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Using collaborative review to deepen conceptual engagement?

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Abstract

In December 2013 the Design Research Institute at RMIT University, and CREATEC at Edith Cowan University, collaborated in a Symposium addressing the topic of 'Digital interventions in everyday creativity'. Partly sponsored by the ARC Centre of Excellence for Creative Industries and Innovation, this Symposium was one of a Digital Interventions series organised by Professor Sarah Pink of RMIT. The Call for Papers noted that the symposium was to examine "how digital media are implicated in processes of change, [... interrogating] how people engage digital media in creative practices that intervene in their own and others' lives, the intentionalities through which they do this, and the processes and experiences involved". By the time the Symposium was held, a proposal had been accepted for a special issue of *Media International Australia* focussing upon the topic: 'Digital interventions in everyday creativity'. Realising that there was already a triple engagement with the ideas raised and brought forth via (i) the Call for Papers, then (ii) canvassed at the Symposium, and (iii) written up for peer review and publication, it was decided to use a fourth set of deliberations to see if these might offer further value in deepening the relevant concepts. All authors whose articles had been accepted for publication were invited to participate in subsequent review of two other accepted papers in parallel with their addressing of reviewers' comments. They were explicitly asked not to review the additional papers, but to reflect upon them and to see if these disparate ways of addressing the same topic might add value to their own deliberations. This paper is an account of one aspect of the research, drawing upon interviews with four authors who agreed to take part in this process and who subsequently consented to be interviewed.

Introduction

At the end of 2014, and beginning of 2015, four authors agreed to be interviewed for this research project. Funded by Edith Cowan University's (ECU) Faculty of Education and Arts, the research sought to identify whether there was a benefit to asking authors writing on a particular topic for a special issue of a journal (Green & Pink 2014) to engage with a range of papers as part of finalising their own article. The hypothesis was that such an engagement would allow a deeper refinement of concepts, discussions and findings. Partly, this perception was informed by a particular practice of in-depth interviewers whereby research participants are reinterviewed as a means of deepening their engagement with a topic. If returning to a topic helps an interviewee to engage more deeply, would repeated revisiting of a specific topic enable academics to engage more fully with a new or emerging concept such as that proposed in the Digital Interventions symposium? It should be noted here that speakers have been consciously de-identified to preserve anonymity.

The responses illustrate some contemporary issues about the research and review process, specifically relating to scholarly collaboration, the peer review process, excellence in research, as well as concerns surrounding digital engagement, research and inter-disciplinary work. These issues are part of the broader discussions within the academy regarding research formation and methodologies as it relates to research excellence, noted by Scott (2015, p. 129) in his discussion of the varied nature of research in the humanities:

In the social sciences and humanities, as in many other disciplines, there is an emerging tension between methodologies for assessing excellence, which are tending to become more urgent and more prescriptive, and concepts of excellence, which are becoming more open, more fluid and more contested. These more prescriptive methodologies can be interpreted as a reaction to these more open definitions of excellence, but they also reflect deeper changes in political discourse and the political system. [...] The social sciences and humanities are dynamic disciplines subject both to far-reaching 'internal' changes in terms of their intellectual agendas and research methodologies but also 'external' changes which impact on their development (for example, the massification of higher education and the shifting logistics of research).

The ensuing discussion in this paper engages with the tensions highlighted by Scott, specifically focusing on if and how the collaborative process may assist research quality, in addition to assisting researchers with their own research as well as their careers. The opportunities for deeper conceptual engagement and collaborative discussions, as noted by Scott, are increasingly infrequent due to the internal and external changes of the academy. This paper illustrates some of the problems with quality and collaboration that have come about due to these changes.

Collaboration and peer review

The peer review process is seen as central to the production of knowledge at an institutional, scholarly and societal level. The process can be viewed both gatekeeping legitimacy and as validating and deepening knowledge. As noted by Lee, Sugimoto, Zhang and Cronin (2013, p. 4) "(m)ore than ever we need to rely on peer review in the efficient and effective evaluation of knowledge claims". However, reliance on this system in its current form as an effective producer of quality content is not necessarily assured nor perceived as such by scholars. A 2012 study by Mulligan, Hall and Raphael sought to understand how the process of peer review was perceived amongst 4,000 researchers. They found that although the majority of respondents acknowledged the need for peer review as essential, "many believe it could be improved" (p. 146). One of the critical findings of this research was that respondents believed that the process should serve to "improve the quality of research published" (p. 146), with 91% of respondents commenting that "their paper was improved by peer review" (p. 147). However, the traditional model of scholarly publishing assumes a high level of engagement by scholars in this process, and does not account for the changing nature of the academy, particularly in relation to the increasing demands on authors' and reviewers' time, as well as that of the publishing sector, wherein there are an increasing number of journals, sites and publications which publish without the established rigour of traditional peer review such as Open Access. The traditional peer review model has an expectation "that

it has been validated by a community of scholars”, and “is a familiar, reliable, and traditional practice and, as a result, is thought to be an important scholarly attribute that enables researchers to search, use, cite, and disseminate with confidence” (Nicholas, Watkinson, Jamali, Herman, Tenopir, Volentine, Allard & Levine, 2015, p. 16). At its foundation is the expectation that papers will be reviewed fairly upon academic merit alone and without institutional or ideological influences.

However, as noted by Scott (2015, p. 127), there may be some shortcomings of peer review when considering inter-disciplinary and collaborative works that span non-traditional disciplines. This has implications for many research areas in technology, innovation and creative practice across the humanities. A possible solution to the problem of researcher specialisation to the detriment of broader conceptual frameworks is through collaboration across disciplines as well as between institutions. Central to these dynamics of knowledge creation and development is the idea of participatory engagement. Cuthill, O’Shea, Wilson and Viljoen (2014) note an insufficient understanding concerning the engagement of scholars in Australian universities with the notion of collaboration, coupled with an under-appreciation peer review’s potential outcomes. In her critique of the current peer review process in relation to collaboration, especially in the area of digital humanities, Cavanagh (2012, p.8) argues that evaluation requires “a different skill set [...] than the conventional image of a scholar working in comparative isolation”. Her critique extends to the current format of peer-review as the pre-eminent structure for assessing quality research, arguing that unconventional review processes and interactions can be far more beneficial in the production and assessment of digital humanities research. The disruption, adaptation and progression of the existing peer review model is discussed by Stewart, Procter, Williams & Poschen (2012) who suggest that innovations that enhance collaborations and new ways of knowledge-making are needed and would be facilitated by innovations within Web 2.0 platforms. Such platforms would be able to foster interactions and reviews remotely, simulating to a certain degree the experiences of gaining feedback from diverse audiences at symposia and conferences.

As discussed by Shatz (2004, p. 16) the peer review process can be construed as an exemplar of John Stuart Mill’s dictum that expressing “multiple and divergent viewpoints [is] more likely to produce truth than would suppressing some viewpoints”. This is, as O’Neill (2013, p. 24) argues, valid insofar as arguments “observe structures and disciplines... hence the elaborate disciplines of academic research, writing and publication”. The foundation of this search for intelligible truths is epistemological; collaboration, free expression and debate of ideas and knowledge have the intended outcomes of quality academic knowledge for the greater good of society. However, this is not always possible with the publication-driven peer review process alone. As discussed by Nicholas et al (2015, p. 18) researchers are becoming increasingly sceptical of even the traditional peer review model due to “changes to the scholarly environment”. Their international survey of scholars found that “young researchers believed more strongly that peer review has become less rigorous, and as a result there is a flood of poor quality material”. Noted problems with peer review include plagiarism, faked research and poor-quality reviews.

One of the impediments to research quality, as well as collaboration which may facilitate quality, is the changing nature of academic work at Australian universities. A report discussed by Cuthill et al. (2014, p. 42) in relation to the university sector argues that Higher Education is “grappling with an ageing

workforce in which many workers are struggling to manage workloads". The respondents to the study expressed concern "that there is little incentive to undertake knowledge exchange activity, which incorporates time-intensive relationship development and collaboration" (p. 42). The Australian Council of Learned Academies' (2012) report showed consistency between the wants of early career researchers and established researchers. Both sought time and opportunities for collaboration but this aspiration was often offset by the pressures of teaching loads and expectations around individual research driven by the neo-liberal interests of the contemporary university (Fredman and Doughney, 2011). As argued by Petersen (2011), these pressures can be particularly debilitating for early career researchers who often find that their 'real work' is encroached upon by the demands of teaching, administration and achieving non-research managerial outcomes for the university. There is little time for scholars to involve themselves in collaborative research and deeper levels of engagement with their work. However, as is shown in the following analysis, this is to the detriment of an individual scholar's work (particularly ECRs), as well as institutional and societal benefits. The participants outline their different methods for composing work for the symposium, ranging from scholars who had prepared fully-formed papers to those who worked in a more impromptu fashion in relation to a concept that was not yet fully defined. Those who did not have their work finalised stressed the importance of interaction in the process of the symposium itself.

Motivations for participation

The multiple sponsors of the Digital Interventions Symposium meant that a range of local and interstate speakers were able to participate, connecting researchers from ECU, RMIT and the ARC Centre of Excellence for Creative Industries and Innovation (CCI) with other interested academics and keynotes. Academics choose to attend different symposia and activities for a range of reasons, and it was thought relevant to enquire about these. One of the key drivers for participation at the symposium, as well as participation in the peer review process, was for the desire for collaboration and the sharing of ideas that prompted reflection and improvement on their own work. One interviewee was drawn to participate because the Symposium organisers (Sarah Pink and Lelia Green) identify "interesting projects that take established questions in innovative new directions". Discussing the value of connecting to research networks around the world, this interviewee added that it was desirable to work "with people who are not only good researchers but also decent human beings and that's very important to me as I make decisions about people I want to work with". A different contributor was more focused on the subject area: "I think there's more going on in terms of the impact of digital technologies in the everyday than is readily apparent and I thought a couple of days talking about this and thinking about this would help me get a clearer sense of the way in which these technologies are impacting on my life and other people's lives". This desire for collaboration reflects the foundations of scholarly practice (as argued by John Stuart Mill) which "stresses hearing and contesting others' reasons and opinions, presenting and considering 'facts and arguments', and correcting and completing one's views" (O, Neill, p. 33). The notion of 'going deeper' in terms of one's own research is facilitated through the process of open discussion and reflection on others' work.

Research by Liao (2011, p. 748) reinforces these key aspects of collaboration for quality, stating that “a scholar can widen his or her horizons of understanding and to achieve better outcomes”, and that “(d)iversity among members of collaborative research teams might...serve as an extra source to reinforce research quality”. This was reflected in the responses of participants, with some citing the diversity of papers as well as the quality of the speakers as reasons for their involvement at the symposium. For one of the participants, the drawcards were subject relevance, ease of access and the opportunity to hear a new voice: “digital strategies have become very important to [my] project [...] and about half the people were people [I know locally ...]. The third reason was Sarah Pink in particular. I had followed her work a bit, I’m interested in what she calls ‘sensory ethnography’.” Whereas this interviewee was attracted by the proximity of the event, the opposite was true for the fourth speaker: “apart from the fact that I wanted to come to Perth? In all seriousness, I hadn’t been there”. This participant identified the symposium topic as particularly useful for their area of work: “it gave me a chance to think ‘what would that mean in my context?’. It just got me thinking about the digital revolution as it were, and [...] I started thinking ‘I’ve never seen anything written about that before, no one’s really talking about it’. So I thought ‘well, that’s a great chance to explore a new area, a digital focus in my discipline’.” Overall, it was evident that participation in the symposium was prompted by a complex mix of motivations and that the concepts to be explored were only one aspect of the reasons which brought the discussants together.

Preparing a paper for the symposium, and the journal

Unless a conference has a refereed stream, with refereeing of full papers required prior to acceptance, different authors can have a range of strategies for preparing the papers they present. This often has consequential effects on the delivery of a final manuscript, given that a number of authors were able to add, adjust or complement their work with regard to interactions at the symposium itself, or afterward during the review process. As part of the investigation it was decided to ask whether the author’s paper had been written prior to the symposium, and whether or not it had changed at all in terms of engagement with the symposium audience. Only one interviewee had already prepared their paper in full prior to the symposium. This participant commented that the paper as submitted had not changed at all as a result of having been presented at the symposium.

The three other interviewees all had different strategies for preparing their papers for presentation. One prepares a PowerPoint supported by a 2,000 word script of what s/he intends to say. This doesn’t operate as a straightjacket; however, it provides a starting point. The presenter finds themselves “talking off the cuff as things come to mind about the paper because I think that’s what a conference is about, it’s working through ideas rather than presenting something that’s finalised [...] I think being able to speak freely about certain things is important.” Because of this flexible and responsive approach, the published version of the paper tends to differ from the presentation starting point. This is similar in strategy to Green’s (1999) definition of the ethnographic process insofar as the researcher is allowed “to set their own agenda within the research agenda”. One participant noted “I want to have the time for ideas to ferment and to develop through the experience of the conference and the contacts made there and any feedback that’s given to me during the presentation.” For this speaker, the theme of the symposium provided a new context for their existing research project. They found themselves thinking: “oh okay,

what I am doing is in fact a digital intervention', therefore I have the impetus to develop it conceptually and to show the value of the project."

Another interviewee prepares the PowerPoint, but does not support that with a written script. "The basic sketch for the paper had already taken shape and [...] we were drawing upon our own experience. [...] So this paper was very much grounded in everyday life as we live it and we already knew when we did the symposium that that was going to be the case". In part, in the view of this author, the sketchy starting point reflects the particularity of the research area. "Normally there is far more written about the field that we can draw on but, because [this area ...] is so new and emerging, we have had to find new ways of bringing that knowledge to consciousness and processing it in terms of academic discussions." This participant, more than others, believed that the experience of attending the symposium had impacted upon the final paper. They said it enabled them: "to think more deeply and more clearly and in a more focused way about the impact of these technologies on daily life. Given this, the paper was immeasurably richer as a result of [us] having attended the symposium and exposed ourselves to other people's perspectives than it would have been had we written it without that context".

The final contributor identified themselves as a creative practitioner and found that their engagement with the symposium offered a chance to critique the notion of 'creative'. "I thought it was going to be, how you interpret 'creativity'. I thought it would be people making creative practice approaches. But it was basically mainly I think people who were talking about how people are using digital interventions just generally. Creative might be creative in the sense that they were being creative, but it's not about creative practice". In terms of this person's own paper, they sometimes "go to a conference with an idea but I use the conference as a way of forcing myself to write a paper". On other occasions, "I have something kind of written, and I'm trying to test it out, find a way of doing something with it. So it's a mixture really". For the Digital Interventions symposium, it was the latter case: "I was looking for feedback and also connections, things that people might be talking about similarly". Given the mixture of papers, and that some addressed creative practice and others did not, this had an effect when this author came to write it up. "I was probably more conscious of foregrounding that fact that this was about practice [...] therefore the way it needs to be reviewed has to be in that light. Because it's different, it's about different things. It's got a different knowledge base in some ways." The symposium was still valuable, even though it addressed a range of perspectives: "I really enjoyed it; don't get me wrong".

Shared readings of own paper/of others' papers

Accepting the diversity in motivations for attending the symposium, and in the approach to the paper the author/s presented, and the relationship of the paper presented to the paper as published, it is unsurprising that there was a range of perspectives around whether and why people agreed to allow their papers to be read by others, and if they also agreed to read other people's papers. For one contributor, these options were novel, and welcomed, but with some trepidation. "I had never seen that option [to have other authors read the paper] before and I thought it could be of value. I was a bit

reluctant as to the level of commitment required, I wasn't sure if it would essentially be a second round of peer review, and then I'd have to go all the way back and you know, change things to suit the reviewers, so I was a bit cautious, but yeah, more than curiosity: I thought it could have some value." One of his/her motivations for reading others' papers was "to see if there was anything I could link to in their papers and yeah, just the sense of participating in a collegial process which is to me the point of academic work, helping each other develop these quite subtle and complex themes." For this person, the additional level of engagement was ultimately worthwhile. "I think that [the additional review] dimension makes it more scholarly. There were two peer review reports and feedback from the editor which is normal in my experience but the addition of that internal peer review or what[ever] you're calling it. The addition of that collaboration I think makes it more scholarly."

It is this notion of extra collaboration and feedback that Cavanagh (2012, p. 12) argues is a critical role played by "evaluation outside traditional 'peer review' in the creation and sustenance of [emerging knowledge]". Another author identified a particular reason why the peer input made a difference to their experience:

sometimes academics, particularly senior academics, find themselves reviewing from a sense of duty and obligation rather than a sense of passion and if you throw this open to people that are contributing [to a symposium] and allow them to engage more deeply with each other's papers then that may allow more passionate engagement, which I think is probably more desirable than having learned but dispassionate engagement in terms of creating new ideas and trajectories of inquiry that will make our fields advance forward. [...] I think it's more democratic than normal scholarly areas because it means that people that have got a particular interest in these areas as other authors, rather than people who may be acknowledged as editorial leaders in the field, people with interests, are the ones who are adding value and making comments. I think [...] that many of these technologies tend to be the domain of younger adults rather than people who are more mature and established in academic work. So not only is it a more democratic and a more inclusive process but it may be a more valid process because it includes people who are more likely to use these technologies.

This notion of inclusion, mentorship and exchange of ideas reflects the attitudes of late career researchers who "strongly favoured supporting ECRs to help them develop their careers, with research" (ACOLA, 2012, p. 35). Similarly, ECRs expressed a desire for collaborative opportunities: "(t)hey want programs and systems to encourage collaboration and mobility: with industry, with government, with colleagues overseas and with peers in Australia; and for cross-disciplinary work" (ACOLA, 2012, p. 31). The interactivity of the Symposium itself, as well as the subsequent reviews and discussions, facilitated this aspiration, allowing both ECRs and established researchers to engage with new ideas and ways of thinking.

One contributor stated "It certainly opened my mind to thinking about how different people interpret [digital interventions]", noting "I never really knew people were doing these things, you know? And of course then, if someone is working in that area or if someone talks about this, you can point to their

work which I wouldn't have been able to do before." Another author drew parallels between this opportunity for engagement and a conversation: "Because my own personal way of developing ideas is strongly conversational. If you just leave me in a room by myself staring at a white wall I find it very difficult to generate ideas, but put me in a conversation with somebody and they just come sparking off," while the fourth was pleased to engage in the additional participation, "[I] got the sense that there was a rationale behind it, so I thought, 'I'll not make it difficult. I'll be happy to look at [... other papers]'. I guess I was kind of curious to know maybe what kind of other papers were going to go in." This speaker felt that the question about whether or not the internal peer review made the process more scholarly missed the point somewhat: "I don't know if it's more or less scholarly, I guess you say 'what does that mean', it's maybe less conventional but in terms of scholarship it's probably quite good because it's an extra layer of review, it's an extra chance to reflect on your work as well, which is always useful. I see it more as a way of getting papers that might be stronger or more coherent."

Was the review useful?

The general consensus of the participants was that the extra level of collaboration and review over the course of the symposium and the subsequent investment in each other's work was beneficial, yet highlighted one of the key problems with the process of research and the production of quality work; namely that of being time-poor and overworked in the current academic environment. This is reflective of Scott's (2015) critique of the external changes that impact on universities which ultimately affect quality. What is pertinent here is that when author's made time to review their work in conjunction with reading the work of others, the process was useful in the sense that it engendered a deeper engagement with their own work, whilst also fostering a closer network of scholars and a sense of collegiality:

I was able to draw some link and incorporate a key study from that paper into mine, both to benefit my paper and show a link to other work in the issue, so that was useful, but it wasn't onerous or really that thorough, really me just reading it and saying 'yay' or 'nay' and then reading the other paper and saying 'okay that's the bit that seems relevant', following up on that point, sourcing the article or book or whatever it was, which was a I think actually a work by one of the authors I cited in my paper but a more recent work, so citing that more recent work by the theorist. But in terms of how it related or compared to other peer reviews it was about a tenth of the work involved compared to the peer review.

Another interviewee commented that "you won't always get something out of it, but there's no downside to it," while a third felt that the constant "pressure on time" meant that it was vital to know "when to draw that line and say 'well this is what I am doing' and all those things, but as a concept I think it is, yeah, very useful." The final interviewee was also aware of time pressures, partly because of the ethics requirements: "it was quite time consuming but I think that it was worthwhile. [...] I had to sign off on a whole range of ethics declarations. I am less clear whether we need that kind of ethical infrastructure or whether it would have been enough just to say 'are you willing to take part in this?'" . This contributor summed up their perspective as "I think that between consenting contributors there's a lot to be said for this kind of detailed engagement."

There was some agreement that the process had enabled a deeper engagement with conceptual matters:

Collaborative review, whereby my paper was reviewed and I reviewed other people's papers, did help me engage more deeply with its conceptual underpinnings. It's hard to say exactly how but I did get a sense of, I suppose it's like when you're interviewing someone and you say 'tell me more about that'. In asking people to dig deeper into their understanding you offer them the opportunity to uncover tacit knowledge that they might not have brought to the forefront of awareness and I think this is part of what it did, engaging first of all in thinking up the abstract, then in presenting in the seminar and getting feedback, then in writing the paper and then in reviewing the paper through the eyes of other paper writers as well as through the editors' eyes, and looking at how other people had responded to their reviewers, that allowed me essentially three or four bites of the conceptual cherry and I think that it's clearly difficult to identify where the conceptual formation would have been without those repeated engagements with the area but I do feel confident that I have a more nuanced and sophisticated view of digital interventions in the everyday as a result of that multiple engagement with the field.

A different contributor thought that the process might have greater value in a less open topic-area: "I think it would work better for a project that was more focussed". They went on to note that "The idea of digital interventions is it's a beautifully encompassing idea that brings together a whole range of things from very different perspectives, talking about different issues, for different ends. I can imagine if one were working on a more focussed project that it could work rather differently."

For a further participant, the real value was that unpublished work is particularly current:

often times the unpublished papers are the most current research in a new field, and if you're trying to write in that field you may find that, two things, you may find that you're trying to draw in concepts or studies or theorists from other fields that support your new field and your contribution to it. The second thing is that by the time your paper is peer reviewed, those studies potentially have been published, so they can become things that you have to address, that your reviewer recommends that you address. I think it's good to know about the unpublished papers in an issue, that you're contributing to, for a number of reasons, to contribute to the cohesiveness of the issue and also drawing on the expertise of people working in your area, I think that this is more common in sciences where I have heard that sharing unpublished drafts or even data sets is more common.

This perspective was balanced by the importance placed by a different interviewee on the fact that these unpublished papers were nevertheless: "peer reviewed, revised in the light of the peer review, almost post prints, so the reliability was almost commensurate to a published paper. If they were not yet peer reviewed I would be less inclined to draw from them." This valuing of reliability was at odds with a

perspective which noted that “If it’s already been published then the chances are it’s not an emerging field, it’s already got an imprimatur of establishment, but I think that it was a particularly useful conjunction between the fact that this is a new field, or a new refinement of a field, that was being explored, and that this was also an early set of publications from that field.”

This perspective meant that it was hard to generalise about the value of the process over all: “I think that combination of novel and emergent meant that deeper engagement with the conceptual framework was particularly valuable, so that it is hard to extrapolate from that to a more established field”. For areas of study that are in innovative, new and/or emerging fields, there can often be a problem in finding an entrance point, relevance and credibility within the academy. This point is furthered by Scanlon (2014, p. 13), who argues that in these areas “new data are created”, and so “it is relevant to consider changes in academic practice related to data, such as the sharing of digital data...and the implications of this for digital scholarship”. She goes on to suggest that changes should be made to academic networks and the sharing of information so that newer disciplines and fields have the opportunity to be recognised and garner the attention they deserve.

The uncertainty around how quality is established in the digital humanities is reflected in the arguments of Cavanagh (2012, p. 12) who notes that “(s)uch inter-institutional cooperation and other collaborative models can lead to projects that benefit all participants. Concurrently, however, they highlight important changes in the shape of faculty work that require more widespread attention.” This can be particularly relevant when comparing the value of peer review with that of collaborative feedback. Reflecting this, one interviewee constructed the pre-publication stage of engagement and exchange as “more collaborative, it’s more of a discussion. I guess it extends the conference experience, since you [don’t just] hear a paper and discuss it for 10 minutes and that’s it. You can read it a few times, follow up ideas, look up references or whatever”:

it’s better in the sense that it’s not ‘well this is finished, this is already out there, therefore it must be right or wrong’. You’re all at the same level, and you would maybe hope that your work might have a positive impact on someone else who’s reading your work as well. Obviously peer review is well, is about gatekeeping. In peer review, I guess if it’s published even if you disagree with it or whatever, you always feel a bit uneasy because someone somewhere has said ‘it’s fine’, so you kind of wonder if you’re wrong in some way.

Interviewees’ final thoughts on the symposium and collaborative exchange

The senior academic who had already written their paper when they arrived noted that, nonetheless, “although the actual process of attending the symposium did not impact on that particular paper, I did then invite one of the presenters [...] to submit his paper as a chapter in a collection that I was putting together, so it was still a very useful exchange of ideas through the symposium itself.” This person went on to say that the symposium “was an absolute delight and fascinating throughout”.

Two interviewees had been concerned about the extra time required by the additional (voluntary) collaborative review. “Signalling to the authors that it’s [the review is] a possibility is a good thing, that way they can brace for it, and even developing some guidelines around what it might entail, so that they can decide if they want to spend that time.” This was a relevant consideration “because it is still a commitment, to read the paper and all that, after you have responded to the peer review.” Another commentator echoed this perspective and also noted that not all the papers considered were of equal relevance to this academic’s work:

If we’d have known before we could have maybe prepared for it or maybe we would have pulled out because timing was so tight. I can’t remember what the exact deadlines were, but it wasn’t long to read something and put in your final version. I guess overall, even if it were [only] a few more weeks, that would have been good. The other thing is, I don’t know how it would work, is if everyone had access to everyone’s paper rather than just a couple, I don’t know if that crosses the moral line, I’m not sure. I could have then had a discussion with multiple people, and have looked at more than just the two, so if there were two that you didn’t really get anything from there may have been other ones that if you’d have looked at [them] you could have seen different ways of getting something from them. Maybe if there was somewhere where you could look at the abstracts, and then you could choose the ones you want to look at?

One interviewee talked about the elements of collaboration as if it had heightened their sense of being engaged in a specific academic field, noting that it was “a very social event, quite small, and it seemed to me that a lot of people engaged with it fully, whereas [with] a lot of bigger symposiums people come and go. I had a real sense of everyone being there all the time.” Thinking about why this might be, this contributor added: “It was a really good idea and people were willing to put the time in to fully engage with the different papers and ideas that were put forward [...] it does seem to be unusually successful”.

Finally, a Perth-based contributor “liked that the symposium brought in the scholars from over east and that the keynotes were really very accomplished in their areas. [...] Any opportunity to bring those people together here is very good, so yeah, it’s certainly of a value.” At the same time, they felt that certain elements of the symposium and their discussion had already been established in the field, rather than being in the process of conceptual formation: “It seemed like a theme that was being revisited at a certain point in the development of technology so this notion of interventions I think had a certain resonance in the 90s and 2000s when and as those technologies were developing, and then in 2010s revisiting this idea of how the technologies are being used as interventions for social, cultural and environmental purposes.” They added: “Things like crowd sourcing and user generated content are normal things [...] I mean this area is one part of what I work within, digital interventions and communications.” Even so, “I certainly think the symposium broadened my outlook.” Perhaps this academic did not perceive a broadening of outlook as indicative of engaging in conceptual development, but others might do so.

Conclusion

The participants who volunteered to be interviewed constituted a cross-section of collaborators in terms of local/distant and senior/early career researchers. Although the specifics of their views differ, all would seem to agree with Cuthill et al that “(t)here is now a pressing need to address national policy arrangements to support collaborative knowledge exchange in Australian universities” (Cuthill et. al., 2014, p. 43). The peer review process which identified the publishable papers, through which the four contributors became eligible to participate in this research, is generally accepted to be worthwhile, and peer/expert review is an important element of the academic refereeing and quality process. Even so, it is not generally constructed as collaborative. ‘Reading’ another author’s paper on the other hand, as opposed to reviewing it, was positioned as being both easier and more productively participatory. Participants’ comments appear to agree with Scott (2015, p. 129) by illustrating the “tension between methodologies for assessing excellence” as well as the problems with “internal” and “external” changes within the university. It may be that peer review is now constructed less as a participative exchange between colleagues and more as a necessary consequence of the massification of research processes. In the face of peer review mechanisms which support identification of the originality and worth of a scholarly contribution, collaborative/participatory engagement might offer a return to a more individual-level, creative, productive association with researchers and their ideas. This form of engagement may also be useful in the production of knowledges as well as advancing new and emerging areas of research in addition to enhancing research quality.

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