboratively. By working 'out loud' and by sharing we are opening up our own doing and thinking to others, co-constructing new knowledge, developing multi-vocal practice. Through collaboration we acknowledge each other – and others – with compassion and we challenge the individualistic characteristics of the 'euro-centric epistemological' traditions that colonise academia.

Humans are social, inter-dependent beings, needing to be and communicate with each other. Being with other people provides an opportunity to grow and develop, creating a sense of self and identity. Together we construct, structure and restructure the stories that build the larger narratives of who we are, what we do and how we live, act and behave as people, professionals and larger communities. It is through our collaborations that we come together, and construct meaning and ourselves.

Searching for an ecology of humane university practice that can sustain and nourish in what are often hostile times, collaboration is not a panacea for HE deficits – but it offers a porous and flexible space for action. There is much power in the 'in-between' spaces of academia and the transgressive space of continued collaborative work, writing and research that allow for different voices to be expressed – and heard. In this journal edition, we celebrate and promote the opportunities inherent in the different positionings experienced by our authors – where the very act of collaboration, research and writing increases visibility and gives voice not just to high status academics, but to early career researchers and students – and most importantly to those underrepresented, outsider identities.

The articles and case studies included build on practical experience, research data and personal and collaborative reflection. They provide refreshed notions of collegiality and collaboration in HE; new and more nuanced and dynamic models of partnerships between student and student, student and staff, and staff and staff. In the process we hope to nurture an emergent epistemology of co-creation. A longer-term goal is that this edition seeds an ecology of collaborative practice and advocates for joint learning, teaching and research approaches in HE. Collaboration is one of the keys for unlocking sustainable human educational futures.

We hope you enjoy this Special Edition of JUTLP as much as we have enjoyed curating and producing it.

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