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Developing a Collaborative Qualitative Research Project Across Borders: Issues and Dilemmas

Peter Sayer
University of Texas at San Antonio, psayer72@yahoo.com

Troy Crawford
Universidad de Guanajuato, crawford@ugto.mx

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Abstract

International collaborative research often refers to collaboration among the researchers and the participants. Few studies investigate the collaborative process among the researchers themselves. Assumptions about the qualitative research process, institutional requirements, and even epistemological orientations, are pervasive. Our experience conducting an empirical research study as a collaborative effort amongst a research team in Mexico and the United States challenged and transformed our assumptions about collaborative qualitative research in terms of organizational compatibility: (a) understanding research perspective and themes, (b) interpreting rules and regulations (c) physical travel between countries, and (d) how research products are counted. We address each assumption through a dialogue, including how our collaborative research diverged from the assumption and how this divergence has impacted our own practice.

Keywords

Collaborative Research, Cultural Meaning-Making, Negotiating Institutional Norms

Developing a Collaborative Qualitative Research Project across Borders: Issues and Dilemmas

Peter Sayer
University of Texas at San Antonio, USA

Troy Crawford
Universidad de Guanajuato, Mexico

International collaborative research often refers to collaboration among the researchers and the participants. Few studies investigate the collaborative process among the researchers themselves. Assumptions about the qualitative research process, institutional requirements, and even epistemological orientations, are pervasive. Our experience conducting an empirical research study as a collaborative effort amongst a research team in Mexico and the United States challenged and transformed our assumptions about collaborative qualitative research in terms of organizational compatibility: (a) understanding research perspective and themes, (b) interpreting rules and regulations (c) physical travel between countries, and (d) how research products are counted. We address each assumption through a dialogue, including how our collaborative research diverged from the assumption and how this divergence has impacted our own practice. Keywords: Collaborative Research, Cultural Meaning-Making, Negotiating Institutional Norms

In higher education in both Mexico and the United States, academics are encouraged to develop international research collaborations. There are clear arguments in favor of binational joint research: combining multiple perspectives can make the research stronger, sharing access to data and scholarly sources benefits both sides, and the research is often incentivized by granting scholars access to funding for projects that have international participation. However, researchers must also confront the fact that the US and Mexican systems work differently, and these differences can create challenges for balancing the priorities for researchers in both countries.

In qualitative research the representation of knowledge is a key element that is in continual debate. Usually when we look at knowledge we are looking at it from the perspective of the relationship between the researcher and the participant. Less often do we explore, as we do in this piece, the relationship of meaning between the researchers themselves, a type of negotiated agency (Wertsch & Toma, 1995) in order to examine how the intersubjective experience of negotiating researchers' emerging understandings of not just the data, but of the goals and concepts within a study, evolves during a collaborative project.

In this sense, this article is autoethnographic. It is presented as a dialogue between two researchers (Crawford, 2013), and reflects the on-going discussions amongst the two research teams carrying out a joint project in the area of applied linguistics and language education. The issues we describe were those that we confronted during the first year of building a joint project around transnational U.S.-Mexican students who decided to become English teachers. Obviously, the theme of transnationals, whose physical and social ties in the U.S. and Mexico meant they kept a foot in both countries naturally lends itself to collaborative, binational research. It involved three faculty members from each institution, as well as graduate and undergraduate students. Holman (2005) defines autoethnography as an "ongoing dialogue between self and world about the questions of ontology, epistemology, method, and praxis:

What is the nature of knowing, what is the relationship between knower and known, how do we share what we know and with what effect?" (p. 766). This is relevant as the issues that surround the understanding of knowledge in language teaching is controversial (Khani & Hajizadeh, 2016; Kumaravadivelu, 2006, 2016; Prabhu, 1990; Zeichner, 2005).

In this article, we discuss some of the challenges we faced in trying to merge and balance the priorities of each research team. The issues ranged from different requirements from each institution, the type of publications that each system values, and the nature of how collaborative research is organized in Mexican and US universities. In essence we are trying to get beneath the surface to look at the perspectives from each side of the border underneath the research and driving it (Eisenbach, 2016). Hence, we are writing on behalf of our respective research team / *cuerpo académico*. To reflect how our understandings of the issues we describing here emerged from our discussions about how to organize our research projects, we have decided to present this article in "dialogue format."

The article is organized according to the four main themes we identified. After briefly framing each theme, both authors will respond individually in his own voice to the issue. Note that both authors are tenured researchers at his respective institution, which are both large, public regional universities where faculty are expected to be engaged in research. Peter writes from the perspective of a US university, and Troy from a Mexican one.

Research Perspectives and Themes

The first challenge confronting groups of researchers trying to build a collaborative project is to find a theme that encompasses the range of interests in both groups. While the theme should be specific enough to allow the group to focus its efforts, giving a clear direction for how to formulate research questions, gather data, and so forth, it must also be inclusive enough to reflect the particular areas of all the members of the groups. Further, in order to generate a project that is coherent, there should be some basic agreement about the approach to research. For example, groups that do not share the same epistemological orientation will have difficulty agreeing on research questions, how to develop a research plan, or even what will constitute the right kind of data to answer a given question. The terms *transnational* and *returnee* have different definitions on each side of the border that may influence how data is positioned (Kasun, 2015; de la Piedra, 2011; Mora, Trejo, & Roux, 2016; Mora-Pablo, 2011; Petron, 2009).

> *Peter: I should say up front that I find collaborating with colleagues in Mexican universities incredibly rewarding. The problem of how to include varied research interests, and of finding the right balance for a project between being focused and inclusive, is one that is not unique to binational projects. I think different perspectives or even epistemologies are going to exist within any group of researchers, and I've found that talking through the differences, and having to articulate carefully my own thinking about why I think a given approach is better suited to a particular research problem, is part of the scholarly process and sharpens my own ideas and understandings. Where it gets a little tricky working with colleagues from Mexico is that the "same" theme can sometimes be understood differently.*
>
> *For example, when we talk about "transnational students," on the US side we generally conceptualize this as children of immigrant families who have transnational ties to Mexico, and may or may not travel back and forth frequently. Many members of transnational families in the U.S. do not have*

legal documents, and their options for physically crossing the border are limited. So "transnational" for us tends to be more about the social and linguistic ties that are often maintained via phone calls, sending packages, or nowadays through social media or Skype. Whereas in Mexico this same theme may be understood as children of "returnee" families.

So the theme of transnationalism is the same, but seen from two quite distinct perspectives. Initially, I think we were all using the term "transnational" as though we meant the same thing, until at some point in the discussions the light sort of came on, and we realized that what we thought was our shared, common theme was actually somewhat different. Again, this is not necessarily a shortcoming, but does take some careful listening to understand what a colleague means when he or she refers to something, and not assume because we use the same term we mean the same thing.

Troy: I think, this type of cross border collaboration is very rich. You are caught in a unique paradigm. You need to interpret your data and simultaneously interpret your colleague. Here is Mexico a "transnational" was back and forth between countries over a period of time and a "returnee" usually went to the US once for a long period of time, as such, are considered completely different. It is mostly due to geography. Herein Guanajuato we generally have "returnees". Whereas in Tamaulipas, which is closer to the border, there tend to be more "transnationals". I think that on the surface the first impression is to simply look at it as an issue of semantics. However, as you get into a description of data you can easily see that on one side of the border the focus may have a tendency to focus on family issues, on the other side the focus while still family also implies economic issues. You start to notice that the more distance in the migration the possibility of such one relocation. This distinction in perspective seems to be tied to the local context. This has shown us that while the idea of transnationalism is a global phenomenon, its local context weighs heavily on how it is viewed.

Different Rules and Regulations

Creating a joint project can often give researchers access to additional funding opportunities. Proposals that include an "international research collaboration" or that create binational research networks are viewed favorably. However, when managing a project budget, researchers can confront problems in satisfying the accountability requirements of each system. Additionally, researchers in the US have to comply with Institutional Review Board (IRB) requirements, even when doing research in Mexico. The same applies in Mexico, even though we are complying the Mexican government's desire of international collaboration, there seems to be no negotiated common ground between countries to deal with the specific issues of day to day research (Lu, Rose, & Blodgett, 1999).

Peter: We generally get reimbursed for expenses like hotels by simply presenting a receipt (we do not have anything like an RFC[1]), and for meals there

[1] The RFC is the *Registro Federal de Contribuyentes,* a national registry system in Mexico for generating receipts that was created to standardize accounting practices as a corruption control measure.

is a set per diem rate, regardless of how much we spend. We also have a fixed travel and conference allowance. It's not a lot, and it encourages us to travel cheap, but it is quite flexible so we can change dates, itineraries, or whatever else without having to do paperwork to justify it. When dealing with the budgetary issues of the joint project we were doing in Mexico, in our system we are not used to having to deal with things like facturas (officially registered receipts) and trying to understand how to comply with the fairly arcane rules of the Mexican system. For instance, the project budget could not cover the registration fee for the conference we attended, but would cover food costs, even for alcohol. Why? Who knows, but we had to learn things the hard way, and I found it quite frustrating until I was reflecting on the fact that we have our own sets of frustrating and seemingly arbitrary rules in my institution. For travel, we have to book it through the university system, which is cumbersome and inefficient.

Also, a big difference in doing research on our side is that we have to have every project approved through our university's Ethics/IRB. This includes a requirement to complete "Human Subjects Research Certification," as well as complete a lengthy project proposal, and submit all research instruments, protocols, and even down to the script for recruiting participants. This all has to be approved before you can collect any data. And if something comes up in the project that you did not foresee in your IRB proposal, you have to go back to the IRB office to request an amendment. Working with children or any group deemed "a vulnerable population" adds even more requirements. The idea is to make sure that researchers are not exploiting their participants, but it is also a bureaucratic process that protects the university from liability. Unfortunately, if we are going to collect data jointly, it also means that the researchers at the Mexican university have to be included in the IRB process, and required to get the certification, and are subject to the same rules.

Troy: In Mexico as researchers we are given a high level of status and freedom in what we do. The first aspect that jumps out for me, is that here I own my data, not the university. In Mexico each researcher is responsible for the data that he/she uses. Ethics are very much an individual issue. The university only takes interest if the material is being published by the institution; however, the legal issues are with the individual researcher. This we have discovered through this project that is makes the bureaucratic aspect far more complex than initially imagined. Even to the point of having to make modifications on the go to stay within institutional norms.

Another issue that has arisen has been the use of research funds. Here, we trade places, while the US shows degrees of flexibility, in Mexico there is almost none. Sadly, due to the unfortunate stereotype – perhaps earned – of being a corrupt nation, there is no flexibility. Our federal government has been forced to place very strict controls on when, where, and how funding can be spent. One difficultly that occurred was not being able to pay for the conference fees. This is true because we have had multiple cases where researchers paid for conferences and then do not attend, but a coworker presents results for them. The logic here in Mexico is we will only pay for events that prove you were actually there. From a certain perspective is seems almost comical, in Mexico

they trust us with data, but not with money. Whereas our US counterparts have little restrictions with funding, but are not trusted with data. In the final analysis we do share something in common: administration trumps academics.

Physical Travel Between Countries

Collaborative projects usually involve travel between the two countries. Generally, when grants or projects are approved, they include travel money to facilitate face-to-face meetings, joint presentations, and similar activities. Like other aspects of joint projects, however, it can be complicated by administrative requirements on both sides, especially when there are possible physical risks (Peterson, 2000). Interestingly, even though we are educational institutions and there is a deep economic interest in homogenizing the aspects of labor between the U.S. and Mexico, there does not seem to be any real interest in structuring the rules of collaborative research.

> *Peter: Nowadays, much work across borders can be carried out via video conference and email. However, I would say that for a project to be a meaningful collaboration between scholarly peers, it should have opportunities for people to sit down and work face-to-face to talk through a project. Also, the members of a project will be more invested if they have an active role in collected data, analyzing and interpreting, and shaping how the results will be written up. This is difficult to do by email, or even Skype.*

> *The problem on our side comes in that many regions of Mexico are under travel advisories by the U.S. State Department. So working for a public university, there is a "blacklist" that prevent us from traveling to any region with a current restriction in place. For example, we had wanted to meet with colleagues from the Universidad Autónoma de Tamaulipas, but we could not get permission to travel to Ciudad Victoria (an area in northern Mexico that has been affected by narcoviolence). Likewise, if we want to involve students in projects, it is even more difficult to get an exemption or waiver. It involves a lengthy administrative process that will probably not get approved, so for many it is not worth the bother to try to go to any restricted region.*

> *Troy: Usually travel inside and outside Mexico is not a problem. However, the drug trafficking phenomenon in Mexico has changed the dynamics here in the last decade. It has gotten to the point to where in some cases even researchers or students do not wish to travel to certain parts of Mexico. While there is no institutional ban, there is nowadays a personal one. This particular project involves one of the areas of Mexico that has had severe issues with drug related violence. In this case, instead of driving to a neighboring university I chose to fly because of safety issues, even though it was more expensive and time consuming. This is a real aspect of academic research in the current social climate that we live in, but there is still no high-risk pay available for university researchers. This makes the work more difficult, there is nothing that can replace those briefs moments of face to face conversation to sort out and understand each other.*

How Products Are "Counted"

The success of joint projects is usually measured by the products they generate. Researchers involved in the projects know that the value of participating in a project is more than just its products. Often, the collaborative process is just as valuable: as a researcher, one learns and grows through intellectual interactions with peers. The bottom line for reporting a project – and in order to secure future funding – is to show that you can meet your goals in terms of productivity, and productivity in our field is almost always measured in terms of publications and presentations. The difficulty comes in trying to figure out what types of joint products will count. The main difference is that the U.S. and Mexican higher education systems tend to interpret the value different sorts of publications distinctly in an effort to make them coincide with institutional structures. Likewise, institutions organize the research units or groups distinctly.

Most importantly, the U.S. prizes individual work while Mexico places more value on collaboration. In Mexico, researchers are organized formally into a *cuerpo académico* (research team), which is registered with the national ministry with a specific area of interest (such as "educational linguistics"), and evaluated as a group. The *cuerpo* is then given a ranking, as "in formation," "in consolidation," or "consolidated." The ranking is publicly displayed, and reflects the prestige of the group, and also affects the types and chances for getting funded projects. In the U.S., faculty may team up with other researchers to apply for larger grants, but there is no formal research team, and all faculty are evaluated individually.

> *Peter: In U.S. universities we do not really have anything equivalent to a "cuerpo academico" (research team). Instead, we are just individual scholars, and so although we often do work together, to co-author or co-present, we do not have an identity as a research group or team in any formal way. Because we don't have a recognized research team, joint or co-authored work is not as highly valued. I think it's almost the flip case of Mexico, where the requirement is to write and publish as a group. For us, manuscripts tend to "count" more if they are single authored, or at least for us as the first author is better than second. If a paper has four or five authors and you're near the end, it really doesn't count for much. I've heard it's different in other fields, like the STEM areas, but in the social sciences, humanities or education fields single authored pieces are worth more than multiple authored ones.*

> *Another, bigger problem for us when publishing with Mexican colleagues are the expectations our institutions have for what kind of journals we should publish in. Generally, peer reviewed articles in top journals are worth the most, followed by mid-tier journals, and book chapters farther down. Conference proceedings (memorias) or journals that are not indexed or don't have much recognition do not count for much. The same goes for books that are published "in-house" by a university rather than an international publisher. What we found is that this creates problems because in order to publish in most better-ranked journals, there is a very long review and revision process. The funding cycles of many projects in Mexico requires that products be generated quite quickly, and so our Mexican colleagues feel pressure to get something out somewhere, whereas we feel pressure to take more time to get our results in certain journals. I've heard the Mexican system referred to as the "juego de puntitos" (the game of little points), but for us we don't count the points in the same way, so what our Mexican colleagues may perceive as a reluctance to*

publish jointly is because (logically, we're all very busy) we don't want to spend time writing up something that doesn't really count for our CV. At the end of the year, we have our performance review, and our chair may go over our CV and say "Okay, this year you listed four pubs but this one you're fourth author, and this one is a conference proceeding, and this one isn't a recognized journal, so you're only going to credit for 1.5 pubs."

Troy: In 2002 Mexico adopted a research system for universities that seems to have been developed in Colombia that is called "Cuerpos Academicos" which translates as a research group. Basically, we have to organize ourselves in small groups from three to eight professors that have similar interests. Our research is then focused on a common research line or area. In terms of preference or value we have a similar structure to the U.S. with top-tier international journals being the preferred choice. However, because of this system for institutional evaluation, only collaborative products are considered valid. This has dramatically changed the way we write up research and where we publish. Here the administrative financial aspects come into play. Our funding is on a calendar year so we have to have results in the same period. However, top tier journals have an average publication progress that tends to be between one and a half to three years. This forces us to place part of our publications in lesser quality journals or in conference proceedings in order to comply with the time constraint placed on us. Furthermore, we have to accomplish this within the framework of collaborative writing. I think most professional researchers would agree that the act of writing is a stressful, time consuming activity usually done alone. The added constraint of preferring collaborative writing for evaluation does not facilitate the research process. This situation has in fact pressured some researchers in Mexico to focus their efforts on projects within the National Council of Science and Technology (CONACYT) that prizes individual writing over collaborative.

Conclusion

We are working in a real life version of Joseph Heller´s novel *Catch-22*. On both sides of the border we are told that collaborative research is desirable. We are also aware that collaborative research plays a strong role in the international ranking of universities. There is governmental funding on both sides of the border to carry out collaborative research. When in the public limelight administrative officials enjoy showcasing the international presence of their institution. However, and this is a strong use of the discourse marker, once it reaches the realm of the practicalities of everyday work life coupled with performance evaluation, the illusion tends to fade. We discover that the day to day administrative processes of our institutions often come into direct conflict with the supposed research goals. Politically we are encouraged to collaborate on research, but at the same time the organizational mechanisms tend to discourage it.

This auto-ethnographic analysis has highlighted several underlying issues that need to be addressed for international collaborative research to be truly effective. Firstly, the local context influences strongly how the research is seen. In our own case, the two groups of researchers had (unwittingly, initially) approached the concept of "transnational" with different understandings at an epistemological level that in turn impacted how data were classified and interpreted. Secondly, we had to create a third space to allow the opportunity to find a way to navigate partially incompatible administrative norms from both university and governmental

departments. Finally, we had to negotiate practical aspects of publication knowing that it can have a direct impact on our professional evaluation and creating unnecessary stress on the group working relationship.

If international collaboration in research really is a desired activity for the future, if collaborative work in something we aspire to create and sustain, then at some point, organizational compatibilities at a governmental and university level will need to be addressed so the focus can be on research. Taking a qualitative analysis towards the understanding of the issues that surround the research process in international projects seems to be an appropriate approach to locating common ground to carry out this type of research projects.

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Author Note

Peter Sayer is an Associate Professor of applied linguistics/TESOL in the Department of Bicultural-Bilingual Studies at the University of Texas at San Antonio. He has a PhD in Language & Literacy from Arizona State University, USA, and works in the area of educational sociolinguistics. Correspondence regarding this article can be addressed directly to: peter.sayer@utsa.edu.

Troy Crawford is a Professor in the Departamento de Lenguas at the Universidad de Guanajuato. He holds a PhD in Language Area Studies from the University of Kent, UK, and specializes in identity and second language writing. Correspondence regarding this article can also be addressed directly to: crawford@ugto.mx.

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