

“Fitting together the pieces of the puzzle: Collaboration and Open Social Scholarship” Lynne Siemens

Open social scholarship is characterized by teams of academic specialists and non-specialists working together to create, disseminate, and engage research in wider contexts than originally envisioned. Benefits and advantages exist for both parties. For partners, they gain innovation, technology and knowledge creation, and often access to skills and equipment (Ankrah & Al-Tabbaa, 2015; Kaymaz & Eryiğit, 2011; Nielsen et al., 2013; Philbin, 2008; Plewa & Quester, 2007). Academic members can expand the scope of research (Dusdal & Powell, 2021), gain new skills (Melin, 2000) and see increased productivity, visibility, and dissemination (Bond et al., 2021). However, these benefits come with challenges in relation to the coordination of tasks, people, disciplines, timelines, budgets, and other factors (Cummings & Kiesler, 2005, 2007). But what are the best ways to collaborate and maximize benefits while minimizing challenges? How can researchers and those beyond the academy work together to further project goals? What has been the impact of COVID on team projects?

Studying the Implementing New Knowledge Environments (INKE) project on open social scholarship is a way to answer these questions with a focus on its collaborative team of academic and academic-adjacent researchers and partners (INKE, 2020). Continuing research on collaboration from the first INKE project on electronic books and reading (Siemens & INKE Research Group, 2012a, 2012b, 2012c, 2012d, 2013, 2014a, 2014b, 2015, 2016, 2019a, 2019b), this paper examines the nature of collaboration within INKE’s new focus on open social scholarship. Through yearly interviews of team members, including administrative leads, researchers, and partners, it explores the nature of collaboration, its advantages and disadvantages, and measures of success. This paper focuses on the first two years of the partnership.

Overall, the interviewees expressed very positive associations with this project. First, individuals connected with the first INKE project decided to stay involved due to the community of researchers and partners. They enjoyed working with their team members and wanted to continue collaborating to build on the success from the first project. Second, the researchers and partners realized that they could achieve stronger projects while collaborating even though it took more time to coordinate tasks, people, disciplines, timelines, and budgets. There was a feeling that collaboration was like a puzzle with different people and expertise fitting together and building something in partnership. Fourth, the team needed to find a balance between quantitative and qualitative measures of success. While the team is producing countable things such as presentations, papers, blog posts, HSS Commons users, they also see success as a measure of new and ongoing partner involvement. In their eyes, the project was already a success because partners remain committed to it. Together, they were creating community that trusts each other and achieves project goals. However, these benefits were not without their challenges. Researchers did not feel as engaged in INKE when they were not receiving research funds. In these cases, they could go for extended times without thinking about the project. In addition, project coordination with research offices was challenging at times due to turnover and changing processes.

Finally, COVID has had an impact on INKE. Since it could not hold its annual face-to-face gatherings in the first two years, the interviewees experienced some feelings of disconnection to each other and INKE. They realized that in-person gatherings can “stoke the fires of collaboration” through excitement generated in conversations over coffee and lunches in a way that is not possible through virtual conferences, gatherings, and project conference calls. When they were finally able to meet face to face, there was a feeling that the “glue” came back between team members. People were energized by the fact that they could continue discussions about open social scholarship and individual projects over coffee and meals. This reinforces the necessity for in-person meetings to create strong working relationships between team members, even when not receiving project funds, and exchange research results. As the team found, conferences are necessary for learning about the latest research, presenting one’s own research, networking, finding collaborators, and maintaining friendships (Falk & Hagsten, 2021; Puccinelli et al., 2022). In the case of INKE, these face-to-face gatherings extend to other conferences and events such as the Digital Humanities Summer Institute where a concentration of INKE researchers and partners gather. There was one benefit to the virtual conferences held in the first two years – primarily, INKE was able to attract a larger audience from new communities from different locations because they did not have to travel to the gathering.

As INKE continues its research in collaboration with its researchers and partners, there are several opportunities facing it. First, INKE needs to continue to harness the benefits of collaboration to achieve its project goals in terms of research and community engagement. This will come as the project has successes, researchers and partners remain engaged, and the goals and objectives of both groups are met. In this regard, the team needs to continue to explore measures of success and the balance between quantitative and qualitative ones (Siemens & INKE Research Group, 2019b, 2020). Value in counting stuff such as presentations and articles exists, but in a collaboration between researchers and non-academic specialists, success might focus less on numbers and more on community engagement, a concept that is not easily measured. Finally, with COVID-19 on the wane, the collaboration will be able to maximize the benefits of face-to-face meetings.

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