Empowered Empathetic Encounters: Building International Collaborations through researching writing in the context of South African Higher Education and Beyond

Reporting on lessons learned from a research project involving partners from South Africa, Ireland and the United States, we propose the idea of 'Empowered Empathetic Encounters' as a foundation and maintenance factor for building successful, sustainable international inter-institutional collaborations. Such collaborations are an increasingly prominent feature of contemporary higher education for a variety of reasons, including financial incentives, prestige, increased course offerings, additional research opportunities, and national and inter-governmental policy (De Jong 1996; Morris 1997; Purcell and Leppien 1998; Johnston 1997; Austin and Baldwin 1991; Flora and Hirt 2010; Eckel and Hartley 2008). In southern Africa, international partnerships are recognized as important sources of 'revitalization' of the higher education sector (SARUA 2012). As long as these relationships take into account the needs and interests of individual institutions, collaborations are viewed positively and seen as a way to achieve both institutional goals and regional growth. Whether people or institutions choose to collaborate is not the concern of this article. We are interested in how successful international inter-institutional collaboration can be supported, especially in the context of South African higher education and North/South partnerships in higher education, generally.

Our research method and contribution to the literature in this regard is a combination of personal and collective experiences and the analysis of those experiences in the context of the existing literature. In this way, we wish to engage in a process of "thinking the cultural through the self" (Probyn 1993) and draw on Couldry (2000), Probyn (1993), Blake and Masschelein (2003), and Mann (2008) who

1

describes what we are trying to do as 'thinking theory *through*' one's own experience (Mann 2008, 10 - emphasis in original). In examining our experiences and reflections on what we believe has mattered most in our collaboration, we suggest an approach that we call 'Empowered Empathetic Encounters.' By this we mean the supported pivotal occasions where one meets with colleagues with whom one wishes to collaborate in face-to-face settings to try to understand, in a deep and meaningful way, the concerns of colleagues and what it means to live and work in each other's contexts. We suggest that engaged encounters of this nature can provide the bedrock for successful, long-term collaboration.

Starting point: our concerns, lives and work

We first met in 2011 at the Elon Research Seminar (ERS) hosted by Elon University in Elon, North Carolina. This seminar brought together 40 – 50 researchers to create projects around the study of writing and transfer. Seminar participants were selected through a highly competitive process. Once selected, smaller groups formed around specific interests. Our group had a shared interest in better understanding and supporting the transition from high school to college level writing. All seminar participants met and worked on the secluded campus of Elon University, living, eating, and socializing in the dorms for a week each summer over a three-year period.

The thousands of miles between our institutions presented a geographic analogy to the social and institutional distances between our individual contexts and experiences. Our three institutions – the University of Johannesburg (UJ) in South Africa; George Washington University in the United States; and the National University of Ireland (NUI) Maynooth in Ireland – are very different in scope, scale, resources, staff, student numbers and stakeholder demands. The University of Johannesburg is a comprehensive urban institution located in the sprawling city of

Johannesburg, South Africa, established in January, 2005 when three formerly segregated institutions were merged into one (Brink 2010). Student enrolment in 2012 was 48 623. In contrast, George Washington University is a private university, located blocks from the White House in the American capital. Established in 1824, it enrols approximately 15 000 graduate and 10 000 undergraduate students. Undergraduate tuition with room and board currently costs more than $50 000 annually. The National University of Ireland, Maynooth, traces its origins directly to the foundation in 1795 of St. Patrick's College, Maynooth, and is Ireland's second oldest university. Maynooth was established under the Irish 1997 Universities Act as an autonomous member of the federal structure known as the National University of Ireland. Today the University has more than 8 800 students.

All of us had worked on international collaborations prior to our meeting at Elon. However, this particular encounter was unique in several ways, including the supported nature of it, the inductive and consolidating impact of multiple, week-long face-to-face encounters, the North/South element, and the degree to which our goals were similar, as it was with our desire to truly understand each other's mutual contexts. We believe these factors contributed to the success of our time in Elon as a foundation for subsequent collaboration, and we unpack that experience here through the idea of empowered empathetic encounters. We suggest that this approach could be applicable across many contexts, but that as a foundation for partnership it may be especially important, not only for the particular context of South Africa, but also for any international partnership attempting to address histories of asymmetrical power relations.

Collaboration in higher education globally, nationally, and institutionally

Collaboration is common in higher education and the need for partnership is continuing to gain ground in the sector, internationally. Stein and Short point out, with reference to Anderson (1996), that "collaboration in higher education among professors is not a new phenomenon" (Stein and Short 2001, 419), noting with generous references to the literature that collaboration can be motivational, achieve results superior to individual efforts, add variety, bring different approaches to the process, and enhance the likelihood of gaining external funding (De Jong 1996; Morris 1997; Purcell and Leppien 1998; Johnston 1997; Austin and Baldwin 1991). While Flora and Hirt (2010) report that "collaboration, or working across traditional boundaries defined by program, department, or university, is a well-documented organizational dynamic in higher education" (582). Eckel and Hartley (2008) concur, adding that "colleges and universities have a long history of collaborating" (615) and that this sharing can be around "exchange agreements, shared resources, coordinated curricula … athletic conferences, and joint research" (615).

The role of partnerships in fostering multicultural peace and understanding has also been promoted by the United Nations and the European Commission. The World Conference on Higher Education, held by UNESCO in 1998, focused on the development of partnerships as a key issue (along with e-learning) in 1998 and 2009 *communiques* (UNESCO 1998; 2009). In July 2013 the European Commission (*European Higher Education in the World*) recommended that partnerships and capacity building be included as part of an institution's internationalization strategy (European Commission 2013, 9).

In some of our own contexts, multi-institutional collaboration is also a common policy goal. In Ireland, for example, at least since 2001, a great deal of the

government funding available to support staff in terms of continuing professional development, research, and teaching and learning has stipulated that collaboration would be either desirable or essential. This continues to be the model and the mantra for the Irish *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030,* which notes in its summary of recommendations that "a framework should be developed to facilitate system-wide collaboration between diverse institutions … where collaboration between autonomous institutions within a region will be promoted in order to improve responsiveness to local economic and social needs; encourage progression pathways for students; and facilitate academic interchange and exchange of ideas" (Department of Education and Skills 2011, 23). This approach mirrors many European calls for funding where one of the eligibility factors is the inclusion of a number of different member states.

Partnerships, South African higher education, and writing

Higher education in South Africa has a strong tradition of using partnerships to overcome challenges and achieve goals; for example, partnerships between schools and universities to support the continuing education of teachers and to create more inclusive learning environments (Hall 2002; Maistry 2008); industry–university and regional partnerships to enhance the training of engineers and other technical experts needed for a developing economy (Dlamini 2001; Ilemobade and Ballim 2005); regional and national partnerships to maximize access by pooling resources (Strydom and Hay 2001); international partnerships to improve environmental education (le Grange 2000); and university–government–international donor partnerships to build local capacity and provide sources of funding (Mwaniki 2010).

One critical aspect neglected in this long and innovative history of using partnerships to overcome challenges and achieve goals is the use of partnerships for improving writing and writing pedagogy as a core feature of reform efforts in South Africa. In the post-apartheid era, South African higher education has sought to fundamentally transform itself into a system that serves the needs of all people with a strong social justice agenda, seeking to be an agent of change and hope for the entire nation and the world. In recent years, two platforms based on particular philosophies and scholarship have emerged as central to ongoing efforts to transform South African higher education: a 'pedagogy of hope' in the tradition of the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (Waghid 2010) and Boyer's 'scholarship of engagement' (Mahlomaholo 2010). Neither of these efforts to re-imagine and remake higher education in South Africa, however, has yet recognized writing and writing pedagogy as a key factor.

The partnership we describe in this article addresses the ongoing need to engage in international inter-institutional models to support writing and writing pedagogy, both in South Africa and globally. Our partnership model seeks to achieve this goal in a way that addresses tensions that sometimes arise between globalization and the social justice agenda existing in South Africa and elsewhere. It does this by extending the importance of friendship from the realm of pedagogy to the realm of support and sustainability. Although South African higher education has sought to enact partnerships that serve local communities (le Grange 2002; Ntshoe 2002; Anderson and Maharasoa 2002), it has sometimes struggled to balance the benefits of a global knowledge economy with the privatization, marketization and colonial potential of globalization. Our model offers insights into cultivating international partnerships that serve rather than undermine the agendas of countries such as South Africa. It does this, in part, by utilizing friendship to build trust and overcome

structural barriers between North and South. In the post-apartheid era, South African scholars have recognized the importance of empathy and friendship for overcoming barriers erected by the history of apartheid (Waghid 2007; Carolissen et al. 2011). Through the concept of empathetic empowering encounters, we expand this insight to include pedagogy and the creation and sustainability of international partnerships.

Methodology

The literature on collaboration provides rich descriptions of the features that promote strong collaboration; these pieces often include very useful guidelines for staff who are either considering, or are in the midst of implementing, collaborative ventures. Much of the literature refers to Wenger (1998) and Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002). For this paper, we are interested in thinking through the theory (Mann 2008) of our peers as recorded in their research in order to better understand and/or influence our own practice while adding our voices to the discussion. We are, in essence, unpacking what we consider a particularly successful collaboration in order to interrogate why it has worked and to explore to what extent it could be useful to colleagues elsewhere. Our peers' applications of the existing theories and our own interpretations of them are, therefore, of interest; this research and our review of the literature (which we have tried to limit to that which has been published relatively recently on this topic) contribute to both the method and the context of our ideas. While we have attempted to read as widely and deeply as time constraints allow, we are not suggesting that our work here provides a systematic literature review of all that exists on this topic and note that caveat for the reader.

Collaboration is difficult

Stein and Short observe that "though it is easy to promote collaboration, it is much more difficult to implement even minimal collaboration, much less a true alliance built upon mutual vision, support and commitment from all partners" (2001, 418). As with most endeavours involving people, collaboration can be incredibly efficient and rewarding, but it should also be noted that effective, sustainable collaboration is very challenging, not least because it is time-consuming and generally demands a great deal of compromise and negotiation. In instances where individual goals are in tension with, or deemed superior to, the collective good then competition can emerge and the agreed collaborative goal becomes secondary to individual concerns; this, if unaddressed, can lead to an undermining of the collaboration and eventual breakdown of the process. Stein and Short emphasize that several factors inhibit collaboration; in particular, negative attitudes, personal barriers, structural barriers, and campus reward structures (419-420). A lack of precedents and limited experience can also affect successful outcomes (422). In contemporary higher education, the overwhelming demands on faculty also impact on one's capacity to work in partnership. Where collaboration is seen as valuable, morally, ethically and in terms of scholarship, it may still be secondary to the day-to-day practice of teaching, research, service and administration. Consequently, being personally and professionally committed to collaboration, in and of itself, will not lead to practical action. The difficulties must be offset with enabling factors, attitudes, dispositions and approaches.

Factors that contribute to strong collaboration

The literature on collaboration in higher education provides a wealth of advice and guidance on how to build good partnerships. Stein and Short (2001), for example, suggest four key steps: "(a) creating a culture of collaboration, (b) addressing institutional requirements, (c) establishing and meeting high standards, and (d) meeting the needs of educators across organizational types" (423). They refer to Purcell and Leppien (1998) in emphasizing the importance of understanding the assumptions that each party brings to the collaboration and in recognizing the need to build bridges as a result of gaps in skills, assumptions and attitudes. They also refer to Breitborde (1996), who stresses the importance of "investing time; building consensus about tasks, roles, and responsibilities; negotiating differences in work style and values; remaining flexible; and making adjustment to accommodate complications in each other's personal and professional lives" (Stein and Short 2001, 423). With respect to the essential characteristics of collaboration, Stein and Short draw from their own research to include the importance of having a common goal "that fosters mutual respect, openness and trust", relationships, shared responsibility, common vision and long-term commitment. They also observe that collaborators are more likely "to require common philosophical ground as they work to design agreed-upon goals and objectives" (425). Reinforcing the importance of shared goals, Louie et al. (2003) argue with reference to Schoenfeld (1999) that "researchers should strive to create a group that has a common purpose, shares in discussing problems, contributes to creating solutions, and has the appropriate background for the enterprise" (Louie et al. 2003, 161).

Adding to this, Creamer (2004) suggests that collaborators can enhance the effectiveness of their work by being strategic; for example, forming groups that have

"comparable levels of expertise in overlapping, but distinct areas." In making this point, she goes on to stress the need to attend to "interpersonal dynamics" and to "create a culture where differences of opinion are valued, considered routine, and open to discussion …." What stands out in her recommendations is that collaboration takes time and effort, both at the formal and informal level. While she admits that this may appear "to be so time consuming as to sacrifice the productivity of the team and its members, it plays a key role in sustaining the long-term vitality of the team" (Creamer 2004, 569). Cassidy et al. (2008) also consider the development of communities of enquiry and identify seven factors that might be considered in this work: "(1) dialogue and participation; (2) relationships; (3) perspectives; (4) structure and context; (5) climate; (6) purpose; and (7) control" (218). With regard to factor 3, they expand by noting "the need to make perspectives and assumption explicit" (225); with respect to factor 5, they outline potential subheadings and point out that the climate emerging from group interactions and dynamics "will have an effect on motivation and confidence to interact" (226). On the issue of control, factor 7, they reinforce the point that "a key consideration for any group or community is where the power resides and how control is exercised" (229). Across these factors, they conclude with the need for "balance." What is required "is an awareness of dualities or tensions and an ability to consider these in relation to other contextual factors, aims and purposes in order to examine, or evolve in practice, an effective set of structures and relationships" (230). These comments hint at what we have mentioned before – collaboration is not easy. Finally, we draw on Bozalek et al. (2008) who write, with reference to Christie et al. (2007) and Leibowitz et al. (2010), that "the development of a community of practice in which knowledge, time, resources and expertise could be generously shared between members accounts for

10

the ongoing commitment and success of our work" (2008, 1031). However, they, too, emphasize that "the process is immensely challenging for all involved in terms of methodology, time, training and emotional support" (1031).

These insights resonate closely with our experience of meeting and working together over the past three years. Synthesizing this research with that of the policies that have impacted our own contexts and experiences, we identify the following characteristics as those that reflect our thinking on collaboration and which have contributed to our idea of empowered empathetic encounters:

- international, inter-institutional collaboration is essential and will continue to be so in the future;

- collaboration is challenging;

- meaningful collaboration takes time;

- strong collaboration is founded on relationships, which are built on dialogue, participation, and shared values, such as fairness, respect, openness and trust;

- strong collaboration requires a shared goal and a shared approach to project management.

We draw on these factors and add to them in the next section where we explain our concept of empowered empathetic encounters and suggest what our model contributes to the conversation on the topic of collaboration.

Empowered Empathetic Encounters as a foundation and maintenance factor for building successful and sustainable international inter-institutional collaborations

As noted in the introduction to this paper, by empowered empathetic encounters, we mean the supported, pivotal occasions where one meets with

colleagues in face-to-face settings to understand and internalize each other's concerns and what it means to live and work in each other's contexts. We suggest that engaged encounters of this nature can provide the bedrock and ongoing scaffolding for successful, long-term collaboration. We believe from our own experiences and review of the literature that the human element of collaboration is integral to its success.

Bozalek et al. (2010, 1033) emphasize "the need for face-to-face, visceral, physical contact across disciplinary and institutional contexts." Similarly, Eckel and Hartley (2008) discuss the need for "a natural affinity first" in collaboration, arguing that there are factors in collaboration which mirror "a human courtship" where "shared interests and similar social networks often trump cold economic calculation" (630). They echo Bozalek et al., arguing that "effective partnerships require a personal commitment built on ongoing face-to-face interaction rather than watertight policies and procedures" (631). Our experience also suggests that face-to-face interaction of a new group can be tremendously powerful when other key characteristics also exist. These characteristics fall under our headings of 'empowered,' 'empathetic,' and 'encounter,' which we will now explore with reference to the literature and our own thinking.

Empowered

While the values of liberation and freedom inherent in the term are part of our work and collaborative approach, for the purpose of this model we use the term 'empowered' pragmatically – being enabled in a variety of ways to achieve a specific shared purpose or goal. In other words, extending beyond a shift in consciousness to active facilitation with resources and access. This facilitation translates as financial

support; time to work together and build relationships; space to collaborate; support from senior management; the provision of retreats and 'time out' from family, friends and day-to-day work; logistics support, including travel and accommodation considerations; etc. We suggest that empowered collaboration results not only from the physical enabling of material support, but also from the authority and access generated through the demonstration of support for a group's work. Empowerment, in this context, is the harnessing of potential and the fuelling of ideas; providing the environment where ideas can grow and collaboration flourish in an advocacy orientated manner where support constitutes an institutional commitment to the goals and the potential of the collaboration.

Our approach to empowerment parallels research into collaborations in several regards. Eckel and Hartley (2008), drawing on Dussauge and Garrette (1999), discuss the need for "similar strategic goals" (629) within collaborative groups. In their model, once a focus is identified and agreed upon, there is a need for time and resources to be devoted to the achievement of that goal. Pretorius (2001) suggests the following practical actions that higher education institutions might consider in their efforts to support collaboration:

- Utilise the pool of talented people …

- Assist with capacity building.

- Provide structures and leadership …

- Create forums … including inter-campus consortia and scholar exchanges.

- Consider world issues that need to be addressed … (78)

These items enable the group to stay focused and identify long- and short-term goals. They also promote empowerment over time, through the support and resources

provided to achieve aims. Other researchers concur, stressing the importance of institutional buy-in and the sharing of skills, knowledge and practical experiences in safe and supportive learning communities (Furco and Moely 2012; Mahlomaholo 2010; Boyer 1990).

In our experience of working together, we recognize that this collaboration would not have been possible were it not empowered in the ways outlined above. This empowerment involved many features but began with our acceptance to participate in the ERS. All members of the group applied independently, although two had been working together at UJ. The other two had never met each other or their colleagues from UJ, nor had any of the institutions collaborated together previously, and none of them had worked with Elon University, the host of the ERS.

Reflecting on the elements of the ERS that contributed to the immediate and subsequent success of our partnership and collaboration, we note that the process of empowerment began with having an agreed upon goal, in this case the investigation of writing and transfer. The next layer of our common goal setting emerged as we self-selected into a group focused on the high school to college transition and began discussing our different contexts and learning more about our professional and institutional concerns. This process helped us not only to refine our research questions, but also to create a common purpose and collective identity. The group was also empowered to pursue this common purpose through practical support that both physically enabled and legitimized the group. Each of us had been invited to join ERS, demonstrating to us, our colleagues, and our home institutions that we had something to bring to the process and that our voices and experiences were valued and could contribute to the conversation. This public recognition of one's worth in the group was in and of itself an empowering force. Additionally, we were all assisted by

our home institutions to attend the seminar and were provided by the host institution with all manner of material and discursive support while on site, including accommodation, travel subsidies, and many opportunities to interact with other colleagues and project leaders socially and professionally. Taken as a whole, ERS provided for 'the communal act' of scholarship through space, time, financial assistance, and shared terms of reference. This practical help, coupled with the clear articulation of specific, shared goals around shared problems, were very important in engendering credibility in the process and the group.

Empathetic

The second element of our approach is its 'empathetic' quality. Our research into empathy began with Carl Rogers and his core attributes for a teacher – "empathy, congruence, and positive regard" (Rogers 1983, 200). Blackie, Case, and Jawitz (2010) suggest, with reference to Rogers (1961), Dewey (1963) and Ramsden (1992), that the key element facilitating a good education from a transformative one is empathy and that empathy in Rogerian terms is, arguably, "the cornerstone of higher education" (Blackie, Case, and Jawitz 2010, 642). This link with empathy and care also resonated with us, and we found Nodding's (1984; 2003) writings very useful in this regard. She notes that care is a "desire for the other's well-being" (19), a commitment of self to others, "a stepping outside of one's own personal frame of reference into the other's…." (24).

In the context of our model of empowered empathetic encounters, we see empathy as the point in the collaboration where we try to understand, build solidarity with, and internalize the perspectives of colleagues living and working in very different contexts. Aside from the need for focus and the practicalities associated

15

with successful collaboration, the literature on collaboration notes that sustainable collaboration is underpinned by shared values and depends largely on good relationships that extend beyond personal agendas to a commitment to the benefit of all partners. Eckel and Hartley (624) found that effective collaborations "intimately relied on their capacity to establish professional *and* personal relationships grounded in mutual trust and a shared sense of purpose" and that "relationships, not organizational hierarchy, become the glue that holds alliances together" (631). Our own experiences resonate with this belief. Yet, despite such findings, Creamer notes, with reference to John-Steiner (2000), that often the "relational or interpersonal dynamics among collaborators have been overlooked in theoretical accounts of collaboration" (2004, 556). Crossman (2007) suggests, with reference to Chen (2000), that "writers within the specific field of Education are … expressing dissatisfaction with the level of attention paid by researchers to the role of relationships and emotions in teaching and learning" (314).

We wish to address this issue in particular and note categorically that our collaborative efforts would have failed to launch, let alone continue, without the active cultivation of shared values and deeply committed relationships within the group. Our experiences reflect those that Creamer found in her study of long-term collaborators, who "came together as collaborators in the first place either because they thought alike or they grew over time to share a very similar perspective or point of view on matters central to their work" (2004, 562). It is "not just the dynamics of the collaborative process that can promote innovation, but also the relational dynamics" (Creamer 2004, 568). Our experience extends this finding by suggesting that an empathetic approach is crucial for those collaborations that hope to bridge north–south divides. Our intent to understand each other beyond a superficial level

led to empathy with each other's situations. A deeper connection was forged through careful listening, questioning, conversation and reflection, leading to friendship and, ultimately, understanding in a meaningful way what it meant to live and work in each other's context. It was this empathy, we believe, that sustained us through our collaboration over the lifetime of the project and which has been a key contributing factor to the continuation of our collaboration beyond the conclusion of ERS and the cessation of its material supports. As a result of the relationships established through the ERS, we continue to work together and to seek out ways to expand and strengthen relationships between our home institutions.

Encounters

We term our approach as built on a foundation of 'encounters' of the face-to-face variety. The choice of this term is deliberate and designed to encapsulate that almost 'magical' quality of collaboration which arises from meeting with like-minded individuals to discover a way of working which is enriching, personally and professionally. The term 'encounter' is unpacked for us through an interpretation of the literature in the area of collaboration. Although Chapman, Ramondt, and Smiley (2005) conducted their research in an online environment, they identified very useful elements that differentiate a learning community from information exchange. They note that these elements include "informality, familiarity, honesty, openness, heart, passion, dialogue, rapport, empathy, trust, authenticity, disclosure, humour and diverse opinions" (218). These features are the stuff of relationships, of friendships. Our face-to-face encounters over three consecutive summers, rich with conversation and laughter, remind one of Schein's (2003) comments on dialogue: "All problem-solving groups should begin in a dialogue format to facilitate the building of

sufficient common ground and mutual trust, and to make it possible to tell what is really on one's mind" (29). Schein notes that "dialogue is a necessary condition for effective group action" (29). He goes on to suggest that "in dialogue, the whole group is the object of learning, and the members share the potential excitement of discovering, collectively, ideas that individually none of them might have ever thought of" (30). "Dialogue … is a basic process for building common understanding" (34). In articulating concerns, and in our emotional and intellectual reaction to them, we experienced in this deep encounter a basis for our action. The conversation within the encounter was vital as it was only through conversation that we could, in Maistry's (2008) words, "[develop] trust and [discover] issues that were important to the group" (369).

Why 'empowered empathetic encounters' matter for collaboration, particularly between North–South institutions

Margaret Wheatley (2002, 116) advises those who want to affect change to "be brave enough to start a conversation that matters. Talk to people you know. Talk to people you don't know. Talk to people you never talk to. Be intrigued by the differences you hear." At the core of our work in researching writing and transfer across the transition from high school to college was a desire to contextualize what we do within the larger picture of social justice, the pedagogy of hope, and the transformative potential of education. When we met in Elon, our encounters were not devoid of emotion or intent. They were empathetic and empowered; an example of what Dwyer (2002) calls effective communication requiring "openness, empathy, supportiveness, positiveness and equality" (in Crossman 2007, 325). According to Chapman Walsh (1999), such "qualities of mind and spirit matter desperately, for they

are the very stuff of what faculty, when they are at their best, are inculcating in their students and passing on to future generations" (20). In arguing this, Chapman Walsh echoes Barnett, (2012) who refers to the 'super-complexity' of the future in higher education. For him, "the way forward lies in construing and enacting a pedagogy for human beings" (65). In other words, learning for an unknown future has to be learning understood neither in terms of knowledge nor skills but of human qualities and dispositions (Barnett 2012, 65). In imagining such encounters, Barnett reinforces the importance of empowerment and empathy by emphasizing the value of qualities such as carefulness, thoughtfulness, humility, criticality, receptiveness, resilience, courage and stillness (76). Research shows that staff value and see as nourishing "situations where they have to work collaboratively …. Such situations made individuals feel involved and empowered" (Niemann 2010, 1012). When one is considering relationships and action towards change, how one feels about such work cannot be ignored.

Many researchers report that effective learning can occur as a result of collaboration (Creamer 2004; Rohleder et al. 2008; Chapman, Ramondt, and Smiley 2005; Louie et al. 2003; Schoenfeld 1999; Anderson and Herr 1999). The collaborative encounter we describe is based on values and contains the capacity to be transformative through the experience of the encounter itself. It has the potential to facilitate learning, co-enquiry and the co-creation of knowledge and of new realities. For us, Oswald and Perold (2011) put it succinctly: "It is in diverse and collaborative contributions that the potential for crafting alternative solutions to difficult questions most often rests" (34). In each of our contexts we see higher education and the capacity to write effectively with, and for, understanding as part of the privilege of the personal journey of meaning making that university education

provides. In each of our contexts, we are attempting to address problems, local and global, which are complex. We understand that collaboration offers greater potential for us to find solutions and that the urgency of the situation demands that we respond collectively.

Finally, we draw on two pieces with which we join in chorus. Firstly, Collarbone (2001), encapsulating the passion and commitment which our own group experienced, writes: "Imagine a collection of individuals, working in close proximity, sharing a common purpose and passion – a desire to learn …. Imagine this same collection of individuals, working closely together, sharing knowledge, aspiring to the same vision …. Imagine that same collection of individuals, sharing each other's hopes and fears, empathizing emotionally, unleashing the power of their collective intelligences. This is a learning community" (Collarbone, cited in Chapman, Ramondt, and Smiley 2005). Secondly, Wheatley urges us to: "Ask 'what is possible?' not 'What is wrong?' Keep asking. … Trust that meaningful conversations can change your world" (2002, 116). We add our voices to those of others through 'empowered empathetic encounters' and suggest that meaningful collaboration is more than agenda driven or strategically significant; it is a demonstration of who we are, what we believe and how we wish to be counted.

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