




On Collaboration and Knowledge


—Mavis Reimer

Over the past decade or so, there has been much enthusiasm for collaborative work in the humanities and social sciences. As a way of doing research, collaboration has been a more common practice in the social sciences than in the humanities for some time, but in neither is it as generally assumed or as highly valued as it is in the natural and physical sciences. Since 1970, for example, over sixty per cent of Nobel prizes in chemistry, medicine, and physics have been awarded to two or three individuals for one project (see Hafernik, Messerschmitt, and Vandrick 31). The rhetoric that accompanies the enthusiasm would seem on the face of it to fit more obviously with the studies colloquially understood as “soft sciences” than with the “hard sciences” and their emphasis on empirical, quantifiable, objective data. Johnnie Hafernik, Dorothy Messerschmitt, and Stephanie Vandrick, reviewing the literature on collaboration, observe that collaborative research has been characterized

by others as “relational,” “dialogic,” “open-ended,” “multi-voiced,” and as “giving expression and authority to marginalized voices” (33), to which they add their own endorsements of the experiences of the “built-in support system for the researchers,” “the multiple perspectives that collaborative work provides,” the stimulation and excitement of group work, and the ability to “tackl[e] more complex projects than individuals might choose” (34–35). Sarah Robbins and Maribeth Cooper recount their nine-year collaboration as English educators working in the different locations of school and university, and conclude that this collaboration has allowed them to “examine critically and continually the material conditions of their institutional cultures” and to create “‘habitable spaces’ for communal reform” (241–42). For Martin Sanders, collaborative research is not only more ethical, but also “more enjoyable, more inspiring, and more productive” than individual research. In the Presidential Forum she



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convened at the Modern Languages Association congress of 2000, and later introduced in *Profession*, Linda Hutcheon encapsulates the value of collaboration in her title as a “creative” response to the fact of an “adversarial academy” (4).

As Hutcheon’s title suggests, the conventions of the academy are not easily adaptable to collaborative work. The credentialing systems of universities—degrees, hiring, tenure, and promotion—for the most part remain firmly embedded in what has been called “agonistic individualism” (Lunsford, Ede, and Arraez 12) or, more colourfully, “the solitary-hunter paradigm” (Sanders). For that reason, collaboration raises issues of ownership and concerns with matters like plagiarism and the fair attribution of individual contributions. According to Hafernik, Messerschmitt, and Vandrick, “any attempt to separate the individual contributions of each author completely contradicts the essence and spirit of collaboration” (32). And yet, much academic collaboration does not assume equal contributions or shared leadership at all, but rather is based on a hierarchical model in which graduate students do much of the investigative or experimental work for a lead researcher who receives most of the academic capital. In these instances, collaboration is easily appropriated to the existing structures of the adversarial academy, with such collaboration understood in the language of granting councils as the “training of highly qualified personnel” or the “building of research capacity.” Rather than creating the habitable spaces to which Robbins and Cooper refer, the recent valuation of collaboration may, then, merely demonstrate the adeptness of contemporary universities and their researchers to “fit themselves to the needs of agile capitalism,” in Christine Bold’s words (6). For many academic researchers, collaboration in this sense no doubt would approach the specific

meaning of the word as traitorous co-operation with the enemy.

But, satisfying as such a conclusion might be, it does not account fully for what is at stake in the struggle to identify new paradigms of research. In Canada, this struggle has coalesced around the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) since its announcement in 2004 of a framework for consultation with its communities on a strategy for “transformation.” In the first published account of the context for SSHRC’s rethinking of its functions, then-President Marc Renaud described a fundamental difference between the academic work of the 1970s and that of the 2000s:

In the academic world of the 1970s, the role of a university professor working in the human sciences was to teach and write books. Nobody observed, or foresaw, that a huge part of the job would be to get grants, find money for graduate students, stimulate discussions with external audiences, participate in national research teams or to work with other disciplines. (*From Granting Council 2*)

That these are now among, if not *the*, primary tasks for humanists and social scientists is assumed by Renaud throughout the rest of his remarks. While he asserts that “a transformed SSHRC will continue to provide a home for all scholars across the full range of social sciences

and humanities disciplines” (3), the document that follows is a framework for participation in a “structured discussion around specific challenges and options that will lead to some basic agreements on the central role of human sciences research in this century and on how to heighten its excellence and impact” (3)—in short, the document is itself the framework for a collaborative project.

If the method is collaborative, the answers about the role of human sciences research already anticipated in the framework document are also, in important ways, about enhancing collaboration: “provid[ing] the missing link between a technologically advanced society and a successful one” (2), “stimulat[ing] discussion” (2), organizing and equipping the human sciences “to help our social structures innovate in tandem with technology” (3), “moving . . . knowledge from research to action” (3), and “linking up with a broad range of researchers and stakeholder-partners” (3). And, not surprisingly, the report on the outcomes of the consultation, published in July 2005 as the Strategic Plan for 2006–2011, identifies various forms of collaboration and networking as the key new strategies to be implemented by the Council: “clustering research, mobilizing knowledge, connecting people and building [collective research] tools” (*Knowledge Council 16*).

Raymond Williams has famously remarked that, within ideological systems, meanings and practices



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are “reciprocally confirming,” “constitutive and constituting” (110). If we proceed from this view, we might say that the practices of SSHRC in privileging collective, collaborative, and clustered research in the human sciences constitute the meaning of research in the transformed Council paradigm—and, indeed, the very definition of knowledge. The two documents I’ve been discussing both feature the word *knowledge* in their titles: the 2004 framework document is entitled *From Granting Council to Knowledge Council* and the 2005 strategic document simply *Knowledge Council*. What is at stake in the privileging of collaborative research, it appears, is nothing less than a redefinition of what is to count as knowledge.

In the documents of the transformed Knowledge Council, knowledge is, first, defined as a response to crisis: in the 2005 document, specifically, it is represented as the crisis of “the future of humanity” in the context of “potential environmental, social and political futures” (*Knowledge Council 2*). Knowledge is brought to bear on present crisis, but it is also future-directed, that which “will enable us to preserve civilization for our grandchildren and theirs.” What we need in order to do this, apparently, is the study and understanding “of values, of economic and political priorities and of social organization.” The “we” assumed in that sentence is a national “we,” a “we” defined as “a medium-sized country such as Canada,” which “must have continuous access to the rich diversity of knowledge around the world and must take advantage of opportunities for international collaboration” if it is “[t]o be a competitive economy and a successful society” (17). As is evident in this statement, there is much encouragement throughout these documents for Canadian researchers to participate in international research projects and much acknowledgement of “the interconnected nature of global

issues" (*Knowledge Council* 17). But, "national" and "international" projects equally depend on the existence of identifiable national communities. In one sense, then, what is represented as a future-directed response to present crisis is at the same time a project to preserve existing political structures, in what Imre Szeman has called "the easy rhetoric of the defense of civilization and the promulgation of the Canadian good life" (10).

There are at least two other ideas about knowledge embedded in the SSHRC documents. Knowledge has been significantly instrumentalized, pressed to serve the nation and its critical needs, and, in this instrumentalization, has been understood as cumulative or progressive. This is a definition clearly in opposition to the idea of liberal education as Cardinal Newman defined it in *The Idea of a University* in the mid-nineteenth century, a definition that continues to underwrite the self-representation of many liberal-arts institutions. For Newman, "Liberal or Philosophical Knowledge . . . is capable of being its own end" and "its own reward" (77), "an end sufficient to rest in and to pursue for its own sake" (78). If there is a "use" for such knowledge, it is in the formation of "[a] habit of mind . . . of which the attributes are, freedom, equitableness, calmness, moderation, and wisdom" (76), attributes, as he goes on to explain, that are the particular property of a gentleman. To the extent that SSHRC in Canada is an indication of

wider movements, it appears that the new emphasis on collaborative research is linked to a fundamental shift in the definition of knowledge—from paradigms of private learning, self-knowledge, and self-cultivation to paradigms of shareable and shared learning, extendable and revisable information, and publically available facts directed to the end of successful social and economic life.

No doubt there are and will be both gains and losses in such a shift, gains and losses to which scholars and researchers should be alert. It seems likely, moreover, that collaborative practices will help to shape the still-emerging definitions of what counts as knowledge. For Religious Studies scholar Mark Taylor, writing in *The New York Times*, important steps in creating "more agile, adaptive and imaginative" universities include collaboration on several levels, beginning with the abolition of current departments and the restructuring of curriculum as "a web or complex adaptive network" based on "problem-focused programs." For Media Studies scholar Henry Jenkins, "the web" is more than a metaphor for this shift; rather, he observes, it is "a networked culture" that sponsors new forms of temporary collaborations and coalitions like the "adhocracy," "a form of social and political organization with few fixed structures or established relationships between players and with minimum hierarchy and maximum diversity." Cory Doctorow, whom Jenkins credits with popularizing the



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term, depicts such a coalition at work in his recent teen novel *Little Brother*, in which hacker and gamer W1n5ton sets out to subvert the surveillance systems of the Department of Homeland Security in a near-future San Francisco.

The study of young people’s texts and cultures seems an obvious site for exploring the possibilities of collaboration in teaching, research, and advocacy. Indeed, a number of the articles that appear in this issue of *Jeunesse* have been developed through collaborations and may suggest some models for scholars. Many disciplines assume children as the object of analysis, take “the child” as a category of analysis, or seek to include children as participants in analysis. The Forum essays we publish in this issue consider cultural constructions of “the child” and representations of children in scholarly studies of Canadian children’s literature, history, sociology, girls’ studies, and transnational English studies. The overlaps and disagreements among these practices surely are useful places to begin conversations. Many of the discourses on “new” and “emerging” ways of knowing borrow the developmental rhetoric often linked to young people. Indeed, the language of crisis in the SSHRC documents specifically invokes future children as the justification for the transformations in knowledge being sought. In the light of such rhetoric, the study of the cultural assumptions commonly made about children and the cultural uses to which the figure of the child is put seem more important than ever. Pauline Greenhill and Steven Kohm’s collaborative essay on the Red Riding Hood character in recent popular films demonstrates that multiple expert perspectives—here, those of a folklorist and a criminologist—are needed to unpack the implications of such cultural figurations.

Roxanne Harde’s essay on Marshall Saunders and the ideal of

humane education that was being formulated at the end of the nineteenth century is a useful reminder not only that this is not the first change in the conceptualization of knowledge and learning to be represented as a new pedagogy, developed for the good of young people, but also that such changes are often the result of collective thinking and consensus building. In her evaluation of a recent French edition of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, Isabelle Nières-Chevrel concludes that the limitation of sisters Anne and Isabelle Herbauts's collaborative translation resides precisely in their failure to understand their work as part of a long history of critical interpretations of Carroll's fantasy. As an illustrated book, the Herbauts edition of *Alice au pays des merveilles* is collaborative in another sense as well, for it is a reminder that the creative practice of combining narrative and pictorial modes of storytelling in one text is a common practice in children's literature. Indeed, picture books (the subject of Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer's review essay in this issue) are often understood to be the most distinctive form of literature for young people.

The other review essays included here are built on other forms of collaboration. Jenny Kendrick's review of pony stories is informed by the experiences of her horse-riding children, while the review of Young Adult fiction by Jamie Paris is an extension and complication of analysis he began as a research assistant in the collaborative *Home Words* project.

The opening essay—in which Jane Newland proposes that we theorize the relation of young reader and text through the Deleuzian concept of the assemblage of enunciation—offers a new vocabulary for thinking about collectivity. Often working in collaboration with Félix Guattari, Gilles Deleuze has developed a metaphorical language that coaxes us to leave behind our need to define discrete subjects and linear narratives of progress and to think through the lateral and adventitious movements of the rhizome and the “communicative and contagious” change of becoming-imperceptible. In the assemblage of author-reader-character Newland imagines, “[a]ll elements find themselves in the middle, each connected to the other” (25). The criticism that might come from such an understanding of reading, Newland speculates, would be a process of discovering with what other things a text “transmits intensities,” implicitly a practice that prevents thinkers from resolving any knowing into fixed objects of knowledge.

Among the earliest uses of the word *knowledge*, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, is to mean acknowledgement or recognition of the position or claims of someone, a use listed as now obsolete. Perhaps it is time to reanimate this sense of knowing as carrying a history and requiring the relation to another. Understood in this way, all knowledge can be seen to be collaborative. As Frances Smith Foster observes, “All of us benefit from, exploit, or are given

the gift of the ideas and thoughts and suggestions and encouragements” of many others (McKay and Foster 23). Poststructuralist theorists have taught us that truth itself is an arbitrary construct; cultural theorists might add that Truth is produced as the consensus of the powerful and privileged members of societies located in particular times and places, sharing particular histories and languages and practices. But, if all

knowledge is collaborative, it is also unfinished—and open to challenge as well as corroboration, interrogation as well as claims, by other groups of people “reasoning together,” to use the resonant title of a collection of essays by The Native Critics Collective. There is no body of knowledge to be discovered, no end in which to rest, only ways of knowing to be produced, recognized, and shared.

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The initial research for this editorial was undertaken by Mavis Reimer and Perry Nodelman in preparation for a paper on their various collaborations as teachers and scholars since 1997. The resulting paper, "This Work is Our Work: Collaborative Research in the Humanities," was delivered jointly at The Child and the Book Conference, hosted by Vancouver Island University in Nanaimo, BC, in May 2009. The writing of the editorial was undertaken in dialogue with the current editors of *Jeunesse*.