

RULES FOR COLLABORATION: THE EFFECT ON THE COLLABORATIVE PROCESS OF CO-CREATING AN ACCOUNTABILITY AGREEMENT

Jacques de Wildt Pienaar

St. Andrew's College, Grahamstown, South Africa

Abstract

This project initiated an investigation into the effect of an accountability agreement on the development of key competencies for collaboration within a committee of students. The study came about when it became clear that effective collaboration and, indeed, the key competencies required by students to collaborate were not automatically forthcoming (as illustrated in Figure 1). The committee in question steered an environmental club, which had the task of designing and developing a Window Farm as its focus.

The need for this study was identified when levels of punctuality and commitment to tasks from some members were not conducive to meeting the goals of the committee. It was clear that other members were becoming frustrated. I was surprised by the lack of commitment and became interested in the dynamics at play, since I was sure most of the boys had a genuine interest in the affairs of the committee.

The germinal concept for this study was that an accountability document would serve as tool to build the identity of individuals and the group, while serving as a formal document which would create a rule oriented "safe space" for boys to express their ideas and interests in the environment.

The committee members contributed their personal and primary values for inclusion into the agreement and this formed the basis of the first draft of the accountability agreement. The agreement underwent several drafts as the need for clarification and additions arose. For example, there arose the need for a "disciplinary clause" to manage those who broke the agreement.

The key findings indicated the boys had a good understanding of what they expected; in other words, they intuitively knew which competencies were required for effective collaboration. However, they had conflicting ideas and definitions with regard to concepts such as "voluntary" and "commitment," and they found it difficult to express their expectations or

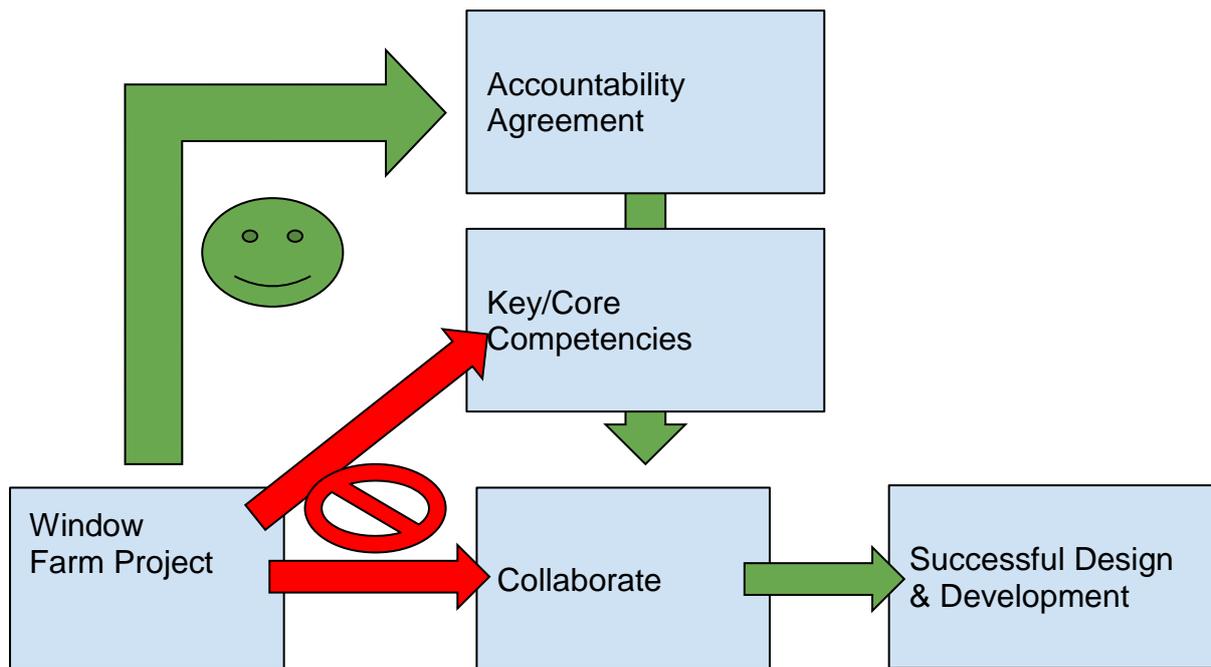


Figure 1: System flow suggested to generate successful outcomes.

offer remedial actions once agreed expectations were not met by their peers.

The boys experienced commitment as pre-defined and without time limit, and with two possible outcomes: meeting expectations or failure. Very little “reward” existed for fulfilling the required commitment in the first place. This might have been as the result of extensive exposure to aspirational communication only, along with little exposure to remedial conversations which dealt with failure. In the worst cases, it led to boys not being able to admit fault.

The key competencies which were developed because of the research intervention were: communication (organisational and personal); support of each other (safe space creation); and creating a working standard (which included expectations around “failure pathways”).

I believe these findings are significant as they can, at the very least, provide insight into why boys do not seem to commit and often have a fear of commitment. The findings might also caution us to take time to consider how we communicate our expectations to boys and how to restructure programs which require commitment to enable success. We also need to redefine how we reward commitment. Most importantly, I believe, the findings of this study should motivate us to talk to boys about failure and expectations around failure, so that they can manage failure constructively.

Introduction

One of St Andrew's College's educational pillars is the Environmental Education of boys. Thus, a student environmental committee exists which steers the environmental interests of boys at the school. The committee experiences different levels of commitment from its members, which negatively affects the level of collaboration within the committee. After various attempts to manage the motivation of boys in the committee it was decided to see how their shared values, presented in an accountability agreement, would affect their contribution and commitment. The following research question was therefore proposed: *How might creating an accountability agreement for an environmental committee enable boys to develop key competencies for collaboration?*

The action research process is not meant to focus on the generation of findings that can be generalised (Stringer, 2014). Instead it attempts to closely look at the case in hand in a way which respects and includes all individuals involved, but also fits the unique context, to find a workable solution. That was exactly what was required.

Some boys were dedicated committee members and were becoming frustrated with those that seemed to take it less seriously. These boys had a need to express their opinion, but they were unsure if they would be "safe," respected, or if their opinion mattered. They were reluctant to confront their peers. It was obvious that they had little to draw on to imagine what such expressions of frustration and interventions would look like.

Once an agreement document was suggested, the boys' lack of relevant experience made it very difficult to construct a workable accountability agreement from nothing. We thus often reviewed this document, via discussion and through questionnaires, as we encountered situations it did not address. This approach enabled us to make changes to the agreement and allowed it to evolve naturally. Since the situation had specific characteristics and required both a tailored, but a systematic evolutionary approach, action research was the most relevant research methodology to employ,

Simply becoming involved in the environmental club indicates that boys care about and identify with the environment, but most of them do not communicate this openly and experience a conflict of sort within themselves. I hypothesised that the environmental club, which I considered a community of practice, could be strengthened by producing an accountability agreement that would create strict expectations of boys and through that, create a convenient "safe space," which could be used to explain compliance to peers on what

would otherwise be “counter-cultural” values they held dear. This hypothesis was supported by the theories and approaches described in the literature review that follows.

Literature Review

The natural place to start looking for information regarding the behaviour of boys was to look at drivers of motivation. Maslow’s (Scancapture, 2017) hierarchy of needs (Figure 2) gives us initial insight into why boys might be motivated to participate in a collaborative project, beyond simply the need to “survive.”



Figure 2: Maslow's hierarchy applied to employee engagement. Retrieved from <http://www.scancapture.co.uk/how-maslows-hierarchy-of-needs-influences-employee-engagement/>

Boys that tend to participate because it is a requirement or because they will be punished if they do not “follow the rules,” operate at the survival/security level of Maslow’s hierarchy. Since the decision to serve on the committee is voluntary, boys do not experience a threat to their “survival” and neither would we want them to participate only because of such a feeling. Punishing them for their lack of commitment was thus not an option, since it would be counter-productive. Ironically, without this “threat,” behaviour, such as attendance, became unpredictable and members of the committee became unreliable.

The visionary effect of the accountability agreement was to unite all boys through their participation in producing the agreement. It was anticipated that the process would respect the individual's opinion and, in turn, create a feeling of importance and belonging by creating an identity through the production of a shared tool or artefact.

Etienne Wenger (2004), shares Maslow's ideas and has developed his own, more detailed, theory called communities of practice, or CoP, which I summarised in a diagram (Figure 3). Wenger proposes that the need to belong is the key driver for motivating our boys to "align" their behaviour to that of the group. For individual boys, this can happen through meaning-making, creation of new practices, sharing expertise, and through leadership

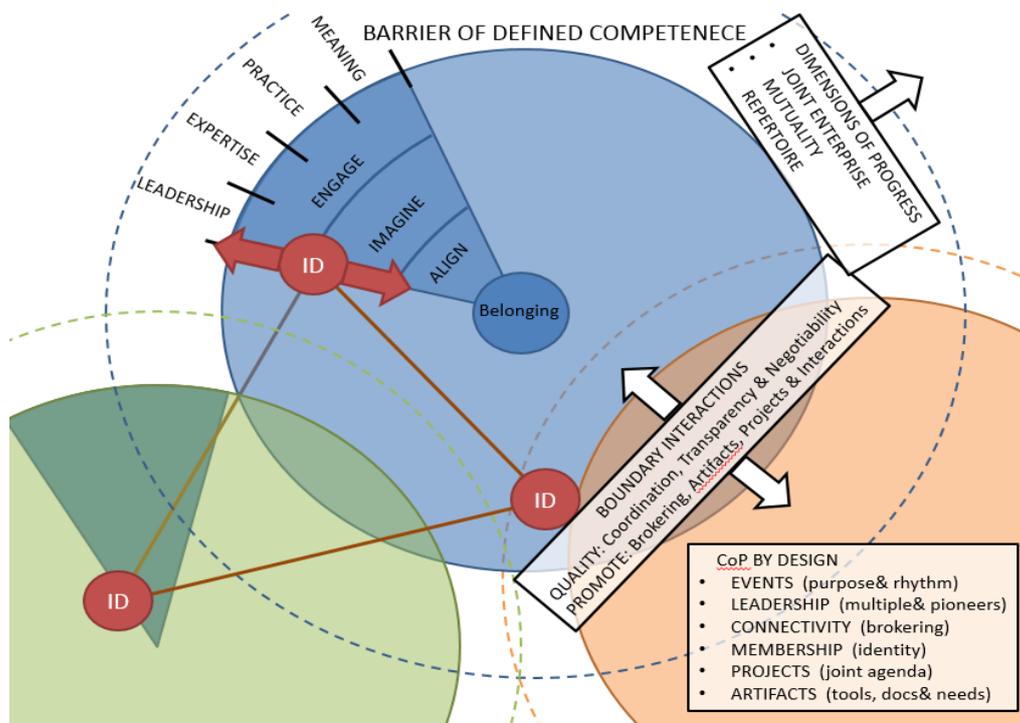


Figure 3: Communities of practice, essential components, characteristics for design and interactions

Adolescents, and especially adolescent boys, have a strong need to belong, but what they align to will be often driven by popular opinion and/or by their peers (the external locus of control). A boy's identity formation is therefore often controlled by peers and not necessarily by the self (the internal locus of control), especially in a boarding school environment like St Andrew's College. It was, therefore, essential to allow boys to share their personal beliefs regarding the environmental committee and their private expectations of the committee members during collaborative tasks, before making such beliefs public. This empowered

them to share; without which, education simply becomes indoctrination (Schreiner & Sjoberg, 2005).

St Andrew's College's environmental club is essentially a CoP by design. It creates a space in which boys can explore their identities as environmentalists and, through meetings, events and projects, build a shared repertoire (Wenger, 2004). Boys identify themselves as members of the club, but they have not yet developed a shared identity. Again, the aim of this research was to see if an accountability agreement could act as a tool which would respect and develop the individual's identity and its formation, and foster a feeling of belonging, which in turn would motivate members to participate productively by developing key competencies during collaborative tasks.

While teaching in the UK, I was exposed to the ROSE (Relevance of Science Education) Report (University of Leeds, 2017), which looked at the attitudes of secondary school children (15-16 year olds) towards science and technology. Globally, adolescents from forty countries participated in a survey, which was then summarised and presented as a report.

Sjoberg & Schreiner (2005) analysed and commented on the report and found the following relevant trends.

- All students (boys and girls) from around the world highly value science and technology, and the role it plays in modern society.
- Despite this, most often, only students from developing countries (boys outnumbering girls) want to pursue a career in science and technology.
- The exceptions are in the fields of medicine, environmental sciences and biology, in which students (girls outnumbering boys) from developed countries still have an interest.

Sjoberg and Schreiner try to explain these trends in a number of ways. Since the countries in the developing world are still in the manufacturing and building stage of their development, scientist and engineers are regarded as important and their roles in the developing world is important. Adolescents respond to this inherent valuing of scientists and engineers by seeking careers in these areas, as they themselves seek to be valued by society, to belong, and to be deemed important.

On the other hand, note Sjoberg and Schreiner (2005), developed countries do not consider scientists and engineers to be as valuable in a post-manufacturing context, as the focus is on needs higher up on Maslow's hierarchy. Therefore, these careers do not feature as strongly

for adolescents. Even though they recognise the importance of scientists and engineers they do not identify with them, seeing them instead as the “experts” that should get on with “what they do.” As a worst-case scenario, scientists often only get “air time” when disasters, such as spills, occur, and when unethical practices are unearthed, such as in the VW scandal. Sjoberg and Schreiner further believe that adolescents in developing countries are no longer preoccupied by survival and security and actively seek lives of importance and self-actualisation. They seek these in the medicinal fields and more recently in the environmental fields as they truly believe these are global issues in which they have a role to play. Thus, to “move” boys in a developed country to the level of “importance” on Maslow’s hierarchy posed a real challenge (South Africa is considered developing, but the living standards of the boys in my club are certainly that of a developed country, thus their views and experiences are assumed to be more closely related to a developed country’s).

In my everyday dealings with boys and in reading their material, such as Life Science essays and research projects, I’m convinced (and concerned) that boys identify with the environment, but need a “safe space” to reveal this part of their identity. My concern is, that where action is often required by boys e.g. amongst peers, they do not consider these “spaces” safe, therefore always creating safe spaces for boys, will result in boys that can only act in safe spaces and not in the more challenging and less “safe” arenas of “real life”.

Ironically, boys’ interest in the natural environment (usually observed in their wonder of animals as pre-adolescents), is often better explored on electronic devices because parents are more concerned over their children’s safety (Hart, 2008) while participating in acceptable “male” activities like hunting and fishing, instead of caring for the environment. Thus, it is clear that it remains a challenge to aid boys in expressing their love and care for natural systems and organisms.

I believe a boy’s identity is often in conflict with their chosen identity (peer group identity) due to the lack of courage to act alone or first. It is also interesting to note that boys will most often use avoidance strategies to minimise conflict or follow a very specific “game or rule-based” principle to manage conflict. A basic example is the “shotgun” rule, which allows the first responder to lay claim to something by shouting “shotgun” first. Boys are more likely to refer and communicate their conflicts with rule oriented, legal vocabulary indicating their instinctual trust and respect for rules and agreements. To this end, I felt that setting up an accountability agreement with boys would encourage and enable group identity, provide common beliefs, opinions and behaviours (Gibbs, 1994), while setting clear boundaries,

which boys prefer and experience as “safe.”

Research Context

St Andrew’s College (SAC) is a 500-strong independent boys’ boarding school. SAC works in collaboration with the Diocesan School for Girls. The academic functioning of the school is similar to any co-ed school; however, the schools have separate boarding houses supported by their own leadership and pastoral teams.

SAC’s motto, *Nec Aspera Terrent*—difficulties do not dismay us—and the founder’s wish for boys to be “profitable members of church and state” are often drawn on to shape the school’s focus. The school is currently developing a leadership award to motivate boys to develop leadership competencies.

My research participants were 18 members of the voluntary SAC environmental club committee. The club comprised one elected portfolio prefect, six house representatives and 11 other boys from mixed grades who joined on a voluntary basis.

As a relatively small school with a lot on offer and high expectations of our boys, the average SAC boy is often over-committed. When a boy “drops the ball,” traditional punishments such as detentions are not effective, since it often results in withdrawal of his voluntary support rather than offering support to mold behaviour. Hence, the environmental committee was a suitable context for investigating whether the process of writing an accountability agreement with the members of my committee would be more effective at communicating expectations while giving guidance in situations where boys might fall short.

The boys were informed of my research and its intent, and were given consent forms, which they signed. The consent forms reassured that the sharing of, and anonymity in, the final report would be achieved.

The Action

The environmental club’s focus in the final term of 2016 was to produce and develop a prototype of a window farm. This is essentially a vertical planter, hung from a structure in front of a window (Figure 4). Basic design decisions included:

- Which plants would be suitable? To what purpose? Edible or decorative?
- In which medium would they grow?
- In which container would they be housed?
- How and on what would they be hung?

- How would watering be maintained/automated and powered/
- Would artificial light be introduced and how would it be powered/

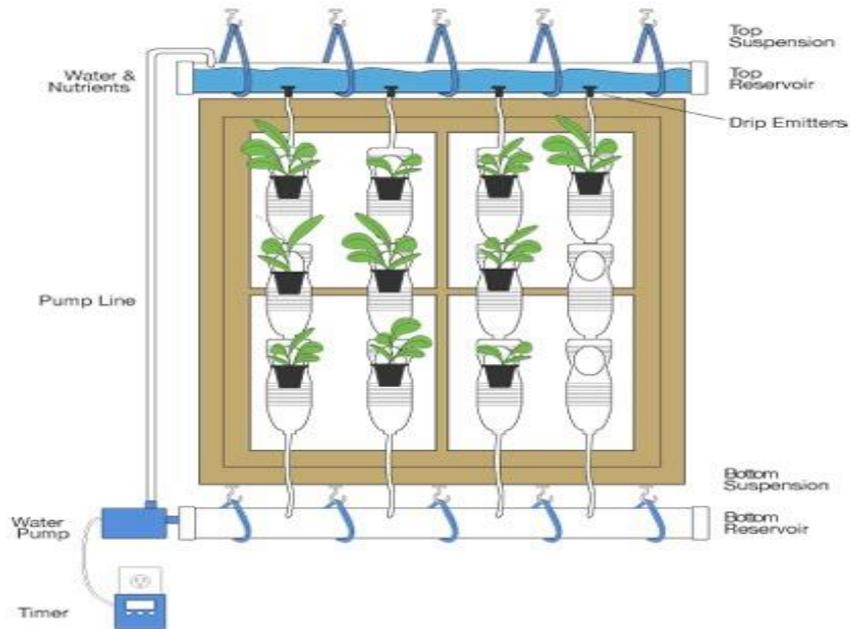


Figure 4: Basic window farm design. Retrieved from http://4.bp.blogspot.com/_NgqJFJRFPoS/S8unMQ9ttNI/AAAAAAAAAF94/v7c0MAPOEiA/s1600/horta_na_janela.jpg

The design decisions for the window farm were split up amongst individuals and pairs within the committee, and they were expected to research and consider appropriate options within their design aspect. At the same time, they were attempting to keep cost and energy usage to a minimum, and maximising the visual appeal. Boys also had to calculate quantities and source resources from their local area, which proved to be the most difficult aspect for them. This was also where effort, communication and reliability of some members started to falter. Over a 4-month period, from mid-July 2016 (end of Term Two) until mid-November 2016 (end of year), the accountability agreement was drafted and redrafted several times. The initial draft included the key competencies boys felt necessary for effective collaboration. The document was scrutinised on a weekly basis during committee meetings against the behaviours it was designed to steer and correct. Amendments were made to the document as the need arose, usually when the accountability agreement could not steer or aid in the decision making of a particular situation. The final draft was completed with the inclusion of a “corrective action” expectation, or “failure pathway” description section, being the main addition to the original draft.

Data Collection

“Initial phases of exploration are designed not to gather concrete evidence or objective data but to reveal the reality that makes up people’s day to day experience” (Stringer, 2014, p. 102).

If collaboration is considered a 21st century skill, what drives that process? What motivates students to collaborate? What do students think collaboration means and are there benefits to it? Are there any tools to facilitate effective collaboration, especially to expose students to the potential benefits and indeed pitfalls of the collaborative process? These questions served as a guide during acquisition of data from the boys.

Interviews should be characterized as informal conversations, according to Stringer (2014), and my initial phase of data collection took this approach. Since the contact time with my club was over lunchtime, with catering provided, the atmosphere was relaxed and boys “trickled” in at the start of their lunch hour. This often allowed for one-on-one informal discussions about our window farm project, but also allowed time before the formal meeting to discuss aspects of their and other’s behaviour that spoke to the accountability agreement.

Since the environmental club is a voluntary club and boys often did not live up to the expectations created, despite showing interest, I became suspicious of their definition of “voluntary, commitment and collaboration.” I also had informal discussions about this with colleagues who run other voluntary activities, such as community service-based programs.

Most of my data collection was done as part of our meetings, in the form of formal documents, such as attendance and minutes of the meeting. Also, participant observation was undertaken once a task had been set. The richest data, however, were derived from semi-structured questionnaires that included grand tour, typical, and specific questions.

Data collection thus took several forms:

- Documents, such as attendance records and formal minutes of meetings.
- Informal conversations, recorded in retrospect by researcher, not in original text
- Weekly meeting which took form of a focus group with grand tour, typical, and specific questions. Specific question and their responses were recorded in original context.
- Participant observation, including taking photographs
- Questionnaires with open-ended questions, which were intended to determine influence of the “draft” agreement on personal and group behaviour.

In the process of producing the accountability agreement, I incorporated the boys' input, which allowed me to generate an aggregate version of their views, values and expectations. I immediately shared it with them as a collaborative descriptive account. At the same time, it satisfied the criteria of an interim report, since participants had the ability and opportunity to scrutinise my version of their "truth."

Data Analysis

By asking the participants to identify the key elements they felt should be included in the accountability agreement, they effectively provided the key themes that would also emerge from the data; especially since many of them suggested the same elements in this process. Member checking was achieved by asking the boys to read the constructed agreement and indicate if it matched their views, values and expectations as interpreted from their contributions. If not, a discussion was had on what needed altering to make it representative of their views.

My interpretive reading of the data also probed for any themes, which have not been identified by the participants themselves during the process. The themes were then used in an abductive reading as a coding exercise to establish relationships and their relative strength.

Discussion of Results

When discussions were had with the boys regarding the challenges the committee faced, it became clear that the boys had varying and often conflicting definitions of, and attitudes to, concepts such as "voluntary," "commitment," and "collaboration."

After collating and analysing all qualitative data, the following themes emerged:

- Expectation of self and others during collaborative work
- The experience of collaborative commitment
- The difficulty of corrective action or "failure pathways"

Expectation (of Self) and Others During Collaborative Work

Most boys agreed with one of their peers when he said, "A legit excuse, should be fine." What he meant was that if one had to be somewhere else, as opposed to simply playing truant, one's absence should be accepted regardless of any prior agreement and does not necessarily need to be communicated in advance, or at all, to stand as a reasonable excuse.

The majority of boys felt that the voluntary nature of the club and its associated events were just that, voluntary, and up until the last minute one "can change [one's] mind," as one boy

expressed. Very few boys felt that volunteering transcribed to a commitment of any kind, since it was voluntary to start with and remained as such.

After discussing the need for improved efficiency with the boys, they agreed to work towards creating an agreement policy. They were each asked to pick two words or concepts that should be included in such an agreement. They were also prompted to think of what they would expect of themselves and/or others while participating in a collaborative task or event. In total, 14 boys contributed to the following list, which is in order of most frequently mentioned:

- 1) Equal effort/contribution (6)
- 2) Consider other's ideas (6)
- 3) Team effort & collaboration (4)
- 4) Attendance & punctuality (3)
- 5) Common standards (2)
- 6) Adaptable (1)
- 7) Fun (1)
- 8) Communication (1)



Figure 5: An example of core competencies required for effective collaboration

Retrieved from <http://www.best-job-interview.com/images/CoreCompetenciessmall.jpg>

When you compared their responses above to a sample of expected responses (Figure 5) it immediately became obvious that they had a good sense of what was required to work well together. Equally obvious, was that they were ambitious and positive about what should be included in the document. It therefore reads more like an aspirational vision.

The obvious omission, perhaps only noted in retrospect, was that there was little mention of how to respond and guide behaviour when someone did not meet expectations (breach), or when the group were not physically meeting (communication). I believe this to be the result of the aspiration discourse boys are often exposed to, while at the same time their lack of experience and/or exposure to discourses discussing, debating, and solving situations where failure has been part of the process.

The immediate and obvious effect the accountability agreement had was a sudden and continued increase in attendance, possibly because it was the most outward expression of commitment to a group; to “simply pitch up” as one boy put it. Some boys were genuinely surprised at the influence of the agreement: “I thought it would be fairly ineffective, but am surprised by its subsequent positive impact on the group.” My impression is that this boy was simply describing the improvement in attendance, since according to my researcher observations notes and student questionnaires, equal effort, consideration and collaboration, within the group did not significantly change.

Eventually, the honeymoon phase of increased attendance dropped off and it became obvious that the agreement in its current format did not increase key competencies for collaboration significantly. A work standard was set, however, and communication did improve and support of each other was more evident, but mostly from those boys who were already highly motivated.

When all the boys, both those attending regularly and those who started to miss meetings again, were then asked to contribute their feelings towards the “accountability agreement” itself, this is what emerged:

The Experience of Collaborative Commitment

- 1) “it clarified our commitment” (4)
- 2) “it’s good” (3)
- 3) “it motivates us” (3)
- 4) “it increases my commitment” (2)
- 5) “it makes me attend” (2)
- 6) “lack of details regarding project” (1)

From the contributions, it was not obvious why the collaboration stayed at the same level and the punctuality started to drop off again. It was then decided to ask only boys who missed meetings and/or who were the least involved, which phrase described them most, given the

list of previous private responses above. All but one chose “lack of details regarding the project,” and, when probed even further, it emerged that the lack of details about time and duration gave commitment an “eternal” feeling. The remaining boy admitted in conversation that he didn’t “really think about letting others down when [he did] not attend; they will get on without me. Isn’t that the point of having groups?”

It is clear that having an accountability agreement, which highlights and describes the commitment members have to others, is not good enough. Boys need to know what they are committing to, and for how long, in order to develop competencies and values that support commitment. As a school, we need to consider what effect expecting indefinite commitment and offering little reward has on the uptake of tasks and activities that require commitment.

The Difficulty of “Corrective” Action

Boys were finally challenged to amend the agreement with a clause which described the consequences of a breach of agreement. Through a similar process as described above, they contributed:

- 1) Warning system leading to detention (8)
- 2) “make up, reinvest time” (6)
- 3) pro-active in corrective action (3)
- 4) Apologise (2)
- 5) Given unwanted responsibility (1)
- 6) Banned (1)
- 7) Communicate in advance (1)

What was obvious from the boy’s contributions was that they showed very little original thought in how they could possibly correct or manage others’ and their own breach of agreement. Initially boys simply did not contribute any ideas. To find any contribution beyond a detention style system was by far the most difficult aspect of my research to get responses on. This should not have surprised me since it is what the boys have most exposure to. With embarrassment, I admit that it took a boy, who frustratingly responded, “It’s all we know,” for me to realise the potential value of this research. We need to expose boys to situations and experiences of dealing with failure to make it natural and help them develop their ideas of how to deal with it constructively.

Conclusion

The boys could easily describe what was expected of them during collaboration, or in general, but only in aspirational terms, possibly as a result of all the aspirational discourse they are exposed to as a school boy. This is achieved through absorbing, visions, missions, rules and regulations and through socialisation as part of their school career.

The boys tried to avoid commitment, since their experiences of commitment was built on “unclear” expectations and usually resulted in failure due to the “indefinite” nature of commitment which is presented to them. Commitment also created unwanted conflict when the meaning of it differed among peers and other stakeholders and/or when they or others needed to be held to their commitments.

We can be more explicit in discussing what volunteering entails and how it links to commitment and collaboration. We should also include and expose boys to as many appropriate situations where failure is admitted, discussed, and has added value to learning, instead of settling everything behind closed doors.

We should consider reducing or exposing boys to activities with reduced “commitment cycles,” to allow boys to practice commitment without fear of breaking the aspirational “code of conduct,” or “accountability agreement,” they have signed up to.

I would suggest the following as possibilities to explore in the future:

- What effect does establishing the duration of a project have on levels of commitment during collaborative tasks?
- How can we re-structure accountability agreements to serve as vehicles for behaviour change rather than use them as punitive documents?

Reflection statement

The action research process has taught me that an evidence based process can lead to valuable insights in relatively short time periods to effect real change. I had explicit experiences regarding the “rules” I was creating through the “accountability agreement” I was constructing with my boys. It was clear that the practical regulations of an agreement have the potential to increase productivity, but it simply piled up more expectations on these boys.

Expectations communicated in the absence of guidelines to what happens when these

expectations are not met creates anxiety. Thus, situations that require responsibility and commitment are avoided or failure is denied and, if neither is possible, guilt is generated.

Personally, I have experienced something similar and, as an educated adult with a psychology degree, I struggle with some of this guilt. How much more anxious must boys feel, therefore, in a context where failure is not discussed often and pathways from it seldom exist.

Finally, I would like to thank the Headmaster, Mr Alan Thompson, my mentor, Mr Simon Holderness, and St Andrew's College for providing both the time and funds for me to experience this extraordinary action research journey, travelling to new places and meeting international colleagues, exposing me to new ways of thinking, doing and being.

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