

## Collaboration: Hope for the future

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I recently attended a colloquium at Stellenbosch University about the Pedagogies of Hope, a project launched by the Vice-chancellor, Russel Botman, based on the writings of Freire.<sup>1-3</sup> At this colloquium I was struck by the openness and directness of the discussion. There was no hiding behind *double entendres* and subtleties that could be misunderstood. The language was strong, candid and challenging.

What is the essence of Freire's writings? Jane Tobbell summarised Freire's philosophy well: 'He argues that education is not about knowledge *per se* but is about ideas, it is about engaging in dialogue to generate thought, explanations and understanding. He rejects the status of the "expert" and instead argues for an exchange of ideas in which both parties benefit and develop. Education is expressed as a mutuality.'<sup>4</sup>

The HOPE project may have been initiated by Stellenbosch University, but we all have the right to hope. As health science educators in the developing world we are particularly responsible for engendering hope.

There are many ways in which we accomplish this already, but one of the ways in which we need to be more successful is collaboration, especially in research. In the December 2010 issue of *Medical Education*, Patricia O'Sullivan makes a strong case for collaborative research and argues that the research questions we address are often interdisciplinary in nature, and therefore collaboration should cross the boundaries to other academic fields. Properly applied, this will facilitate connection between the abstract nature of theory generation and the concrete nature of addressing practical needs. The collaboration will therefore go beyond only obtaining a larger study sample or enhancing generalisability, to a shared intellectual process.<sup>5</sup> We may argue that by the nature of what we do, we collaborate already, but that is often only within our institutions. We infrequently cross the boundaries to other institutions and countries to work on truly collaborative research.

In the previous issue of *AJHPE*, Wendy McMillan argued that we need our research to move beyond description to the realm of explanation.<sup>6</sup> She states that this will allow us to inform best practice in education and generate theory. She provides us with a discussion on the role of theory in education research and also with practical ways to ensure theoretical rigour in our research.

Therefore, on the one hand McMillan adds her voice to others who argue that we must move from description and justification to clarification and generating theory.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand O'Sullivan argues for collaboration to generate theory and apply it. I want to reason that it is clear from these two arguments that we need to fearlessly cross the boundaries and engage in collaborative clarification research that could possibly be our best contribution towards engendering hope.

I am not suggesting that currently we do not collaborate or perform clarification research; I am proposing that we should be more intentional. Where do we start? We could follow a model where one individual initiates the collaboration and subsequently expands, but that would be like an inverse triangle that pivots on one individual. A more sustainable way is to create numerous interlocking networks. This creates a much stronger system that does not depend on a single individual and is therefore more sustainable. Networks already exist. There are the institutional networks in faculties, but also across faculties, especially with academic education



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departments and education units; there are regional and national networks like SAAHE and HELTASA, and then there are continental and global networks such as SAFRI/FAIMER, the Network, and AMEE, to mention a few. I think we also need to identify key areas for collaboration. There will always be certain aspects that are institution specific, but other aspects with much wider implications, and we need to identify these and develop large collaborative research projects that will substantively contribute not only to the body of knowledge but to engendering hope.

'As the editor I wish to develop an academic platform which will allow experienced health professions educators to share their work and develop the scholarship of teaching and learning as relevant to our needs. I would also like to see the work of emerging educators published so as to advance their careers and promote educational research. ... The challenge to put an African footprint on the map of academic discourse relevant to health sciences education is, I believe, long overdue.'<sup>8</sup> These were Vanessa Burch's closing words in the first editorial of this journal.

Three issues down the line the question arises – have we achieved anything during this period? Looking at the past three issues of this journal I already see glimmers of hope and I can only say: 'I believe so'. It is you, the reader and the contributor, who has the final say. Do you read the articles? Do you submit manuscripts? Is it of value to you? As with any newborn, it will take a while for this journal to walk and talk. We are still taking baby steps, but once we have matured, the hope will be a bright shining light.

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4. Tobell J. The oppressive curriculum: viewing the national curriculum through the Freirean lens. *Annual Review of Critical Psychology* 2000;2:204-205.
5. O'Sullivan P, Stoddard H, Kalishman S. Collaborative research in medical education: a discussion of theory and practice. *Med Educ* 2010;44:1175-1184.
6. McMillan W. Moving beyond description: Research that helps improve teaching and learning. *AJHPE* 2010;2:3-7.
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