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The Collaboratory
**A Co-creative Stakeholder Engagement Process
for Solving Complex Problems**



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A meta-collaboratory

The Globally Responsible Leadership Initiative¹

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In this chapter we consider the evolution of the initial definition of the collaboratory within the 50+20 community by looking at two recent and ongoing initiatives of the Globally Responsible Leadership Initiative (GRLI).

The two GRLI initiatives are both ongoing at the time of writing. The first describes how GRLI partner institutions in South Africa convened concerned stakeholders around the Western Cape wine region to develop an agenda of responsible action for that particular regional industry. The second initiative describes the convening and early activity of an innovation cohort of management educators focusing on the question of implementing 50+20 in their own institutions.

In closing, we suggest some points for consideration and investigation to further inform the initiation and development of future collaboratories.

1 The authors wish to thank Arnold Smit and Nick Ellerby for making valuable contributions through their review of this chapter.

Defining 50+20 collaboratories

When the wording of the 50+20 Agenda was being finalized a term was sought that could describe the central and defining feature of the vision. The blend word “collaboratory” offered an appropriate portmanteau to fuse the key elements of “collaboration” and “laboratory” without making it exclusively about the one or the other.

The term suggested that new types of laboratories of research and learning are needed within management education, and that the basic conditions and requirements of what is generally understood by “laboratory” needed to be modified through the introduction of prerequisite collaborative elements or “collaboration.” A laboratory provides a safe space for experimentation where qualified professionals distil and verify truths or findings and explore their potential to enable innovation. Such an environment typically favors reductionist approaches investigating *how* something functions or exists, often by isolating and studying its component parts and ignoring mostly the question of *why* something functions or exists—purpose is mostly ignored. While the need for study, innovation and learning through experimentation in relative safety (laboratory) remains legitimate and needed, collaboration suggests that traditional scientific inquiry conducted exclusively by qualified researchers, concerned mostly with the inner workings and component parts at the expense of understanding the whole, is insufficient. The term “collaboratory” implies that scientific pursuit and the learning associated with that pursuit may not be confined to the inside of the symbolic laboratory and that research, education and innovation embedded at the coalface of the practical world, that is, societal issues, ought to be trialed. The collaboratory stretches into the space of transdisciplinarity, where scientific knowledge and method blend with real-life experience and wisdom—shared in the form of narrative. Mainstream scientific approaches and perspectives may sit less comfortably here. In the collaboratory learning is spurred when diversity of experience and knowledge is present, and the head, heart, hand, and will are engaged. Purpose and impact are fundamental to any collaboratory, and the presence of deeper emotions and sense-making is essential.

With the launch of the 50+20 Agenda during the Third Global Forum on Responsible Management Education, which took place as part of the

Rio+20 Earth Summit in 2012, the co-authoring group hosted and facilitated learning circles referred to as collaborative meetings, collaborative sessions or simply as collaboratories.² These were held in order to provide participants of the Third Global Forum a sampling of what management education for the world implies, and they also offered a tangible, visible, and ultimately complementary action to the launch of the written 50+20 Agenda.

Box 21.1 Fishbowl sessions

Fishbowls involve a group of people seated in circle, having a conversation in full view of a larger group of listeners, and are useful for ventilating “hot topics” or sharing ideas or information from a variety of perspectives. In an “open” fishbowl chairs are open to “visitors” (i.e. members of the audience) who want to ask questions or make comments. Although largely self-organizing once the discussion gets underway, the fishbowl process usually has a facilitator or moderator.³

The method employed to facilitate these sessions was similar to fishbowl sessions (see [Box 21.1](#)) or Open Space gatherings (see [Box 21.2](#)) that were also in use during some of the 50+20 visioning retreats that took place in the build-up to the Rio+20 Summit. The sessions at Rio+20 were well attended, offering well over 100 management educators an opportunity to participate actively in one of three facilitated learning circles on the issues of gender equality, corruption, and poverty. The Rio+20 collaboratories were well received and attracted encouraging feedback and positive comments.

These sessions set the tone for how participants, many of whom became future champions of 50+20, understood and interpreted the central element of the 50+20 vision. The term “collaboratory” became associated very closely with the particular style and format of learning and investigation that took place in Rio de Janeiro in 2012. Subsequent to the launch several participants at the time simulated these collaborative meetings in their own settings or institutions, simply referring to these meetings or events as “collaboratories.”

2 See: <http://50plus20.org/documentary>.

3 See: <http://www.kstoolkit.org/Fish+Bowl>.

Box 21.2 Open Space (also known as Open Space Technology or OST)

OST is a method for convening groups around a specific question or task or importance and giving them responsibility for creating both their own agenda and experience. The facilitator's key task is to identify the question that brings people together, offer the simple process, then stand back and let participants do the work.

The collaboratory meetings held at Rio+20 were a symbolic demonstration and enactment of the central philosophy of the vision. A fuller realization of the vision would see management educators assume their role in collaboratory development and hosting more completely. Ideally they would move beyond initiating and hosting one-off collaboratory meetings, to a future scenario where the institutions themselves become ongoing collaboratories-in-action and ultimately conveners and initiators of collaboratories.

Later described more fully by differentiating between “bolt on,” “built in,” and “platform” solutions (Muff 2013) using a three-order model of innovation, the positive response from management educators to the 50+20 call of developing collaboratories could range through these stages:

1. Initiate and facilitate one-off collaboratory meetings in and among traditional educational offerings. This may result in a series of collaboratory-based events that deal with a particular issue of relevance to that institution and its constituents
2. Active displacement of traditional learning and research initiatives with collaboratory-based programs of learning and research
3. A full transformation of the entire educational offering and operating model of a management education institution to become a collaboratory-in-action that shapes its work and ways of working around new and ongoing collaboratory investigations that in turn are identified and scoped through ongoing societal and environmental stakeholder engagement

The varying degrees or levels of collaboratory participation and engagement described, all satisfy (on the surface at least) the concise and

ambitious original 50+20 definition of a collaboratory as “an inclusive learning environment where action learning and action research meet” (Muff *et al.* 2013). It should, however, be understood that the core ingredients identified here are about fostering active collaboration among a diversified group of stakeholders, convened around a central issue or question, and working with whole person learning, creative, and systemic approaches to foster collective problem-solving and co-creation.

Through this chapter we propose examples of collaboratories in full knowledge that the concept is evolving. The 50+20 vision is meant to describe stretch goals—an aspirational state. Optimistically, these examples may also provide a starting point for theoretic purists to supply the collaboratory ideal with its epistemological and methodological foundations.

In the years since Rio+20, many of us who have experimented with the collaboratory method have come to realize that there may be more dimensions to collaboratories that we need to explore and understand. There are also lessons to be learned from earlier initiatives such as the GRLI, which has been modeling and refining aspects of the collaboratory since 2004.

The GRLI partnership as collaboratory and container

Founded in 2004 the GRLI may be viewed as an early and continually evolving collaboratory prototype; 21 corporations and learning institutions were invited to join a one-year process of hands-on investigation into the question of what global responsibility implies from the perspective of their organizations. They had to be strategically committed, dedicated, and equipped to introduce new practices. The inquiry was facilitated on a peer-based and whole person learning basis as later articulated in *Learning for Tomorrow: Whole Person Learning for the Planetary Citizen* (Taylor 2007). The initiating GRLI partners formed what we now label a “collaboratory” with the open space meeting at INSEAD in April 2006, facilitated by Harrison Owen, kicking off GRLI as an enhanced global community of learning and action. It assembled then and still

does using the circle as a setting for collective work and dialogue. What evolved since then is a more elaborate language and explicit conceptualization regarding the format of collaboratories and lots of learning and development regarding the facilitation.

Today GRLI operates as a partnership of companies, learning institutions and global organizations, working together to enable the development of individual and collective leadership and practice that is globally responsible. The strength of GRLI lies in its ability to lead the discourse on what globally responsible leadership and practice represents beyond current mainstream experience and understanding. The GRLI has a proven track record of convening organizations and individuals, across all spheres of society, committed to sustainable human progress built on recognition of the need for deep, systemic change.

Decisions about the focus and content of GRLI's work as a global partnership, and the ways in which it delivers that work, is informed by a number of guiding principles as summarized in Box 21.3. These guiding principles are reflected visibly in the 50+20 visioning process and outcome, both of which the GRLI partnership and associates actively contributed to. An earlier version of these principles was implied in the original invitation to the 21 initiators of GRLI in 2004; and voiced again explicitly in the first GRLI report (2005).

Box 21.3 The GRLI Guiding Principles

1. Everything we produce is a contribution to the global commons and is freely shared
 2. What we do should create hands-on results on the ground, stand the chance of producing long-lasting, scalable effects, and is not being done better elsewhere
 3. Our operating mode is built on the entrepreneurial approach of "Think big. Act small. Start now"
 4. Effective change requires work at individual, organizational, and systemic levels: "I," "We," and "All of Us"
 5. Making an impact at the organizational and systemic level requires committed, dedicated, and empowered individuals who are willing to bring a "whole person" approach to their work and to their lives
-

Through these principles the GRLI is led, or driven as it may appear, to operate as convener and host of what it calls **Communities of Responsible Action** (CoRAs). CoRAs are groups of people and organizations willing to respond to a strong call, often issued in the form of a central unanswered question, dealing with an aspect of enabling globally responsible leadership and practice. They have no formal membership or leadership structure; in fact actors and participants within a CoRA may not even recognize the term “communities of responsible action,” but remain linked through a common and shared intention of addressing or working with a core question. A CoRA always requires a convening person or team to sustain and maintain its momentum and impact.

For example, the growing body of individuals and organizations identifying with, and in places actively responding to, the 50+20 call, may be thought of as a broad and inclusive CoRA. At the outset of developing the 50+20 vision, the call to critical thinkers—within and outside management education—was to ask how management education ought to be transformed in the interest of serving society and making business sustainable. This call attracted a diverse group of more than 150 people, some acting in their personal and others in their organizational or professional capacity, to collaborate on the development of a collective response. The visioning process that followed, a collaborative effort in itself, resulted in the 50+20 Agenda. The vision and inherent call articulated through the 50+20 vision continues to attract interest and spark action.

The GRLI’s guiding principles, and at minimum a subset of the first three principles, are typically tabled and reaffirmed at the initiation of GRLI projects. In the case of the Western Cape wine industry group the first three guiding principles were tabled upfront and collectively agreed as relevant and foundational to any potential work the group may undertake jointly. In the case of the 50+20 Innovation Cohort the participating group agreed, using different terms or language, to operate according to these principles.

Considering GRLI as an early form of collaboratory and initiator of subsequent and similar initiatives suggests that the 50+20 collaboratory at present may be defined as an emerging methodology for initiating a multi-stakeholder inclusive discourse convened around societal issues, aimed at catalyzing systemic change through individual and collective action.

Let us look at more detail into the GRLI initiatives, starting with the wine industry group.

The Western Cape wine industry group: convening diverse stakeholders around a central issue

As leading contributor to the agricultural export economy of the Western Cape province in South Africa, and with a history dating back to 1659, the wine industry not only employs a major percentage of the local population and arable land, but also presents a microcosm of the changing role of business and industry in the region.

Towards the end of 2012 the General Assembly of the Globally Responsible Leadership Initiative was hosted by Spier Wine Estate outside Stellenbosch in partnership between GRLI, University of Stellenbosch Business School, Spier, and the Albert Luthuli Centre for Responsible Leadership at University of Pretoria. One of the learning journeys planned for the event had to be cancelled due to farmworkers in the region protesting nearby demanding increases that would see them being paid a so-called living wage. Visible news coverage of the protests, which by then had turned violent, were set against the meeting backdrop of the Spier wine estate—a champion of socially and environmentally just winemaking and food production in the region. These contrasting realities underlined the urgent need for the local wine industry to increase efforts to be responsible stewards of economic and social progress while being mindful of the impact on the natural environment.

In the months that followed, the co-hosts of the 2012 GRLI General Assembly issued an open invitation to stakeholders in the Western Cape wine industry to participate in the development of a shared and open agenda for responsible action in the region—the Western Cape Wine Collaboratory. The signatories to the letter were positioned simply as the “conversation starters” jointly calling on the collective to co-develop an agenda for responsible action.

It was proposed that existing organizations and projects concerned with ethical, responsible, and sustainable winemaking and business practice—along with other critical voices that ended up including representative from key industry bodies, several wine producers, and societal stakeholders across government, civil society (including three union representatives), and academia—join in a facilitated discussion where they might:

- Develop coherence and synergies among individual strategies for responsible action
- Identify and initiate key actions within the landscape that might accelerate and aid collective efforts to develop responsible action
- Consider approaches that might add value to the development and continuation of such a collaboratory

The full-day session was facilitated by GRLI and it employed the collaboratory methodology used at the 50+20 launch complete with a traditional knobkierrie (a South African club or stick) used as a talking stick.

The discussion and input of the circle reached a rich and personal level fairly quickly—participants sensed early on that this was a safe space within which they could share openly and directly. The discussion took a dramatic turn about three hours into the meeting shortly before lunch. One of the visible figures of the protest movement, a former unionist himself, took hold of the talking stick for the first time—until then he had only been listening to the contributions of major players and producers. The anticipation within the circle was palpable. He started by acknowledging that the carefully convened and facilitated collaboratory event created the first real opportunity, in his view, for farmworker representatives along with business owners and industry stakeholders to engage in constructive dialogue about the issues at hand. He proceeded to share how, unbeknown to the winemakers present, further strikes were being mobilized at the time—a fact that was confirmed a few days later. While this news was not entirely unexpected it could hardly prepare them for what followed. The speaker then admitted that his participation in the collaboratory, something which he experienced as a unique process of building a shared agenda, convinced him to advise the union structures not to protest against or target producers that actively participate in initiatives of ethical, responsible, and sustainable winemaking.

This was clearly a breakthrough moment and it released energy and stimulated initiatives within the group that could not have been imagined beforehand. The small group work that followed over lunch and into the afternoon resulted in a number of actions being agreed by the end of the day. Most notably it was agreed within the collaboratory that they would draft and issue a joint public declaration, signed by key industry bodies, farmworker unions, and producers to condemn unfair labor practices

such as unilateral enforcement of changed working conditions and non-compliance with minimum wage legislation. The statement would also call for avoidance of potentially imminent strike action.

Although the public declaration was completed and issued it was unfortunately signed only by the sub-group to whom the action was delegated. Doing so clearly did not match the spirit and intention of the agreed guiding principles. In the view of participants interviewed after the issuance of the press release, the potential impact such a statement could have had was greatly diminished since it appeared to be coming from only one grouping within the industry. Despite this clear and obvious failure this example holds a lesson or two about convening a collaboratory and keeping the collaboratory accountable. Let us look at another example from GRLI before concluding with some suggested learning and topics for investigation.

The Innovation Cohort: responsible action through peer-learning and prototyping

In contrast to the one-off meeting of the Western Cape Wine Industry Collaboratory, the 50+20 Innovation Cohort is a work in progress rather than a work in limbo.

The launch of the 50+20 Agenda invoked positive responses worldwide and a demand for practical support in moving forward in its implementation. In response the GRLI announced a global peer-based laboratory that would enable management educators, leadership developers and organizational leaders to innovate and transform their own organizations and offerings around the key roles articulated in the 50+20 vision: educating globally responsible leaders; enabling business to become the best for the world; and engaging with societal transformation.

In May 2013 a handful of deans and directors, within a facilitated process, validated the need to bring a global network of committed peers together to prototype and pilot globally responsible change in education and business. They envisioned a shared journey and program for business school, leadership development, and corporate university leaders

to jointly build on insights developed through the 50+20 project and put the vision into action.

By the end of October the first intake of the 50+20 Innovation Cohort had been recruited and was preparing for their first meeting to take place at the University of St. Gallen in Switzerland. Each of the 18 participants representing 16 institutions prepared an overview on what they would like to contribute to the cohort and also gain from participation in the cohort. It was clear from the outset that this was a group of dedicated and committed change agents who were willing to engage fully in a process of co-learning and co-creation.

The cohort operates along the same guiding principles that inform other CoRAs and indeed the GRLI itself. From the outset it was agreed that the cohort's work would answer to the key dimensions of:

- **Result orientation.** Will it deliver visible results on the ground?
- **Long-term effects.** Will it live on and continuously affect the development of globally responsible leaders and practice?
- **Uniqueness.** Will it get things done that could not be achieved elsewhere?

Along with these criteria the cohort also agreed to undertake its work being mindful of the following:

- To encourage development through innovation with others
- To mobilize collective and individual potential
- To work with learning approaches that seek to offer both safety and freedom
- To prepare the self as an instrument of change (building on the “whole person learning” concept of GRLI and the Oasis School of Human Relations)

Underlying this approach is an acknowledgement and desire to develop globally responsible leadership and practice at individual, organizational and systemic levels—or put differently, through “I,” “we,” and “all of us.” The “I, we, all of us” phrasing and approach was first formulated by GRLI Chief Executive Mark Drewell, inspired by Don Beck's work on Spiral Dynamics. This concept also formed the basis for the three ellipses of the GRLI logo commissioned by Anders Aspling in 2006.

Within a day and half of the first cohort meeting the group self-organized into three working clusters. The clusters can be thought of as workstreams within the cohort through which participants, bringing diverse interests and strengths, may channel their energy and effort. Apart from the cohort delivering a practical or actionable output that builds on the 50+20 Agenda and vision, there are also three sub-projects driven by the clusters. The cohort also represents an explicit model of peer-based learning with all the challenges, dynamics and possibilities that such an approach shapes and demands. It is an ongoing experiment that calls for learning and development in each person, each grouping, the cohort as a whole and those facilitating the process.

Necessary phases within the effective development of the Innovation Cohort collaboratory appear to echo previous work by GRLI partners on what was termed “authentic collaboration” (Ellerby, Lockwood, Palin, Ralphs, and Taylor 2010), namely:

- Preparation and checking readiness
- Enabling authentic collaboration
- Working with the emergent challenges
- Reviewing the process

Each phase has subsets with related activities, and it is clear that while they may appear linear, it is in reality an iterative, challenging and dynamic process.

Six months after the final session the cohort will be invited to meet with the next 50+20 Innovation Cohort to support its development, to share experiences, build networks and reflect on learning and progress.

Conclusions

Informal discussions with Rio+20 collaboratory participants and participants of subsequent one-off collaboratory meetings confirmed that participation in itself was experienced as impactful or powerful and generally helped awake a sense of purpose and urgency among participants to deal with the central issue. However, many of the individual participants were left with the impression that the collaboratory refers

merely to the one-off meeting and the particular style of facilitation used. Those participating in a sequence of meetings experienced raised value and learning both as individuals and for their organization—and a pronounced appetite for continued learning and development of the collaboratory.

It is important to emphasize that a meeting in itself and the facilitation style employed is only one practical and visible act of transforming management education. The ultimately goal should be to transform our institutions and the management education industry to fully emulate the collaboratory approach in all its work—individually and institutionally.

Hosting an event or participating in a collaboratory-style meeting could, and hopefully does, signify the start of an involved process of organizational and personal inquiry into a particular issue and way of working, a process that is not only issue-centered but ultimately also demands some transformation on the part of the actors involved. And perhaps this is where both the original definition and some of the current perspectives on the meaning of collaboratory ought to be elaborated on. Should we more fully acknowledge and explicitly state the need for individual and organizational transformation through the process of continued contribution in a collaboratory setting?

First-hand enactment of the vision through participation in a session has the potential to open new perspectives on the role of institutions and individuals in solving real-world issues, even beyond the immediate research and educational interest or relevance of such issues. It appears to surface and recognize an explicit ethical dimension to the purpose of research and educational activities. This suggests to many the need for some form of “internal” work at individual and institutional level. Differently put, there is work to do at the “I” level as well as the “we” level in order to affect change at the systemic “all of us” level. Sparking action and specifically responsible action at the “me” level seems to be a critical requirement for a successful collaboratory.

In hindsight the Western Cape Wine Collaboratory had no visible and agreed mechanism in place to keep the group accountable to the actions it generated. Delegating emerging actions to smaller working groups ensured a minimum amount of momentum and responsibility at the “I” and “we” level. The group as a whole did not commit to continued development of the shared agenda, or collective and continued development

of their individual and organizational roles in the system, and as a result this collaboratory quickly ran out of steam.

On the positive side—the level of interest shown when the Wine Collaboratory was first announced, and the speed at which seats were confirmed, far exceeded the expectations of the conveners. The positive response was an indication that participants were drawn to the urgency and content of the call, but also to the innovative nature of the process as described. Immediate feedback on the process was that participants experienced it as unique and radically innovative. It proved in a real-world setting that it is possible to work together on common ground with individuals and organizations with a commitment beyond responsibility to themselves and serving the common good.

Since the Wine Collaboratory was not concerned with transforming management education it may be added here that the essence of the 50+20 vision appears to carry meaning and relevance beyond the immediate management education fraternity. Informal discussions with faculties of Law, Engineering, and Natural Science (to name a few from the higher education landscape) and direct participation from those areas in collaboratory events, confirmed how they equally own the urgency to respond to the 50+20 call—to develop responsible leaders, to enable organizations to serve the common good, and to engage more broadly and vigorously in transforming our societies and economies towards inclusive modes of being and operating.

At a minimum it appears that the degree of inclusivity required of the collaboratory, from an early agenda-setting phase through to eventual societal impact having materialized, needs to reach even further beyond the immediate and obvious stakeholders. A level of openness is required of individual and institutional participants alike, to the possibility and often necessity of transforming their own views and practice through active contribution in the collaboratory process.

These suggestions are based in part on early stage observations and come less than a year since the full 50+20 vision was published in book form as *Management Education for the World* (Muff *et al.* 2013). However it also draws on ten years of work done within and through the GRLI. Learnings from the GRLI and initiatives like the ones presented above, along with preliminary insights drawn from informal discussion as referred to earlier, hopefully serve to enrich and ultimately progress

both our theoretical understanding and our practice of convening and hosting collaboratories.

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