Collaboration

The Erdős factor: personal engagement

Collaborative working in higher education represents a challenging mode of activity, with one's ability to persist essential for establishing and sustaining collaborations. Self-efficacy concerns the extent to which you believe that one can achieve what one sets out to do, organising and executing the necessary actions. Bandura argues in (1997, pp1-5) that people's levels of motivation, emotional state and actions are closely linked to the beliefs that they hold about their ability to make a difference in any given situation. Those with higher self-efficacy are more likely to succeed in the face of obstacles, putting in the extra effort and persistence that delivers success. Of course, if you combine high levels of self-efficacy with ineptness then you are destined for trouble – but self-efficacy still remains important for competent professionals.

But do we actually have any scope to change the attitudes and beliefs that determine our own levels of self-efficacy? Dweck (1999) meanwhile outlines two different sets of beliefs that we can hold with respect to our abilities: 'entity' beliefs and 'incremental' beliefs; or, as Yorke and Knight (2004) prefer to call them, 'fixed' beliefs and 'malleable' beliefs. While Dweck applies these initially to intelligence, they relate also to our ability more broadly. Those with fixed beliefs about their ability tend to choose activities that confirm their level of ability, which they perceive to be fixed. They would typically avoid taking on something that might lead to failure. Those with malleable beliefs see any lack of success as an opportunity for learning, and indeed for further effort. Knight and Yorke (2004) expand as follows on these ideas:

The 'malleable' position is that, with effort, one simply can achieve more and, in doing so, ascend a virtuous spiral. People who hold the fixed view can be strikingly successful but, when faced with difficult challenges, they are prone to judge, in advance, whether it is something they can succeed at or not. Those who are used to encountering tasks they suppose to be too hard will tend towards 'learned helplessness'. Those of a 'fixed' disposition who are more used to success are likely to be less persistent than those of a malleable disposition, which is why malleability is preferable—it makes for greater versatility. What can you adapt, while still serving to achieve worthwhile goals?

It is clear that a malleable position in regard to self-efficacy is a realistic option. Bandura goes on to group the strategies that we can employ when seeking to develop self efficacy under four categories (alongside these categories are some suggested approaches that we as developers might employ):

1. Mastery experiences concern occasions when we overcome obstacles through persistent effort.

   - Identify activity within your collaborative working that you think would be challenging to complete, but still realistically possible. Set sub-goals for yourself in relation to challenging activity – this boosts your self-efficacy when you achieve them.
   - Develop a greater understanding of your sphere of influence.

2. Modelling – if we see someone in a similar situation going the extra mile to make something work then we too can be inspired.

   - Further encouragement to network.
   - Find support for your collaborative activity from others. (Perhaps a mentor or group of supportive colleagues.)

3. Positive mood - How you feel in relation to a challenge is also important. We can learn to relish a challenge!

4. Encouragement - others can instill in you're the beliefs through their encouragement – persuasion as Bandura terms this.

- Gain feedback on your collaborative activity. (It is possible to build feedback loops into your initiatives.)
- Put the critical comments that you receive to good use.

Securing a job

Do people speak up for you in committee deciding on promotions or as part of an interview panel out of some 'objective' 'disinterested' analysis of your contribution? Who you know counts for a great deal in such situations, and this is not simply to do with reasons of back scratching.

We don't know as much about each other as we might imagine. One model that is helpful in analysing awareness within the process of human interaction is the Johari Window, as outlined in the Figure below. This window describes four different aspects of awareness: the open area, which represents things that I know about myself and that others know about me; the blind area, representing things that others know about me but of which I myself am blind to; the hidden area, for things that I know about myself but do not reveal to others; and finally the unknown area, containing things of which neither I nor others are aware. It is easy to assume that the open area is larger than it actually is, as much of what we imagine is known to others is in fact hidden from them. The challenge then is to develop the trust needed to be more open about our motivations, experiences, attitudes, values and so on. You will also need to welcome feedback from colleagues in this area, reducing the size of the blind area in order to increase the size of the open area.

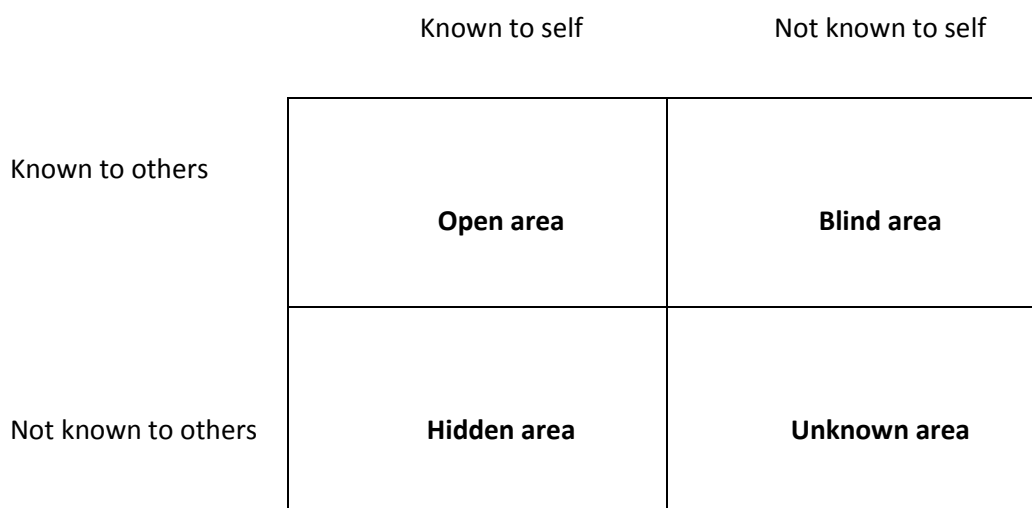|	Known to self	Not known to self
Known to others	**Open area**	**Blind area**
Not known to others	**Hidden area**	**Unknown area**

Figure: The Johari Window, after Luft (1970) [This above text and diagram is an edited extract from Kahn and Walsh, 2006, p137]

If you know relatively little about someone it may be harder to visualise them in a role, or you may be less ready to stand up for their merits when a promotion is being discussed. Or if you are not at all concerned with the progress of their career, then again there is less reason to speak up on their behalf. Collaborative working offers a substantive basis for someone to support the progression of your career.

Further advice on networking

Hectic schedules, endless work and piles of paperwork. There are only some of the reasons that can prevent you from interacting and networking with your colleagues. Yet, networking is a key aspect of an academic's working life, which can often result in support, advice or direct help that can impact on how we deal with the more demanding and challenging aspects of our practice. Networking is important to everyone's career development but it can be particularly important if, for example, you are on a part-time or fixed-term contract; your office is not centrally located on campus; or you spend a lot of time working independently, when it can be all too easy to be missed out of the information loop. Begin to think about the role that networking plays in your working life by considering these review questions.

> Consider the people you have contact with in your professional life. Which would you regard as your immediate circle and what function do these individuals play in your working life?
>
> What about the next circle? And the next?
>
> How many circles are there?
>
> Are you aware of whether the circles overlap – and is this important to you?
>
> Do you actively seek out new networks and acquaintances?
>
> How can you do this better?

A network, or networks, of colleagues can open a number of routes to more effective working. Here are some suggestions for how that can work in practice:

- raising your visibility and your profile
- getting a feel for the 'politics' of a situation
- getting your name known in your institution
- keeping abreast, or ahead, of developments and trends – or beginning to set them yourself
- finding out about and understanding how university systems work
- finding out what others think about issues – peers, senior colleagues, the sector, different disciplines
- developing and disseminating good practice
- problem solving
- sharing and validating learning
- getting to know who is who.

Many of these activities will make your work more interesting and enjoyable but they can also support the development of your practice through sharing of practice, ideas and information. They can also potentially lead to promotion and advancement through opportunities to develop and enhance your expertise and academic reputation.

When people start to discuss networking they often think automatically of conferences, writing papers, related costs in both time and money, and they feel overwhelmed. Conferences can be great for networking if you make best use of the opportunities – more on this later – but before you reach this point there are any number of smaller things that you can do to get started. There are many ways of beginning to network effectively from your very first days in post in a new job, including attending organised events such as induction for new staff; joining a reading group, the sports centre or musical society; or perhaps creating your own personal web page and linking to colleagues' sites. All of these approaches will involve you in four key aspects of good networking practice:

- being proactive
- getting involved

- letting people know who you are
- making connections.

Here are some further suggestions to get you networking:

- join, and contribute to, email discussion lists
- collect colleagues' business cards
- get your own business cards printed – and distribute them
- identify common interests with colleagues
- visit other institutions
- invite colleagues from other institutions to visit you
- get a mentor
- set up a buddy group
- join an action learning set.

As you can see, there are a number of different levels at which you can begin to network. Consider the following review points and make a commitment to do at least one thing this week from both the departmental and institutional levels lists. Also think about how you might begin to network proactively at a national or international level.

Review point: Departmental networking

1. Get out and about around the corridors meeting people.
2. Smile and say hello as you pass colleagues in the corridor – make an impact.
3. Go to the coffee room, lunch canteen or common room and don't sit on your own – introduce yourself and ask if you can join colleagues already seated.
4. Make sure that your name is on your door – if you have to wait for an official nameplate, make a temporary one for yourself.
5. Invite colleagues to coffee or lunch – find out about their subject areas and interests.

Review point: Institutional networking

1. Think vertically as well as horizontally.
2. Join committees relevant to your field of study and interests – find out how your institution 'works'.
3. Explore opportunities for secondment to other areas of the University,
4. Participate in development sessions – a great way to meet new colleagues in addition to developing your skills.
5. Attend institutional events, introduce yourself and speak with colleagues.
6. Conferences at national and international levels provide excellent networking opportunities.

Review point: (Inter) national networking

1. Always aim to present rather than just attend – it is often cheaper to participate as a presenter and you will have better opportunities to network with the conference organisers.
2. Start by offering poster presentations – this provides the opportunity to meet and chat with potentially all of the participants rather than the self-selected few who may choose to listen to a paper.
3. Check the delegate list at an early stage – aim to speak with a wide variety of participants.
4. Don't feel that you have to attend all the sessions – your time may be spent more profitably in chatting informally with other participants.
5. Exchange business cards/ email addresses/ contact details with a range of colleagues.

6. After the conference, send a brief email to everyone that you would like to keep in contact with.

Aim to build up a variety of networks. You will find that some of these will be focused on a particular group of people such as colleagues in your discipline area, while others will have a more diverse composition, and might include colleagues working in a variety of areas. You might also find yourself becoming involved in networking groups which have a more specific agenda that may lean more towards lobbying or political activism, or a group that adopts a particular standpoint, such as supporting women or ethnic minorities in academia.

(Adapted from Kahn and Walsh, 2006, p81-84).

References

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Planning template to develop the underlying basis for collaboration within your research

Does collaboration happen of its own accord? Write down any actions that you could take in relation to the points made during the session.

Practice Aspects of your research that would benefit from further collaborative working.	
Personal engagement Roles you could take on that would allow you to take the initiative with others. Ways to strengthen the articulation between your research and your own concerns. Skills/expertise you possess or could develop that facilitates collaborative research.	
Professional dialogues Strategies to promote exchanges with (potential) collaborators, including those with specific expertise to contribute or who can bring alternative perspectives or contributions. How can you integrate further discussion as an integral element of collaborative research?	
Collaborative vehicles Use, or instigation, of stable patterns of social interaction, as through practices, relationships, roles, events and agreements. Connections to underlying infrastructure that supports research (professionals networks, technology, …)	