Creative Collaboration – Unpacking Collaboration Theory

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'Collaboration' is everywhere – the word is constantly used across sectors, contexts, arts, sciences, and business. Collaboration studied in an academic context has attracted research from many disciplines attempting to explore what collaboration means and how it can operate (Wood and Gray). Each study is rooted to one particular theoretical context however which can cause some problems when trying to develop a unified theory suggesting the need maybe for more cross disciplinary (ie collaborative!) – approaches to the issue of collaboration.

In order to understand collaboration as applied to creative industries one can see two broad approaches emerge. The first is to examine collaboration theory in an artistic sense; the second to take more of management angle to look at collaborative activity within the creative sector. The former is particular in approach and usually focused ultimately on output – so it may be about how to use spaces, environments or networks to create collaborative artistic works, whether a curated exhibition, a performance or a single piece that involves many artistic hands and where the creativity has become something new and different (ie beyond the works of the individual involved). This approach can lead to interesting ways to identify the creative moment where the individual inputs become a new, synthesised output; it is more about the alchemy of collaboration.

However, my interest focuses more on the second type of approach to creative collaboration, exploring the way industries create and facilitate collaboration. Exploration of the research in this area tends to follow two strands: one is to examine studies looking specifically at the way the creative industries operate where collaboration is part of the ecosystem (just as random examples: Starkey et al., and Hesmondhalgh who study the industry from within); the other is to examine collaborative theory that takes a general socio-economic standpoint but happens to use case studies from creative industries (Grabher for instance who comes to creative industries from without). This second approach serves to look at the industry from the outside and also more obviously compares the creative sector to other industries; in this way it can yield quite rich reflections on the nature of the creative industries; so that Grabher in his comparison of IT firms and advertising companies explores the different ecologies that emerge from collaborative activity in each – which show how collaboration is adapted to an industry that looks for iterative and evolutionary effects (IT) compared with an industry that uses collaboration to instil originality (advertising).

So in looking at the wide range of collaboration articles out there that have relevance to creative industries – from across disciplines and across approaches, they can be divided into various themes.

The starting point are those researchers that attempt to reach a definition for collaborative theory. Easier said than done especially as ultimately each collaboration is different (in many ways one of the defining characteristics). This leads to a combination of different disciplines attempting to identify the characteristics of a collaboration. A particular issue is the need to distinguish them from joint ventures or alliances. This leads to some more forensic approaches to differentiate, often quite subtly, what makes a collaboration not a joint venture; attempts are somewhat distorted by the fact there are no firm definitions to the alternative mechanisms across different disciplines and while some are very specific others use the words indistinguishably – which ultimately ends up unhelpful. Often these articles remain within their own disciplinary frameworks to look for definitions (Eg an alliance in corporate business is a particular thing that may be different from the way a public sector study defines alliance). But broadly, across all disciplines, definitions are most usually based on:

1)   The way the collaborations are formed

2)   People involved in the collaboration

3)   The way they are structured (eg layers of ownership and responsibility)

4)   Patterns of behaviour

5)   The way information is shared/managed

6)   The outputs expected.

These themes can be useful when examining collaborations in order to assess their application and effectiveness across any sector or industry; they can also help describe differences in the way some collaborations operate compared to others ie how do collaborations operate in a creative sector?

When looking more closely at various theoretical frameworks for collaboration explored in academic journal articles the following approaches seem to summarise the range of disciplinary approaches available:

1) There is a strong public sector research base on themes of collaboration, due to formal procedures of public private partnerships – these often take very specific approaches and are often particularly focused on mechanisms for assessing value and effectiveness, given the public sector remit.

2) There is also a strand of studies in intellectual collaboration around theory development in academic thinking both scientific and arts/ socioeconomics with commentary from authors like Moreland and Levine. There is a sub-theme here exploring how academics work when producing research outputs: indeed there is quite a lively discourse in examining journal submissions and numbers of writers involved as it charts a narrative around changing scientific, arts/humanities and social science research.

3) For artistic outputs, apart from those that describe different collaborations between artists, there is also a discourse on the way individuals can benefit from collaboration (Farrell) which provides an interesting take on collaboration that inspires individual output (eg authors and painters who are still individual but can be significantly influenced by a collaborative circle). Here the study tends to more about social context.

4) Sharing and collaborating in a digital age, where tools for sharing are low cost and easily accessible, and collaborators can be identified and reached with no major barriers is another strong theme in the study of collaboration. There is a continuous discourse by people like Sennett, Gauntlett and Leadbeater about collaboration – whether at a creativity, DIY level (Gauntlett), at a collective intelligence, mass collaboration style (like Leadbeater) or at a more macro socio-economic level (like Rifkin).

5) The strongest strand is business and organizational behaviour angle. While there is a sub-theme that encompasses aspects of effective group working, negotiating problems, togetherness and empathy, collaboration theory here more widely looks at the way business can develop through collaboration, through networks and collaborative behaviour, to organize themselves and to learn and create. There is a particular angle on the behaviour of collaborations that focuses on the network theory and many articles explore the way networks work in the formation and operation of collaborations (Uzzi, Granovetter etc. as examples). Categorisation of different sorts of collaborative activity or strategic partnerships reflect wider industrial change: some collaborations can help companies can grow globally, or, perhaps more significantly, compete effectively where new entrants are constantly impacting on traditional places (Kaats and Opheij). Goals then may be less about a specific output as about learning so companies can develop, as an example, expertise to anticipate audiences which are changing rapidly and continuously. Collaboration here moves into innovation theory as new ideas are tested and tried out, ideas that may not always work. The wider story here is that collaboration is a way forward for businesses and encourages competitiveness in a new networked industrial age (Castells).

This last point resonates with parts of the creative industries sector that are competing with new technology entrants and need to cross the traditional boundaries of their own sector. The principle of collaboration both through project-based working and portfolio career development runs deep in the creative industries. In that sense the industry is ahead of the curve. But when applying business approaches to the creative sector some problems can emerge.

Collaboration happens continually in the creative industry but it is often around the project in hand, with defined outcomes. A musical (c.f. Uzzi) needs a variety of creative partners and an element of spontaneity and improvisation helps ensure originality, while balanced with expected, well established ways of working to ensure effectiveness. But that limits the way these creative sectors respond to new challenges and innovate. In many ways innovation rests in a traditional output (a musical, a film, a book); some of these may flop so the industry understands failure and manages for a very specific sort of risk. But the innovation in the platform (one might say) does not necessarily occur along these lines; this is looking at innovation to deliver something new, not just a new version of something using a traditional form. Here risk is a less manageable as the outcome is less clearly defined.

So taking the book industry, it has been exceptionally creative for centuries – but broadly within well defined boundaries and to some extent in a silo with its own set of creative participants. What the industry now faces is change from without: the way a consumer behaves is changing extremely rapidly; and an emerging digital environment on one hand allows incredible creativity but on the other opens doors to other players to innovate. So collaboration needs to alter – become more about learning and experimenting. Structurally the industry needs to examine and test the traditional boundaries and move across them to explore and experiment. This changes the mind-set of what comes out of innovation for creative sectors.

In this way the study of the motivation, formation and operation of collaborations is of interest in a sector that is changing as it recognizes the growing importance of this sort of innovation alongside its traditional creative practices. This also opens up an additional question to explore: how does the network encourage not just collaboration but also creativity? Structurally facilitating different sorts of collaboration requires organizational change as well: industries used to operating in particular ways need to take their strong collaborative characteristics and expertise and apply them in new ways to strengthen and renew in a digital world.

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