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Enhancing the student experience through effective collaboration: a case study

Abstract

In the United Kingdom (UK), closer integration of public services, is challenging professionals to work more collaboratively within and across their organisational and professional boundaries (Great Britain DOH 2000; Great Britain, DFES 2003). Reflecting a move to more significantly include librarians in educational collaboration (Schulte and Sherwill-Navarro 2009), this paper provides an insight into the development of an innovative health curriculum in which academic staff on a range of health and social care professional programmes, together with library staff, have engaged in successful collaborative working. This successful partnership has to date, enabled the theme of lifelong learning to be embedded into a complex, year one, interprofessional module entitled "Foundations of Learning and Collaborative Working" (Northumbria University 2007). Using the Symbolic Interactionist Framework for Collaboration (SIFC) (Machin 2009), a case study of the collaborative working process undertaken is presented and factors influencing the success of the venture are highlighted. Sharing our experience may help others seeking to collaborate in their own work setting.

Introduction and Background to the Development

Across the UK public sector, there is a move towards greater integration of services more equipped to respond effectively and efficiently to the needs of services users. This challenges professionals to work more collaboratively within and across organisational and professional boundaries (Great Britain, DOH 2000; Great Britain, DFES 2003). Collaboration is a word used increasingly widely as an alternative to partnership or joint working. It can be defined as a process of "conscious interaction between the parties to achieve a common goal" (Meads and Ashcroft 16). As a public sector provider of Higher Education (HE), universities are also responding to the need to work differently. Working collaboratively within and across universities, and increasingly with external stakeholders such as employers, is a key driver for national initiatives such as Centres of Excellence in Learning and Teaching (CETL) (HEFCE 2005) which seek to make best use of available expertise across the wider knowledge community. In addition, providing student focused HE, responsive to the needs of a demographically changing student population, changing funding streams and the workforce needs of employers, is of paramount importance (Great Britain, HM Treasury 2006). Meeting these changing needs requires greater collaboration in higher education institutions (HEIs) to deliver a high quality, fit for purpose, student experience.

Another key economy driven, international workforce issue is an established need for well developed information literacy skills (Corrall 2007; UNESCO 2003). To meet this need, strategic developments to produce fit for purpose lifelong learners are steadily increasing in HEIs, driven and informed by the standards of America (ACRL 2000), Australian and New Zealand (Doskatsch 2002). Many models of practice, frameworks, strategies and case

studies (Bruce 2001; Brown and Duke 2006; Wrjayasundra 2008) have been developed to meet this growing need. The cross-disciplinary nature of information literacy and its importance to the capability of UK public sector workforce makes it a prime vehicle for HE collaboration between library and academic staff.

Evidence suggests cultural differences exists that can disadvantage collaborative efforts between academic and library staff (Bowler and Street 2008; Webber 2006). For example, some HEIs do not value librarians as academic equals, using lack of teaching qualifications or published papers as the basis for this assumption (Wijayasundra 190). Clearly this represents a barrier to successful collaboration MacGuinness (2003). According to Lampert (qtd. in Brasley 75) librarians rarely have the opportunity to participate in curriculum development. Schulte and Sherwill-Navarro (2009) however, identified academic staff as receptive to collaboration on assessment and curriculum development, but less likely to see teaching as part of the librarian's role. In addition, working arrangements in HEIs may mean that Librarians may find it difficult to be

'a servant one day and a partner in teaching the next' (Webber 14).

Library professionals are being encouraged to be proactive and to seek out opportunities to collaborate, taking on responsibility of initiating their involvement with curriculum design (Cobus 2008; Wrjayasundra 2008). However, there are few literature examples describing how successful collaboration between librarians and academic staff can be initiated, developed and sustained (Ivey 2003; Schulte and Sherwill-Navarro 2009).

This paper presents a case study of the development of an innovative curriculum in the School of Health Community and Education Studies (HCES) at Northumbria University (NU). Librarians were key contributors to the development of a core curriculum theme of lifelong learning for professional practice. The case study details the collaborative development of a

year one undergraduate module called "Foundations of Learning and Collaborative Working" (Northumbria University 2007). This module is one of a series of shared modules across several health and social care professional programmes, involving circa a thousand students per year, which seek to address the collaborative working agenda. The discussion begins by presenting and clarifying concepts underpinning an innovative model for understanding and facilitating collaborative working. This model will be used to illustrate the collaborative development process undertaken to embed lifelong learning and information literacy in the module. Each stage of the model is then applied to our experience and discussed, cumulatively building an in depth case study of a successful collaborative venture.

## *Understanding key concepts*

Collaborative, interprofessional working in an HE context

The collaborative working situation, on which this article is based, involved over 30 staff from different health and social care professional disciplines, including health specialist librarians. This mix of individuals and cultures engendered a complexity which needed to be understood and managed to a successful outcome. Developed through reflection on an experience of interprofessional change leadership in an HE setting, Machin (2009 267) proposed the "Symbolic Interactionist Framework for Collaboration" (SIFC) (Figure 1), as a process to facilitate and understand collaborative working.

This theoretical model is underpinned by symbolic interactionism (Mead 1934). Derived from an interpretive philosophical paradigm (Hughes 1990), symbolic interactionist theory suggests that individuals make sense of the world through their interpretation of their interaction with other people or things, within the context in which then interaction takes

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place (Mead 1934; Blumer 1969). Central to the SIFC model is the principle of valuing the perspectives of the individual.

Figure 1 – Symbolic Interactionist Framework for Collaboration (SIFC) (Machin 2009)
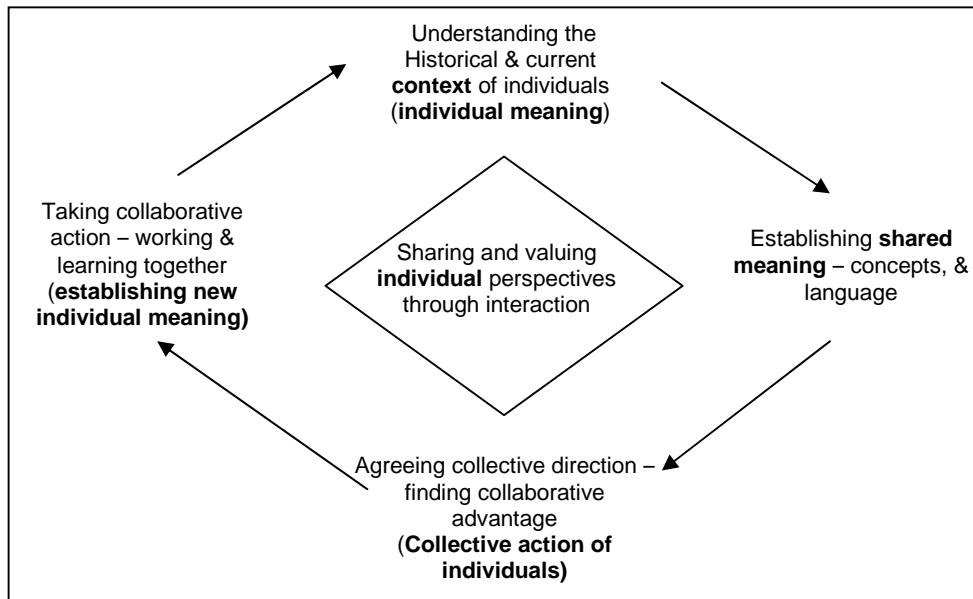
SIFC overview

In collaborative working, all stakeholders should be involved from the outset of the development and through effective facilitation, enabled to share their views, values and interpretations in an open supportive environment. Through ongoing facilitation, the collaborative team work towards shared agreement and understanding of key values, tasks, operational language and the parameters of the development. Once achieved, the team then discuss practicalities and decide on a course of action in which everyone involved feels they can gain from the experience, i.e. "collaborative advantage" (Huxham 1996) is anticipated. Huxham (14) applied the term "collaborative advantage" to a situation where an outcome is only achievable through collaboration and where all participants, individuals or organisations, also benefit in some way from the collaboration. Finally the group engage in collective action

toward the agreed shared agenda. In the SIFC model it is essential that each time the team meets, individual contributors' views on progress are made transparent and valued. This has echoes of the transformational change theory put forward by Karp (2005). Failing to value and acknowledge the individual contributor in any complex, collaborative change, may result in a fragmentation of the team, the development of misinterpretations and a misalignment of values between the team members (Machin 2009).

SIFC Stage 1: "Understanding the historical & current context of individuals"

Curriculum context

In HCES in 2007 the "Making it Real" curriculum was validated (Northumbria University 2007) as a suite of integrated professional programmes in nursing (adult, children, mental health and learning disability), midwifery, physiotherapy, occupational therapy and operating department practice. As a huge collaborative undertaking in its own right, the curriculum is focused on students developing a strong sense of professional identity in their own role, whilst recognising and valuing where their roles are similar and different to the other professionals they might work with.

Core to this suite of programmes are two cross programme, shared modules in each year, focusing on core skills for professional practice and collaborative working. The collaborative working modules are also shared by social work students.

Individual context

Morison et al (2003) suggest that shared modules in university are only of value when the content taught is of value to all professional groups. It was therefore important from the outset that everyone in any meeting situation felt able to speak openly and have their perspective heard and valued. Achieving integration at programme level is not always easy (Stubbings and Franklin 2006). However, in HCES, library and academic staff have a history of successfully working together resulting in a mutual desire to collaborate. In this development health specialist librarians had the opportunity to participate as equals, with all participants in the development, learning with and from each other (Barr 2005), rather than liaising following decision making by the academic team. As valued team members from the outset, library staff contribution specifically focused around supporting the team in embedding lifelong learning in the curriculum.

SIFC Stage 2: "Establishing shared meaning – concepts, & language"

Facilitating such large interprofessional, collaborative meetings is no easy task. It takes well developed transformational leadership skills (Higgs and Rowland 2005; Karp 2005) to lead large scale change in a complex environment. Having openly shared perspectives and listened to the views of all participants, agreement needs to be reached on what the team is trying to achieve and how this will be articulated. The outcome of this stage in our development resulted in a clear set of agreed module learning outcomes (Figure 2) focused around three core themes: professional issues in collaborative working; lifelong learning for collaborative practice; and working collaboratively with others.

Figure 2 – Agreed Module Learning Outcomes

At the end of the module the student will be able to:

1. Discuss the concept of collaboration and the professional issues associated with effective collaborative practice.
2. Demonstrate an understanding of the nature of groups and teams in health and social care practice and the importance of collaborative working with users and carers.
3. Communicate with others and contribute effectively to the process of inter-professional learning.
4. Demonstrate an awareness of different sources of knowledge and their use in supporting professional practice.
5. Demonstrate an ability to write academically and understand the academic and professional implications of academic misconduct.

These outcomes resulted from lengthy discussion and agreement on priorities, terminology, expectations and available expertise across programme teams and available HCES' service provision. This stage of the SIFC process is characterised by potential difference of opinion based on diverse understandings and priorities. The facilitator of these meetings needs confidence and skill in positively resolving conflict that may arise from the differences of opinion expressed at this stage and as development progresses. This stage has echoes of the "storming" stage of Tuckman's (1965) group formation process.

Collaborative working takes extra time because of the complexity of individual perspectives involved. Clearly there is a need to make the best use of everyone's time otherwise potential collaborative advantage may be reduced. At this stage then, further development time scales were agreed and other development parameters identified. Having this discussion early in the development and setting such parameters meant that when later discussion seemed to be deviating off course, a swift reminder of previous agreements made, helped the team maintain focus and collaborative momentum

SIFC Stage 3: "Agreeing collective direction – finding collaborative advantage"

The next stage involved deciding on the contribution from different team members. This was based on available individual expertise but also the reciprocal benefit to the individual's professional development and their work environment. There is little doubt that the visibility of the librarian and their role within the curriculum development team created cohesion within the programme with advantages to all parties (Cobus, 2008; Schulte and Sherwill-Navarro 2009). Developing and maintaining the partnership simply required dedication. Through attendance at meetings a great deal was learned about process and the teaching of the subject, which provided content and context for the student learning. This facilitated a move from co-operation and co-ordination to a more student-centred, integrated approach to skills delivery (Hart et al. 2003).

At the end of this stage everyone was very clear who in the interprofessional team they were working with, what they had to do, how developments would be shared with the rest of the team for comment and what their timescale was. However, sharing out work tasks runs the risk of fragmentation of the team and lack of ownership of parts of the work developed by others. Again facilitation of the process is crucial, as is the continuation of the sense of shared responsibility fostered at stage one of the SIFC development process.

SIFC Stage 4: "Taking collaborative action – working & learning together"
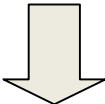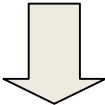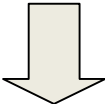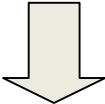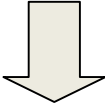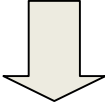
Through the process of effective collaborative working in small teams, module material was developed to meet the learning outcomes described in figure 2. This is described below to give a concrete indication of the extent to which we were successful in our collaborative working.

What the students do

Module learning outcomes 3 & 4 (see figure 2), reflect the importance of equipping students with the skills to become a lifelong, collaborative and reflective professional practitioner. The module content addresses a complex combination of professional issues, literacy skills and collaborative competency development. Students thus need to engage in diverse learning and teaching activities. A combination of uniprofessional (with their own profession) and interprofessional (with students from other programmes) opportunities balance learning to work collaboratively whilst developing a strong professional identity (Hind et al. 2003).

Figure 3 outlines the learning, teaching and assessment activity undertaken by students over the course of the module to address learning outcomes 3 & 4:

Figure 3. Lifelong Learning & Information literacy – Student Learning Journey

Overview of Student Learning activity (Taught)	Overview of student learning activity (Self-directed & individual support available)
Brief overview of the Library and Learning Services (Library team) ↓ IT induction workshop – introducing university systems (library team) ↓ Library skills workshops – introducing library resources (library team) ↓ Lifelong learning lecture (academic team) ↓ Academic writing lecture (academic team) ↓ Referencing/ plagiarism/Turnitin® seminar (academic team) ↓ Diagnostic essay seminar (academic team) ↓ Formative/summative assessment workbook activities (both teams)	**Face to face** Library team: • Information Skills Programme of workshops and drop-in sessions • Help desk for immediate resolution • Personal tutorials available with qualified librarians • Academic team: • Individual tutorial • Group progress seminar • Opportunistic support and guidance on other taught sessions • Support form practice assessors mentors with activities whilst on placement **Online** Library team: • IT self-assessment checklist • Skills Plus online tutorials covering IT, study and information skills • Study guides and Help sheets on web pages • Electronic enquiry service 'ask4help' • Help desk for immediate resolution • IT self-assessment checklist • Skills Plus online tutorials covering IT, study and information skills • Presentation with tips and examples on how to complete the workbook Academic team: • Communication via E Learning Portal • Module lectures and seminar material available on ELP for students' later use • Compilation of reading lists and useful external links

The librarian was able to offer support and a valued alternative perspective including: advice on copyright; optimum timing of literacy focused sessions; cross-team liaison for the resourcing and delivery of the library sessions. Though the library and IT inductions were generic and aimed at building hands-on learning confidence, in this context they focused on the skills needed to complete the first piece of academic work (the formative 'diagnostic' essay).

It is of note that the delivery activity described in figure 3 is undertaken by both library staff and/or academic staff, as a team. Delivery aside, teaching resources for lifelong learning were developed collaboratively and/or agreed, to ensure consistency across academic and library teams. In addition, explicit links were made for students, between sets of self directed study information available across the University. Previously information literacy development relied almost entirely on the latter. Whilst these self directed activities have been maintained and enhanced, there has also been an increase in taught content around information literacy. This was a direct result of an earlier academic/ library team research collaborative venture in HCES (Bailey et al. 2007) which indicated a more joined up approach would enhance the student experience.

One area on which collaboration has been particularly effective in this module is around the growing problem of plagiarism. Relevant information, including University assessment regulations, is introduced to students in one of the early module seminars (figure 3), which aims to equip them with the knowledge and skills to avoid any unintentional plagiarism. Students are also shown how to use "Turnitin®" online plagiarism detection service and this forms part of the formative assessment strategy for the module. Students are also expected to submit a 500 word essay on plagiarism, summatively outlining their understanding of the issue and its implications.

Student perspective

Students are not currently members of the development team. However the quality of their learning experience is central to our development. The majority of students achieve the module learning outcomes which has given the team reassurance about the module learning, teaching and assessment. In addition, a university standard, anonymous, online evaluation form is completed following each module delivery. The result from one cross programme cohort (133 students completed the questionnaire) is as follows:

Fig 4. – Online Module Evaluation (most recent delivery)

Student evaluation: example feedback	Agreed/ Strongly agreed
The following elements of the module helped me to learn:	
• Range and balance of teaching	76%
• Taught sessions	80%
• Support and advice during seminars, laboratories, workshops and tutorials	76%
• Non class based work such as set exercises, independent study and placements	72%
Course materials (paper based and online) were useful	87%
Learning materials or practices used by staff on the module were up to date.	88%

Figure 5. – Qualitative Comments (relevant examples)

"Lectures were all relevant and all helped contribute towards the learning which was necessary in our first semester. I would say all of this module very helpful, useful and very enjoyable"

"Library services teach on accessing literature on the various university sites and the lecturers helped simplify my approach to the topic"

"I found the library resources most useful for this module assessment"

> "I found this module very useful in getting me started on writing essays and looking at academic writing in general. The feedback and advice given in these sessions was very useful and I will use the handouts given throughout the next three years"
>
> "I found this module very useful, it has helped me and will hopefully reflect throughout all my future academic work"

These examples give a flavour of the type of evaluation we received. There were of course some negative comments. These were largely focused around the timing of the workbook assessment activities, with some students' feeling overwhelmed at the start of their programme.

At this stage of the development in the SIFC process, individual staff feedback was also important. Figure 6 outlines library staff perceptions of the benefits of collaborating in this module and curriculum:

Figure 6: Collaboration Benefits to Library Service

Key Practical Benefits for Library Service
- Early receipt of reading list for ordering, items are in stock and/or in VLE as required   - Knowledge of formative/summative assessment to inform equitable study support   - Tailoring of skills session to forthcoming assessment at most appropriate time/point of need   - Timing of optional skills sessions to complement learning progression   - Help Desk primed at relevant times for enquiries on specific topics

In addition to the obvious benefits for the library team, academic staff members have also clearly gained advantage from the collaboration. For example they now have a better understanding of library support available, enhanced mutual trust and respect for library staff expertise and not least, a firm foundation of confidence on which to base further planned

development. The year two collaborative working module, for example, is currently being delivered for the first time. It develops the lifelong learning theme further with a focus on research development and knowledge exchange, in which the library team contribution has also been invaluable.

Conclusion

This paper has provided an in depth case study of successful collaborative working between academic staff and health sciences librarians in an HE setting. It has presented the SIFC model (Machin 2009) which can potentially be used to both facilitate collaborative working and reflect on the success of the collaborative process. In the latter context, it may be used to help others identify where in the process collaborative working has faltered and enable teams to get back on track toward a common goal. A more systematic evaluation of the tool, perhaps through an action research approach is warranted. This would help to further establish it as a framework to facilitate collaborative working in an HE setting, or indeed any other setting characterised by the complexity of a large interprofessional team.

Learning together to work together continues to be a common goal across the public sector in order to enable individuals to function in an increasingly integrated, service user focused environment. This applies not just to students, as the workforce of the future, but to the existing workforce across the sector, including those working in higher education. This paper has provided an insight into the high level of collaborative advantage possible when health sciences librarians and academic staff undertake to learn together to work together, for the ultimate benefit of the curriculum and most importantly the student experience.

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