

The Challenge of Studying Collaboration

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This is a response to "Collaboration as Dialogue: Teachers and Researchers Engaged in Conversation and Professional Development" (Clark et al., 1996), a narrative account of teacher-researcher collaborative research presented in Readers Theater format. The authors identified a powerful value tension in collaborative research---the unequal benefits that accrue to classroom teachers and academics engaged in research and publication--and suggested that this inequity could be surmounted by collaboration in the form of dialogue. Although the authors argued against generalizing from their experience or constructing an integrative theory, their observations are concordant with other collaborative situations where inequality exists. Our response proposes ways to address the issues they have identified without losing the power of a theoretical analysis. We contend that, by looking for commonalities and differences across settings, tasks, working methods, goals, and values, a framework for understanding collaboration can be constructed that preserves the benefits of rich descriptive accounts.

In "Collaboration as Dialogue: Teachers and Researchers Engaged in Conversation and Professional Development," Clark et al. (1996) addressed the dynamics of collaboration, a subject important not only in education but in academia (Bauer, 1990; Mar, Newell, & Saxberg, 1976), the sciences (Barmark & Wallen, 1986; Chin, 1981; Rapley, 1995), health care and other professions (Hinshaw, 1995; Lau, 1983; Margolis & Fiorelli, 1984; Meyer, Babor, & Hesselbrock, 1988; Shibley & Schneekloth, 1988), and international business (Browning, 1994). Rather than constructing a theory of collaboration, Clark et al. presented narratives of collaboration. We admire the intention and effect of the narratives. However, if studies of collaboration are to offer guidance to individuals and groups committed to joint endeavors, we think that a theoretical structure is necessary. We are as wary as Clark et al. of uncritical commitment to a single theory. We are equally concerned, however, that, without a framework for comparing successful and unsuccessful collaboration, this promising mode of human engagement may become a passing fad. Thus, the theoretical approach we are pursuing integrates *multiple models of collaboration*.

Clark et al. gave a lively account of collaborative projects within and among three groups of high school teachers and university researchers. As the authors noted, in most school-based research initiated by academics, researchers gain disproportionately in comparison with participating teachers from the work itself and related publications. By contrast, Clark et al. took mutual empowerment seriously. The content of their article, as well as its form (the narrative Readers Theatre), honors the voices of all participants; the entire project is jointly owned and produced and presented by teachers and researchers alike.

In the Readers Theatre and their discussion of it, Clark et al. described several *value tensions* that have been noted in reports by or about collaborators: their desires to learn and change, on the one hand; their fears of self-exposure, on the other (Faber & Proops, 1985); and status differences among them, based on differences in the prestige of their respective institutions or on whether their interests lie primarily in research or service (Barmark & Wallen, 1986; Wallerstein & Martinez, 1994). In this and in other instances mentioned below, "Collaboration as Dialogue" is not anchored in the growing literature on collaboration, either inside or outside education (see Bickel & Hatrup, 1995; Bruffee, 1993; Chubin, Porter, Rossini, & Connolly, 1986; Fornan & McPhail, 1993; Galegher, Kraut, & Egidio, 1990; Gersick, 1988; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Levine, Resnick, & Higgens, 1993; Rogoff, 1994; Wasser & Bresler, 1996). Indeed, the disciplinary diversity of researchers addressing collaboration and the varied sources for theoretical analyses of the process make writing any article on the subject daunting. Because Clark et al. did not take cognizance of the broader literature and draw on it; their presentation lacks the context that could make it more memorable to collaboration researchers.

Even if the authors' only purpose was to tell the story of their collaboration, readers still would need to know the material of greatest *importance*: What was done and with what result. Missing is their original objective of portfolio assessment, evidently lost in the concern with teacher-researcher relationships. Instead, the emphasis is on understanding who the players were, how they fashioned their interactions, and where their joint work took place. Yet, even here, there is little portrayed in the way of the negotiations of classroom practice.

To provide a larger context for the study of collaboration, our response to Clark et al. highlights what we regard as their article's strengths and problems under four topics: (a) definitions of collaboration, (b) the rejection of a

theoretical approach, (c) the method of exploring collaboration through the co-construction of narratives, and (d) processes and outcomes of collaboration.

Definitions of Collaboration

When a term like *collaboration* becomes popular in the mass media, in research communities, and among educational practitioners, it needs to be defined. Definition is a creative though difficult process, because drawing meaningful boundaries is challenging. Two dangers are evident: being too limiting or too broad. After struggling with this issue, Clark et al. arrived at the following definition:

We have come to see dialogue as the centerpiece of our exchange. We see this as a fundamentally different take on collaboration—one that characterizes sharing and mutuality not in terms of *doing the same research work* but, rather, in terms of *understanding the work of one another*. (p. 196)

The authors' emphasis on dialogue is in response to the widespread problem that teacher-researcher collaborations are perceived as unequal and frequently burdensome for people faced with the many responsibilities of classrooms. The authors believe that dialogue, with its emphasis on voice and full participation, is the "central shared feature of collaborative research" (p. 197). This focus is also stressed in the inclusion of Martin Buber's (1970) notion of dialogue in which collaboration is more than the sum of individual participants; there is shared knowledge of an emergent form, and it cannot be reduced to the separate knowledge of the individual participants.

This latter definition is closer to our own understanding in which shared views, construction of new knowledge, and joint work are also significant aspects of collaboration. But Clark et al., although stating a commitment to portfolio analysis, did not envisage this objective as shared work. Narrowing their definition of collaboration to dialogue as the central feature, Clark et al. seemed ambivalent about the extent and efficacy of shared work.

To focus exclusively on dialogue is to ignore complementarity of skills, effort, and roles in trusting relationships as an alternative to lack of fairness and unequal power in some collaborations or to everyone doing identical work. We agree that dialogue is important to mutually respectful joint endeavors, but, unless it is linked to the participants' values, shared objectives, and common work, the result is not necessarily collaboration. We also question whether *dialogue* covers all that Clark et al. reported as their own collaborative processes and purposes. Their work also included shared planning, teaching, interactions with students, and routine paper-work-all practices identified in definitions offered by others who have studied collaboration (see, e.g., Bruffee, 1993; Kahn, 1993, pp. 14-18). Our definition highlights both the group task and the manner in which the members approach it:

The principals in a true collaboration represent complementary domains of expertise. As collaborators, they not only plan, decide, and act jointly, they also *think together*, combining independent conceptual schemes to create original frameworks. Also, in a true collaboration, there is a commitment to shared resources, power, and talent: no individual's point of view dominates, authority for decisions and actions resides in the group, and work products reflect a blending of all participants' contributions. We recognize that collaborative groups differ in their conformance to this profile and that any single group may exhibit some of the features only episodically or only after long association. (Minnis, John-Steiner, & Weber, 1994, p. C-2)

Implicit in our characterization, in addition to dialogue, are some of the activities Clark et al. described. For example, they read and analyzed their discussions, they identified recurrent themes in their data, they made cross-site comparisons around themes and sub-themes, and they structured their Readers Theatre according to the topics that emerged from their analyses. These collaborative decisions went beyond dialogue but were not identified as distinct from it. Similarly, the authors reported that their collaboration resulted in mutual professional development (p. 196), but the nature of the professional development is not clear, and they left it to readers to extract from their account the specific activities that led to this outcome. As we read the article, these might have included shared thinking and the definition and redefinition of their objectives (the shift from a common interest in portfolio assessment to a documentation and understanding of one another's work).

Clark et al. also discussed different levels of clarity about the objectives of the teacher-researcher projects at their three sites, thereby leaving the confines of dialogue and entering into a broader discourse concerning roles, values, and working methods in collaborative projects. In view of the failure of dialogue to encompass a range of collaborative activities—indeed, the range of collaborative activities included in Clark et al.—we conclude that, as a definition of collaboration, dialogue is too narrow and too ambivalent.

Theoretical Approach

Clark et al. rejected a theoretical approach to collaboration. They claimed that, by their nature, theoretical explanations override the specificity of experience; they represent theory in a universalistic manner and argue that it is an inappropriate framing device for their work. We disagree. We think that theory generalizes and essentializes only when it yields a single model and will admit no other.

Apart from the issue of whether theory is desirable, we doubt that Clark et al. avoided, or could have avoided, theorizing. "Collaboration as Dialogue" is akin to other qualitative teacher research in its focus on collaboration narratives. Although such narratives are highly informative, they are seldom limited to description. Implicit in the telling is selection, highlighting, and negotiation about the meaning of what is being reported. Indeed, in describing how they composed their Readers Theatre, the authors indicated some decisions of this kind, but they did not acknowledge such decisions to be theory building.

Identifying themes in one's work is a way to begin to see how it relates to that of others. For instance, in recent work on creativity, authors such as Csikszentmihalyi (1988), Feldman (1986), Gardner (1993), Gruber (1989), John-Steiner (1992, 1997), and Weber and Perkins (1992) have identified overlapping themes from which a contemporary theory of innovative thought is emerging. Their approach to theory construction is inductive, situational, and collaborative. It relies on mutual validation. It does not provide a single model of creativity but, instead, a set of nested, interrelated representations of complex, innovative human activities. Similarly, theories of collaboration, whatever their focus, involve careful distinctions and generalizations---for example, cooperative learning in elementary school (Sharan, 1994), collaborations of teacher-teacher (Engestrom, 1994; Stevenson & Lee, 1995) or teacher-researcher (Florio-Ruane, 1991), collaborative learning in college (Bruffee, 1993), or collective self-reflection in action projects (Schratz, 1993). When theory is context sensitive, embedded in the details of collaborative activities, it can help in detecting and weaving together significant features of these activities.

Clark et al. included, but only in passing, several themes that are familiar to collaboration researchers and that might have been developed more deliberately: between-group differences in role flexibility, time demands and allocation, and participants' competing obligations, loyalties, expectations, differences in working methods, and difficulty in writing together. Equally important but effectively buried themes are those concerning measures of success and the relationship between trust, conflict, and negotiation.

The thematic analyses of Clark et al. point to collaborators' roles and responsibilities, collaborative values, and dialogue as the most important features of collaboration. In our research, we attend to variations in patterns of collaboration. In product-oriented collaborations, for example, the roles tend to be clearly delineated, and efficiency is a primary objective. In more integrated collaborations, on the other hand, an emphasis on process, dialogue, and empowerment results in more flexible roles and division of labor (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996).

Aside from identifying themes, theoretical development can be advanced by systematically comparing collaborative endeavors across situations, participants, objectives, and complementary personal and disciplinary resources. The Clark et al. comparison of their three sites and their reliance on analytical notions such as "clarity of objectives" suggest the utility of such comparisons and generalizations that might be built on them. But, in "Collaboration as Dialogue," these comparisons were all but incidental to the focal story, the description of and the reflection on each collaborator's specific experience. As site-related differences and similarities are noted, named, and organized, the resulting framework can be strengthened by imagining whether and how it might be attached to broader constructs and data relevant to social forms of knowing---for instance, those drawn from sociocultural theory (Wertsch, 1994), situated cognition (Lave & Wenger, 1991), and feminist theory (Haraway, 1991). By separating themselves from such fruitful, ongoing endeavors, Clark et al. withdrew from collaborating with others who are committed to goals similar to their own.

Methods of Analysis

The authors' joint narrative by teachers and university researchers is an admirable accomplishment, particularly in its dramatized form as a Readers Theatre. In reconstructing their collaboration, from entry to dissemination, they highlighted, as the central outcome of their work, changes in teacher-researcher relationships. In some sections, however, it is difficult to track the multiple voices through which this conclusion is reached. Additional methods could have reinforced the way these 10 individuals experienced and learned from their interactions.

Specifically, dialogues and conversations that have been taped, transcribed, and analyzed for thematic features (the authors' method) could be supplemented by focused interviews with the participants. Moreover, as language was the primary data in this study, discourse analytic techniques (Edwards & Lampert, 1993), if used, could have provided further specificity to the Readers Theatre accounts. To mention only two possibilities, discourse analysis could have differentiated voices by examining the nature of speaking turns and the reliance on contrastive use of pronouns. For speaking turns, one may ask if they shorten with increased experience in collaboration; does speech become more elliptical as shared understanding develops? For contrastive pronouns, what happens over time in a collaboration with the relative frequency of *my* versus *our*, and *I* versus *we*? We propose these additional analyses as ways to corroborate the implications drawn by Clark et al. about the complexity of individual development in the context of supported change.

Processes and Outcomes of Collaboration

Collaboration produces multiple outcomes and questions. For Clark et al. these included a growing, mutual understanding among the participant teachers and researchers. But, if the rich vein of study suggested by their article

is to be developed, other aspects of their work need consideration and assessment. Clark et al pointed to changed teacher-researcher relationships as the central outcome of their work:

“We have grown increasingly aware of how much each of us has changed....[W]e see change and professional development occurring in all our lives – both as K-12 educators and as university researchers....Through our interactions, we have come to see ourselves and one another differently.
(p.222)

This welcome result is but one of several that might have been explored. For example, Clark et al. could have analyzed those parts of their Readers Theatre that concerned the perceived impacts of the collaboration on teacher-teacher and teacher-student interaction. With regard to the first, a close reading of their account indicates the beginnings of a community of practice and support among the teachers. Reflecting on past experiences, the teacher participants repeatedly referred to their isolation from one another, a likely factor in teacher burnout. As one of them remarked, “We don’t collaborate with each other. [Teaching is] an individual craft that you do in the privacy of your own room with your door shut usually, and you don’t have opportunities to have conversations [with other teachers]” (p.217). Elsewhere in the account, (p. 212-213), the teachers described how, within their collaborative projects, they overcame this isolation by helping one another, sharing planning, and reflecting on their classroom experiences. Toward the end of the Readers Theatre, the teachers explained how much the collaboration experience meant to them, and how it made the teaching process more rewarding (pp. 222, 225). Even so, the authors did not identify increased teaching satisfaction as one of the major motivations for continuing to collaborate. Had they done so, they could have theoretically and experientially linked their own collaborative experience to findings in the broader literature (Heath, 1983). Improved relationships and mutual support among teachers are surely an important outcome that deserves elaboration, replication, and theoretical understanding. Nonetheless, it would be useful to have direct evidence that a diminishing sense of isolation contributes to more effective teaching or to reduced drop out from teaching.

In discussing changes in teacher-student interaction, Clark et al. reported that the students felt validated by being included in the collaboration; specifically, students started to see their own work and roles as more significant that they had previously (pp. 215-218). Making students co-participants in this adventure helped them create positive attitudes toward their own learning and themselves. This is a particularly intriguing result which, if further documented and expanded, could enhance understanding of the potential of collaboration in educational settings.

Because Clark et al. were careful to explain what they did, it is possible by hindsight to identify important factors in their collaboration that were dealt with only tangentially. For example, we would have welcomed a more penetrating analysis and comparisons of tensions in the three groups. The Readers Theatre makes it clear that tensions varied across the groups. One teacher recalls that, when the researcher with whom she collaborated first came into her classroom, she felt both fear of being observed and hope for the benefits of consulting with an experienced individual (p. 218). Such misgivings did not exist, at least to the same extent, in another group where a long-standing, friendly, and trusting working relationship had already been established before the project began (p.212). In keeping with their postmodern stance, Clark et al. did not wish to analyze these differences in a systematic manner; they preferred to voice them but not examine or interpret them. We argue that an account of collaboration that does not attempt to examine differences, particularly those related to tension and conflict – areas of pivotal importance to successful collaboration--- cannot contribute fully to a comprehensive understanding of collaboration.

In their aversion to inequality, Clark et. Al. inadvertently may have diminished the influence of complementary differences on teachers’ and researchers’ perspectives, training, experience and skills. Handled correctly, complementarity is a resource. In fact, vis-a-via the students, these authors regarded it as such. Teachers reported that, while they collaborated with the researchers, their students assumed new roles: They began to question, criticize, and take on the adults in ways the adults valued. This is a particularly interesting and potentially significant result; it implies that complementarity of experience, age, and training can be assets in a collaboration. Certainly, it should be more systematically examined and linked to other research, because most studies that even consider collaborators at both these levels of age and experience consider them separately. By focusing on the frequently negative aspects of teacher-researcher interactions, Clark et. Al. have downplayed the powerful resources that complementary backgrounds can bring to a collaboration. Indeed, we think that collaboration is first and foremost an opportunity to build on complementarity and succeeds when status differences within the group are overcome and the benefits of complementarity govern the process.

Conclusion

We believe that “Collaboration as Dialogue” contributes significantly to understanding collaboration between university researchers, teachers, and students. Several important outcomes have resulted from the efforts of Clark et. Al. These include Reader’s Theatre and teachers’ communities of practice. However, we think that, in

presenting their study from a postmodern point of view and refusing to frame it theoretically, they have complicated and made burdensome the application of their experience to other situations. By rejecting usual practices—mutual validation, triangulation, and systematic comparisons across studies—they oblige readers to undertake them on their own. We found their account of sufficient interest to have made a beginning at linking it to our own on-going research and to the larger body of studies on collaboration. In our opinion, the work of Clark et al. reinforces the idea that a single-model approach to collaboration, their dialogic definition implies, is unworkable as a guide to prospective collaborators. Rather, we see the necessity of building a theory of collaboration that specifies multiple definitions and multiple models of collaborative practice.

Notes

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