

Collaborator: Traitor or Ally?

David Trubridge

Designer, New Zealand

Abstract

The paper looks at various examples of collaboration in search of the essence of collaboration—to find that which gives it its creative potency.

In World War II, and in other times of conflict, a collaborator was a traitor, French who went over to the other side and helped the Nazis were derogatively called collaborators. In this sense, to collaborate is to transgress—a bad thing. Is it the fact that they crossed a line, or that they crossed the wrong line? Why are we now talking about it as a positive?

What is collaboration?

In this talk I am going to work through a number of examples, or case studies if you like, in an attempt to work out exactly what collaboration is, and to find the essence that makes successful collaborations so creatively potent.

1. SOCIAL COLLABORATION

I know someone who used to share house cleaning with a few close friends. Occasionally they would spend a week getting together and each day they would all clean one of their houses. This made the chore a fun communal event, providing a good opportunity to both laugh together and to share their concerns and worries. Here collaboration generates social interaction, community building and person-to-person support.

This used to happen much more in the past, and it still happens today in poorer communities around the world. For example, building a house was far too big an enterprise for one family so they would all come together and, one by one, build the community houses. In this way they all had an ownership of the houses. There was an incentive to get the job done well because it was they who suffered the consequences if it wasn't. And they also made sure that the materials were used sustainably, because if they weren't it was they who would suffer the lack in the future.

In the developed world we no longer do this, and we are poorer as a result. We live increasingly isolated individual lives in our castles and everything has become too **specialised**. Instead of sharing jobs within the community we buy from providers outside. Sometimes the builder may live nearby but most of the materials are sold by large national and increasingly multinational businesses. We buy phone services, insurance etc. from similar massive multinationals. They have little or no stake in, or concern for, our community which is only a vehicle for them to make more profit. In this hand-over we lose power and control, as well as community cohesion. If we learn again to collaborate more we regain ownership and control

over our lives, and rebuild our communities. The Christchurch earthquake is a good example of community collaboration coming to the rescue when larger systems have broken down.

As In recent years we have seen how multinationals have become so large that they are even more powerful than nations. When we consider that their only guiding doctrine is profit, that it is even enshrined in law, we should be extremely worried. Greed goes where profit leads. For the health of our communities and even more importantly, for the health of the environment, I believe that it is vital that we wrest control back from these companies. The best way we can do this is to stop buying services from afar and collaborate together to provide as much as possible that we need from within our community.

So collaboration is anti-capitalist, anti-profit—or at least it ensures that those who generate profit own it. It is pro-environment, pro-community and it is more likely to be sustainable.

One small example of this: we are moving to a new, custom built workshop/design studio/gallery. Initially I wanted the building to be zero energy—to generate as much energy as it used. One way is to place a bank of solar panels on the roof. But when I started doing some calculations I learnt that the \$/kW cost of solar panels is very high. It is more efficient to buy shares in a wind farm, or better still to buy our electricity from Meridian because all theirs is already renewably generated. There is an understandable desire to wear your heart on your sleeve and let everyone know that you are “sustainable” with panels all over the roof, but actually it is better to work within the community networks. Similarly, instead of burning our waste offcuts inefficiently in a small unit of our own to generate heat, we give them to a local company that burns them in a large, highly efficient incinerator to make electricity.

2. DESIGN COLLABORATION

For most of my adult life I have worked alone as a designer-maker, using my craft skills to express my creative ideas. When my business took off I moved to larger premises and started employing others to share the work load. Now I head a core design team of four, with a separate workshop where my designs are made by skilled craftspeople. I do not make anything any more and most of the design process is carried out by the design team.

When I first started thinking about this talk I immediately saw this as a good example of collaboration. Our team is made up of disparate individuals. There is one trained designer who is my lead designer and who has well developed aesthetic sensitivities. One person went through a craft-design school in Canada and brings very grounded practical thinking and skills. There is an artist who is already successful on his own, and who brings a zany, unexpected viewpoint. The last member has learnt her design skills with us and also brings very valuable organising skills. There are two women and two men and several races and nationalities represented. I saw this as a commendable collaboration.

I will usually instigate an idea, then we will bounce it around the group. This progresses the idea far faster than was ever possible when I worked alone. Then I used to easily get bogged down and found it hard to extricate myself alone. Often it was my wife Linda, also an artist, who came to the rescue.

But then I started thinking about this a bit more. In lectures over recent years I have talked passionately about my vision of the creative process. As I have said, we suffer from over-specialisation—it may be efficient but it is also deadening. Increasingly we live in a binary culture, the 0 and 1 of the digital world. Art, design and craft have been specialised into their own ghettos. The result is superficial in all camps: art-for-arts sake, etc. I sincerely believe that Art, Design and Craft are not nouns they are verbs, they are processes, and crucially they are all component parts of one creative process in which we all engage.

So if art, design and craft are really all part of one **creative process** how can we talk of collaboration between them? Surely it can only happen between separate entities? It seems that I have to look further for what collaboration really is.

3. OTHER COLLABORATIONS

Other examples of fruitful collaboration:

1. We have worked with Scion and Biopolymer Network, both scientific research institutes in Rotorua, on the development of a new plastic material for us to use for making lights. This is a composite of PLA (plant derived) plastic and native flax fibre. The project may continue with AUT research lab and CNC injection processes.
2. Frog Design in Britain suggest that designers work in a more collaborative process with their clients.
3. In Perth I have met Geoff Warne, of Donaldson and Warne Architects, who for certain suitable projects will assemble an unlikely design concept team made up of such people as a botanist, a historian, a sculptor and even a musician.
4. I have worked together with my son Sam Trubridge, who is a theatre director and designer, teaching design workshops in France at the Vitra Summer Design School. The basis of our workshops was to shift the focus of design from just being on objects, to the rituals we engage in in daily life. If objects are still needed, there is now a reason to design them, once you have the ritual. "Don't think table, think eating". Sam brought his theatre workshopping skills to initial group exercises, and his performance design skills to help think about the rituals. This was a very rewarding collaboration between theatre and design and also between the many very varied cultures that make up the classes at the Vitra school.

4. SLEEP/WAKE—A CASE STUDY

One of Sam's finest productions is *Sleep/Wake*, which is a multi-media performance involving dance, theatre, video and sound. It is a collaboration between art and science, between Sam and Dr. Philippa Gander from the Sleep Research Institute at Massey University where they both work.

Out of their initial discussions about sleep came the idea of a collaboration. Sam wanted to learn about sleep and how it could teach him about performance studies. Sleep is the antithesis of performance—it is the ultimate non-performance. How can you perform sleep?

At first they saw it simplistically: Sam wanted to 'sex up theatre', and Philippa wanted to 'communicate science'.

As a scientist Philippa needed everyone to read things in the same way, but came to appreciate subjectivity more and to see that there is no such thing as objective truth. She realised that she was only *performing* objectivity and came to understand the slipperiness of language.

Sam learned the science of audience relationships, perception and performance and how to manipulate them as a director. He became more analytical; he had always been captivated by the wonder of science, as a child wanting to study marine biology.

Philippa's need for clarity was opposed by Sam's need for ambiguity. *Sleep/Wake* is full of ambiguity and uncertainty which allows, even requires, the audience to form their own conclusions. In these areas of uncertainty lie the seeds of art.

Science has a code of ethics, which is in effect humanity applied to science. Philippa was horrified at some of the things that Sam did, such as waking up his 'subjects' at night in the middle of an experiment to film them. In science, such intervention is not acceptable. But it taught her to see them as people—that performers are not specimens, that they speak back.

If we don't dream, we can't use our imagination to resolve problems. Dreams encourage creative thinking. While sleeping, a block in the thalamus separates the brain off, so that our bodies don't act out our dreams physically. In the same way, the audience, located in their seats, can't move—in the darkness they suspend disbelief and allow themselves to be affected emotionally by what they see.

Science is a world within itself, but Art is dependent on the viewer - and it holds up a mirror to science. Dali illustrated Einstein's concept of warped time with his sagging clocks. In the same way 'Waiting for Godot' created a suspension of time and also a sense of hopelessness brought on by the nuclear cold war, the result of science splitting the atom.

Sleep/Wake evolved into an ongoing project with both papers at conferences and other performances around the world involving both Sam and Philippa, as well as the Waking Incubator Symposium in Wellington (6 sleep scientists + 6 performing artists) and a book. They received funding from Smash Palace, a government project aimed at bringing art and science together. It took a while for Sam to comprehend the full relevance of the name - two separate, carefully constructed and complete world views coming together, and causing some fundamental rearranging of ideas.

In the course of the collaboration they came to understand the relevance of **transgression**: when things go too far, such as the sleep scientist who grabbed a box of paints, or the idea of Philippa trying to direct. But ultimately they concluded that "transgression is at the heart of discovery". This "brave excursion into foreign territory" can also be a "a process of (and catalyst for) acquiring new perspectives or 'awakenings'".

The regions where real novelty occurs—where really new things happen that you haven't seen before—are always regions that are at the edge of chaos. John Polkinghorne "Speaking of Faith" Radio NZ broadcast *Quarks and Creation*. The spark of life occurs in the friction generated along boundaries and areas of confrontation. Transgressing these boundaries is a risk, but if successful much can be achieved. If a collaboration is too close, there is a danger that it will only reinforce prejudices. These need to be challenged from the other side which has to be sufficiently 'other'.

So is a collaborator a betrayer or an ally? Philippa was seen as betrayer by other scientists, in the same way that Sam may have been by other artists. But between them they became allies and went where no one had gone before. In doing so they added to the creative capital of humanity. We are all the richer as a result. This is true collaboration.

David Trubridge is a designer and Principal of David Trubridge Designs, New Zealand.