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## **The Art of Collaboration**

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### **Introduction**

In the arts world, the word collaboration covers a range of activities: from artistic collaborations, such as the collaboration between Gerhard Richter and Arvo Pärt for the 2015 Manchester International Festival, to teaching collaborations, such as the Regional Universities Network's collaboration in languages and creative and performing arts, to larger-scale collaborations, such as the Dance Massive festival, a collaboration between four arts organisations in Melbourne (Manchester International Festival 2015; Arts House et al. 2015; Anon n.d.). This paper, however, will focus on organisational collaborations, rather than artistic collaborations. It draws upon a systematic literature review on organisational collaboration in libraries that I have undertaken as part of my doctoral research for the University of South Australia. . This paper also draws upon the ongoing literature review that I am undertaking into the broader Galleries, Libraries, Archives and Museums (GLAM) sector and beyond. The findings of this review can be applied not only to libraries but also arts organisations (including art schools) wishing to engage in collaboration.

Three themes emerged from the review: the practice of collaboration, convergence (in the form of the learning or information commons in higher education), and collaboration as a skill. This paper will focus upon the practice of collaboration, examining the drivers, benefits, challenges and lessons learned (Kerrigan 2015, p.13).

### **Methodology**

The findings emerge primarily from a systematic review of library and information science (LIS) literature. This entailed reviewing the tables of contents and abstracts for the top fifteen LIS journals for articles on collaboration for the period 2009-2014. The top fifteen journals were determined by comparing journal data from Web of Science, Scimago, Google Scholar and the Excellence in Research Australia's 2010 ranked journal list. An additional five journals were included for geographic and topic scope and their tables of content reviewed for articles on collaboration for the period 2009-2014. Through this method, a total of 192 articles on inter- and intra-organisational collaboration were located, mostly case studies of collaboration.

### **Defining collaboration**

Because the word 'collaboration' is used to describe a wide variety of activities and relationships, it has proven difficult to define (Gajda 2004, p.66; Wood & Gray 1991, p.143). According to the Oxford English Dictionary, collaboration is 'united labour' (Oxford University Press 2015). There are, however, degrees of united labour, ranging from two individuals working together on a task to multiple organisations working together on a common purpose. The process of collaboration is also something of a black box (Wood & Gray 1991, p.143). Wood and Gray set out a framework of preconditions, process and outcomes but then chose to focus on the role of the convenor rather than the process (1991, p.149). Thomson and Perry extended their work by describing five dimensions of the process, specifically governance, administration, organisational autonomy, mutuality, and norms of trust and reciprocity (2006, p.21). They concluded that attending to these five dimensions increased the likelihood of successful collaborations (Thomson & Perry 2006, p.30).

Within the library literature, a commonly used model of collaboration is Bailey and Koney's spectrum of strategic alliances: cooperation, coordination, collaboration and coadunation (2000, p.7). In this spectrum, cooperating organisations share information and provide mutual support; coordinating organisations work on common tasks to achieve compatible goals, collaborating organisations have integrated strategies and a collective purpose, while coordinating organisations have effectively merged to create a new organisation with a unified structure and combined cultures (Bailey & Koney 2000, p.7). Bailey and Koney are writing from a non-profit perspective, however, even a for-profit perspective recognises a spectrum of alliances. Kanter (1994, p.98) described alliances as ranging from mutual service consortia to joint ventures to value-chain partnerships. She defines collaboration as 'creating new value together' (Kanter 1994, p.97). Value creation also features in Hansen and Nohria's discussion of intra-organisational collaboration in the for-profit sector, specifically for large multinational corporations (2004, p.23).

In his discussion of collaboration between non-profit and for-profit organisations, Austin (2000) refrains from defining collaboration. However, he describes a continuum of collaboration to identify three stages of cross-sector collaboration: philanthropic, transactional and integrative (2000, p.20). Furthermore, in line with Bailey and Koney, he strongly emphasises strategic fit between the non-profit organisation and the for-profit organisation (2000, pp.61–86). Strategic alignment is a theme that runs through the library literature on collaboration.

So collaboration entails collective purpose from a non-profit perspective, creating new value from a for-profit perspective and strategic alignment from both perspectives. The non-profit and for-profit perspectives may appear to conflict but I suggest that creating new value is embedded in the collective purpose and the

apparent conflict between them arises from the differing goals and language of non-profit and for-profit enterprises. My working definition of collaboration therefore is: organisations strategically aligning themselves and working together to achieve a collective purpose and create new value.

### **Findings from the review**

As noted in the introduction, the practice of collaboration was one of the themes emerging from the literature review. Although no commonalities were discerned in the process of collaboration, common issues did arise in the areas of the drivers of collaboration, the challenges the collaborations faced, lessons learnt from the practice of collaboration, and common characteristics of successful collaborations. These are set out below.

### **Drivers of collaboration**

Within the library sector, collaborations range from local consortia of libraries to the global sharing of catalogue records via the World Catalogue (OCLC 2013). Within Australia, two major collaborations are the South Australian One Card Network which brings together 135 public and community libraries to form a single-state-wide network and Trove, a search interface (called a discovery layer in the LIS literature) that searches multiple Australian library databases simultaneously (National Library of Australia 2013; Libraries SA n.d.). The library literature shows two key drivers for collaboration: the need to improve services to users and the impact of the digital world (Kerrigan 2015, p.14).

Within the arts sector, the key drivers appear to be an expectation on the part of funding bodies that arts organisations will collaborate and the need to increase audience participation. In *A culturally ambitious nation*, the Australia Council's strategic plan for 2014 to 2019, the Council sets out four goals (2014, pp. 4-7). The word collaboration appears in the description of each goal, however, this strategic plan may well have been superseded by the Ministry of Arts' forthcoming *National Program for Excellence in the Arts* (2015). The consultation document for this program nonetheless mentions collaboration in the fourth of its objectives (Ministry for the Arts 2015, p.3). Included in the assessment criteria for funding under this program are criteria regarding support and partnerships (Ministry for the Arts 2015, p.6). This shows that the Federal Government, a major funder of arts organisations, has an expectation that arts organisations should collaborate. From an education perspective, there is a similar expectation from the newly created Department of Education and Training (DET). A statement on higher education research sets out support for collaboration through funding programs, collaborative research methods and the National Collaborative Research Infrastructure (Department of Education and Training 2015).

Beyond the Federal Government's expectations, collaboration is also expected by philanthropic organisations who provide funding for the arts. The Ian Potter Foundation includes a commitment to partnerships and collaboration as one of its funding principles (The Ian Potter Foundation n.d.). Coyte, Rooney and Phua found in their examination of funding decisions by philanthropic organisations that one of the four key criteria used by these organisations to assess grant applications was whether the applicant had 'partnerships and alliances with other organisations as an indicator of capability to harness the resources necessary to 'make a difference' (2013, p.407).

The other key driver mentioned is the need to increase audience participation. A study undertaken for the Wallace Foundation in the United States in 2003 and a study by the Tate Gallery in the United Kingdom in 2012 both underscored this as a driver for collaboration in the arts (Ostrower 2003, p.8; Mortensen & Nesbitt 2012, p.8).

### **Challenges of collaboration**

The challenges to collaboration are many and varied. Complicated funding mechanisms and the differing archival traditions of Russian archivists were amongst those encountered by Bishop and Rock (2010, pp.124–125). Gueguen and Hanlon found dealing with legacy data, changing scope and changing policies as well as convincing stakeholders that digitisation should be considered a core library function were some of the challenges they faced (2009, p.473). Redefining the library's role in an online world is a challenge for many academic and special libraries: as library resources become virtual, the library becomes invisible (Clements 2009, p.394; Scale 2010, p.944). Sustainable funding for infrastructure and ongoing programs is an issue for many libraries (Gaetz & Stewart 2012, p.79; Genoni & Varga 2009, p.556; Koelker et al. 2010, p.100). Irvine found evaluating the collaboration difficult (2010, p.67). Enabling libraries to maintain their own policies and procedures in a network proved a challenge in both Nova Scotia and South Australia (van den Hoogen & Parrott 2012, p.324; Strempele 2014, p.5).

Finding suitably qualified staff and depending on grant money to run a program were challenges to a teaching collaboration (Long 2011, p.116). Differing professional philosophies were an issue for Kwon, Pardo and Burke (Kwon et al. 2009, p.189). Trehub and Wilson found gaining sustainable funding an issue (2010, p.249). Sustainability is also an issue for library consortia in Hungary, as it is for the Michigan Evergreen Consortium (Csajbók et al. 2012, p.338; Dykhuis 2009, p.64). Michigan also faced the challenge of libraries wanting to customise the system to local needs whilst maintaining integrity of the system (Dykhuis 2009, p.64).

For Doyle, finding the resources to devote to collaboration whilst maintaining normal operations was a challenge, particularly in an era of diminishing budgets (Doyle & Tucker 2011, p.216). Furthermore, Kramer noted that collaboration as a philosophy is not sufficient: collaboration is a tactic that should be deployed to meet specific goals (2010, p.225).

### **Lessons learnt**

Librarians have learnt many lessons from their collaborations. In a cross-border collaboration, Bishop and Rock learnt the necessity of understanding their co-collaborators' needs and also of downsizing goals (2010, p.228). Clarification of goals was a lesson learnt by Gaspar and Wetzel (2009, p.581). Gueguen and Hanlon found giving up control over processes to their collaboration partners led to success (2009, p.473). For Tong and Kisby, having mutual goals and identifying measures of success were amongst the lessons learnt (2009, p.141). In a collaboration with the local indigenous people, Libraries ACT found that alignment of the core activities was a great help in ensuring a genuine two-way collaboration, as was a willingness to learn on the part of library staff (Blackburn 2014, p.132). Scale discovered that face-to-face contact was not a necessary precondition for collaboration (2010, p.945).

Long also found clarifying goals and establishing measures of success was essential (2011, p.116). Koelker, Bouchard and Lutz found that assumptions that staff would absorb different skills and attitudes from their colleagues naturally were wrong – more pro-active efforts were needed to get staff to learn from each other (2010, p.104). Additionally, they found their library-centric perspective and goals were challenged by the different perspectives and goals of their collaborators (Koelker et al. 2010, p.104). Cheung and Lau found that compromise was essential and variations inevitable (2014, p.98), as did Juntunen, Muhonen, Nygrên, and Saarti (2015, p.244). Norton, Wilson and Yowell also found it necessary to be flexible in the application of policies and procedures (2009, p.133). For Henrich, time spent identifying mutually beneficial partners was time well-spent and that ensuring that the library had both the financial and human resources to devote to the collaboration was vital (2013, p.232)

Gardner, Napier and Carpenter found alignment was central to success (2013, p.147). Juntunen, Muhonen, Nygrên, and Saarti found identifying change agents amongst the staff helped the collaboration (2015, p.244). Providing sufficient time for staff to learn new technology and procedures was a lesson learnt by both Stoffle and Cuillier (2010, p.125) and Long (2011, p.116). For Haas and Stillwell, communication between the collaborators was vital to the success of the collaboration (2010, p.58).

### **Characteristics of successful collaboration**

Reading through the case studies suggests that each collaboration is unique and that there are very few commonalities between them. That makes it difficult to discern the characteristics of successful collaborations, particularly as each case study tends to focus on a single collaboration. Nonetheless, a few characteristics do emerge from the literature and although most of them seem to be common sense, being reminded of them can help.

When organisations decide to engage in collaboration, clearly defined goals are necessary. Hand-in-hand with this is the choice of partners – it is crucial to ensure that the goals of the partnering organisations are strategically aligned. For example, strategic alignment of goals enabled a successful collaboration between Libraries ACT and UsMobWriting (a local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander writers' group) – literacy is a core goal of Libraries ACT and this goal aligned neatly with the UsMobWriting's goal of fostering the writing ability of the local indigenous population, leading to a successful collaboration (Blackburn 2014, p.132).

It follows from this that the choice of partner is crucial. Kanter, writing in the Harvard Business Review, likens partnerships to marriages and sets out eight characteristics for successful partnerships: individual excellence, importance, interdependence, investment, information sharing, integration, institutionalization, and integrity (1994, p.10). However, Kanter does not mention in this list a characteristic that libraries have identified as vital for success: that of matching cultures. Abram has emphasised that one should never underestimate the impact of culture (Horton & Abram 2009, p.146). Each organisation has its own culture and indeed each profession has its own culture. Libraries have found that collaboration between professional groups can be hampered by the differing cultures and that even different types of librarians can have different cultures. Joint-use libraries that operate as both a public and an academic library have found they needed to put a lot of effort into bringing together the differing culture and ethos of public and academic libraries: the Henderson Library in New Zealand found this to be the case with an 'us and them' mentality evident between the public and academic librarians (Calvert 2010, p.139). Even within the same organisation, shared values may not translate to a shared service philosophy. When the University of Idaho created its information commons, it found that the differing philosophies of reference librarians and student tutors meant that the aim of enhancing the student experience was frequently not met, necessitating changes and more communication between librarians and tutors (Henrich 2013, pp.231–232).

This also leads into communication. Abram also notes that there is always a need for more communication, however, he also notes that the type of communication that is needed is not telling but listening. Accordingly, he urges managers to refrain from relying on memos and emails and to engage more in open-door policies, town-hall

type meetings where staff can put their views, and hallway conversations (Horton & Abram 2009, p.146).

### **Conclusion**

As a sector, libraries have been engaged in collaboration successfully for a long time: the case studies in the literature examine collaborations going back to 1969. Consequently, libraries provide good examples of how to go about organisational collaboration. These case studies provide guidance on the critical success factors for collaboration as well as the many challenges collaborating partners will face. Some of these success factors have not been previously identified in the literature on collaboration, specifically the need for strategic alignment of goals and the need to ensure a cultural match between collaborating organisations. Libraries have found that communicating with staff both formally and informally and ensuring that sustainable sources of funding are in place are also necessary for successful collaboration.

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