What Collaboration Means to Me: The Infrastructure of Welcome

Emily Drabinski
Long Island University - Brooklyn Campus, emily.drabinski@liu.edu

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Emily Drabinski (emily.drabinski@liu.edu)
Associate Professor, Coordinator of Library Instruction, Long Island University, Brooklyn

When I sat down to take a few notes on how I think about collaboration, I was right in the middle of it. I work on a journal about socialist, feminist, and anti-racist pedagogy called *Radical Teacher*. A few years ago, the journal transitioned from being university-press-owned and a paywalled publication to university-library-published and an open access title. Making that change was and continues to be an intensely collaborative process, one requiring the contribution of knowledge and skill from many directions to make each issue happen: Dick's Marxist critiques of technological determinism, Leonard's visual acuity, and my ability to apply styles to text blocks in Microsoft Word. Many of my collaborators on the *Radical Teacher* project spent their lives hitting the space bar five times at the start of each sentence. At the moment I heard from Jill, I was patiently deleting all appearances of five spaces in the document. We've talked about the spacebar problem on the board, but talking doesn't seem to change the documents I end up with each issue. Some parts of writing are physical—Bob's hands automatically hitting the space bar, and mine just as quickly finding and deleting those spaces. It's the rhythm of collective work, each of us offering what we can, some of what we offer recursively deleted.

This is collaboration. It is certainly about the lofty ideas and big stories, the coming together as one to work toward a common goal that is larger than what any single person could accomplish alone. Like so many clichés, when it is really happening in real life, collaborative work is even more powerful and transformative than the stories we tell about it. Getting to that magic, though, is a material practice. It's sending an email, and then a follow-up email, followed by a phone call. It's picking up snacks for the meeting, and then vegan snacks, and then gluten-free snacks so that everyone can be nourished.

And collaboration is about the contribution of knowledge and skills that are themselves built and acquired by material means. When we started talking about taking *Radical Teacher* open access, I ended up being the only person in a very smart room who understood what was happening. We were losing institutional subscriptions at an alarming rate. The Board wondered if we needed to conduct a direct mail campaign. I knew that Big Deal databases had so fundamentally altered the serial subscription landscape that cold-calling and begging would never work as a strategy to re-coup the revenue loss. That insight, gained in part by spending hours combing through subscription lists in order to cull print we could now get in electronic bundles, helped make the open access transition happen.

I also want to suggest that collaboration is material even when we are collaborating in the realm of ideas. In April 2014, a group of librarians began chatting on Twitter every other Tuesday night about critical perspectives in the field, first about pedagogy in libraries, and then about a much broader and more diverse set of professional topics: working with refugee populations in public libraries, conference codes of conduct, and critical cataloging strategies. Twitter's material infrastructure of servers and software enabled us to thread our discussions using the hashtag "#critlib." This loose affiliation of interested librarians who happened to be free at 9pm Eastern on Tuesdays with reasonably good In-

ternet connections and phones, tablets, and computers have produced more than just a conversation on Twitter: unconferences at ACRL 2015 and ALA Annual that same year, two volumes of critical writing co-edited by chat moderators Nicole Pagowsky and Kelly McElroy, and the Critical Librarianship and Pedagogy Symposium at the University of Arizona in February 2016. Collaboration enables both singular projects like *Radical Teacher* and the shifting of a discourse, like #critlib. In both cases, the capacity for big change relies on small actions, ordering coffee, organizing spreadsheets, saving documents with clearer file names. This is the invisible work of collaboration. It is never flashy, often invisible, and absolutely necessary.

One of the critiques the #critlib group has faced as it has grown is concern that only some voices are welcomed and highlighted. That working class perspectives, the voices of people of color, and the work of public librarians have no place in the #critlib discourse, excluded by a dominant white, academic, and often masculine voice that privileges Foucault over finding ways in for all kinds of voices. *Radical Teacher* faces a similar challenge. The editorial collective is comprised primarily of people who were there at the beginning. Bringing in new people who can shepherd the journal into its next years of online life is a

struggle; they often find, despite our invitations, that there is no way into the mix.

Collaborative projects are, I think, particularly susceptible to these critiques. Collaboration requires building an in-group, one that includes collaborators and not others, not for nefarious reasons, but just to get things up and running within the limits of a given context. Who these collaborators are is often decided at the start of a project—happy accidents, just people we know, what makes sense on the org chart—and collaborators caught up in the magic often don't take the time to stop and see who is on the outside looking in.

Sustainable collaborations that make room for different voices require the invisible work of people who know how to build doors and ladders and stairs instead of just walls and windows. This work is skilled labor too. Collaborative librarianship provides the means to build these infrastructural participation skills. Some of us learn them in activist communities or by doing political work; some of us learn them at our local food co-op or within block associations or community boards. However these engagement skills are developed, we need to bring them to more of our collaborative projects, so that we can find ways for to encourage inclusion and a multiplicity of voices.