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Building a community of scholars: Positive relationships in a holding environment

Ian Boudville

Murdoch Business School, Murdoch University, Perth, Australia

I.Boudville@murdoch.edu.au

Dr. Megan Paull

Murdoch Business School, Murdoch University, Perth, Australia

M.Paull@murdoch.edu.au

Anne Clear

Murdoch Business School, Murdoch University, Perth, Australia

A.Clear@murdoch.edu.au

Dr. Teh Eng Choo (Elaine)

Murdoch Business School, Murdoch University, Perth, Australia

E.Teh@murdoch.edu.au

Natalie van der Waarden

Murdoch Business School, Murdoch University, Perth, Australia

N.Vanderwaarden@murdoch.edu.au

Steve Klomp

Murdoch Business School, Murdoch University, Perth, Australia

S.Klomp@murdoch.edu.au

Jean Wootton

Murdoch Business School, Murdoch University, Perth, Australia

jean@technomet.com
ABSTRACT:

Academic staff in Australian universities are experiencing significant change, generating stress and anxiety. Caught up in these emotions, individuals seek the means to manage them. Kahn (2001) suggests that an appropriate means for management of negative affect is a holding environment. A ‘collective auto-ethnography’, this paper describes the holding environment constructed by a group of academics focussing on interpersonal relationships which are at the core of the Community of Scholars (Goodman 1964). It offers evidence that the holding environment created by this mutual collaboration between like-minded people has served to provide support for those involved. A holding environment may be an option to be considered by others facing dynamic change.

Keywords: adapting to change, managing change; flexibility, organisational learning, holding environment

The benefit of the ECR [group] is its collegiate nature. It brings people together on a voluntary basis and brings people together who might not normally meet in other than formal settings such as faculty/school meetings. No-one is trying to score points or achieve anything other than the intrinsic outcome of helping those of us who are beginning researchers. [The School] has also benefitted from the development of a sense of direction for early researchers previously left to their own device. (Early Career Researcher –ECR group member)

In the late 1940s, Karl Jaspers described a university as “a community of scholars and students engaged in the task of seeking truth ... it derives its autonomy ... from ... academic freedom. ... Academic freedom is a privilege which entails the obligation to teach truth, in defiance of anyone outside or inside the university who wishes to curtail it.” (Jaspers 1960: 19). While Jaspers may have been describing the Platonic Ideal of a University, it is the pursuit of this Ideal that has transformed society. As social transformation takes place against a backdrop of decreasing marginal utility of expended resources, the University’s infinite challenge of research, teaching and community service becomes constrained by finite resources (Altbach, Reisberg & Rumbley 2009). The modern university needs to transform itself (Marginson 2011) and this change is taking place in universities around the world. This paper does not seek to address the lofty ideal of what form that change should take. Whatever form changes take, there have been effects upon the people that make up the Community of Scholars, such as stress, anxiety and dissatisfaction (Bexley, James & Arkoudis 2011). This paper describes the response of a group of academics caught up in the maelstrom, the difficulties that change entails, and their initial steps to deal with the externalities of change by focussing on interpersonal relationships, which Goodman (1964) describes as being at the core of the Community of Scholars.
This paper will first describe the current higher education environment in Australia and outline the effect of this environment on academic staff. The concept of a holding environment will then be introduced followed by a first person narrative of the construction and evolution of such an environment in an Australian business school. While the tangible outcomes for the individuals in the holding environment are easily quantified, less evident are the intangible outcomes. Hence the basic objective of this paper is to describe the intangible outcomes of the holding environment and its efficacy in dealing with the stresses and strains as they currently exist in Australia’s higher education sector. The method of exploration is described and key themes arising are discussed. We will conclude with a summary of key findings and offer directions for future research, as well as speculation on the shape this holding environment will take in the future.

THE SETTING

Academic staff in Australian universities are experiencing a range of changes. At times they may feel as though they are under siege. Reference to media sources which focus on the higher education sector (e.g. the Higher Education Section of The Australian; the Education section of the Financial Review; Campus Review) and to organs of the National Tertiary Education Union, Universities Australia and relevant government bodies, are testament to the myriad of changes visiting the profession and its context. Recent research undertaken across twenty of Australia’s universities has shown that Australian academics exhibit high levels of motivation, while at the same time expressing serious concern about the conflicting demands in their roles (Bexley, James & Arkoudis, 2011).

At the student and teaching level the ‘massification’ (Altbach et al. 2009) of tertiary education at a global level is coupled with moves to a market driven environment for undergraduate places, the advent of the new regulatory regime in the form of the Tertiary Education Quality Standards Agency (TEQSA), the replacement of the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) with the Office of Learning and Teaching (OLT), and the demands of the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF). There are often also priorities to maintain any offshore relationships. At the research level, Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) is changing the whole research environment.
In this environment business schools are particularly in the spotlight, having, in many universities, been a cash cow (Wilson & McKiernan 2011). A renewed focus on research outputs has placed business schools under increased scrutiny. While quality teaching and relevant curriculum are required, staff are also being asked to look at their publishing profile. There is an increased emphasis on having a doctoral qualification, and a publication record, where this was not previously emphasised. Casualisation of the workforce, and short term contractual arrangements for those who do not have doctorates, makes those who want to stay in the sector feel vulnerable.

Universities have moved from attracting star performers (read high levels of publication in recognised journals) to scrutinising the research activity of existing staff and setting goals for deliverables aimed at lifting the research performance of the university (Hare 2012; Mather 2012a; Rowbotham 2012). This focus has led to redundancies and non renewal of contracts (e.g. Mather 2012b; Hare 2012) and an examination of ways to identify research-led teaching approaches (Hiatt 2012).

WHAT IS A HOLDING ENVIRONMENT?

Changing and challenging contexts commonly generate negative affect in individuals (Fugate, Kinicki, & Prussia 2008). Caught up in negative emotions, individuals seek the means by which such feelings can be contained and managed. Kahn (2001) suggests that an appropriate vessel for containment and management is a holding environment. If contained well, the individual is able to grow and develop as an organisational member. If holding is inadequate, the individual can respond with cynicism about change efforts, withdrawing affective commitment (Wanous, Reichers, & Austin 2000), and, in concert with others, create dysfunctional authority-relations (Kahn 2001). The concept of a holding environment was developed by Winnicott (Abram 2008) to describe a parenting relationship that had reliable and safe boundaries within which experimentation could occur in order to meet life’s challenges. Winnicott’s conceptualisation of a holding environment is analogous to Bowlby’s “secure base” in Attachment Theory (Greenhalgh 1994). The central postulate of a holding environment or a secure base is to facilitate continued positive development of an
individual through to adulthood. The holding environment concept has also been extended to organisations positive development of workers in organisations (Kahn 2001).

There is no consensus on the strict definition of a holding environment (Van Buskirk & McGrath 1999). To Heifetz a holding environment is an intentionally created “relationship in which one party has the power to hold the attention of another party and facilitate adaptive work” (Heifetz, 1994: 104/5). Van Buskirk and McGrath (1999: 812) define it as “… those practices and symbols characteristic of a local organisational culture which supports (either well or poorly) the specific identities of organisational members”. Kahn (2001: 260) identifies a holding environment as “interpersonal or group-based relationships that enable self-reliant workers to manage situations that trigger potentially debilitating anxiety”. These definitions are not incompatible if a linear perspective of the organisation is adopted. If the snapshot, point-in-time view of a holding environment of Kahn (2001) and Heifetz (1994) allows the group to cope with the negative emotions that can arise due to change, then aspects of that holding environment can be extended beyond the group to the organisation, driving change in the organisational culture. This may be the basis for Stapley’s (2006) assertion that the holding environment can be the progenitor of organisational culture. Indeed, applying Pascale and Sternin’s (2005) model of positive deviance, a holding environment could become the nucleus around which an organisation’s culture can coalesce.

To create a sustainable holding environment, Kahn (2001) identifies the necessary conditions: optimum range of anxiety, trusting movement towards others, available and competent holding and competent receiving within resilient boundaries and positive outcomes. The absence of any of these conditions leads to the failure of the holding environment. The difficulty is creating a confluence of the conditions, making holding environments rare in the modern workplace. Yet it is precisely such conditions that make holding environments critical (Heifetz 1994).

Long, et al.(1997) reported on an organisation, facing precisely these conditions, that turned to a holding environment in order to facilitate its work. Long’s group was successful in creating a good enough holding environment within the group steering change, but it had mixed success in
concurrently extending that holding environments beyond the steering committee to the wider organisation. Long, et al. (1997) posit that this was due to the holding environment beyond the steering committee being not good enough. Miller (1995) suggests that a holding environment is also critical to healthy organisations. In one intervention, Miller described how a fractured work unit reported improved morale and work quality following the construction of a good enough holding environment to contain the negative emotions associated with growth. As with the steering committee described by Long et al., this holding environment was constructed not to diminish these negative emotions. Instead, they were raised and discussed openly, with the intention of facilitating further development in the work groups.

Holding environments are not one-size-fits-all environments. They are crafted for a specific purpose, given the context of the wider organisation. They may reflect the organisation’s culture (Van Buskirk & McGrath, 1999) or run counter to it (Long, et al. 1997). While holding environments may be described as ‘safety nets’ (Kahn 2001: 276) that allow emotional release, a more accurate term would be ‘safety trampoline’. The former graphically captures the notion of catching, however the latter not only catches but also propels upwards, incorporating the additional notion of emotional and social development. This development permits orientation towards proactive behaviours to prevent the build up of negative emotions. Though the holding environment has its genesis in psychotherapy, in the workplace it is not a therapy group, focussing on work-related issues (Kahn 2001).

In this paper, a collective approach is used to explore the crafting of a holding environment for a group of business school academics as their response to the challenges in Australia’s higher education sector. Auto-ethnography was the starting point for the development of this paper.

**APPROACH**

Auto-ethnography can be used “to refer to the kind of writing that inquires into the self as part of a socio cultural context” (Glesne 2011: 247). It is less of a methodology than a narrative, and at times can be seen as a form of creative non-fiction, where authors create texts to explore aspects of their lives. Variations on the approach include the work of Weaver-Hightower (2011) reflecting on the loss
of his stillborn daughter, to Barker-Ruchti (2008) weaving her own story into the stories of Australian women gymnasts in training. Published auto ethnographies tend to be created by an individual or couple. This paper involved a whole group, and could be seen as being guided by some of the principles of collective auto-ethnography.

The term ‘collective auto-ethnography’ had been used to refer to a method adopted by Kidd and Finlayson (2010) to describe their collation of auto-ethnographic stories from nurses about their experiences with mental illness. The collaborative effort in the development of this paper was similar, involving the other storytellers in the evolution and authorship of the paper.

Group members first contributed to this paper by reflecting on six open-ended questions about their experiences with the group. The questions asked members to describe why they joined the group; what outcomes they had received or anticipated to receive from the group; what personal benefits they had derived from being part of the group; what benefits they perceived had accrued to the School from the group and what they would like to see for this group in the future. The authors have contributed to the paper through their answers to the survey and the development of the discussion. Contribution to the paper was voluntary and no individual comments have been attributed or used without consent. Direct quotes from the reflective process are italicised for clarity.

We also explored the early emails amongst members, and sought recollections from each other in constructing the story of the evolution; as well as seeking reflective retrospection about context and culture, including norms and roles.

Myers (2009) posits that ethnographic work should be evaluated according to four criteria: contribution, insight, data and method. The description here contributes to understanding holding environments in two ways – first by presenting the evolution and sustenance of the environment as a lived experience, and second by outlining the deliberate yet fluid evolution of the environment to meet participant needs. The insights in this paper are an unfolding story which will need to be followed up in the longer term. The data is linear and collected over the period of the existence of the
group. The stories of the individuals show that there are not only personal benefits from the holding environment, but also benefits for the greater organisation.

Freshwater, Cahill, Walsh and Muncey (2010) identify criteria for rigour and relevance in qualitative research. Identifying auto-ethnography as an approach that draws on individual experiences, they “hesitate to call it a research method” (504) despite recognition of individual stories as a legitimate source of data. Despite this, they go on to endorse auto-ethnography as an example of a “transformational approach to qualitative research” (506). It is acknowledged that the approach to the phenomenon under investigation shapes the outcomes. In the words of Cresswell (2013: 278) “our writing is an interpretation by us .... and individuals reading our accounts will have their own interpretations.”

**ORIGINS OF THE GROUP**

*I started feeling lonely, pressured, frustrated and angry because looking back I feel that I was getting no support ie. the emotional or academic support – no one to answer questions, did not know who to turn to – people were so busy they did not have time for me.* (ECR group member).

As contracted staff we felt disillusioned and isolated. Relatively junior, no doctoral degree, limited mentoring and a general feeling of *I didn’t know how to get started.* We recognised that an avenue needed to be developed to support staff attempting and needing to undertake a Higher Degree by Research (HDR) and develop a research publication profile, required for continued employment in the new academic environment.

Following corridor conversations late in 2008, an email was sent to five colleagues to request feedback on a PhD research proposal. There were no further developments until May 2009 where, in an email regarding the proposal presentation, the idea of a self help group for staff undertaking HDRs was also mooted. The first formal meeting of the group took place in November 2009. The email inviting participants to this meeting set out the raison d’être for the group:

*An informal meeting to: exchange ideas; discuss issues, solutions or just complain; introduce/develop research proposals and the possibility of future collaborative publications. It is hoped to establish a network of support within the school which can be used to foster and develop ‘junior’ researchers.* (Email, November 2009 ECR group member)
A group of academics were invited: contracted staff; early career researchers needing to complete higher degrees and publish but under increased teaching workloads, and *nice people* who would contribute to the feeling of collegiality to join. The invited group specifically included academics from all business disciplines, and the length of service ranged from very new staff to seasoned teachers. Academics, needing a safe and supportive environment, wanting to engage with others could contribute to developing a research culture.

The group has become known as the ECR group, a name derived from the fact that all members are early career researchers. There are now four to five meetings each year. At the group meetings one member will give a presentation of their research. Following the presentation there is an opportunity for discussion and feedback. At each meeting those present give a short up date of how their work is progressing. This has led to affirmation that our research experiences are common.

Three years on, there is no requirement for any group member to attend at any meeting. The need for this form of group is evident from the fact that at the meeting held in May 2012 there were fourteen researchers present. In a small school this is a good turnout.

The school hierarchy is aware of the group but has no formal involvement. There is a level of consensus amongst members that it is desirable for the group to operate independently. The group has advocated on behalf of members. Members now have a voice on the school research committee. This constitutes acknowledgement of the group by senior staff.

This account of the origins of the group has been presented from the founders’ perspectives. The individual stories of the members in this collective auto-ethnographic exploration offer a range of themes for further discussion in relation to this holding environment. These are explored below.

While group members have different perspectives on the group and its benefits, there is also agreement on a number of themes. We all seem to be looking for support, collegiality and relationships to assist us in the complex environment. One member observed that it is a *core group of like minded individuals who are actively trying to meet the demands made of the School, be it in research or in teaching. A diverse group of people who try to break down the silo mentality.* The
feeling of inexperience and the demands of the workplace are reflected in the story of another member: *I work full time and find the demands to research and study in addition, overwhelming and I get lost in my own self demoralisation.* Members seeking safety and security are also looking for ways to improve their research, *learn about the research process,* and replace their inexperience with a sense of achievement. The point was made that the School would also accrue benefits including *a lifting of morale.* One story outlined that the School now has a *collaborative informal support group with an open door policy, with no attendance requirement, and offers a flexible supportive environment for the researchers who are trying to establish themselves in a competitive and stressful environment.*

The outcomes for the members include intangible elements such as a feeling of belonging, *support, safety, and collegiality.* One member described the feeling of *camaraderie, that others nearby are facing similar challenges and are persevering with them, like me.* The opportunity of *getting to know colleagues I would not otherwise have known personally* was expressed.

Members expressed appreciation of the informality, exchange among equals, and *egalitarian,* peer support. *No-one is trying to score points.* One member used the word *sanctuary* going on to say *I see this as a means to navigate the research gauntlet with minimum harm to myself.*

There was also evidence in the stories that members felt there were constructive outcomes such as being able to have a peer critique a draft, *or the opportunity to learn about what other researchers are doing and to help anyone with a solvable issue.* The round table updates from all at the gatherings is a constructive and beneficial time for all involved, *even the individual, as we hear ourselves reporting on our own research.* Interestingly, when asked to identify outcomes, members tended to focus on the intangibles such as feelings of support and encouragement, rather than the tangible achievements such as presentations and higher degree enrolments.

Generally we identified the outcomes for the School and the University in terms of the fact that this is working for us in the absence of other more formal structures, but that those structures are still needed. It was identified by one member that the group is a nurturing place for growing research and for *building the talent pipeline in terms of qualifying people who already ‘fit’ in the school.* Another
A group member observed *this support can only be viewed in a positive light by external sources and colleagues still thinking of breaking into the research world.* These views reflect the common understanding that the School and the University must focus on research as a priority, keeping research *top of mind* for members.

There are two views expressed about the future of the group. The first is that the group should maintain its status and continue to be a supportive, informal group. One member observed that *I would not like the group to become a formally convened entity of the school;* while another expressed the view that it should *not become so large that it loses its personal touch.* In contrast, some members seek a more formal structured approach. It is important that the group achieves both: the former by maintaining the informal regular contact and support of the ECR group; the latter, by empowering members to involve themselves in the structured research activities of the School outside the group. This group will be enhanced by drawing in new members and by current members remembering the benefits they have derived and continuing to be involved. The work of this group will, hopefully, enhance the confidence and self-efficacy of members who will then be able to seek support, in grant seeking, writing, and problem solving, from more experienced researchers.

**DISCUSSION**

This discussion will be structured around Kahn’s (2001) necessary conditions for a holding environment: optimum range of anxiety; trusting movement towards others; available and competent holding and receiving within resilient boundaries; and positive outcomes.

**Optimum range of anxiety**

There is no means to determine if the optimum range of anxiety has been attained. There does seem to be consensus that levels of anxiety have been reduced by involvement in the ECR group over time. This suggests that the environment within the group does allow for the release of negative affect, allowing participants to regain perspective over their research programs and HDR progress. It is important to note that negative emotions are not removed, but expressions of dissatisfaction are
encouraged to enable participants to share these experiences for support in the form of affirmation and feedback.

**Trusting movement towards others**

The paradox of sharing of experiences and emotions to reduce anxiety is that it can also increase anxiety: such sharing can potentially make participants feel vulnerable and exposed. The circuit breaker is trust. Trust, therefore, is an essential component of a holding environment and requires participants to make what Mollering calls “a leap of faith” (2005: 296). The extent to which participants had made this leap of faith was evident in their decision to dry run their research proposal presentations or present research findings. Less tangible evidence of this trust, but no less concrete, was characterising the ECR group as a sanctuary, where support was asked for and received, giving rise to feelings of collegiality.

**Available and competent holding and receiving within resilient boundaries**

At the most basic level, meetings were scheduled for group members at regular intervals or when needed. This temporary, physical setting delineated a boundary that stopped the distractions of the workplace from intruding into the space. Availability though, is more than physical presence. Competent holding and receiving is evidenced by members actively sharing their own research experiences in order to illuminate the path forward for others, or to validate others’ experiences. While members valued the opportunity to hold and be held by others, they also recognised that the ECR group is a support and not a crutch to usurp their sense of self-efficacy.

**Positive experiences and outcomes**

Positive experiences and outcomes are the life blood of holding environments: facilitating these positive experiences and outcomes helps holding environments sustain themselves. At the very least, the ECR group has reduced levels of anxiety. Members viewed the meetings as an opportunity to be joined with like-minded individuals facing similar challenges and this engendered feelings of support, understanding and trust and confidence in the other members of the group.
WHERE TO FROM HERE?

Due to the informal nature of the group and that it is not an official group of the School, there is a risk that the group is an extension only of the individuals who created it. This can be both a positive and a negative. Should the group determine that levels of anxiety are too high, it could develop into a subgroup with the School characterised by cynicism, mistrust and suspicion, in essence a deviant subgroup. This is not the envisioned future for the group, hence the focus on Jasper’s (1960) Community of Scholars as a guiding principle. At the core of the group is the question “How can we evolve into a community of scholars?” The group has survived thus far because of the continued involvement of a handful of members. It serves the purpose of those individuals, as well as facilitating an opportunity for others to collaborate. The long term future of this group is uncertain, and will need to be addressed by the group. The purpose of the group will continue to guide the construction of the holding environment that is created.

It will be interesting to see where the ECR group goes from here. One of the key things will be to retain the informal, egalitarian collegiality and support which it has generated, while seeking ways for it to thrive. I would hate to see it absorbed into the infrastructure of the school as it develops, and become a formal group, but I would also be disappointed if it did not succeed in achieving greater recognition of the needs of ECR researchers. It is really great to be a part of this, and I hope it will continue. (ECR group member)

Bexley, James and Arkoudis (2011) have identified that there is a need for Australian universities to consider the future of academia, and to address the changing environment, while nurturing the next generation of scholars. It is likely that it will be appropriate for other groups of scholars to develop their own strategies for negotiating the changing pathways. It is evident that the holding environment created by this mutual collaboration between like-minded people has served to provide support for those involved to date. It may be that constructing a holding environment is an option to be considered by others seeking mutual support in a dynamic, anxiety-inducing setting. Its application extends beyond the higher education environment described in this paper. Refinement of the concept of the holding environment and its application in a range of settings would require further research, including investigation of its genesis, management and evolution.
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