

# The More We Get Together:

## The Politics of Collaborative Research

by **Pat Campbell**

**The institutionalization of the research process has, in effect, put a monopoly on the creation of certain kinds of knowledge. Demystifying the research process is a way of changing this monopoly. (Kirby and McKenna p. 27)**

Marina Niks' doctoral dissertation focuses on the politics of collaborative research between university-based and non university-based researchers. During the past decade, the funding of literacy research has encouraged partnerships between universities and community groups. For example, on December 21, 1998, the National Literacy Secretariat and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) announced the launch of Valuing Literacy in Canada, a joint initiative to fund strategic research into adult literacy issues. This initiative attempted to develop research capacity in Canada in the field of adult literacy through the promotion of collaborative practices. This program's objectives included stimulating collaboration among researchers from different disciplines, and encouraging and assisting cooperation between researchers and adult literacy practitioners. Marina's dissertation serves to inform literacy practitioners and researchers, as they negotiate power and relations while generating and constructing knowledge.

Recently, two pieces of published research have documented the rewards and challenges of collaborative research. *Dancing in the Dark* (2003) was one of the first pieces of research to explore the question, "How do practitioners do collaborative research?" *Hardwired for Hope* (2004), which was reviewed in the last issue of *Literacies*, found that working collaboratively was one of the project's biggest challenges. However, this challenge was offset by the ways in which collaboration contributed to the richness of the findings. Marina Niks was involved in both studies and helped to guide the practitioners through the collaborative process.

### Methodology

The participants in Marina's doctoral study were 12 researchers who had been involved in collaborative research between university-based and non university-



**Collaboration refers to people working together.**

based researchers. Of the twelve participants, eight were women, who described themselves and their work as feminist. These women worked in the university, in centres of excellence, in community-based organizations, and in unions. The remaining four participants were men, who worked in non-university settings. The participants ranged in age from 35 to 55. Ten of the participants were Caucasian. Although the participants did not work in the field of adult literacy, the findings and implications will inform the work of literacy practitioners and researchers.

The following three questions guided the research process:

- (1) What motivates researchers to engage in collaborative research between university-based and non university-based researchers?
- (2) How do researchers' understandings of research and of collaboration influence the relationships they establish and the research projects they develop?
- (3) What are the conditions that promote collaborative research as perceived by the participants?

The data was gathered through 90 to 120 minute interviews held in the researchers' offices. Marina coded the transcripts line-by-line, looking for similarities and differences in an effort to identify categories and themes. She deliberately chose not to consult the literature during the coding process, as this might have influenced the analysis. Rather, Marina "was determined to allow [the participants' voices] to dictate the topics [she] was going to articulate in [the] dissertation" (Niks p. 73).

## Findings

### Motivation

The findings indicate that researchers choose to engage in collaborative research because they can anticipate the benefits to the community and to the university. Many researchers view collaborative research as a way to respond to community needs and to share forces to produce change in the community and workplace. They believe that collaborative research provides the opportunity for people with different social identities and experiences to articulate their perspectives, engage in dialogue, and generate knowledge. The researchers' different perspectives enrich the research process and product. Sometimes, funding requirements and academic reward systems can overpower the collaborative process, restricting the potential of different perspectives to emerge.

### Relationships

All research involves relationships. Collaborative research, however, is unique because collaboration is based upon relationships among the researchers, and these relationships are influenced by each researcher's understanding of research and collaboration.

Most participants emphasized that they collaborate with individuals rather than the institutions that employ these individuals. The relationship is built through time and shaped to fit a myriad of contextual and individual factors. Community

researchers look for university-based partners that they can trust. They also seek individuals who are flexible and capable of adjusting institutional norms and working around the institution's rules.

The non university-based researchers discussed academic researchers and culture in general; they were not referring to specific individuals they had collaborated with. They discussed the academic researchers' need to maintain control over the research process and the ways in which they maintained control. One of the ways was to create an illusion that only those with specific training could do research. In other words, the research process and the researcher's role was mystified. This serves to legitimize the university-based researchers' knowledge and create a separation between the thinkers and the doers.

## Relationships in Collaborative Research

- among researchers
- between researcher and subject
- with participants
- with data
- with institutions

### Benefits and Challenges

Some of the university-based researchers found that collaborative research enhanced their teaching, research, and writing. Their involvement with the community gave them access to insights, ideas, and examples that they could integrate into lectures and writing. The community groups benefit from collaborative research by gaining credibility as a result of working with academically trained researchers. Moreover, the community groups can use the end products of research, such as reports, in their advocacy. Finally, collaborative research has the potential to generate richer data and analyses because it involves multiple perspectives on a situation.

The findings revealed that the most frequently named challenges were time, differing agendas, and funding. One of the biggest challenges for collaborative research is the fact that collaborating researchers do not always discuss their notions of research and ways of knowing. This can lead to a scenario where researchers assume that others have similar or identical understandings of research. This situation can also lead to the mystification of the role of the research.

### Implications

Collaborative research opens the door to exploring different ways of knowing among researchers who hold

different perspectives. In order for the door to remain open, all included perspectives need to be allowed to surface. Therefore, it is important that the dialogue between university-based and non university-based researchers includes an opportunity for researchers to deconstruct their conceptions of research, and recognize that everybody's perspective is valid. One way to open the dialogue is to ask questions, such as "What is research?" and "Who is a researcher?" Marina finds that these questions bring assumptions to the surface and generate a sense that the researchers in the room hold different perspectives. Another way to open the dialogue is to bring in some data, perhaps from a newspaper article. The researchers can exchange views about whether the data constitutes research. Then, they can discuss how and why the data was collected, who benefits and who doesn't. In recent communication with Marina, she noted "The conversation allows for issues of ideology and ethics to surface, which in turn bring up the larger questions of what is research and who is a researcher." If this dialogue does not occur, the academic perspectives might be assumed as the 'better' way of doing research. This leads to a situation where potentially collaborative research "becomes academic research

carried out by researchers based in different locations" (Niks p. 146). Indeed, Marina argues that 'research' is typically defined using traditional academic tools such as peer and literature reviews to assess its quality. This positions non-academically trained researchers at a disadvantage. Collaborative research projects need to include a conversation about how the process is going to be carried out and by whom. These discussions should be open so that all participants and not only those with academic training can determine how the knowledge will be developed. Otherwise there are voices that are silenced and the potential of collaborative research is not achieved. ■

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