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Becoming authentic multidisciplinary or interdisciplinary researchers: methodological practices and outcomes

Abstract:

This article outlines successful practices employed by two experienced researchers from different knowledge fields (in this case, creative writing/applied arts and nursing/applied science) who bring diverse research methodologies and approaches to work on multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary projects. Defining single discipline, multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary research, and based on a review of their own disciplinary – as well as multidisciplinary and traditional ‘mixed methods’, research methodologies – this article investigates how these researchers navigate the range of available methodologies to both make meaning in their research projects and also allow a wide, and project-relevant, dissemination of their findings. It profiles completed collaborative projects and evaluates the approaches utilised, including how this rationale has influenced their practice as higher degree research student supervisors.

Biographical notes:

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Keywords:

Creative writing – Nursing – Multidisciplinary research – Interdisciplinary research

Fig. 1. Ulrike Sturm, *Connecting*, linocut, 2016

Introduction

This article outlines a series of successful practices employed by two experienced researchers from distinctly different knowledge fields (creative writing – understood as in the applied arts and nursing – understood as in the applied sciences) who have mobilised diverse research methodologies and approaches to work on collaborative multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary social and cultural projects. We ground this discussion in our own working definitions of single discipline, multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary research because, as the European Research Advisory Board finds, such definitions ‘are many, varied, vague, and conflicting and often simply absent’ (2004: 2). In this, we have also brought our individual understandings of, and extensive experience in, single disciplinary research approaches to these collaborative projects. Each of us understand single disciplinary approaches as those where researchers use the research methodologies and tools that are recognised as appropriate to a particular, individual discipline. This might, in itself, involve a number of methodologies, and may include a mixed-methods approach. It is worth noting in this context that the designation ‘mixed methods’ is often incorrectly used to refer to research involving a number of research methodologies. Yet, mixed methods has a more specific meaning and features processes associated with the ‘collection of both quantitative and qualitative data’ (Cresswell 2003: 21) and its analysis.

In a multidisciplinary project, investigators from two or more different disciplines each lend their disciplinary expertise to the project in question, but work relatively independently and separately, on different tasks (Klein 2010). In an interdisciplinary project, researchers work much more closely together, in terms of considering the problem and then designing a study that blends aspects of the underpinning understandings, approaches, methodologies and tools available to each of their disciplines to best investigate the problem. Interdisciplinary researchers jointly design an approach that explores a complex issue or problem in a fuller way than is possible using a single disciplinary approach by utilising methodologies particular to multiple disciplines, and aims to achieve a more holistic understanding of both the issue/problem under investigation and the way to approach it. Val Brooks and Jill Thistlethwaite note that interdisciplinarity moves beyond disciplines working together to the ‘linking, blending and integration’ of specialised knowledge fields (2012: 404). We see working in this manner as a progression from multidisciplinary, and a purposeful act. In the below, therefore, we will outline how, as our joint work has progressed, we have moved from a multidisciplinary to an interdisciplinary approach and outcomes, before evaluating this way of working.

From single to multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary practice

One author of this article, Brien, is a researcher in the creative arts working to extend knowledge in the specific field of creative writing through creative practice-led and traditional research projects. Since the 1970s, when creative writing emerged, this applied art has developed as an important academic and research discipline in Australia

(Dawson 2001). Qualitative and interpretive research methodologies have largely formed the basis for disciplinary investigation, with minor forays into quantitative data gathering. As, for instance, through denotative content analysis, and efforts to determine and interrogate such data as reader numbers, sales figures achieved by certain titles, and the geographic location and spread of book buyers. The overarching disciplinary methodological umbrella is, however, as in other areas of the creative arts, usually practice-led research (Brien et al. 2011), a creative arts-based methodology that focuses on the production of work and its consideration in context (practice) as a research method and research in which creative practice is clearly at the centre (Harper 2011, Webb and Brien 2011: 186). Results of this research are usually reported in the creative work plus commentary, dissertation, research statement or exegesis combination (Perry 1998), or via peer refereed academic outputs (such as books, chapters, articles, conference papers and research reports).

Practice-led research mobilises a ‘tool kit’ or combination of qualitative approaches, including auto-ethnography, narrative, discourse and textual analysis, reception/audience studies, case study, bricolage, history and historiography. Because there is a creative practice focus, an iterative development involving testing and refinement of both the creative work and the investigative approach often leads to an unfolding methodological design (Webb and Brien 2011). In her own work as a creative arts researcher, Brien has been interested in investigating genre structures in biography, memoir and other types of non-fiction writing to investigate the taxonomies which underpin their generation and publication, and why such writing, and their writers, either attain recognition, fame and success or are unrecognised and/or forgotten. Such questions are nuanced and multifaceted and certainly cannot be approached by any kind of statistically-based quantitative study. Indeed, these problems require imaginative thinking beyond the literal and denotative, and towards the metaphorical and liminal (Tjora 2006). They also require review of a diverse range of publications including the so-called ‘grey literature’ available from journalism and non-published government and industry materials (Auger 1994) and, often, development of a new and more nuanced range of literary descriptors with which to discuss the findings. An understanding of practice-led research in terms of Carole Gray’s definition, which includes how research ‘is initiated in practice, where questions, problems, challenges are identified and formed by the needs of practice and practitioners; and [...] the research strategy is carried out [...] using predominantly methodologies and specific methods familiar to us as practitioners’ (1996: 3), is particularly relevant to other social and cultural projects involving professional and other types of practice. Biography, specifically autobiography, and the potential this creative field has for interdisciplinary research is taken up, by Irene Walters, in more detail in the next article of this Special Issue.

The other researcher in this collaborative pairing, McAllister, comes from a very different area of knowledge and inquiry, that of applied science. Her work involves an examination of the changes in nursing and nursing training, and the impact this has on stakeholders. While providing remedies for various maladies has long been at the core of the definition of ‘nursing’, the profession of nursing today requires lengthy and complex training in human anatomy, physiology, psychology, health promotion and

social care. Competent nurses need to enact the principles of evidence-based practice, a derivative of Evidence Based Medicine (EBM) (see, Sackett et al. 2000), that is, they are required to provide interventions that are based on scientific evidence showing that they improve outcomes for patients (Jirojwong, Johnson and Welch 2011). Whilst all nurses are expected to use evidence-based practice, not all of them are, however, engaged in *generating* that evidence. Thus, in terms of research, all nurses learn how to be discerning consumers of research-based knowledge, which is explicitly required in the competency standards for nursing registration in Australia (Nursing and Midwifery Board of Australia 2006) and, additionally, some nurses also later, in their postgraduate studies or if they undertake a research-based career, learn how to be effective producers of such evidence (Polit and Beck 2008). Because nursing is, as a practice, so diverse and dynamic, choosing a fitting research methodology to investigate a problem will depend on both the nature of that problem and the specific goal desired. If the purpose is, for example, to determine the extent of a problem, or the effectiveness of a nursing intervention, the preferred approach chosen will be usually quantitative in nature. If the problem, however, relates to understanding the patient or practitioner experience of the problem, then the approach chosen may well be qualitative. Thus, nursing researchers generally are usually skilled in both methodologies, and a mixed methods approach is often used (Cresswell 2003).

In her own work as a mental health and nursing education researcher, McAllister is most interested in the problems impacting these fields at a cultural level. This includes such questions as: Why is the environment in nursing and health care so volatile, oppressive and divided? (Stanley et al. 2007); Why, despite most people having access to formal education and other forms of learning, do stigma, fear and misunderstandings about certain disorders and conditions remains so prevalent and sustained? (Byrne et al. 2013); and, Why, when nurses have had well over 200 years to finesse the art of compassionate care, do official and other inquiries continue to expose deplorable cases of patient neglect and dehumanisation within health systems? (Sharp, McAllister and Broadbent 2015). Such questions are complex, profound and not easy to answer, and certainly cannot be approached by a gathering statistics, a survey or a laboratory-based study. Even the preliminary work of unpacking these questions demands contemplation and analysis, while working towards resolution requires wide reading and the development of practical and viable solutions that can be put into place by every nurse (Corbin 2008). Ironically, these processes are also placed at the bottom of the EBM hierarchy, which although highly valued within nursing and medicine, can be seen to be contributing too many of the problems McAllister has investigated (Fulford 2008).

Joint projects

Routines of practice in both creative writing/creative arts and nursing can each become embedded into culture and ritualised (McAllister 2008). This has the effect of relegating these routines to the realm of the mundane everyday, where they can be overlooked as deserving of inquiry or research (Tonuma and Winbolt 2000). In a series of collaborative projects, we have found it useful to work together in order to find ways in which to problematize what is seen as 'natural' or 'logical' in our own disciplines and,

thereby, identify pathways to understand and explore socially and culturally embedded problems, habits and practices (Brien and McAllister Forthcoming a). Our processes of working together have evolved as our familiarity with each other's research, interests and working methods have grown and our shared experience has progressed. By profiling two collaborative projects, we will demonstrate how we initially worked in a multidisciplinary way, but then in a more interdisciplinary manner. In the process, we brought our single disciplinary ways of thinking and working to what could be characterised as a 'joint' multidisciplinary approach (different methodologies working together but separately), but then moved to a more 'blended' interdisciplinary approach.

The first project herein outlined focused on evaluating the importance of using creative narratives to teach mental health students foundational concepts in the field – in this case, unconditional regard for a person, empathy with them and their situation, and optimism despite working in sometimes extremely challenging situations (see, Rogers 1951). In this project, we explored the viability of using a creative writing product – popular published first person memoirs of illness – to attempt to raise mental health students' awareness of the personal and complex experience of living with a particular disorder, which was, in this case, an eating disorder. In the preliminary phase, we drew on anecdotal and personal experience that students, because of their extensive exposure to clinical procedures such as diagnosis, monitoring and treatment during the process of their education, are usually well versed in the objective signs of an eating disorder, but are not, however, as knowledgeable of, or even alert to, the subjective experience of this type of illness. This means that they may be technically able to deliver the interventions mandated in their textbooks, but may not be as competent or confident in the deep listening, suspending judgment or in responding empathically and compassionately which are also known to be crucial for successful treatment (Stanghellini and Rosfort 2013). We further hypothesised that enhanced learning and knowledge in these areas would lead to increased feelings of empathy and therapeutic optimism (Rogers, Hemingway and Elsom 2013).

In this project, we, as the two chief researchers, worked together in a multidisciplinary way. That is, Brien's expertise regarding memoirs of eating disorders (2013) was drawn upon to select a number of well-written, compelling memoirs on this subject. Then, McAllister's mental health expertise was mobilised in order to identify the many, and often complicated, ways that individuals with eating disorders struggle throughout the illness as well as the recovery period. We then came together to select short excerpts from these memoirs that might fit the various critical points for patients in their illness and recovery journeys. Together, drawing on our individual backgrounds as educators, we then designed a learning experience. This involved the development of a session on empathy (by McAllister), a session involving a guided reading of memoir excerpts (by Brien), followed by the design of a mixed method pre-post test quasi-experiment examining participants' levels of empathy, therapeutic optimism and experiences of the learning process (by McAllister). A day-long workshop was held, wherein the attendees participated in the session on empathy (led by McAllister), the guided reading discussions (with Brien) and the pre- and post- test activities (with McAllister). There is a large body of work developing and evaluating educational activities that are

concerned with sensitising learners to develop greater empathy and compassion for groups that may have been stigmatised, marginalised, misunderstood or oppressed (Taylor 2007). Within the mental health field, this work aims to maximise clinicians' capacity for empathy, kindness and compassion (Ballat and Campling 2011). The project culminated in the production of a number of conference papers written collaboratively, but delivered singly by each researcher in her own discipline setting (McAllister and Brien 2014a, 2014b), together with several co-written journal articles, again published in journals in both disciplines (Brien and McAllister Forthcoming b; McAllister et al. 2014a, 2014b) and a report to the funding body to outline and discuss the outcomes of the educational innovation (McAllister and Brien 2014c). In the process, these papers, articles and report also elaborated on a range of matters of relevance for each discipline. These included those significant for nursing – regarding learning experiences that can awaken fitting values for practice in students, and the potential for using a popular form of creative writing (memoir) with both health students (educative) and patients (therapeutic). These outputs also had relevance for creative writing – in terms of new ways of conceptualising the memoir for writers and publishers; and enhanced ways to market published memoirs to consumers in educational and therapeutic settings.

The second project reveals how our work became more interdisciplinary as we continued to work together. In this project, a year after the example profiled above, we worked together to find a way to describe how regional food memoirs might be able to arouse interest and curiosity about, and build knowledge of, regional food systems for potential consumers, in the process connecting food consumers and producers. To undertake this, we located a concept developed and used within the health disciplines – values-based practice – and used it to analyse creative writing narratives, in this case, regional food memoirs. This work combined our (by this time) joint knowledge of what happens in health systems when human values are overlooked (O'Halloran and Blackwood 2010) and applied this to food-based memoirs to create new knowledge in the area of how to encourage and support more sustainable food production systems.

The interdisciplinary nature of our working processes became evident as we found ourselves collaboratively investigating the problem using the same theoretical concept, but hybridising it to fit a context where the theory had not before been applied. Having worked together for some time, we had begun to see other areas where the evidence-based practice model (of medical practice) prevails, and where this has similarly led to the over-use of objective, rational decision making and the overlooking of subjective and intersubjective experiences (O'Halloran and Blackwood 2010). In this process, we discovered evidence that supported our own knowledge that much writing about sustainable regional food systems emphasises evidence-based practice, and privileges the use of rationalism, objectivity, pre-set outcomes and an examination of 'the problem' (Mullen and Streiner 2004). And so, we hypothesised that the use of values-based practice (Fulford 2008), so valuable in the medical context in providing an additional world view alongside evidence-based practice, would also be useful here.

According to KWM Fulford, health-workforces have been preoccupied with developing expertise within the technical-scientific realm, but have overlooked the

importance of cultivating strong values such as respect, compassion, and the understanding of every individual's personal standpoints and needs (2008). He suggests that these values can be developed in four ways in clinicians by: raising their awareness of how values do and do not operate in practice; developing their ethical and compassionate reasoning abilities; using methods of inquiry that gather subjective data so that they can appreciate that objective and subjective data informs good practice; and, emphasising the development of advanced communication skills to complement the high level of technical proficiencies required to practice in the health fields. Through our discussions about the problem of how to communicate with consumers about sustainable food production systems, we realised that Fulford's values-based practice could also be applied in this second context. That is, rather than expect people to buy local foods and support regional food systems, just because they have been advised of the various benefits for them as individual consumers (as well as the farmers and communities producing this food), it might be more productive to instead empower these consumers to change their behaviour through a mobilisation of passion and feeling about these food products and choices. Instead of presenting statistics about enhanced vitamin levels, longer storage times and more local jobs, a values-based practice approach would encourage and assist writers to write engaging narratives that shared human stories about life on the land and how food production is deeply connected to real lives and the environment. This, we proposed, could allow for the production of writing that could activate a reader to develop and embed a belief in the need to be an 'authentic consumer' who knows him- or herself, acts consciously rather than automatically, and is engaged with the local food system and its benefits and challenges (Sheth, Sethia and Srinivas 2011). Our analysis of a series of published memoirs by regional food producers and reviews of these books by readers revealed that readers do, indeed, have the potential to become empathic and respectful consumers, more sensitive to the cultural and social factors around food production and distribution, as a result of reading such texts (Brien and McAllister Forthcoming 2015a). Applying Fulford's theorisation also suggested that such values-based understanding was also more likely to lead to any changed consumption behaviours being sustained.

Insights from the above projects have led to a number of other collaborations in which we have worked on theorising key problems in nursing using materials and approaches from practice-led research in the creative arts, as in: analysing the 'problem' of the 'good nurse' (Brien and McAllister 2015); what the classic film *The Snake Pit* (Litvak 1948) and the book it was based on (Ward 1946) and other Gothic texts can tell us about the stigma of mental illness (McAllister and Brien 2015 a, b and c); and, developing new creative therapeutic strategies such as the use of diaries in healing (Alexander, McAllister and Brien Forthcoming). We have also worked on developing and testing new (practical) uses for popular creative writing texts (Alexander, Brien and McAllister 2014).

Multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary research training

In our shared professional practice as educators seeking to develop emerging researchers, we have also designed shared creative teaching and learning experiences

for research higher degree students. How to best support research higher degree students for success is an ongoing area of research (Rowe and McAllister 2002, McAllister and Rowe 2003, Brien 2005 and 2006, Kroll and Brien 2006, Evans 2011, Milligan and Golovushkina 2012). Our intervention in this area has encouraged and supported research students' learning through what we have termed 'the safe crossing of knowledge borders' via designing and delivering innovative and responsive multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary learning experiences. This has included – but not been confined to – our own students and disciplines. This series of learning experiences has been designed in response to our realisation that research students, regardless of discipline or topic area, tend to struggle at pivotal points in the research journey: in identifying a topic that is significant and manageable; in understanding where their topic fits within the knowledge landscape; in grappling with the dialectic of speaking confidently about tentative ideas that they have developed; in appreciating the value and limitations of established theories, methodologies and conventions; and, in creating outputs that can withstand criticism, and interpreting such critical feedback. These struggles resonate with what Margaret Kiley and Gina Wisker (2009) suggest are generic threshold concepts in research – argument, theorising, framework, knowledge creation, analysis and interpretation, paradigm building – and which are not always successfully addressed, or able to be realistically addressed, within the individual student/supervisor relationship (Platow 2012, Bruce and Stoodley 2013, Hamilton et al. 2014). They are, moreover, academic issues and concerns that need to be addressed by an approach to learning and teaching that is academic, rather than generic generalist training (Craswell 2007, Costello et al. 2014).

Our resulting series of research training and development workshops, held over the past two years, have attracted an enthusiastic audience (usually 20-30 participants), with many repeat attendees. Evaluation of this approach from the students' perspective illuminates more fully the impact on learners. Informal and formal feedback suggests that, without this innovative and sustained learning experience, students may have felt isolated and unaffiliated. As a result of the training, feedback from attendees stated that they felt enriched and inspired, that their thinking had been extended and challenged, their self-belief validated, and determination to succeed fuelled (Unpublished Evaluation Data). These are all indicators for future success (Pickstone et al. 2008), and evidence that bringing students together from unrelated disciplines has yielded benefits at individual, school and university levels. The value of these multidisciplinary activities has also been recognised in a university award (CQUniversity 2015 a) and a grant (CQUniversity 2015 b) to benchmark these activities nationally.

Our work developing, delivering and evaluating these activities has also expanded the number of our opportunities to invite research students (our own and others) to submit to journals with which we are associated, and mentor their contributions. It has also led to a multidisciplinary/interdisciplinary teaching and supervisory practice, where we offer joint work into each other's postgraduate courses and programs (in both the creative industries and mental health nursing) and jointly recruit research higher degree candidates to undertake multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary projects. It also allows us to act as knowledgeable peer reviewers of each other's candidates' work, including

their theses, conference presentations, refereed publications and grant applications. In this case, applying insights from experience in conducting multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary research has also enriched and benefited our teaching and supervisory practices as well as fed back into our own research activities.

Evaluating our joint and blended project methodologies

In order to evaluate the effectiveness and viability of these joint and blended approaches, we have undertaken a SWOT analysis of them. Widely used as a business development tool (Armstrong 2006), a SWOT analysis is a structured, visually-presented instrument used to evaluate the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats involved in a project, strategy or other aspect of an organisation, business or individual's work (Fine 2009). Strong correlations between strengths and opportunities can, for instance, suggest that a more confident and forceful strategy be taken in these areas, while strong interactions between weaknesses and threats indicate the need for the use of a more careful and defensive strategy (Chermack and Kasshanna 2007). This tool, with its four aspects, which we align in the traditional way (with strengths and opportunities understood as being helpful in achieving the project's objectives and with weaknesses and threats as harmful in achieving them) has been extremely useful in analysing our process in a clear and simple way. It has, indeed, enabled us to clearly identify the areas of our practice and approach that are strong and productive, and the other areas that need development or other attention. One of the core features of a SWOT analysis is its ability to identify both internal and external environmental factors that affect the activity under investigation (Ferrell and Hartline 2012: 85). In this way, being able to recognise the strengths of what we do has been very helpful in developing already extant opportunities and identifying new ones, while having a good sense of the weaknesses of our practice has also been important in identifying current and future threats to our work, and attempting to contain or deplete their impact. Table 1, below, summarises our SWOT analysis of our joint practice.

This analysis identified several strengths in this collaboration that may be useful for other researchers to consider. The first strength that we identified is that we are both established researchers in our own fields. What this meant in practice was that our reputation and rigour as researchers was accepted as legitimate and this helped us to also promote our collaboration as legitimate. Also, neither of us were preoccupied with needing to launch our own research careers through this endeavour. Whilst established researchers, we both also come from disciplines that are relative newcomers to the academy, and with this 'youth' came a certain amount of liberty to try new methods, and not to have to prove anything to what could be characterised as 'the established order'. By working together at a similar pace to what we would normally, we were able to achieve more outcomes and thus we actually became more productive and in no way felt that the collaboration was time consuming or a wasted effort. Furthermore, when we combined some of our student supervision work by running joint research development workshops and other events, we found that some of our responsibilities in this area were not only able to be conducted more efficiently, but they modelled interdisciplinarity and generated energy within, and amongst, the student group. It is

important to note, however, that the analysis revealed some weaknesses in our activity. As many as the unique attributes of ourselves, as the two lead players, is a strength it can also be read as a weakness, for without each other's presence, the collaboration would simply not exist. Thus, the longevity of the partnership remains vulnerable, and its future potential relatively insecure. With only two researchers, the sense of a community of practice able to be cultivated is limited. Another important structural barrier is that currently the Australian research quality assessment framework, the Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) system, does not even have a code to encompass, and therefore assess, multidisciplinary work. The reality is that the work must be allocated to two discipline codes and its quantity split.

	Helpful in achieving the objective	Harmful in achieving the objective
Internal origin	STRENGTHS <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Established researchers in our fields Can cast new light on enduring problems in each other's disciplines Both from newer disciplines, where traditions are not cemented, and eclectic methods invited Dissemination opportunities have a multiplier effect Has encouraged economy of scale in other areas of our work Agile and responsive practice 	WEAKNESSES <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Small team Driven by two individuals Australian research evaluation is currently (single) discipline-based
External origin	OPPORTUNITIES <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Under-researched area New journals in which to publish; new conferences at which to present Entrenched social and cultural problems in health, mental health and the creative arts provide rich future fields of inquiry To involve students and early career researchers To join with other multidisciplinary research teams and centres 	THREATS <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Personnel factors Original disciplines may fail to see the value of practice Institution may fail to support practice Work seen as non-essential research Multidisciplinary grants are more difficult to obtain The multi- and inter-disciplinary view could be seen as a replacement for the original discipline

Table 1: Summary of SWOT Analysis of our research practice conducted May 2015, refined September 2015, by Donna Lee Brien and Margaret McAllister.

Opportunities arising from our relationship also became evident in this analysis. Our actions as researchers began, and have continued to be stimulated, out of a desire to investigate the intersection and the possibilities for new knowledge that could emerge when two quite separate fields of knowledge connected. We have since found that this constitutes a relatively green field for research. This has not only opened up many new

journals and conferences in which we can seek dissemination of our work, with few others working in this same space, it is likely that research questions and topics for inquiry will continue to flow the more that we engage in conversation and exploration. We have also appreciated through this joint investigative practice that unanswered issues, enduring questions and recalcitrant problems lie at the boundaries of what is known in each of our respective disciplines and, for us, these issues, questions and problems are rich with opportunity – yielding significant material for future research. For example, at the edge of nursing as a discipline is the issue of values-based practice discussed above, and how this aspect might be examined, researched and improved when much of what it constitutes is intangible and immeasurable, is worthy of investigation. For the creative arts, both taxonomical issues and questions of the practical applications of research remain boundary issues. From this, we foresee that, in the future, there will be many opportunities to grow our relationship and practice – by inviting early career researchers to join the team, and to nurture interdisciplinarity amongst the student body so that they become familiar with the experience, open to it and, importantly, not automatically resistant to it (Tatar 2005). Joining with other multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary research teams and centres is another opportunity to be investigated.

Threats to the relationship and its work are a reality and these include the personal (such as us falling out, moving position or institution, or retiring) as well as those external to the relationship. External threats arise from more conventional groups that exist within each discipline who doubt the benefit of the collaboration, who see no reason to change from a single discipline focus, or who see multidisciplinary and interdisciplinarity as a fashion that will come and go, and hence fail to offer the support – in terms of peer review and publication (Riisgård 2000, Ware 2008, Nelson 2009). There is the risk, too, of the failure to obtain the funding and other support upon which all academic research work depends.

The straightforward approach offered by a SWOT analysis has been useful in our context as it not only identifies both the present advantages and future potential prospects for such a collaborative research practice, but also the pressure points and vulnerabilities of such a way of working. A SWOT analysis does not, however, offer solutions – this component of maintaining and developing a partnership remains the province of the researchers involved. In our own practice, as a result of this analysis, we have become more aware of not only considering our intentions, goals and expected outcomes for this joint work, but also how to build resilience into our partnership by considering how to meet the weaknesses and threats. This means that, alongside this SWOT analysis, we have also interrogated the basis for our collaborative working practices and remain mindful of maintaining one of the more enduring forms of collaboration, what has been described as ‘joint collaboration’ (Brien and Brady 2003). Although defined in 2003 in terms of creative practice – a joint collaboration occurring when two or more writers or other artists ‘work together on a single product producing a seamless text unrecognisable as belonging in part to any individual collaborator’ (Brien and Brady 2003), this form of practice also describes our processes. A joint collaboration is also very agile and flexible as the process of working together mimics

that of interdisciplinary work, and ‘does not follow categorical steps or demarcations of roles [...] remain[ing] instead, a more fluid process’ (Brien and Brady 2003). This flexibility and fluidity will, hopefully, allow us to build resilience through enhancing our ability to adapt to, and embrace, change.

Conclusion

As practitioners in the field, we hope that this discussion, and the examples we have profiled, has demonstrated how applying insights from experience in conducting both multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary research can enrich and benefit the researchers and disciplines involved, and the communities this research seeks to serve. Working on these joint projects has allowed us, as researchers, to find more commonalities and more subtle points of intersection and investigation as we progressed than we initially envisaged. Evaluating our practice has also, we believe, not only assisted with identifying potential opportunities and defusing dangerous threats to our collaborative practice, but has also emphasised the benefits of deeper and more holistic research approaches to social and cultural problems and issues. For us, it has certainly demonstrated how such hybrid and openly evolving approaches to methodology have the potential to emphasise such aspects of social investigation as humanity, understanding and empathic connection. Such approaches do, we believe, have the potential to make a significant contribution to the problem of addressing how to encourage the cultivation of skills fitting for the twenty-first century, a time calling for empathic connection, shared decision making, empowerment and social and cultural, as well as economic, sustainability. They have much, moreover, to offer individual disciplines – in this case creative writing and nursing.

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