Understanding Long-Term Collaboration: Reflections on Year 1 and Before

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Abstract

This article considers the results of an ongoing study of research collaboration within a cross-country research team in the digital humanities. The INKE group (or, Implementing New Knowledge Environments) is in its first year of funding for projects in the areas of Interface Design, Textual Studies, User Experience and Information Management. The author presents initial findings on the challenges and advantages to collaborative work on such a large-scale project.

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The INKE Research Group comprises over 35 researchers (and their research assistants and postdoctoral fellows) at more than 20 universities in Canada, England, the United States, and Ireland, and across 20 partners in the public and private sectors. INKE is a large-scale, long-term, interdisciplinary project to study the future of books and reading, supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada as well as contributions from participating universities and partners, and bringing together activities associated with book history and textual scholarship; user experience studies; interface design; and prototyping of digital reading environments.

Introduction

Many academic teams and granting agencies undergo a process of reflection at the completion of their research project to understand lessons learned and develop best practice guidelines (for example, see Bracken & Oughton, 2006; Bryan, Negretti, Christensen, & Stokes, 2002; Kishchuk, 2005; Lawrence, 2006; National Endowment for the Humanities Office of Digital Humanities, 2010). However, these reflections are generally completed after the fact, which may mean that some of these lessons learned are forgotten or minimized through the passage of time. This raises the question of what can be learned through reflection as a project is underway. This paper begins to answer this by examining the nature of collaboration and its associated benefits and challenges at the end of the first year of funded research of the Implementing New Knowledge Environments (INKE) research project.

Case Study

INKE research project is a seven-year project with 35 active researchers, plus post-doctoral fellows and graduate research assistants, across four countries with a budget of approximately $13 million, in cash and in-kind funding. The team has just completed its first year of funded research after approximately five years of discussions and planning. INKE is funded through the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada's Major Collaborative Research Initiatives program, which focuses on large scale integrative and collaborative research projects (SSHRC, 2010). INKE is divided into four research areas, including Interface Design, Textual Studies, User Experience, and Information Management (Siemens, Cunningham, Galey, Ruecker, Siemens, Warwick, Dobson, & the INKE Group., 2009).

Methodology

Members of the administrative team, researchers, graduate research assistants and others will be asked about their experiences collaborating within INKE on an annual basis in order to understand the nature of collaboration and ways that it may change over the life of a long-term grant. The interview questions focus on understanding the nature of collaboration, advantages and challenges associated with it within the context of INKE. The first set of interviews focused on the years leading up to funding, and the first year of funded collaboration.

Findings

A total of seven individuals were interviewed with representation from three groups within the project, including graduate research assistants (GRA), researchers (R), and administrative leads (AL). The three groups share common understandings of collaboration. They all agreed that collaboration allows individuals as a group to accomplish more than is possible alone, and is focused on attaining certain agreed upon outcomes. They also highlight that this type of work requires a specific set of skills and perspectives, which include interpersonal, planning, patience, flexibility, and the ability to "see the world in other terms" (AL#1)[1]. One of the researchers commented that collaborative writing requires a blending of voices, rather than privileging one over others.

At the same time, the participants' view of collaboration is tempered by the position that they occupy within the research team. The GRAs have a fragmented and micro view of their role in the collaboration, without a larger understanding of the full research endeavour

and their contribution within it. The researchers focus primarily on collaborating with other researchers within their specific sub-research area. Finally, the administrative leaders possess a larger view which includes the integration of the various sub-research areas to accomplish the larger project's goals and objectives. Within that perspective, one of the administrative leads commented that collaboration is really between people, rather than sub-research groups as represented in the organizational schema.

The participants highlight the advantages that flow from a collaboration of this nature. First, collaboration creates a larger community, both within the context of this particular research project and with the larger community of the practice or discipline as a whole. In particular, a collaboration of this scale creates opportunities for graduate students to interact with the larger community, extending their understanding of, and connections to, the field. Second, all participants highlight that a research team provides an opportunity for members to learn from each other in areas of content, skills, methodology, and new ways of thinking, as well as the chance to pool information and expertise. Finally, an effective collaboration creates an environment where individuals are more willing to cooperate because they are supported. This in turn creates more collaboration.

Of course, every collaboration comes with challenges. These challenges flow from disciplinary difference and interpersonal issues. The administrative leads also comment on the level of administrative workload associated with accountability both to the project and to each other, as well as to the funding agency. They often needed to spend time on tasks in which they were neither interested nor had the training to complete. In addition, they outlined that they felt that they were behind on other research projects because the INKE accountability documents ensure that INKE research takes priority. Further, the necessity to meet in person with other team members prompts additional travel. This type of work also requires skills in planning that are learned through the collaboration process. Teamwork of this scale and scope also serves to identify structural and systemic challenges. For example, several participants indicated that institutions did not understand big "H" humanities research and, as such, did not have the infrastructure to support this research. In addition, reward and recognition policies, particularly within the humanities, still tend to privilege the individual over a research team. Finally, tensions may also exist between participating institutions.

Discussion

While the INKE research team is still in the early stages of their collaboration, some preliminary conclusions can be drawn. Thus far, the research team is experiencing similar benefits and challenges associated with collaboration, as seen by other research teams (Amabile, Patterson, Mueller, Wojcik, Odomirok, Marsh, & Kramer, 2001). Others can be identified within INKE. Within an interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary research project such as this one, an opportunity is created to contribute to the larger community of practice with new ideas, methodologies, perspectives, and graduate student training. Thus, the benefits and understanding of collaboration must be considered beyond the scope of a particular project. At the same time, there is a realization that this type of collaboration creates additional workload, administrative paperwork, travel and time away from other projects, a situation that is not often clearly articulated or understood at the outset of a project. This is often

considered invisible work, which is typically not recognized through evaluation and promotion policies (Siemens, L. & INKE Research Group, 2009). Further, these challenges often require skills that are not often developed through traditional graduate programs; instead, skills are developed by participating in collaborations of various scales and scopes. As such, a project like INKE provides a deliberate opportunity for GRAs, post-doctoral fellows and junior faculty to apprentice in these roles and prepare themselves for life in the academy and beyond.

Note

1. Individuals will be identified by abbreviation for the group that they represent. For example, a graduate research assistant will be named as GRA#1.

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