**Further Reflections on a Collaboratory Approach to Leadership Development Evaluation.**

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**Short 750 word abstract**

This paper builds upon research presented at the DLCC Conference in 2017 (Edwards, Palmer and Watton, 2017) and the work of Kempster, Guthey and Uhl Bien (2017) who proposed the opportunity that exists for a Collaboratory to be used as a vehicle for leadership development.

We are seeking to extend the existing literature on Collaboratories by highlighting some of the key factors to be considered when setting up a new Collaboratory initiative together with research evidence as to the impact that can be achieved through a Collaboratory. For the purposes of this paper, we are defining a Collaboratory in pure science terms using the description by Wulf (1993: 19):

*‘…[A] center without walls, in which a nation’s researchers can perform their research without regard to physical location, interacting with colleagues, accessing instrumentation, sharing data and computational resources… accessing information from digital libraries.’*

The researchers are drawing upon their experience of delivering a series of events known as the **Leadership Development Evaluation Collaboratory (LDEC)** that have taken place over the past 2 years. The LDEC was developed by the University of the West of England (UWE) and the University of Winchester, with funding from the Thames Valley and Wessex Leadership Academy and the South West NHS Leadership Academy. The quarterly events have between 20 and 30 attendees each time from a mainly public sector background but also with some participation from the private and third sectors.

Over this period, the researchers collected data using a variety of different methods (Edwards and Turnbull, 2013). These have included observation, postcards, interviews and letter writing.

Generally, individuals report a range of impacts from attending the Collaboratories. These include:

* Impacting National Policy – confidence to challenge national policy.
* Networking – encountering different stakeholders and sector perspectives.
* Benefitting from Academic Engagement – the implications of research based evidence for developing and challenging practice.
* Opening Minds and Shifts in Thinking and Practice – raising questions and promoting more critical conversations around evaluation to support changes in practice.
* Validation of Existing Knowledge – confidence in evaluation practices.
* Connecting Conversations with Action Learning Sets (ALSs) – support for individual projects for action research participants.

However, the research team were keen to reflect upon what improvements could be made to the existing Collaboratory series as well as informing the design and delivery of any future Collaboratory events. Improvements noted include:

* Lacking Laboratory – the need to provide more opportunities for focused experimentation on identified projects over a longer period using techniques like action research.
* Expectations of Participants – the need to manage these and ensure that the Collaboratory rationale is re-iterated in the invitation to each event.
* Hosting and Facilitating – make more use of a facilitation framework similar to action learning to provide a more consistent quality of experience for in-group discussions.
* Mix of Participants –further expansion of the involvement of different sectors.
* Continuous Dynamic Feedback – through following the progress of selected case studies at each event.
* Involving Commissioners of Evaluation – targeted invitation needs to be made as none have been present any of the events.

Some improvements have already been implemented and which have been well received by attendees include:

* The format and environment of the LEDC needs to support a safe place to speak openly but in confidence within the group.
* To design events with increased experiential components, the most recent Collaboratories contain more instances of trying techniques out.

There are of course further research areas to investigate as the Collaboratory series continues these include:

* The Notion of Collaboratory - to learn more about the research evidence for the achievements of other collaboratories.
* Tensions and Politics in leadership development evaluation – to understand more about how the effects of these.
* The Role of Language in leadership development evaluation – to explore metaphors as a way of explaining the impact of evaluation and the potential for new approaches to evaluation.
* Space and Place – to research the effect of structure, framework and facilitation of events.
* Context and Creativity – to investigate how these can be incorporated in both the organisation of the events and in evaluation.
* Longitudinal Approaches to Evaluation- to consider how collaboratories might support these.

To summarise, Collaboratories afford a great opportunity to bring a diverse community of people together with common interests and who are keen to invest time in understanding more about the theme and try out new solutions to make progress on a chosen topic. However, as Muff (2016) recognises one of the core limitations to a Collaboratory is that its true impact is problematic to calculate particularly from an organisational development perspective.

**References**

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