

Guides for Collaborating

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We experience collaborating as a life style; it is a deliberate, purposeful way of relating that is simultaneously flexible and responsive to others. There is nothing quick or random about collaborating—it is not to be taken lightly. It is not a singular one-time event. It is a process that takes time, energy, dedication, and persistence on a daily basis—it is a way to live one's life in the world.

Collaboration has served as a cornerstone of some forms of therapy (Anderson, 1997; Anderson & Gehart, 2007). In this paper, we would like to highlight some ways in which collaboration can be understood and enacted outside of therapy. Many of the principles of collaboration that we study and discuss in this paper are revealed in the therapeutic arena, but we will focus on how collaborating ideas can inform other activities and relationships just as profoundly (St. George & Wulff, 2007).

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collaborating, new ideas can emerge as viewpoints are subjected to mixing and matching. Family members, students, and colleagues who “put their heads together” regularly have reported to us that new ideas were created—ideas that likely would not have evolved had these persons operated as individuals and that these creative ideas spawned innovative projects and collaborative learning communities that encouraged transformational learning. Our specific focus in this article is on collaborating and a discussion of transformational learning goes beyond our scope here (see Mezirow, 2000 for a discussion of transformational learning).

We think the power and generativity of these ideas could and should be expanded to many of areas of daily living. To demonstrate this broad utility, we will offer nine guides and drawing from our joint experiences, we will illustrate how each guide can lead to creative and generative actions to form collaborative learning communities.

Abstract: *We experience collaborating as a life style; it is a deliberate, purposeful way of relating that is simultaneously flexible and responsive to others. In this paper, we highlight some ways in which collaboration can be understood and enacted outside of therapy. Based upon our collective experiences, we propose nine guides to develop collaborative practices. The guides are: equal footing; creating a cohort; personal and professional intersections and connections; hospitality; finding a comfortable location; feedback and adjustment to feedback; lasting outcomes; learning through art, music, culture, and languages; and open space, do what the occasion calls for.*

Key Words: *Transformational Learning; Collaboration; Hospitality.*

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Meet the Collaborators: Sylvia, Sally, and Dan

At the Galveston Symposium in Chicago in 1994, Sally and Sylvia first met and discussed their mutual interests in using postmodern ideas in the classroom and in clinical supervision. In the midst of one of their conversations, Tom Andersen (the Norwegian psychiatrist) approached them; he looked at Sylvia, then at Sally, and with his trademark enveloping gaze said, “You must be sisters.” Sylvia and Sally looked at each other, put their arms around each other, and responded that “from today on, we *are* sisters.” That was the day Sylvia and Sally first thought of themselves as sisters and their relationship was changed forever.

Sylvia's connection with Dan grew during a celebration at the Galveston Conference in Guadalajara in 1995. As the organizer and host for an evening Mexican Mariachi celebration, Sylvia included a customary tequila toast. Dan noticed that Sylvia was teaching the participants the art of tequila toasting (salt, tequila, lime) but

she was not participating in the drinking herself. He said, “Let me teach *you* how to do a tequila toast,” and in jest proceeded to show Sylvia how to drink tequila just as she had taught the group earlier. That was the day Sylvia anointed Dan as the “Tequila King” and thus began their special fun-loving relationship.

Sally and Dan have a special relationship as a married couple who also work together. It would be an understatement to say that they have unlimited opportunity for collaboration. Over the years, Sylvia, Sally, and Dan have evolved a relationship of professional productivity characterized by camaraderie, creativity, and fun; it is once again showing itself in the writing of this paper. The stories we include in this paper stem from the relationships we have developed as colleagues and friends. In the last 12 years we have created projects, planned conferences, and shared teaching ideas; we have visited each others’ working settings and we have actually cohabitated while Sylvia was a Visiting Professor at the university where Sally and Dan were faculty and co-directors of a family therapy masters program. While collaboration does not require these close connections in order to occur, they have certainly added to the productivity we have experienced. We will outline and provide illustrations of some of our collaborative efforts and initiatives. We hope that readers might find some seeds of ideas in what we write that might reveal collaborative efforts that they are already involved in or may stimulate them to invite collaboration within their own professional and personal life contexts.

The Settings

We will be drawing our illustrations from three specific settings in which we are/were all involved.¹ The first is the International Summer Institute (ISI), an annual intensive week-long workshop on collaborative practices in which Sylvia shares organizational responsibility and which Sally and Dan regularly attend (see www.harleneanderson.org). The second is the Family Therapy Program that Sally and Dan co-directed in the Kent School of Social Work at the University of Louisville. The third is the Visiting the Visiting Professor Program that the three of us developed when Sylvia went to the University of Louisville as a visiting professor in the fall of 2006. One of the most notable arrangements about Sylvia’s visiting professorship was that she lived with Sally and Dan for the semester—that really extended our collaborative practices.

The Guides

Guide 1: Equal Footing

One of the keys of collaborative efforts is the sense that all of the collaborating participants are on equal footing, that all are worthy and important partners in the effort. Different people certainly have different things to contribute to

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conversations and relationships, but the relative value placed on all contributions is equal. The more vocal are not considered superior to those more quiet. Those who are “serious and contemplative” are of equal value to those who are “light-hearted and humorous.” There is an explicit appreciation of differential contributions within relationships and an understanding that if all partners brought the same talents and viewpoints together, there would not be the need for all to participate. In other words, differences are valued.

In the ISI, activities are designed to mix the talents and experiences of the participants and to recognize each contribution as significant. Graduate students discuss issues and their ideas with veteran practitioners. Experienced clinical practitioners converse with organizational consultants. There is a sense that all contributions are valuable. Each voice is taken into consideration in the planning of the ISI as it evolves. Participants submit written reflections about the previous day’s activities; these are reviewed and presented to the total membership by pairs of ISI participants who are from different countries, disciplines, and experience levels.

Guide 2: Creating a Cohort

In our experience the cohort effect is profound. When people are joined by a common experience, especially one that is quite intense, the group can become a strong and powerful influence upon its members and its surround. A cohort develops a sensitivity to the individual needs of its members as well as what is required for the group to retain its value and integrity. The individuals become part of something bigger than themselves.

When Sally and Dan co-directed The Family Therapy Program, students were told in their application interviews that they were expected to “care as much for the progress of their cohort as their own individual progress.” All three of us,

as teachers and supervisors in the program, put much emphasis on the power of the cohort through our language: for instance in the words we use, in our actions, and in our responses. For example, we would ask if students had consulted their cohort regarding their complaint or concern before coming forward to us as directors, we would request that the cohort meet to discuss a program-wide dilemma and come back to us with their recommendations. Our students learned early to figure out ways to include all members' voices and participation in their study groups, problem-solving talks, in giving feedback, and in upholding each other. We have noticed the same kind of behaviors in the ISI groups—participants form special bonds of appreciation that lead them to reach out in supportive ways, to connect with, and to be curious about other participants whom they may even disagree with on some issues.

Sylvia applies the benefits of the cohort experience in the process of grading master's students' academic work. For example, students have been expected to prepare a class presentation which must be prepared by inviting and including all of the student's classmates' voices in some way. The evaluation of the presentation is then conducted by all members of the class (keeping in mind that one's own ideas and voice are also included in the presentation). The effect of this process has been an extremely high level of commitment to and respect for the presenter as well as increased presentation planning and quality. In this environment a collaborative learning community (Anderson, 1998; Anderson & Gehart, 2007) is created in which every participant is inspired to bring the best of himself or herself forward for the collective's interest, learning, and well-being (Brufee, 1990).

In our current world where successful professionals are encouraged to vigorously (and sometimes competitively) pursue their professional goals, the experience of being in a supportive cohort of people is invigorating. The sheer pleasure of placing one's goals and objectives alongside others (rather than in front) is clearly felt.

Guide 3: Personal and Professional Intersections and Connections

If one holds collaboration as a guiding light, then it becomes difficult to separate the personal enactment from the professional or as Harlene Anderson calls for, coherence between ones personal and professional ways of being (Anderson & Gehart, 2007). When a professional is "doing" his/her professional work, he/she is also present as a person. The idea that we can cut out our personal ideas and viewpoints from our professional work situations is quite problematic. We may try to assert that we have left ourselves out of the therapy room (or the classroom or the organizational position), but that is a fiction. We may try to minimize or section off our personal viewpoints and attitudes, but our ability to do that is limited.

Beyond whether separating the personal and professional is possible, we can ask about what we could be missing by trying to create that separation. Personal and professional connections can enhance all aspects of our lives. One reason is that our clients or students are also not leaving their personal natures "at the door" when we meet with them. All people long for human connection and who we are as people is what we have to offer each other.

Trying to be "one way at work" and "another way" in our so-called private lives can take a toll on us, particularly if those two ways are very different. To behave in ways at work that are at odds with our private attitudes and preferences can create ethical conflicts.

One of the ways we enact the personal and professional connection is in beginning a class, workshop, or conference by asking students or participants to introduce themselves through stories about their names. They are asked to answer these questions: What is your name? What is the story about why you have the name you have? What has been the meaning of going through life with that name? How would you like to be called during our time together? This way of meeting people allows time and space for each person to share a very personal story as a part of beginning a professional relationship. Invariably, this way of beginning invites and encourages the participants to think of themselves and the others as people first, professionals second. The ensuing relationships are then a blend of personal and professional elements. Knowing the "person of the professional" adds dimension/depth to relating to one another that promotes an atmosphere conducive to forming a collaborative community.

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Guide 4: Hospitality

Hospitality is crucial to creating the atmosphere of collaboration. We have found that it is "expensive to be cheap" and that when we forsake hospitality and generosity in terms of food, celebrations, and parties, we forsake having people join in an atmosphere of close, personal, and informal interaction. This is not to suggest that we take hospitality as a

lighthearted welcoming. We are deeply committed to Derrida's idea that hospitality is an unconditional welcoming of the other:

I have to - and that's an unconditional injunction - I have to welcome the Other whoever he or she is unconditionally, without asking for a document, a name, a context, or a passport. That is the very first opening of my relation to the Other: to open my space, my home - my house, my language, my culture, my nation, my state, and myself. I don't have to open it, because it is open, it is open before I make a decision about it: then I have to keep it open or try to keep it open unconditionally. (Bennington, 2003, Ques. 4)

Each project we develop has some form of hospitality explicitly included, from the way we invite and greet participants to providing refreshments. This helps set the tone of welcoming and invitation. In the graduate program Sally and Dan directed (and in which Sylvia also taught and supervised), we always began the academic year with a party honoring all of the new students and their families. Alumni of the program and their families often attended these parties to welcome the new students, answer their questions, and offer their support and friendship. In our "Visiting the Visiting Professor" project, the visitors who came to Louisville from Mexico resided with the three of us. They ate with us, traveled with us, and participated in our nightly tequila ritual—perfect conditions for idea generation and collaboration. In the ISI, following the tradition of Mexican hospitality, we always have special regional foods and cultural activities which help participants feel welcomed and which invite them to experience and learn about the Mexican culture.

Translation is a relational practice and provides another dimension of hospitality

We are firm believers in Harlene Anderson's idea that the way you begin to meet and greet people creates the kind of conversations and relationships you can have with them (Anderson, 1997; Anderson & Gehart, 2007). Following that idea, participants who inquire or register for the ISI receive a personal reply from Harlene or Sylvia. They spend time engaging in conversation through email with each participant to make sure the participants understand the kind of intensive seminar that is planned, to learn about the participants and their particular personal and professional needs. It is important to them to help participants feel welcome and safe while attending a workshop that is held in a different country and setting. This includes instructions about how to get to the workshop location, suggestions of what to wear and what to bring in order to be comfortable

Translation is a relational practice and provides another dimension of hospitality. The ISI is an international learning community; we have people who speak many different languages. Ensuring that everybody understands what is being presented and providing appropriate opportunity for each participant to express his/her ideas and questions are another way in which we practice hospitality. During the ISI every utterance is translated to English and/or Spanish. The lecture part of the seminar is in English with sequential Spanish translation. Participants have commented that this format has given them time for reflection and/or the opportunity to practice their English or their Spanish. As each person speaks, the translator stands next to or behind the speaker and waits for a sign to enter the talk. This allows each participant to keep his/her own personal style and pace while speaking.

Guide 5: Finding a Comfortable Location

It might seem that conversations can take place anywhere, but that is not necessarily the case. Developing good conversations and relationships, which ground collaboration, will take place if care is taken with the surrounds as well as how people are welcomed. For instance, if a room is cold and sterile or if the seating is arranged so that people are not facing each other, it is not easy to have meaningful and generative conversation. Think about why coffee shops are so popular for meeting and conversing (see Cohen & Piper, 2000 for a similar emphasis on "setting" and "breakdown of roles" – they describe a residential course that has many of the format/relationship pieces similar to the ISI).

In the ISI, we have a strong belief that in order to create the kind of conversations and relationships we wish to foster during the week, we need to carefully attend to the physical setting. We like to work in the open air, away from enclosed traditional meeting rooms and surrounded by natural beauty; the beach environment has proven to be the kind of setting that invites a relaxed and reflective context. We like small hotels where we easily "run into each other" outside the assigned meeting hours, which allows the conversations to continue to flow day and night. We also like small towns, where participants can walk everywhere and lunches or dinners can be easily obtained. Given the fact that participants come from all over the world and may not know each other prior to this gathering, being in a small

town creates a relaxed and inviting atmosphere, where you can walk in the street and run into someone from the seminar and join them for conversations over dinner, drinks, coffee, shopping, or sightseeing.

Guide 6: Feedback and Adjustment to Feedback

Collaborating requires the ability to welcome feedback and to make use of that feedback. Sometimes feedback comes automatically but sometimes it needs to be requested. Both listening to the feedback and then incorporating it are vital components and neither is necessarily easy to do.

Prior to convening the ISI, we ask participants to send us their hopes and dreams for the week. This helps us to begin to design the experience according to the participants' expectations. We say this is a beginning because we find that expectations shift as we move forward with each other. As briefly mentioned in Guide 1, at the end of each day during the week we ask participants to write reflections and to place them in a basket during breakfast the next day. We read the reflections, and assign participants to help us read and give the ideas and requests back to the group every morning. We take this information very seriously and do our best to accommodate to participants' needs and specific requests. In response to feedback we make changes to some aspects of the ISI ranging from creating conversational clusters around topics of expressed interest to addressing comfort needs by providing different chairs and increasing the number of breaks.

Incorporating feedback into traditionally hierarchical systems is not always easy, but we think that it is necessary in order to create harmony within the group and value for the individuals. This may seem like a non-academic matter, but in the supervision groups in our graduate program, the issue of breaking for lunch was raised by our students. Our own bias is that good conversations and good work can occur over meals especially when the academic schedule crosses a lunch or dinner hour. Yet we had one cohort who preferred to not work over meals. They preferred to lengthen the time we allotted to supervision (we had thought that getting out earlier would have been the greater value—it was for us) in order to have a meal break in which they could relax and casually chat with each other. As supervisors we went with the group's request in order to create optimal conditions for learning. By the same token when this same group began drifting in later and later each week, delaying the beginning of supervision time, we were able to give them feedback regarding our concerns and interpretations, and the entire group decided to be more considerate of the groups' time by coming to class on time. The issues of time and food are not the critical pieces, but the idea that we can mutually provide and accept feedback and make appropriate changes.

Guide 7: Lasting Outcomes

Collaborating is sometimes considered to be something “in the moment” and has no need to claim anything into the future, but we see collaboration as being something that has a history, a present, and a future—it has action in the “real world” as a component. The action may be continued face-to-face meetings, or it may be periodic updates or email communications. The action may even be joining with others in an international study, introducing well-known colleagues to new colleagues, or the implementation of ideas learned at a workshop into daily practice. Newly formed friendships and colleague-ships endure as some participants form ways of collaborating via the Internet or becoming consultants on one another's research projects. In other words, participants become part of a world-wide community of collaborative practitioners.

For some of us, the ISI has become like a family reunion, we go back every year to renew bonds with old friends and greet new ones. Some of us keep spontaneous e-mail exchanges along the year, others wait for the reunion. We have created a blog to share pictures, comments, and ideas. Some participants engage in professional endeavors to make sure we keep on thinking and planning together. On the last day of the ISI we talk about ways to take the ideas home, asking participants to select one aspect of the ISI that they want to take home with them and put into action. Participants then pair up as “responsibility (or conversational) partners.” These partnerships help keep the collaborative process alive as partners decide on ways to follow and support each other's progress regarding their plans or ideas.

In our “Visiting the Visiting Professor” Program, we, along with our students and participating colleagues, have exchanged ideas that have been shared within and across social service agencies. One of the outcomes reported to us from the variety of workshops offered was the importance of listening--listening to the voices of those we usually exclude or take for granted. In their various practices (e.g., working with victims of violence, working with children, working with immigrants) clinicians were asking their supervisors and work teams to invite others not normally considered as part of clinical work, such as former clients, neighbors or friends who could offer ideas based on their

experiences, artists, and administrators to participate with their clients to widen conversations and options for change and relief. Ironically, none of the workshops that were offered was about the topic of listening and inclusion and yet that message was heard and promoted.

Guide 8: Learning through Art, Music, Culture, Languages

One of the greatest benefits we have gleaned through collaboration is the lesson of variety. With variety and some associated unfamiliarity we tend to pay attention, have our creativity stimulated, and become energized. Our collaborative efforts have enjoined us with practitioners from other disciplines who can speak to us and address our questions. This alternative venue for dialogic and experiential exchange can enhance our personal as well as our professional lives.

One of the highlights at the ISI is the presence of a resident artist. Sara London from Mexico City has been our resident artist for the last 9 years. Sara sits and interacts with the group during the week and participates with us in a special way by creating a piece of art that emanates from her total experience at the ISI. Most of the time she works in the common participant space, and other times she works in other parts of the hotel. Some participants sit with her and even ask to use some of her art materials to use as part of their own learning process. As we work, she works, creating a piece of art that is her expression of her interpretation of what she sees and hears. On the final night she presents her creation and her interpretation of it to the group. In this way we integrate another language into our already multi-lingual learning process. This last year Sara also created a piece of art for one of our clients, as a reflection after listening to her story during a consultation. Some other participants in the ISI have included music, poetry, and dance as ways to express new ideas, emerging thoughts, or as a way of joining the group with the local context.

Sara was one of the visitors in our “Visiting the Visiting Professor” Program. In her visiting role, Sara was granted permission by clients and their therapist to sit in one of their therapy sessions to observe. During the course of the next week she reflected upon her experience within that session to create a piece of art (e.g., fabric, painting) to give to the client. This work served as a symbol of Sara’s reflection. Through this collaboration we are able to add variety to the clinical experience of some clients and to add to the body of work regarding reflecting processes.

Guide 9: Open Space: Do What the Occasion Calls For

We know that open space has become a very popular notion, a commodified practice—a buzzword. Distinguished from that use of the term, we mean the creation of an open, free, and creative environment, where spontaneous activities and flexibility are welcome. The space is available and welcoming in order to meet changing needs and to take advantage of emerging and unforeseen opportunities. We would like to emphasize that open space provides the opportunity for coordinated and mutually responsible action—not a case of a random, anything goes activity.

Following this guide, last year at the Pre-ISI, a forum for small workshops which convenes two days before the ISI, we found ourselves in a bind after a presenter requested a time change. Our two workshops, Sylvia’s on cross-cultural conversations and Sally and Dan’s on ethics, were scheduled at the same time. We had planned to attend each other’s workshop, and while we wanted to be accommodating we did not want to miss out on our own original arrangement. “Putting our heads together,” we decided to merge our two workshops and present together for the whole group. Since this was a change in the advertised plan, Sylvia as part of the organizing team, presented the idea to Harlene, who was slightly wary and intrigued about how we might put together two presentations on such short notice, and trusting us she agreed. Given our relationship and the way we knew our each other’s work and presenting style, we were able to prepare an interactive bi-lingual workshop in which we addressed the ideas of ethics and culture and adapted one of our exercises. The workshop was so successful and energetic that the organizing team asked us to do something as a team the next year as a way to bring the Pre-ISI to a closure with the whole group together. In the summer of 2007, we prepared a workshop on collaboration as a life style for the ISI, using those ideas inform to this paper.

Closing

Collaboration is not an idea or practice we take lightly. It has informed and guided us through personal and professional journeys. We use these guides as markers, guideposts to help us to be true to what we believe works in human relationships.

It is also worth noting that our intention to join with others in a collaborative capacity is not always successful (Fernandez, London, & Rodriguez-Jazcilevich, 2006; Kasl & Elias, 2000). But that does not mean that we relinquish

these ideas. Our failures inspire us to reflect and regard failure as feedback, as an experience to learn from, to incorporate into our thinking and action. We may, over time, reshape what collaboration means and how it is demonstrated, but for now we find that collaboration is the best way for us to honor our own principles for living and working as well as the living principles that others with whom we interact have chosen.

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Endnotes

1. The ISI is a yearly week long seminar in Collaborative Therapies organized by the Houston Galveston Institute in Houston, USA and Grupo Campos Eliseos in Mexico City. The ISI faculty includes Harlene Anderson, Sylvia London, Elena Fernandez, Irma Rodriguez-Jazcilevich and Margarita Tarragona.