Making Academic Collaboration Work

Introduction

In their 2012 paper, 'The how and why of academic collaboration: disciplinary differences and policy implications', Lewis, Ross and Holden argued that there was a useful distinction to be made between collaboration (lowercase c) and Collaboration (capital C). The idea is that, whether we recognize it formally or not, almost all academics engage in the lowercase c type of collaboration through discussions and exchange of ideas. The capitalized Collaboration is the formal kind, when we apply for grants together and co-author papers.

In this ebook we will be looking at the way that these two concepts work together. That is how the requirement of formal Collaboration meshes with the day-to-day collaboration that goes on in all sections of the academy to produce new knowledge, even if from here on in we dispense with Lewis, Ross and Holden's C/c distinction.

Who is this ebook for?

It is intended for anyone who is considering collaborative work in an academic setting, and will be of particular interest to those embarking on cross-disciplinary research and academics in their early career.

Case studies and reflection from experienced researchers will help to guide your expectations and illustrate the practical advice on offer.

91% of researchers agreed that collaboration increases research impact (source: *jobs.ac.uk* survey)

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84% of researchers think that building personal, on-the-ground relationships (informal collaborations) are as important to research excellence as strategic initiatives (formal collaborations) in their institution. (Source: *jobs.ac.uk* survey)

1. Benefits of collaboration

Collaboration and the benefits of co-producing knowledge are not necessarily uncontroversial. External pressure can be a major factor in the desire to collaborate, and this should not be ignored. Successive regimes in the United Kingdom and elsewhere have valorised and rewarded collaborative research. It is a lynchpin now of the system, as can be seen from the recent Delivery Plans published by Research Councils UK.

However, these pressures cannot be said to have been applied without benefit. By constraining researchers to work with new fields and new areas, they have stimulated new enterprises; they have allowed methodologies to be applied across disciplines and they have motivated impactful research. There is also evidence to support the view that collaboration in and of itself increases the productivity of researchers (Landry, Traore and Godin, 1996).

Furthermore, the collaboration agenda has provided new opportunities for researchers to develop their skills in management and communication. The ability to form fruitful, sound partnerships, to lead a team or to play an essential role in a consortium are all legitimate ingredients for academic promotion in modern universities.

What are the benefits of collaboration?

New applications for research methodologies

Stimulation of new interdisciplinary fields

Increased productivity

Opportunities to develop leadership skills

Opportunities to develop communication skills

Access to new funding streams

Increased opportunities for meaningful impact

79% of researchers said that collaboration makes them more productive (source: jobs.ac.uk survey)

2. Tactics to avoid common pitfalls of collaboration

We recognise that collaboration happens all the time, in different ways. Even in the Humanities, where co-authoring is relatively rare, it is common practice to present papers at conferences and symposia, then revise and rework based on peer feedback. But how do you know whether you should formalise this kind of collaboration and what are the possible pitfalls that you should avoid?

What are your goals?

Begin by asking yourself: Why are you looking for a formal collaboration?

This is important because you want to make sure that you are doing this for the right reasons. Collaboration for the sake of collaboration is rarely successful in terms of outputs or research funding. If you are responding to a research funding call, you should be careful of re-inventing the wheel. You could investigate what existing consortia exist, which you could realistically join, or strengthen with your contacts. Also, be careful of joining up with friends for the sake of it, or because a research grouping is expected. You want a strong working relationship based on a common goal, and mutual benefit and respect.

Building relationships based on individual strengths and shared values

"I have found that the best and most satisfying collaborations are those where we are all confident in our own particular area of expertise and can see the wider positive effects of bringing that range of expertise together to generate a 'product' that would be impossible individually. Building these collaborative relationships with key individuals, each of whom can visualise that shared end point is crucial. For example, a current collaborative research interest of mine is in the areas of breast and gynaecological cancer where we have particularly focused on women's individual and shared experiences of these devastating diagnoses. With those colleagues involved, I have published a number of papers where each of us has contributed a different set of strengths. Negotiation of those relationships and their shared aims has taken time and effort on all our parts, but has begun to reap rewards in extending our networks beyond those small projects with which we began.

A further aspect of the shared relationships I've built is that, as researchers we all hold a similar set of values. My aim within the psychological fields where I'm active is to try to create a context for positive change. I am aware that the changes I am able to make individually are perhaps minimal; however, these incremental changes build up as collaborations develop. In addition, those individuals I am working with now will carry on their work beyond a particular collaborative enterprise, as will I, thus continuing and expanding the impact of what we might have achieved in our first joint research project."

Jane Montague, Discipline Lead for Psychology, University of Derby Excerpt from Strengthening research through collaborative partnerships

Who do you want to work with?

How do you go about finding the right partners? In the modern academy, we are all connected through networks; whether they are virtual or face-to-face. Personal recommendations, examples of successful past collaboration and academic reputation can help you decide who to work with.

To make sure you're choosing the right people, it's worth making early contact and establishing a connection before a project begins. You could also collaborate on something small or less pressured to determine how people work and what skills they bring to a team. If the person you're collaborating with is a brilliant scientist who can't meet deadlines, it's good to know that long before you're lagging behind in the project milestones for large scale funding.

Do you know your worth?

A big part of finding the right partners and joining the right team is knowing your own value. While academics can have the reputation of being egotistical and arrogant, the reality is that we are equally prone to selling ourselves short and underestimating our worth. Perhaps this comes from the way that we are separated into departments and schools: we might stop seeing our individual research as something special and unique if our immediate colleagues are doing work very similar to our own.

To establish a successful collaboration, you need to know what you can offer and how to position yourself and your discipline.

Consider the following questions to assess the value you can bring to a team:

1. What are your skills and experience using specific methodologies, techniques or software?

2. Are you a strong communicator? Think of examples of communication using different mediums

3. Can you offer organisational or leadership skills? Consider experience from outside your work

4. What is your public engagement experience?

5. Do you have a network that you can tap into in a specific area?

This is not an exhaustive list of skills, experience and qualities that you might bring, but a starting point to get you thinking about the value you can add.

What are the legal considerations?

You do need to consider due diligence and legal requirements. Individual universities will have different policies on working with outside partners and institutions. You should consult your research office, policy office or insurance office if you have any doubts about any collaboration you wish to undertake or have been offered.

There are often legal mechanisms that will enable people to work together, whether in the form of memoranda of understanding or formal collaboration agreements. There are people in your institution who know what you need to know.

Get in touch with your research administrators/office and let them help.

What are the skills and expertise that you can bring to a collaborative project?

Our blog might help you to find the answers: Tricks from an expert: how to identify your skills and boost your confidence

3. Case study: Cross-disciplinary collaboration in Norway

Dr Kate Maxwell

Collaboration is a great way of improving skills, increasing visibility, and making networking mean something. Often, collaboration is between colleagues who already know each other, or who work in related disciplines. What happens when collaboration occurs across diverse fields, such as when a sociologist works with chemist, or a physicist with an architect? This is a question that is currently being studied in Norway, via cross-disciplinary projects funded by the Norwegian Research Council.

These projects were born in an 'idélab', which translates literally as 'idea lab', but is probably better known to Anglophone readers as a 'sandpit'. This is an event with an open call for applications. Out of the applicants, a group of around 30 people (academics, industrial researchers, professionals) come together for a week and work on designing viable projects around a theme, with the help of mentors and leaders. At the end of the event, the treasure (in this case, three years of funding from the research council) is divided among those projects which the team of assessors and mentors feel are most pertinent and viable.

The first Norwegian idélab took place in 2014, and the funded projects will finish in 2017. What have we learnt?

First and foremost, collaboration is tough but rewarding. For the funded projects, the first job was to find the right people to complete the team. This meant advertising for, and hiring, postdoctoral and doctoral colleagues. This took time, and one of the projects kicked off with an incomplete team. In other projects, life circumstances changed so that some team members have changed job or taken long-term leave.

While everyone at the idélab may have been in one place for that intensive week, once they are spread out around the country again (just remember that Norway is over 2500km long - that's about the distance from London to Moscow), meetings are most often virtual. Add to that the normal problems with getting a group of people together at any one time, plus illnesses, other meetings, holidays... It is a wonder that group members keep in touch with each other at all.

The obvious solution to geographical and disciplinary disparity, then, is of course to divide the project into smaller work packages, typically small teams each reporting back to the wider group at a fortnightly video-conference meeting.

This is a typical method in collaboration, but the difference here is that the work projects cover quite diverse topics. Therefore, the two sociologists work together on ethical considerations while the two chemists test out the enzymes and the ICT team builds a database. This raises the question that if everyone is off doing their own little thing in ones and twos, is it really cross-disciplinary collaboration?

Of course it is. Each work package has its own aims, but these fall under the common goal of the whole project. Above all, the fortnightly video conferences – and the annual get-together – require a level of communication that is quite different from projects of a similar magnitude where the disciplines are related. Not nearly so much prior knowledge can be assumed, and complicated results must be translated into language that all project members can understand. This is vital, because in return, the experiment that just isn't working yet is suddenly given new life by an out-of-the-box comment from someone who, in any other project, wouldn't have the faintest idea that such an experiment was even taking place.

This, then, is the ultimate reward of cross-disciplinary collaboration: you never know where the answers will come from.

> **Key tips**
>
> What can we learn from the experiences of the Norwegian idélab projects?
>
> Take the time to find the right people to form your team
> Divide the project into smaller, more focused work packages
> Work towards a common goal
> Keep communications open – schedule a regular virtual meeting with all team members.
>
> Don't make assumptions – translate results into clear language for all team members to understand.

4. How to build your team

Aim high

Who do you really want to work with? Who are the big names in the field? Don't be afraid to contact your first choice, even if you are relatively junior. Make sure you're clear about your reason for getting in touch and give them a reason to respond. Think carefully about what you want the outcome of that first contact to be. The worst thing that can happen is silence, and the second worst is an introduction to someone else to work with.

If you're looking for ideas for how to make an introduction, see our blog post 7 ways to make the first move when strengthening your network'.

Seek a mix of skills and personalities, not just disciplines

What if you're an ideas person? What if you're great at connecting people but not so hot on organizing them? What if you're a timetabler and goal-setter that prefers to take a back seat? Whatever your skills you'll need different kinds of people working with you. Building a team can help you accentuate your strengths and negate your weaknesses.
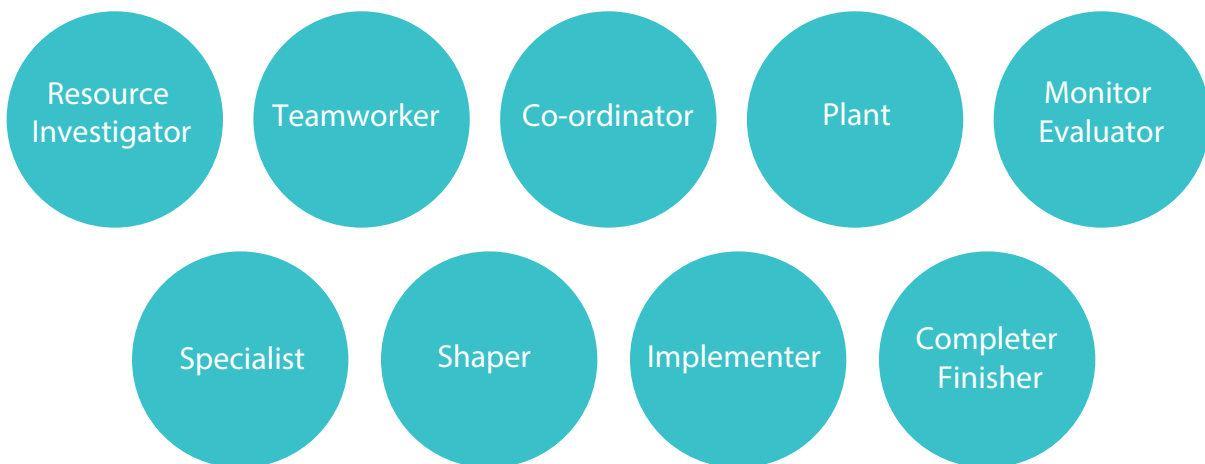
This is just an indication of the kinds of collaboration services on the market. All the tools listed above offer a free version, some also provide paid plans with additional features. We know that you'll have to investigate for yourselves, especially because, depending on the sensitivity of your research project, you may have data security issues to explore before you can decide which tools or services to use, and how.

Identify your team needs

There are several profiling techniques that are used in the workplace to identify personalities, work styles and requirements of a team. As an example, the Belbin Team Roles suggest nine types that a team can be formed from, noting that the best teams have examples of each type (although one person can play more than one role).

Please can you put the team roles below in a visual rather than a numbered list?

The Belbin Team Roles are:

Resource Investigator

Teamworker

Co-ordinator

Plant

Monitor Evaluator

Specialist

Shaper

Implementer

Completer Finisher

More information on the characteristics of each role is available on the **Belbin website.**

Other models for personality type and workstyles are **Myers-Briggs Type Indicator** and **DiSC profiles.**

Use technology to work together

Every day, a new internet service is launched that promises to help us to work together. There's no telling what the flavour of the month will be in the future. There are some common functions that you'll find helpful, especially if you're working across institutional boundaries.

Communication

The first hurdle to get over is how you're going to keep in touch with your team members. Even if you're working nearby, it may be a more effective use of your time to meet virtually. There are a range of services available to do this, including:

Appear.in
Google Hangouts
GoToMeeting
Skype

Use a scheduling service, like **Doodle** or **Meet-o-matic**, to arrange meetings. Using these tools, you don't need access to everyone's calendar; just pick some dates and your team can indicate when they're available.

Sharing and collaborating on documents

Create shared folders in a cloud-based service, like **Dropbox** or **Box**, so everyone in the team can access files, no matter where they are or what device they're using.

Google Drive offers additional features like synchronous editing, chat, and version control so you can work together in real time, track changes and monitor progress on your work.

Project management

To make sure everyone knows what's required of them and when tasks are due, you'll need some form of project management tool. T**eamweek** allows you to create Gantt charts for your project. It's free for teams of up to 5 people. For a more dynamic approach to task management, try **Trello.**

And then there are services like **Slack.** It provides a virtual forum where all communication about a project can take place. You can also integrate many of the services we've already mentioned, providing a single project space for your team to work in. The benefits of using such a service include:

- Increased transparency within the team
- Finding information is made easier
- Team culture is improved
- Team members feel more connected

There are plenty of people writing about these new tools and how they can help researchers. Take a look at the digital academic hashtag on Twitter or Professor Andy Miah's A-Z of Social Media for Academics. And don't forget that we share practical advice on our own blog, get started with our tips for undertaking collaborative projects.

5. Finding help

If collaborative research is new to you, or if you are uncertain about how things are supposed to work, it's natural to be apprehensive. Luckily, you are not alone. People have done this before. Have a look around your institution: is there a senior staff member who is charged with mentoring and fostering first-time collaborative researchers? Is there a successful collaborator in your department that you can chat to before you get started?

A massive resource is going to be your administrative support. Research offices are increasingly run and staffed along para-academic lines, with dedicated professionals who have dealt with dozens of contracts, research proposals and networks.

Here are some of the things that your administrators might be able to help with:

- **Identifying possible collaborators:** they have the best seat in the house to see the research being produced by the university

- **Identifying existing networks:** they know who has worked with whom in the past.

- **Checking the legal side:** what's the due diligence process at your institution, and what do you need to do to sort out contracts?

- **How much to charge for your time:** the costing function for staff time is often managed centrally.

Finally, do look at the experiences, both positive and negative, reported by other researchers through their blogs and social media profiles. There's a lot of people out there working together, learning together and producing excellent work together. Why not join them?

6. Case study: The importance of leadership and support

Dr Kate Maxwell

Cross-disciplinary collaboration can work. But it can also fall apart, with a project ultimately being like a bowl holding smaller projects around a theme. What has become clear from the Norwegian idélab projects is that good leadership is essential. What makes a good leader? And how can you become one when there is so little support available?Don't jump straight into leadership. It is easier to be a good leader if you have seen a good leader in action.

- What did they do?

- Why did it work?

- What did they do that didn't work so well and how did they move on?

Every leader makes mistakes. A good leader mends them.

A good leader needs a good team. Not everyone needs to be a leader; other team roles are just as important. Communication skills are essential. If you can't communicate what you've worked on in a way that your team members can understand, how will they work it out for themselves? So, practice summarising your complicated research in everyday language. It might seem awkward at first, but it soon becomes natural. Practice on your family and friends. Write a blog or present a vlog. The more you do it, the easier it gets. Attend the regular meetings and enjoy them. Sometimes they might take 20 minutes, sometimes 2 hours, but they are always inspiring. Make sure there is an agenda; if there isn't, offer to make one, and suggest a pattern for future meetings.

What can you do if you feel your leader isn't leading well?

This is a difficult situation, and there are no easy answers. I would advise you to focus on the future: how to make things better. Find a practice that works and suggest building on that. Chances are, your leader is well aware that things could be better, and will appreciate help in building on the positives. It's fine to acknowledge that some things don't work, but nit-picking and finger-pointing over failures is only going to bring people down. If I can borrow a notion from my discipline, music, then wrong notes are always going to happen. A musician will get beyond them through improvisation, experience, and doing well in the future, because like time, the music doesn't stop.

Final thoughts

A final lesson from Norway is that support from funders and host institutions is essential. By 'support' I don't just mean financial support. The staff at the Norwegian Research Council are great at responding to queries. In the same way that the fire service would rather prevent fires from starting than put them out, so the research council would rather help solve problems in their early stages rather than worry about a project that is floundering. So, from your funders or your institution, ask for an advisor or a mentor and use them. Sometimes, a 5-minute telephone call can save days of time. Be on the watch for problems and spot them early. Don't be afraid to ask for help. Keep in touch with the rest of the team, even if things are tricky or you feel you have nothing to report. This is collaboration, so collaborate!

Golden rule: keep in touch

7. Summary

There are many great opportunities to be gained from research collaborations, from growing your own skills and experiences to opening up new routes to publishing and impact. Yet collaboration is not without its risks. Understanding what they are early in the process, or preferably before you take the first step in forming a team, can help you to tackle problems before they become an issue.

Opportunities

- Grow your network - people contacted at early stages, as well as team members
- Get feedback on your work
- Exchange of ideas lead to inspiration and new lines of enquiry
- Adapt methodologies from other disciplines, and learn tools and tips from colleagues
- New routes to publication through co-authoring
- New routes to funding through team connections
- Increase productivity through shared goals
- Gain skills, for example in project management, communication and team working

Risks

- **Collaboration can become "box ticking" exercise in response to specific funding calls**
  Make sure collaboration is really beneficial to your research. Have a clear, common goal and understanding of the mutual benefits.

- **Loss of goodwill from friends and contacts, if the collaborative project goes awry**
  Take time to invest in relationships. Learn how to acknowledge, and to improvise around and move on from mistakes.

- **Wrong mix of team skills: all leaders, no completer-finisher, lack of communicators, etc.**
  Collaborate on something small to get to know team members before applying for big projects together. Know the mixture of personalities in your team, and how they can work together.

- **Your leader doesn't lead well**
  Ask for help and advice from experienced researchers as mentors, and from university administrators and funder teams.

- **Your team can't communicate with each other**
  Practise summarising your research in everyday language. Keep in touch with all stakeholders, even if you feel you have nothing to report. Regular communication can't be underestimated.

8. Five actions that will help you make academic collaboration work

Use this action plan to take the first five steps make your academic collaborations a success.

1. Build a winning team	When looking for collaborators consider what roles your team needs as well as what disciplines. Test the water by working together on an informal project before beginning a formal collaboration.	
2. Agree a common goal	Form a strong working relationshio and increase your chances of success by agreeingan overall goal for the project from start. Regularly check with all team members that you're all working towards this.	
3. Find the right tool for the job	Virtual teams need methods to work together. There are many possible tools you can use to help manage the project, keep in touch, share and collaborate on documents. The right tool works for everyone in the team.	
4. Appoint a leader and support them	Every team needs a leader to drive the project. Above all, a leader needs good communication skills and a team who support them.	
5. Know when to seek help	There are legal considerations you need to be aware of when embarking on a collaboration. Check with your research administrators for your institution's policies on working with external collaborators.	

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10. About the authors

Dr Christopher John Ferguson

Christopher is a former researcher and research administrator who is deeply interested in how and why people connect. An entrepreneur, Christopher runs his own company and works as a consultant in the social entrepreneurship space. In 2016, he became a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts in recognition of his work in promoting creativity and communication through setting up the Queensferry Sports and Community Hub.

Dr Kate Maxwell

Kate is an Associate Professor in music history at the University of Tromsø. Her research focuses on multimodality in medieval manuscripts and popular music, the notion of 'performance', and medieval French song. She is co-PI of the 'idélab fellowship project', funded by the Research Council of Norway, which serves to unite the projects funded by the 2014 idélab, as well as researching their cross-disciplinarity in action.

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