

Creative collaboration as a bridge between old and new power to achieve social change

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Keywords

Old power, new power, co-production, facilitator, creative collaboration, campaigning, partnership

Introduction

As a facilitator, working for the Royal College of Nursing (RCN) - a large membership organisation that is both a trade union and a professional body - my role as a social change agent has always been a significant part of who I am. Facilitating others to make real and meaningful change in the experience of nursing staff and the people they care for is very important to me. This feels particularly important at a time when health and social care services are coming under increasing pressure and threat from sources that range from demographic to ideological.

In the summer of 2018, my organisation suffered a very public and uncomfortable disruption when a sizeable number of active members mobilised to express their unhappiness about the implementation of an NHS pay deal that included nursing staff. Details of the outcome and issues involved have been well-documented elsewhere ([Independent](#); [Nursing Notes](#); [Nursing Times](#), 2018), and I am not intending to revisit these here. However, the events of that summer – occurring just after I had completed an [Advanced Diploma in Leading Creative Collaboration](#) – prompted me to think about where power sits within a membership organisation, and about the contribution I can make as a facilitator to bringing people together through creative collaboration.

Here, I argue that creative collaboration provides an approach that brings people together as equal partners working towards a shared goal, providing a safe space for innovative thinking in a spirit of curiosity and mutual respect.

Old power structures and the rise of the new

The [Royal College of Nursing](#) is over 100 years old. We celebrated our centenary in 2016, and are the world's largest nursing union and professional body, with just over 432,000 members working across the health and social care sectors in the UK. We have over 900 staff, working in offices in all four UK countries, with a large headquarters in Oxford Circus in central London. Like many traditional organisations we have a well-established corporate and governance structure, but as a membership organisation and trade union we also have an extremely large and widely distributed membership, many of whom are natural campaigners and activists.

In reflecting on what happened when a group of our active members challenged and brought down our corporate leader and governors – both the Chief Executive and the elected Council of Members – I found recent work around the concepts of old and new power to be very helpful (Heimans 2014 and 2018). This article draws upon my experiences and reflections of that episode, and offers some insights into co-production as a process of creative collaboration in working with different forms of power, distinguishing between old and new forms.

Old power

In their book, Heimans and Timms describe old power as the traditionally understood model of top-down authority, invested in a few senior individuals who make key decisions about the strategic direction of the organisation. Communication with the rest of the organisation is prescriptive and formal, with an expectation that others will co-operate with the vision from the top. Old power is held by those who also have formal or designated authority and seniority within the organisational structure.

'Old power works like a currency. It is held by few. Once gained, it is jealously guarded, and the powerful have a substantial store of it to spend. It is closed, inaccessible, and leader-driven. It downloads, and it captures'. (Heimans 2014)

New power

New power operates very differently. It can be held by individuals who may have little or no formal or designated authority within the organisation, and they may not even be employed there. Those who exercise new power do so informally and through relationship-building. The advent of social media platforms means that they can find one another more easily and combine their activity to develop their influence and reach.

'New power operates differently, like a current. It is made by many. It is open, participatory, and peer-driven. It uploads, and it distributes. Like water or electricity, it's most forceful when it surges. The goal with new power is not to hoard it but to channel it'. (Heimans 2014)

Old and new power working together: a co-production?

Reflecting on the model represented in Figure 1 during and since the challenges of that difficult summer, it seemed to me that more traditional corporate structures will naturally tend towards an 'old power' style of interaction. Formal authority and power sit with a few at the top of the organisation, and is potentially experienced by others as prescriptive, commanding and transactional. In an organisation such as the RCN,

that additionally has its roots in professional membership and trade unionism, it is not surprising that it could be experienced as operating out of the expert position of 'telling', rather than being truly collaborative and 'listening'.

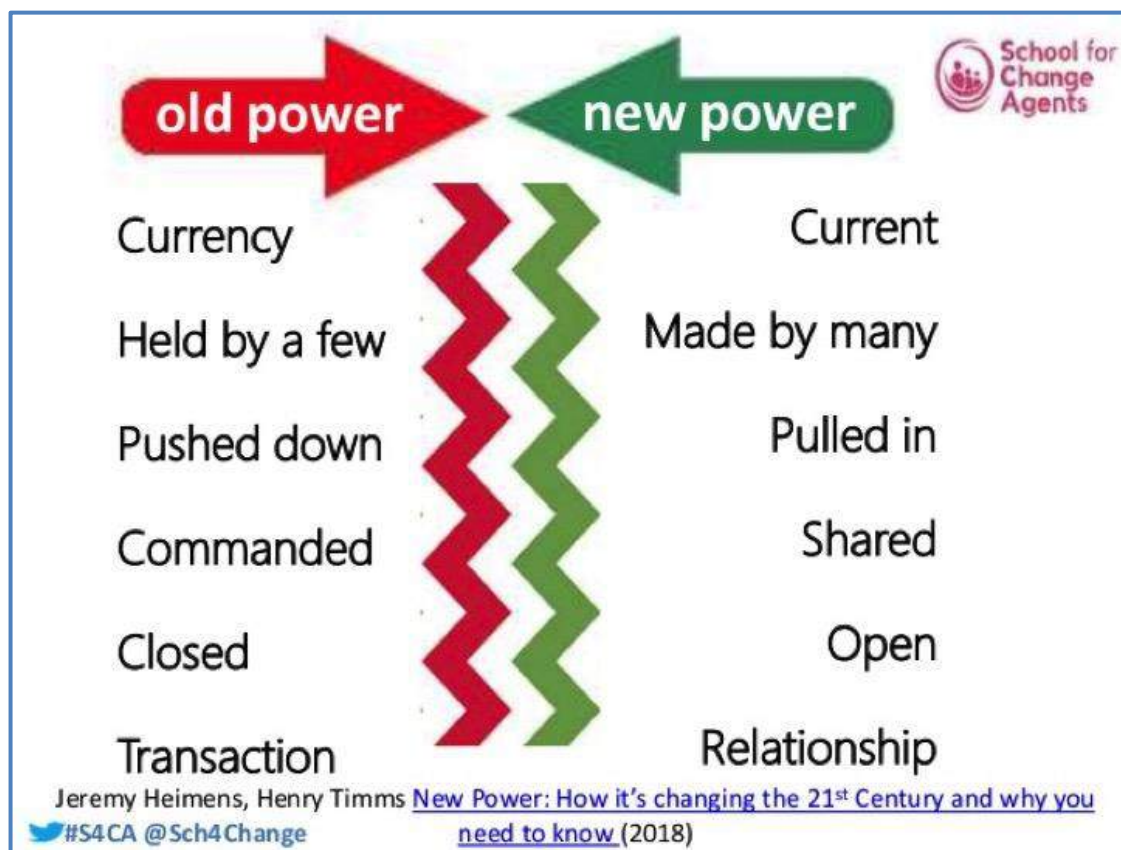


Fig 1: Old power versus new power (reproduced with permission of NHS Horizons)

In contrast, it seemed to me that our activist members operated very much out of a new power base, pulling in and mobilising support from others through the use of social media and practical campaigning tactics to challenge the perceived old power base.

In watching the resulting fall-out - the resignation of elected member leaders and the departure of the corporate leader - I found myself wondering whether old and new power could work together, instead of against one another. Could both parts of the organisation be brought together to build a collective power base in pursuit of a shared purpose around social change? I felt it could be argued that the whole organisation – both members and staff – want the best-possible outcomes for the nursing workforce and the people it cares for. Surely there should be a way of uniting all of us in pursuit of that common goal?

Identifying a shared purpose around social change

Current challenges across the UK in terms of nursing staff shortage – sitting at just over 40,000 vacancies in England alone at the time of writing – are having a strongly negative impact on our members, and on society as a whole. RCN members and staff alike recognise this as a national crisis that needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency by health and social care system decision-makers.

The RCN 'engaging active members' project

Throughout 2018 I was involved in an RCN project that was looking at identifying new and tested ways of engaging more positively with our members. This project preceded the subsequent period of difficulty but proved to be extremely timely in terms of addressing our corporate understanding of how members experienced the organisation and how they did (or didn't) engage with it.

As a baseline for our improvement work, we set out to identify two specific areas of member perception:

1. The issues that they felt strongly enough about to be prepared to be active with us to effect positive change; and
2. How engaged they currently felt with the organisation

Key findings

From this we identified that **staffing levels and the resulting quality of care for patients and clients is the number one issue** that members would like to tackle to improve their working lives. However, when we asked them about the ways in which they were encouraged to work with the RCN to address important issues and bring about positive change, it was clear that **they did not feel empowered or engaged**.

As a way of describing levels of involvement, we used an adapted version of the ladder of participation (NCAG 2018), which was in turn developed from the work of Sherry Arnstein on citizen participation (Arnstein 1969).

Members were asked to describe which of a series of statements best described their relationship with the RCN. (More than one option could be selected)

The results – presented in Figure 2 - show that an overwhelming proportion of our members who took part in the survey felt, at best, informed and educated by their engagement with the RCN. However, only a tiny proportion felt actively engaged and involved with the college in co-production and co-design.

Given that these results come from a group of members who were sufficiently engaged to respond to the on-line survey, it is certainly possible that the wider membership perceptions around how they participate in the activity of the college would be skewed even lower.

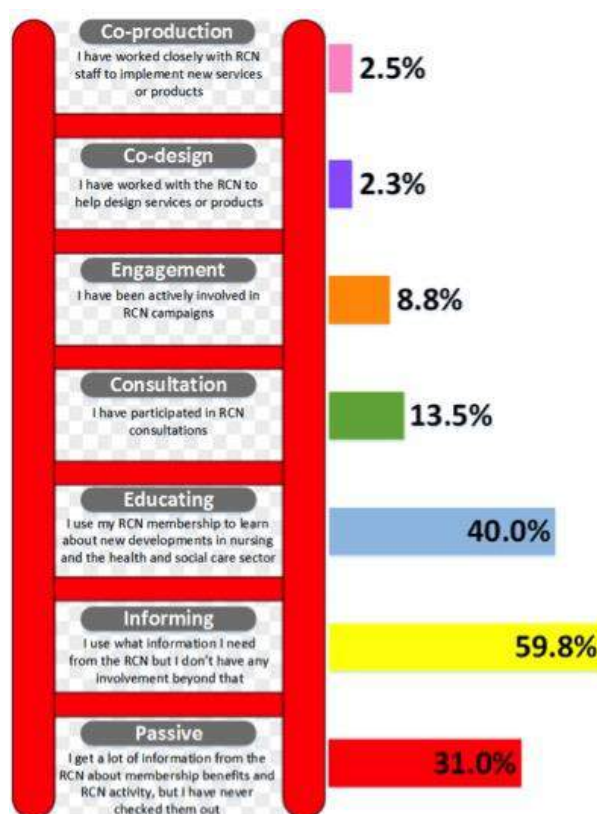


Fig 2: Ladder of participation findings for RCN members (RCN 2019)

Co-owning and co-producing

In their work on old and new power, Heimans and Timms talk about levels of participation.

‘New power gains its force from people’s growing capacity – and desire – to go far beyond passive consumption of ideas and goods’. (Heimans 2014)

This desire to be more than a consumer of services, moving instead to co-owning and co-producing, seems to me to be a key issue particularly for membership organisations like ours. At the time of the difficulty with members it was recognised by the incoming CEO that we needed to move to being more collaborative and collegiate – bringing members right into the heart of the work of the College.

It could be argued that our failure to achieve this shift was a contributory factor in the difficulties and challenges we experienced from our active members. And in addition, it is likely that a continued failure would limit our potential to be a strong, collegiate force for the social change we all want to achieve.

An analysis of a range of successful campaigns, by the Sheila McKechnie Foundation (2018) has shown that positive social change is often achieved as a result of concerted and aligned campaigning activity in four quadrants. They call this the social change grid (Fig 3a).

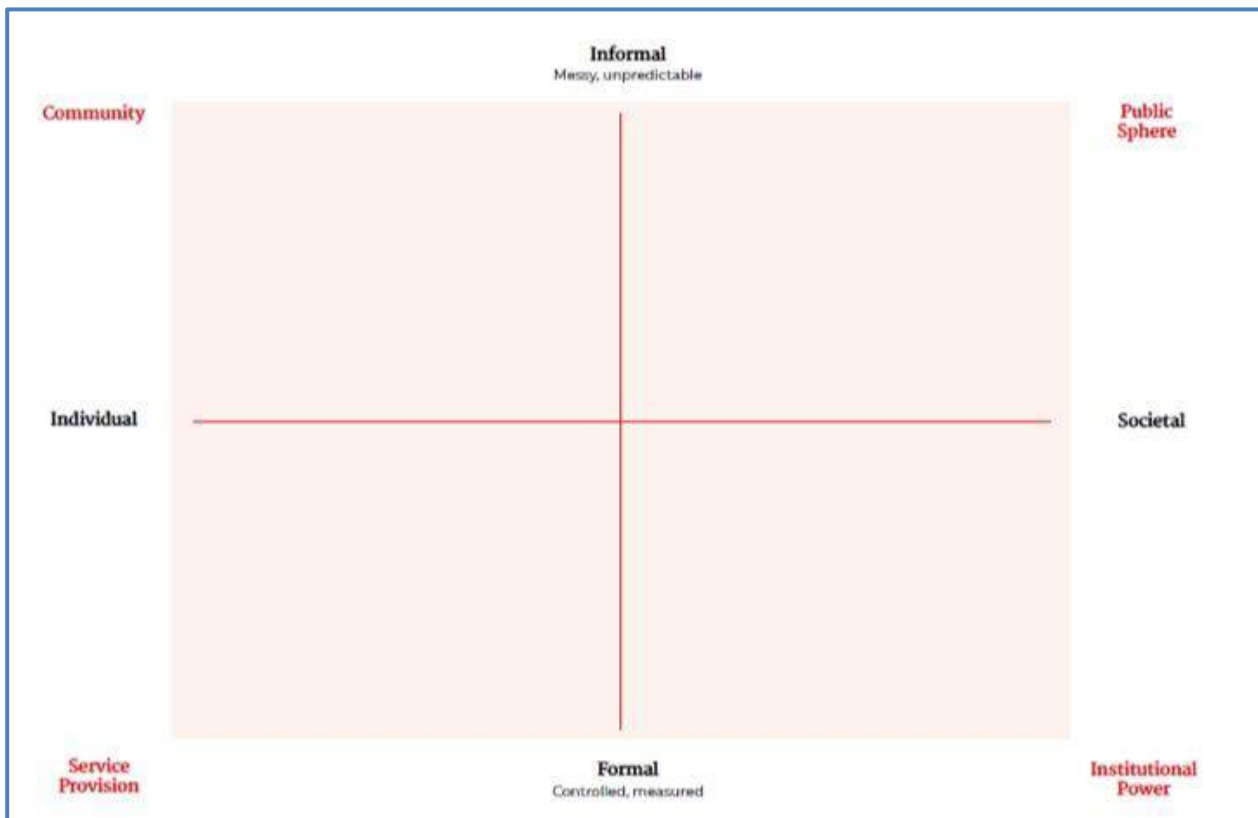


Fig 3a: The Social Change Grid

(Figs 3a and 3b both reproduced with the permission of the Sheila McKechnie Foundation)

The social change grid is made up of four quadrants: the bottom two are relatively formal and controlled, and include traditional power structures from governmental to organisational. The upper two quadrants are messier and less predictable, and include individual communities as well as the wider public sphere. The two right-sided quadrants reflect work on a societal level, whilst the two left-sided quadrants tend to involve individuals or smaller numbers in the relevant activities.

The findings of this analysis suggest that successful campaigning will often require differentiated activity in each of the four quadrants. Figure 3b below shows the range of different types of activity that can be undertaken in each of the quadrants.

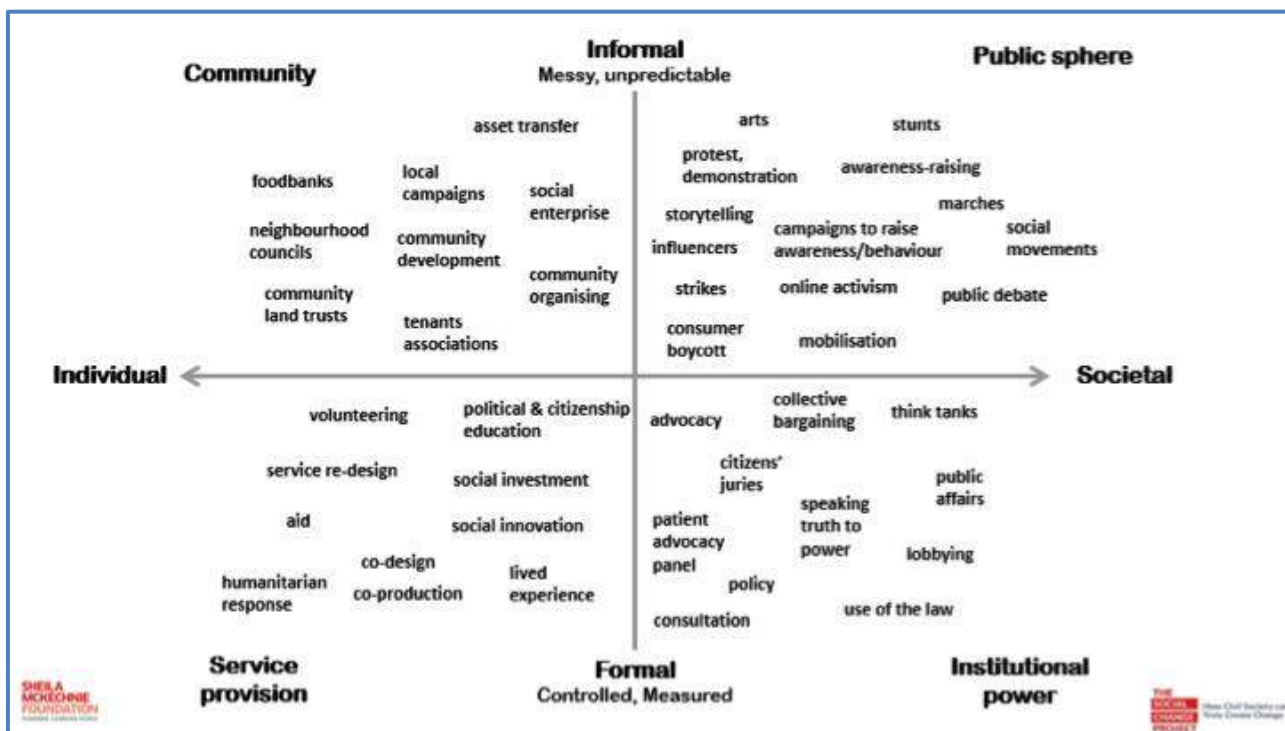


Fig 3b: The Populated Social Change Grid

When the RCN has campaigned to address change within the health and social care sector in the past, its ‘old power’ activity has tended to be primarily focused on, and most effective in, the formal institutional power quadrant of the grid (bottom right). This makes sense in that many of the decisions that need to be taken to address the issues within the sector will involve government intervention, therefore necessitating work to be done within the corridors of old power to make the case for change. Traditionally this activity has been led by staff with specialised expertise in policy and public affairs who influence through responses to consultations and lobbying around policy and legislative change.

However, the success of this approach also requires a political will to listen and agree to the required interventions. New power can invigorate the work of formal old power by pulling in, and mobilising, activity within the other three quadrants - in workplaces, communities and with the wider public - to build up the ‘heat’ on institutional power so that the issues that both old and new power care about can no longer be ignored.

In her speech to the RCN Congress in May 2019, incoming CEO Donna Kinnair recognised the approach that was needed and made a commitment to working together to raise our collective voices and influence.

‘The College is changing. And through this, Congress, we are rediscovering our voice. That voice is the member voice. It is you our members leading the campaigns and lobbying. There is a genuine commitment to change’. (Nursing in Practice 2019)

I would add that this approach relies on old and new power working together in collaboration, pulling together in the same direction to contribute to the same goal. And this is where I believe that creative collaboration comes in – providing an approach and safe space for old and new power proponents to come together in a spirit of curiosity and mutual respect.

The power of creative collaboration as a bridge between old and new power

Creative collaboration is an approach that brings people together in an improvisational space that allows room for individuals to share and build on one another’s ideas so that the outputs are more than the sum of all of the parts (Sawyer, 2008).

‘Innovations result from an invisible collaborative web with single sparks gathering together over time, multiple dead ends, and the reinterpretation of previous ideas’ (Sawyer 2008 pg. xi)

The model is one of collaborative members working together as equal partners with hierarchical, formal authority left at the door, and everyone’s contribution being valid and valued. In addition, the use of creative activity as part of the collaborative work allows for all participants to be part of the creative process, moving away from traditional formats and approaches that can favour the input of more senior and experienced group members.

Creative collaboration theory in practice: the RCN national campaign

At the beginning of 2019, the RCN decided to develop and launch a national campaign in England to address the emerging nursing workforce crisis as a known key imperative for our members. This seemed to me to present us with a golden opportunity to respond to the criticisms levelled at the College in the previous year concerning lack of true member-voice and leadership and ways of working that failed to draw in and capitalise on the expertise and experience of our 420,000 plus members.

In the RCN structure, England is divided into nine regions (Fig 4).

Having obtained senior support for the creative collaboration approach to be used in the development and implementation of RCN England’s ‘Staffing for Safe and Effective Care’ campaign, I designed and facilitated a launch collaborative event in February 2019 and nine subsequent regional collaborative events.

We asked each region to nominate four campaign leads for the launch event – an active member, a trade union representative, a student member and a member of staff.



Fig 4: The nine RCN England regions

This approach was designed to ensure that both staff and members were part of the initial creative collaborative. Subsequent regional events broadened out the involvement of both members and staff with senior regional staff and members from across all membership categories coming together to build the campaign from the grassroots up. Invitations to be involved were communicated in a way that ensured all members had an opportunity to express an interest in taking part. This resulted in many people commenting on the high number of members attending who were previously unknown to their regional offices.

Principles

Before the launch event, I developed a set of eight principles that I asked the England Campaign Project Board to sign up to (Figure 5), and then shared with each collaborative so that everyone taking part was aware of the stance being taken. This felt important in the context of the previous summer of crisis, and also in making explicit the intention of the organisation to work with and listen to all members.

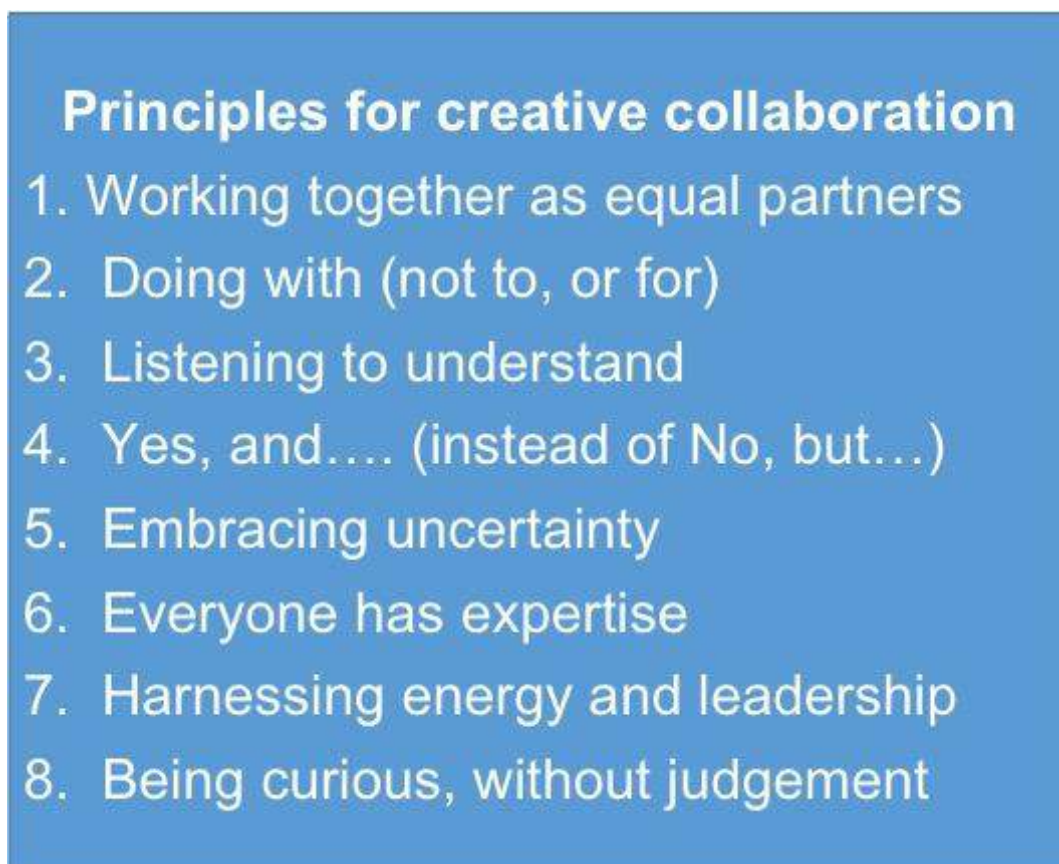


Fig 5: The eight RCN principles for creative collaboration (Source: O'Siochru 2018)

These principles were drawn from a range of models from creative collaboration (Sawyer 2008), community activism (Bolton 2017) and quality improvement (Institute for Healthcare Improvement 2003) through to our own forthcoming report outlining successful approaches to connecting and campaigning with members (RCN 2019).

Some creative approaches and relationships

All events used creative approaches to the generation and development of ideas. We asked participants to work with images, words and creative process to capture the issues and their ideas about what was possible (Figure 6).

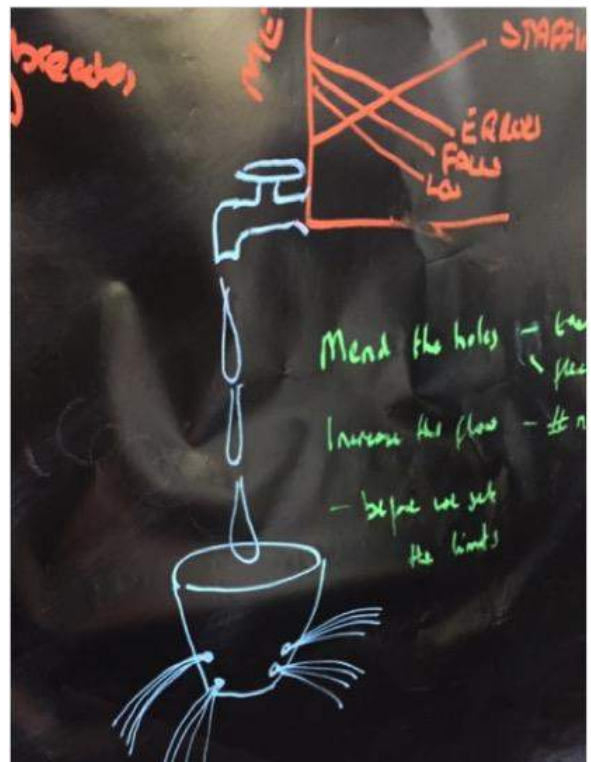


Fig 6: The creative collaborative at work (Images by O'Siochru)

The approaches adopted ranged from drawing and film-making to poetry writing and performance. In designing the events, I realised that it would be essential to create spaces that felt open, accepting and collegiate. Members and staff would be sitting alongside and working with one another, and senior managers who wanted to attend were asked to be there as observers, not leaders, listening carefully to the ideas coming from the room, without judgement or critique.

Practice and outcomes

Setting out expectations in advance, and the use of new and different creative approaches to the generation of ideas, resulted in collaborations that were highly creative, energetic and enthusiastic. Participants enthusiastically embraced the challenge to think differently and creatively with truly innovative results. The range of outputs from images and stories to poems and films was beyond anything we had achieved in the past in working with our members.

‘With visual creativity, researchers have found that groups beat out solo workers. Many innovations depend on visualisation, abstract representation and complex relations’

(Sawyer 2008 pg. 69)

Some of the films that were developed by participants can be seen by clicking on the following links, featuring members speaking passionately and expertly about their own experiences ([Natasha Akbar](#), [Danielle Tiplady](#) and [Michael Lawton](#) 2019). By harnessing the contribution of these ‘new power’ voices to support our shared work as a College, we have been able to build our campaign from the ground up.

Consequences of creative collaboration: a nursing nuclear reaction

It remains to be seen whether the resulting campaign is more successful than our previous experiences (although the signs are good in terms of what is emerging in the co-design of our campaign brand, narrative and plans). But the key point for me is that this bridging approach has clearly delivered on engaging our members, bringing them in to the work and developing a sense of ownership and stewardship over it.

Bringing old power and new power together in a collaborative space has resulted in what our RCN President, Anne-Marie Rafferty, has described as, a ‘*nursing nuclear reaction*’ (Royal College of Nursing Feb, 2019). By creating a space where all participants felt safe to express their contribution in new and varied ways, we released an energy and collective power that has continued to sustain the work of the campaign through the subsequent months.

The resulting outcomes of the collaborative work have more recently been referenced by Ms Rafferty as a social experiment for the College:

‘The collaborative model brings together members, accredited reps and RCN staff from across our nine English regions. But our social experiment isn’t solely a voyage of discovery. It’s to demonstrate how you, our members, are leading change and have the skills to recruit members, patients and the wider public to support our campaigns.

As the public face of our profession and the most trusted of professions, you have the power to amplify our messages and champion our cause. And you have the ability to bring together our trade union and professional work better than anyone else’.

(Royal College of Nursing 2019)

At the time of writing we have just held a lobbying event in July (2019) at the Palace of Westminster, where 70 RCN members and staff jointly hosted a drop-in event for MPs and peers to speak to them about the nursing workforce crisis. 115 MPs turned up to listen to our members speak about the impact of the crisis and the reality of their working lives, making it the most successful lobbying event in the history of the College.

Bringing old power and new power together through creative collaboration has enabled us to come together as an organisation, working together as equal partners – members and staff – to fight for social change. Given where we were this time last year, it feels like an astonishingly powerful positive outcome.

Facilitating a nursing nuclear reaction: personal learning and reflection

I have been asked what it is like being a transformative facilitator using creative collaboration as a bridge between old and new power, and this question has really made me think about how I work and what it feels like to be in the middle of this nursing nuclear reaction (Figure 7).

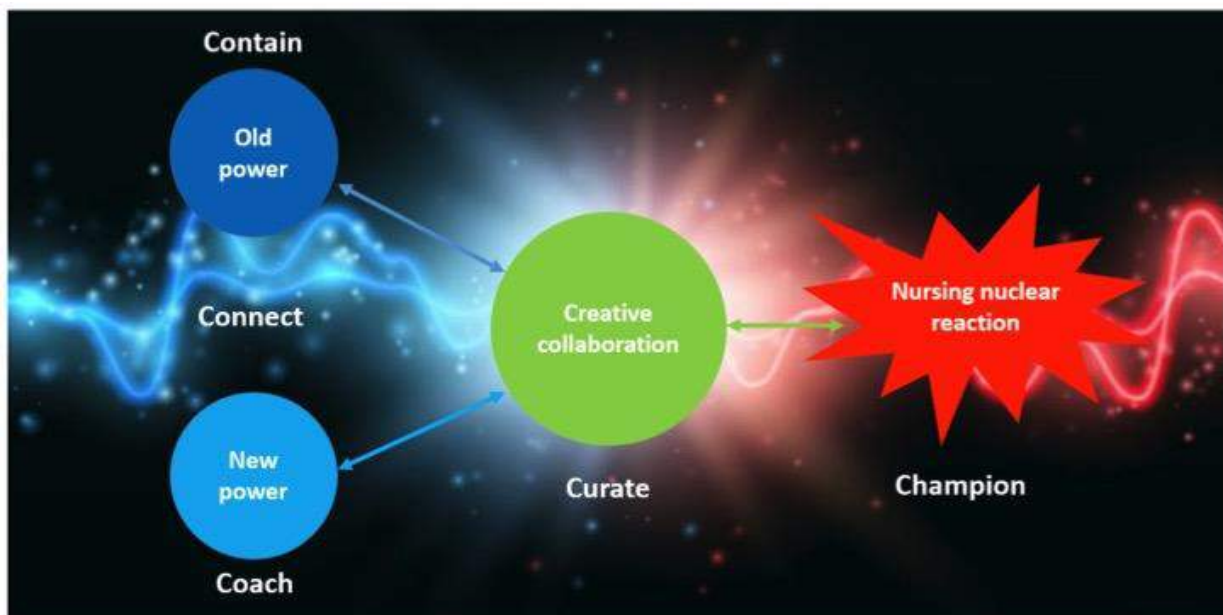


Fig 7: My 5C approach to creative collaboration as a bridge between old and new power (Source: O'Siochru 2019)

In reflecting on the past year, it seems to me that there are five key roles that I have taken on in order to facilitate our new ways of working and the creative collaboration approach.

1. **Connector** – old and new power need help to come together. Some of this help can be practical, such as commissioning, planning, designing and delivering collaborative events that bring both sides together in a safe and creative space. However, there is also something about identifying shared intentions and a sense of purpose and commonality that means that the invitation to come together is one that both sides step in to and embrace.

2. **Container** – working in the ways I have described seem to result in a significant amount of anxiety, particularly in those who hold and exercise old power. It appears to me that much of this anxiety stems from issues of trust and control and, in our case, the added sensitivities resulting from negative or painful past experiences of conflict. I found that I acted as a container for much of this anxiety, enabling individuals to express and acknowledge their concerns, and presenting ways in which they could be managed without compromising the creative collaboration approach. In this, I found the development and sharing of the eight principles (Fig 5 above) was invaluable as an underpinning framework, and I returned time and again to them as an agreed and signed-up-to way of working.
3. **Coach** – many ‘new power’ activists have passion and energy, but may struggle to express their ideas and suggestions in ways that can be embraced and understood by their ‘old power’ partners. In this bridging role, I spent time with our active members helping them to think through how they might engage with the process, and reflecting on how staff and other more experienced members reacted to them. As part of our on-going work on the campaign, I have also arranged for formal opportunities for old and new power proponents to come together to learn and develop their campaigning skills. This partnership approach to developing new skills and knowledge around campaigning for social change means that both old and new power are learning and putting their learning into practice together.
4. **Curator** – when you facilitate a creative collaboration, it generates an astonishing level of innovation and creative ideas. In the middle of this group flow (Sawyer 2008) it can be easy to get caught up in the process and energy, and miss the opportunity to harvest and then curate it. I have found that very often this role has fallen to me as the facilitator, and the prompt turning around of the work of the groups has been an essential part of honouring their creative output and making links across the nine regions. Further curation is also involved in ensuring that the work of the collaboratives informs and drives subsequent work to develop the strategic direction and is visible in the resulting campaign brand, narrative and plan.
5. **Champion** – throughout the whole bridging process, perhaps the key role is that of champion, both of the creative collaborative approach and of the resulting creative outputs. After collaborative events there is a key role for the facilitator to support the subsequent planning activity ensuring that the agreed way forward honours the work of the collaborative. Keeping everyone true to the eight agreed principles, containing anxiety and coaching others to contribute successfully to the collaboratives, capturing and collating the creative outputs, also all play a part in being a champion. For me, a key aspect of this role is delivered in the public arena through the use of my Twitter account. As a membership organisation with a huge membership – the vast majority of whom cannot be directly involved in the initial creative collaboratives – it feels essential to me that I use my role as champion to bring others into the work, so that they understand the approach and feel part of the resulting campaign brand, narrative and activity.

As Sawyer puts it:

‘Making the collaboration visible makes it much easier to talk about’ (Sawyer 2008 pg.177)

And perhaps that, in essence, is the key job of the transformative facilitator - enabling and making visible the work of creative collaboration and building momentum for social change. By building our campaign around the visible outputs of the collaborative, we ensure that all involved can see their contribution and feel a sense of ownership and pride in their shared endeavour. In addition, the wider organisation – both members and staff - can see the hard evidence that speaks to the commitment of both old and new power to working together in service of their shared intention.

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Finally, the work presented in this paper would not have been possible without the help of my colleagues **Catherine Salter** and **Peter Fairbank** and the commitment and growth mindset of **all the RCN members and staff who worked on the Engaging Active Members project** (there are too many of you to mention but you know who you are).

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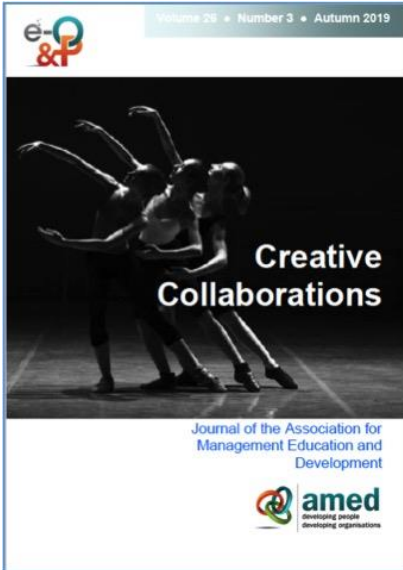
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About the author

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More recently, Mairead has been seconded to the England campaign team to work on the Staffing for Safe and Effective Care campaign which is aiming to elevate the known problem of nursing staff shortage to the level of a national crisis that demands urgent action to address the serious consequences for nursing staff, the health and social care system and wider society.

In 2017 Mairead completed an Advanced Diploma in Leading Creative Collaboration and since that time has been bringing her new skills and knowledge to her quality improvement and campaigning work to build bridges between senior management and members and enable meaningful co-production in high profile areas of work for the college. E: mairead.o'siochru@rcn.org.uk, mairead63@hotmail.co.uk.



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