Collaborative Projects: An Interdisciplinary Study. Edited by Andy Blunden.

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Collaborative Projects is a collection of studies solicited by the editor, Andy Blunden, as a way of developing a new unit of analysis which he has been working on over the last five years. Blunden is a social theorist who has come to Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) and discovered what he sees as a certain disorderliness in the existing unit of analysis, that is, of activity. The disciplines include child development, psychotherapy, architectural design and political science, written by workers in both CHAT and social theory.

In the extended introduction, Blunden reflects on how the human sciences are, in broad terms, divided between disciplines concerned with people as individuals and disciplines concerned with people in groups. The former include psychology, for example, psychotherapy and child development, and education, and the latter, sociology, political science and history. He has an ongoing concern with this disjunction, arguing as he does, that humans are formed in culture and society, and, in turn these structures are maintained by individuals. In working in the broader humanities specialists from these varying disciplines usually come together to analyse a problem through the lens of their own approach. Blunden is hoping to transcend these differences using a new, shared unit of analysis in addressing problems. This we could term Community Psychology.

As befits a unit for social theory, "collaborative project" is not a static entity of social life, but rather is concerned with the dynamics of social change. When Blunden developed his new unit of analysis he went to a (then) Marxist – McIntyre for a theory of ethics. Projects then, have an ethical aspect of how people ought to collaborate as well as a descriptive aspect of how they actually do work together to make and remake the world.

Most of the authors have their roots in the Cultural Psychology of Lev Vygotsky and the Soviet school of Activity Theory which developed after Vygotsky's death in 1934. Vygotsky saw that human beings developed not merely in collaboration with the adults of a given culture, but through collaborative use of cultural artefacts, especially signs such as the spoken word. The use of these signs is internalised, creating new culturally-mediated links between perception and action. The Activity Theorists extended, some say, modified Vygotsky's work with the concept of 'an activity' which is an aggregate of actions which are united because they serve the same socially-developed motive, understanding of activity that we find collaborative projects, but the term avoids the vagueness of 'activity'. It also appeals to the everyday connotations of the words, something that lends to the attractiveness of the concept.

Other authors are primarily social theorists with varying degrees of familiarity with Vygotsky and Activity Theory who have used the concept of collaborative project because it provided a particularly useful approach to problems arising in their speciality. The book itself was a collaborative project, leading to an enhanced understanding of the posited unit of analysis. There are 12 research projects described in Part 1 and Part 2 contains 12 short chapters in which the authors reflect on the ideas raised in the earlier chapters. These reflections are followed by a final reflection on the whole book by the editor.

The first three chapters describe initiatives in which children and young people are engaged in projects as the centrepiece of a developmental approach to pre-school and primary education, college education and social work, respectively. Elena Kravtsova outlines the projective method for a continuous education system as it is applied in the Golden Key Schools in Russia. This is an experimental-genetic

method of instruction which aims to model the developmental processes which are replicated in real life, realising the potential of each child.

Eduardo Vianna Naja Hougaard and Anna Stetsenko describe a collaborative project developed at an urban community college in which students were inducted into developing a Transformative Activist Stance in which they examine social practices leading to inequality and discrimination which play a part in their own lives. They developed a Peer-Supported Activist Learning Community, focussing on closing the gaps between their learning goals and their overall life pursuits. Morten Nissen discusses a video produced and displayed on the internet by young drug users at a Copenhagen facility. The collaborative video production is explored, exposing issues of power, and examining the role of recognition in identity formation.

Moving on from this focus on projects designed by professionals to engage young people and promote their personal development, into the adult world as such, the next chapter is devoted to a study of collaborative projects in the arts and sciences. Vera John-Steiner, a cultural psychologist, sees thinking as a collaborative process where partnerships and collaborations are key to understanding. She looks particularly at a partnership of a chemist and physicist whose joint work gained international renown. They worked collaboratively, where this productivity was interspersed with periods of individual elaboration. They provide a key example of cross-disciplinary complementarity, and mutual appropriation.

From here on, the focus shifts from psychology per se, to projects aimed at creating a changed social space. One of the foremost CHAT practitioners, Michael Cole developed a after-school project aimed at enhancing learning experiences of working class children and teenagers, as part university, part community development. He documents the history of these endeavours entitled the 5th Dimension over three decades, particularly interested in forces against the sustainability of such educational initiatives.

The next two chapters continue the focus on projects involving a finite number of people over a finite time-span, but having the objective of introducing some specific change in social practice. Andy Blunden tells of a project launched in 1999 by academic and general staff at the University of Melbourne which led to the introduction of

Collaborative Learning Spaces, and changed the University's policies for the maintenance and construction of shared teaching spaces. This project led to a new concept of learning spaces for university instruction, serving an example of how concepts are produced by projects. This configuration is now a world-wide practice in tertiary education.

When such short-term projects succeed, they necessarily become long-term programmes, part of the larger social fabric. One such project is described by Helena Worthen where she looked at a non-unionised work situation in conservative Central Illinois. A longstanding positive worker-employer relationship in a healthcare facility was suddenly ruptured when the employers abruptly made a downward shift in working conditions. The workers decided to unionise and there was a long strike which finally emanated in their being given a contract.

Ron Lubensky uses the concept of collaborative projects to study public deliberation in a citizen's parliament in Australia. Policy issues in contemporary life have become complex and many believe that such decisions should be left to experts. However, there is reason to believe that citizens – through the use of mini-publics – should be involved, rather than simply arguing that they make better decisions than panels of experts. In other words, public acceptance of the deliberative enterprise will rise on normative rather than epistemic claims. This analysis shows that deliberative practitioners should make a social movement to bring public deliberation into their mainstream their priority.

Next comes those projects which transcend the life span and activity of a finite

number of individuals, beginning with Vygotsky's collaborative project of social transformation in the early Soviet Union. Anna Stetsenko brings us back to Vygotsky's (and his collaborators) original project. In the last three decades his work has been interpreted in the West as a traditional value-neutral theory. This perception is not true to the spirit of his theory: His practice itself mirrors his conception of the social collaborative nature of the human mind. Knowledge is embedded in practical transformative engagements with the world – there is a link between the practical and theoretical, social and individual.

The final three reports concern projects enacted in the global social and political arena, involving masses of people. Here the projects are essentially engaged in conflict with the dominant projects in a society and in collaborative relations with other projects. As they show, the social changes achieved are not just legal or institutional changes, but changes in the consciousness of masses of people.

Jennifer Power shows how profoundly the AIDS Movement changed people's minds about health in Australia, where affected communities, notably the gay community, established the first 'safe-sex' campaigns, created large volunteer-based care and support networks for people living with HIV/AIDS, and established a presence at the forefront of public health-policy making regarding HIV/AIDS. AIDS activists successfully convinced the Federal Government to provide funds to enable them to take a lead in HIV-prevention. In doing so, they permanently enshrine the concept of community participation within the Australian public health system, including a measure of expert status equal to that of medical professionals in scientific and clinical decision making regarding HIV/AIDS. They "became" experts.

In another case study in Australia Lynne Beaton tracks the change in attitudes towards asbestos, used in a wide range of industrial products. Although mining and manufacturing of asbestos had long been recognised as a source of toxic, even lethal effects on workers, attitudes of industry were resistant for decades. Internationally asbestosis had been recognised in the early decades of the twentieth century, but early on asbestos companies organised themselves against claims from workers. They remained resistant to efforts to ban the substance by medical scientists, governments, trade unions, and the media who were more or less vocal over decades. Asbestos was finally banned in Australia in 2003 after two projects –the union movement and medical science - collaborated to draw in the media, victims, and lawyers, to build an Anti-Asbestos Movement as a collaborative project.

Finally, Brecht De Smet examines the emergence of the Egyptian revolution from the collaborative project in Tahrir Square, to defy expectations, bring down the Mubarak regime and open a way to democracy. De Smet investigates the complex relations between different projects and importantly shows how a project's concept of itself develops immanently from its activity.
The final part of the book is made up of 12 reflections covering reflections on the projects studied in the previous chapters as well as other projects such as the Women's Liberation Movement, prefigurative politics, emotions, children's play, and others.

In providing a unit of analysis which is appealing to people working for social change, Blunden and the other authors in this book offer a strong case for community psychology. Community psychology works with the 'we' of change: Building relationships, providing tools, analysing social and workplace settings, and working with people to fight oppression. The challenge for community psychology is probably to confront their role as experts in helping others towards social change.