
Building and Sustaining Long-term Collaboration – Lessons at the Midway Mark

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Introduction

Within the humanities, the typical research project is still predominately thought to be the purview of a single author, a tendency reinforced through graduate training and recognition policies (Newell & Swan, 2000). However, this situation appears to be changing in response to several trends. First, new research problems and the re-examination of traditional questions require new methodologies, perspectives, and work patterns, which can often involve project teams. Further, this trend is being reinforced through new collaboration-oriented and discipline-spanning granting programs, such as the Digging into Data Challenge and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) Partnership grants (Bruce, Lyall, Marsden, & Meagher, 2013; Office of Digital Humanities, 2010; SSHRC, 2010). Finally, advancements in digital technology mean that finding the “right” researcher is no longer bound by geography.

While these trends are exciting, they raise the question of how best to support researchers and the resulting projects so that those trained in solo research can work effectively with others. How do these teams function and what supports are needed (Lyall et al., 2013)? At this point, the body of knowledge to support new and existing teams is in development.

As a large project in terms of team membership, budget, scope, disciplinary perspectives, and project length, Implementing New Knowledge Environments (INKE)

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provides a unique perspective to explore the nature of collaboration in a highly integrative and collaborative project (INKE, 2012a). As outlined in the grant application (Cunningham, Dobson, Galey, Schreiber, R.G. Siemens, Ruecker, Warwick, & INKE Research Group, 2009), beyond exploring e-books and their potential from a variety of perspectives, this project is “understanding, creating, and evaluating research structures that will allow academic and non-academic (including industry partner) members of our research team to work together in ways that meet the needs of the research and development cycles of the entire INKE group” (Cunningham, Galey, Ruecker, R.G. Siemens, Siemens, & Warwick, 2012, p. 7). This project is a seven-year multidisciplinary project with 35 active researchers plus postdoctoral fellows, graduate research assistants, and partner organizations across four countries and a budget of approximately \$13 million of money and in-kind funding (INKE, 2012c). These collaborators are divided into two primary research areas with focus on interface design, and modelling and prototyping (L. Siemens & INKE Research Group, 2012d).

This article will contribute to the discussion of ways to support research collaborations by reviewing INKE’s experiences in collaboration and the creation of supportive structures and processes from the first three and a half years of collaboration (L. Siemens & INKE Research Group, 2010, 2012b, 2012c, 2012d, 2012e).

Reflection

As can be seen in Figure 1, INKE has been busy over the first three and a half years. Even before starting funded research, the team spent approximately six years defining the primary research question, objectives, methodologies, and budget, as well as forming the team itself along with a project charter that expressed the spirit of the collaboration. This effort culminated with a grant application and ultimately funding success on the second attempt (L. Siemens, 2010). At that point, before starting the planned research, over a six-month period, the administrative team focused on establishing work patterns, accountability structures, and planning and reporting cycles, which were then articulated in formal documents (L. Siemens & INKE Research Group, 2012b) and a seven-year plan for the entire project – a document that SSHRC used to evaluate progress at the midterm review and determine the possibility of funding continuation. After laying this important foundation, the four sub-research areas began their first year’s work of establishing research foundations and then targeted research on the book (year 2) and journal (year 3) (R.G. Siemens et al., 2012).

While the grant application suggested that a smooth research process would unfold, this collaboration experienced change and transition almost from the start. For example, the administrative team, comprised of leads from each of the sub-research groups, has been reorganized several times and changed in numbers (INKE, 2012d). The sub-research areas themselves have been reconstituted with new team members. Year three also saw the creation of a new sub-research area and introduction of new researchers and partners (L. Siemens & INKE Research Group, 2012c, 2012d). During this time, INKE relied on several structures and processes to support and strengthen the collaboration (L. Siemens & INKE Research Group, 2012c, 2012d). In particular, the annual “birds of a feather” gatherings proved to be useful for presenting research to each other and other interested stakeholders, building collaborative

Figure 1: INKE Timeline

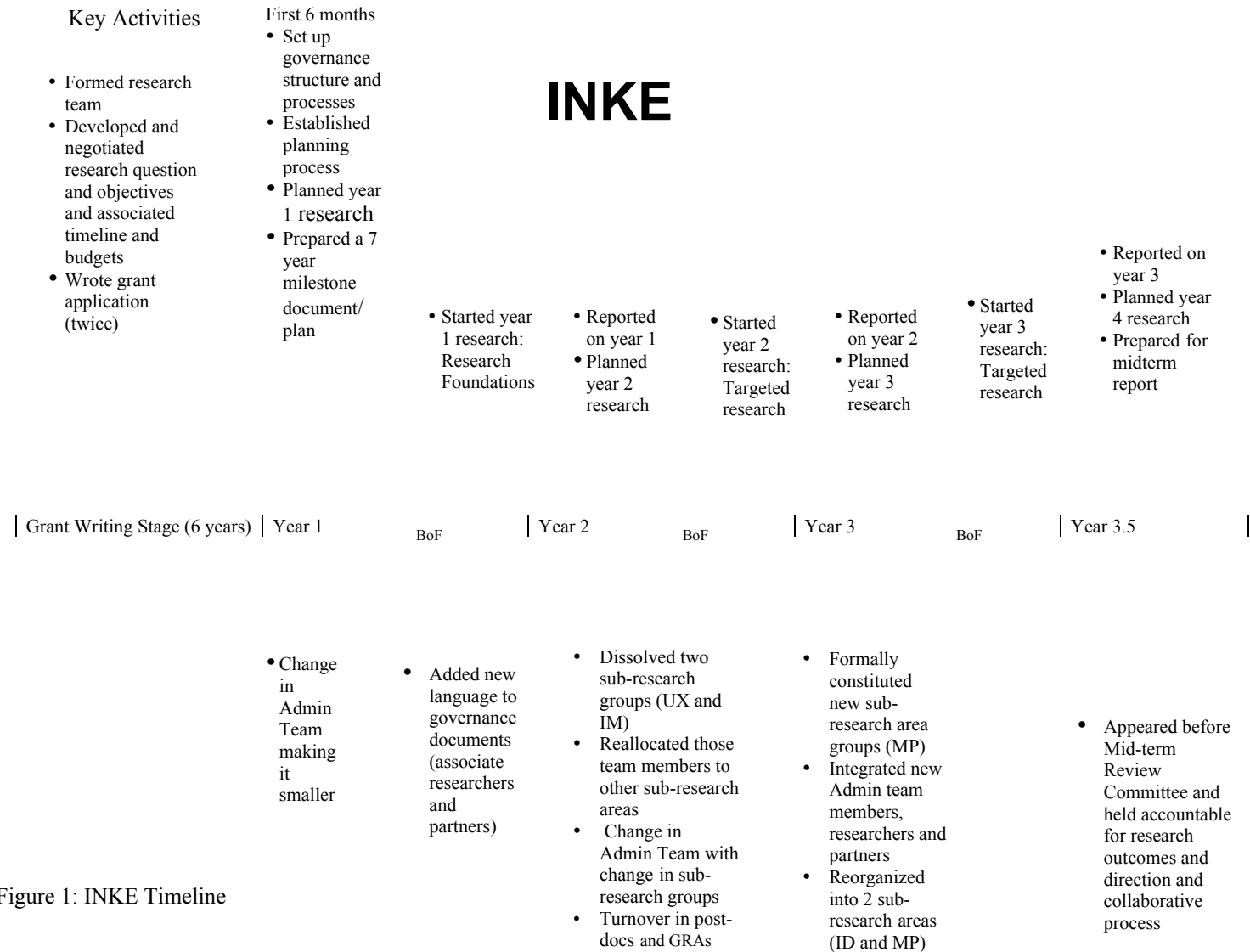


Figure 1: INKE Timeline

opportunities between researchers from the sub-research areas, holding face-to-face administrative meetings, and spending informal time with each other to reaffirm team spirit and commitment. The governance documents also provided mechanisms for managing transitions with articulated processes while remaining flexible and responsive to changing circumstances. Finally, the team used a variety of communication channels to plan work and collaborate with each other and sub-research areas. As a result, the team members reported very positive experiences in terms of the collaboration and its research outcomes, including papers, presentations, tools and prototypes, and connections to the traditional humanities and digital humanities communities (INKE, 2012b, 2012d).

Discussion and conclusions

After the conclusion of a successful midterm review, several lessons can be suggested for similar research projects.

First, this type of intense and highly integrative project requires skills that are typically not taught in graduate school. Among others, these include project planning and reporting, collaboration, negotiation, budgeting, and the ability to work within a targeted and integrative research environment. It also takes time and practice to develop these skills and become accustomed to working in these important ways. Post-docs and research assistants also gained experience in these skills (L. Siemens & INKE Research Group, 2012a, 2012d).

Second, by interviewing INKE team members on an annual basis, it is possible to explore the potentially changing nature of collaboration over time. It is clear that different aspects of collaboration received more (or less) emphasis depending on the year in question. For example, year one's reflection stressed the fact that the collaboration and teamwork was deepening and overall very positive with a nod to some challenges. Years two and three were more focused on the transitions and changes that were taking place and the use of the accountability structures to address them (L. Siemens & INKE Research Group, 2010, 2012a, 2012b, 2012c). These reflections also show that change and transition will always be present and processes are necessary from the outset to anticipate and manage them effectively and efficiently to ensure that the research can continue as planned.

Third, while INKE has encountered many changes, including several re-organizations of sub-research areas, administrative team leads, researchers, partners, and others, several constants have provided important foundations that have sustained the team. These include the governance documents that provided guidance for the change as well as clear articulations of roles and responsibilities, which proved especially important when new team members and administrative leads joined INKE. Further, communication channels, including the "birds of a feather" gatherings, have made the highly integrative collaboration actually work. Sub-research areas were not operating in silos because team members were aware of and often actively involved in projects with the other sub-research areas.

Finally, INKE's experience shows that it is possible for humanists to collaborate, though it takes time to develop and deepen a research team. In this case, INKE had a strong

foundation developed through the grant development stage. It still took a year or two before the collaborative skills and important personal connections were in place for true collaboration to occur, that is for the sub-research teams to be planning and undertaking work together. The governance documents, face-to-face formal and informal meetings, along with regular conference calls, emails, and other forms of interaction supported this process.

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