Collaboration: not a thing, but a family of practice

We are treating collaboration as an emergence rather than a method or technology. This avoids any pre-conception of what inputs constitute collaborative practice, and any '*how to*' agenda. We seek to discover key factors affecting collaborative processes by looking through the eyes of those practicing what they recognise as collaborative practice. The overall question of our research is: *what conditions, capabilities and capacities influence the success of collaborative processes?* The definition of 'success' here is deliberately left unspecified. It is in the eye of the beholder. We have not brought a definition of success; we are seeing success through the eyes of participants and deriving our understanding of success by inference.

To treat collaboration as an emergence is to provoke the question, an emergence from what elements? And, what practices and conditions are most likely to enable and support collaboration, as recognised by participants?

We are not treating collaboration as if it is a consistent entity that can be studied as if it were stable. We are realistic about the challenge of comparing instances of what might be called collaboration, and of generalising from what we discover in particular instances.

To make a useful study of collaboration, we would either have to agree on a standard definition, or would need to find some elements that can be studied. To attempt a standard definition would inevitably be a reduction of the richness of collaboration. Practitioners and participants who have a reasonable claim to have experience of something called collaboration would, inevitably, find some of their experience excluded from any standardised definition of the term. However, by conceptualising collaboration as an emergence of contributing elements, we are able to consider how the elements are variously configured together in various examples recognisable as collaboration. This provides a basis for comparison and, perhaps, for generalising insights.

One theoretical framework for considering collaboration as an emergent configuration of contributing elements is that of Shove et al (e.g., Shove, Pantzar, & Watson, 2012) in relation to social practice. They conceptualise practice as 'emergent entity', and focus on the way in which practice is not able to be separated from acting in time and space, and that each act can be studied for its particular configuration of the three elements of materiality, competence and meaning.

In our research framework for the Our Land and Water collaborative capacity project we sought to learn about collaboration from experienced practitioners. By 'practitioners' we mean those participating in actively in direct acts of collaborative practice. We avoid a distinction between facilitators of collaboration and participants in collaboration. Our starting point was practitioner experience as a whole, that is, the emergent entity that can reasonably be called collaboration by those considered experts.

What we had access to was the reflective narratives and generalisations that practitioners share when stimulated by collegial dialogue with interviewers and peers. We needed a framework through which to listen to and learn from such material. We needed a way of defending that the narratives and reflections belong to a particular class of experience, and that that can be reasonably called 'collaboration'. And, we needed to find a way to examine the narrative and reflective material as evidence of 'collaborative capacity', that which makes the experience and practice of collaboration possible.

We initially identified three contributing elements to focus our listening and to systematise our learning: capabilities, capacities and conditions. We also considered capabilities, capacities and conditions as properties that might be found in three interlinked sites (system levels): the practitioner, associated organisations, and the prevailing socio-cultural-political context.

The three elements proposed by Shove et al, materiality, competence and meaning, usefully complement our initial framework. **Materiality** covers some aspects we had included in capacity, and helpfully includes technologies and physical conditions; **competence** covers both a knowledge, skills and attitudes nexus, and the human dimensions of our 'capacity' (e.g., availability and endurance); **meaning** adds an important consideration to our study by surfacing questions such as the potential importance of how various actors in a practice make sense of the activity, their involvement and their experience.

In order to better understand temporal and socio-political influences, we suggest adding a fourth category, **history** (features of the particular period of history, its politics, institutions and dynamics). The addition of history is an innovation in relation to social practice theory. It introduces factors that are matters of context, beyond the control of practitioners, such as politics, social attitudes, economic conditions, path dependence.

We, therefore, examine collaborative capacity as a family of practice, in which the comparability (family likeness) between examples is found in the pattern, or configurations of materiality, competence, meaning and history. Our enquiry is through the experience and reflective observation of practitioners, but we will work with practitioners and their insights to consider the role or contribution to practice of the system levels above (organisations and socio-cultural-political context) and below (community or stakeholder participants).

Thus, we have chosen to regard collaboration as an emergent entity and interrogate practitioner collaboration experience to 'map' the contribution of, and links between, materiality, competence, meaning and history. The result will be a model of collaboration that identifies nested attributes or variables. As Ostrom (2007) puts it in developing a similar model of nested attributes:

> "Many variables affect the patterns of interactions and outcomes observed in empirical studies" (p. 15181).

Ostrom's multilevel, nested framework to discuss diverse social-ecological systems (SES) offers us a template for developing a multilevel, nested framework to better understand key variables in relation to collaboration.

> "Understanding a complex whole requires knowledge about specific variables and how their component parts are related ... Thus, we must learn how to dissect and harness complexity, rather than eliminate it from such systems [(Axelrod & Cohen, 2000)]. This process is complicated, however, because entirely different frameworks, theories, and models are used by different disciplines to analyze their parts of the complex multilevel whole. A common, classificatory framework is needed to facilitate multidisciplinary efforts toward a better understanding of complex SESs (Ostrom, 2009, p. 420).

Our first-level core subsystems are our adaptation from social practice theory: materiality, competence, meaning and history. Each of these subsystems is then shown to consist of multiple "second-level variables" (Ostrom, 2009) derived from our listening to practitioners.

Table 1 turns each of the core subsystems into practical enquiry at two levels to show how we have applied the subsystem in making sense of practitioner experience. The two levels are the practitioner/participant and associated organisations (structures affecting the collaboration).

Table 1: Core subsystems and the associated enquiry of data

	Practitioner	Associated organisations
Materiality	What finances, time, technologies and physical capacities enable successful collaboration?	What resources (finances, infrastructure, technologies) from associated organisations enable successful collaboration?
Competency	What knowledge, skills, attitudes and human capacities are important in enabling successful collaboration?	What organisational knowledge, skills and attitudes are important in enabling successful collaboration?
Meaning	What attributions of meaning enable successful collaboration?	What organisational understandings enable successful collaboration?
History	What background, experiences, and socio-political settings enable successful collaboration?	What organisational background, experiences and socio-political settings enable successful collaboration?

Figure 1 is the beginning of a model of elements or variables important in designing, evaluating or comparing instances of collaborative
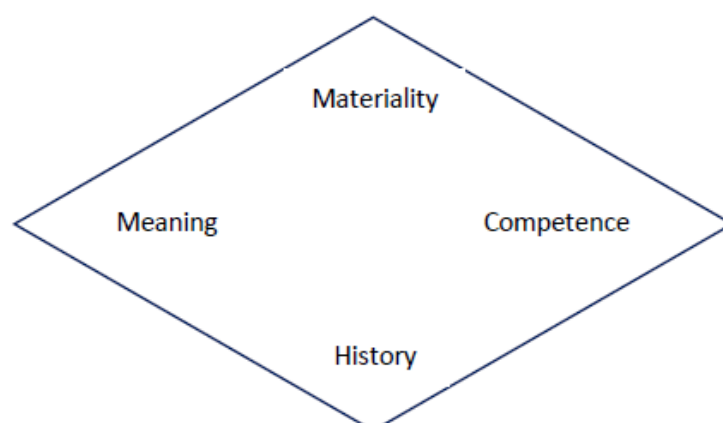

Figure 1: Core subsystems for collaborative practice – as a model

References:

Axelrod, R., & Cohen, M. D. (2000). *Harnessing Complexity: Organizational Implications of a Scientific Frontier*. New York: Basic Books.

Ostrom, E. (2007). A diagnostic approach for going beyond panaceas. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, 104*(39), 15181-15187.

Ostrom, E. (2009). A General Framework for Analyzing Sustainability of Social-Ecological Systems. *Science, 325*, 419-422.

Shove, E., Pantzar, M., & Watson, M. (2012). *The dynamics of social practice: Everyday life and how it changes*: Sage publications.

Graeme Nicholas
ESR, October 2018