

# *Collaboration and Coauthorship: Reflections from the Inside*

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We were each asked by the editors of this journal to write about the other. We knew at once it was not a matter of each of us having been individually selected to write a profile or to be profiled—NO—it was the duo, the team, that automatic and understandable pairing of the names Weber & Mitchell and/or Mitchell & Weber by so many of our readers, students, colleagues (and even our children and partners) that we assume underlies the “coincidence” of both of us being invited to write for the same issue. Please don’t misunderstand, we are not complaining—but we did think that it might be interesting to start by sharing a variety of reactions we have overheard in one context or another in relation to ourselves or to other research partnerships:

- Your personalities and methods are so different! How do you ever manage to work together?
- Everyone knows she is the one who does all the work!
- Working in tandem must keep you honest and on your toes. Two heads are better than one?
- Writing a book with another author takes half the work and should only count as half a book on the CV!
- It sure is fun to watch you two in action! Do you rehearse your presentations?
- How do you reconcile differences in writing styles? This article reads as if only one person wrote it. How do you manage that?
- You seem to have so much fun—how can we take you seriously?

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- You two are joined at the hip aren't you? (Implication: do you sleep together? . . . or . . . you would be incapable of independent work on your own, wouldn't you?).
- How do you decide who gets to be first author?
- How do you handle procedural, personal, and theoretical disagreements?
- Who leads the team? Who's in charge ultimately? If you don't make that clear, aren't you asking for trouble?
- Boy, would I love to have some one to work with. It must make things so easy. You two are so lucky!
- Co-authoring is more trouble and time than it's worth! And the promotion committee sure won't reward you for it. . . .
- Don't you get tired of always hearing your name associated with hers?

The comments above reveal some of the assumptions as well as the misperceptions people can have about the process of co-authoring. Although we find some of the remarks amusing (or irritating), they have also given us cause to stop and reflect about the collaborative process in which we are engaged. Co-authorship has received far less attention in the literature than collaboration. The two are of course intertwined, and for some, including us, almost synonymous. Co-authorship can vary in form and practice and can imply a political or paradigmatic stance that is seldom made explicit. Moreover, being a co-author can become an unacknowledged but important component of professional identity. Although there have been some long-standing and influential co-authoring partnerships among academic researchers in education (e.g. Cochran-Smith & Lytle; Connelly & Clandinin, Guba & Lincoln, Howey & Zimpher, and Miles & Huberman), co-authoring is not yet the norm in higher education. Researchers are just beginning to articulate some of the issues and theoretical implications raised by writing together (see, for example, Knowles & Cole, 1996a; Knowles & Cole, 1996b; Richardson, 1998; Cole & Knowles, 1998; Smith, 1997; or Kaplan & Cronan Rose, 1993; Jipson & Paley, 2000).

Submission guidelines to most big academic gatherings such as the CSSE or the AERA's annual meetings stipulate that conflict-free scheduling in the program can only be assured to first authors. Second authors of a paper may well find that they cannot be present at one of their sessions because of a scheduling conflict. Our professional associations thus unwittingly reinforce what so much of university culture takes as given; one person can stand in for many, first authorship is what counts, and the rule of individual intellectual property dictates that we clarify who said what, who said it first, and who is the all-important Principal Investigator (in cases of funded research). Promotion committees at many institutions of higher education favor first-authorship. And yet, there are growing numbers of author collaborations in the academy, collaborations in terms of research process, theo-

rizing, writing, advocacy, and presenting—collaborations so close and thorough that each author’s contribution and presence might seem essential, at least to them. Why do we persist? What is the potential value of co-authorship? What are the implications for scholarship and for the structure and culture of education?

What follows will not address these questions in any generalizable way, but we do hope to get people thinking about the importance of encouraging, honouring, and making room for more collaboration in academia. In the remainder of this piece, we simply share excerpts from individual and spontaneous responses to the question we set for ourselves, “What is it like to collaborate with the other?” We each wrote separately, without prior discussion or knowledge of what the other was writing, before coming together. And, as often happens for us, the coming together makes for a certain resonance and complementarity that we find of interest, but that readers can assess for themselves.

### What is it like to collaborate with Sandra Weber?

I first met Sandra at a conference on narrative and biography in Toronto in the early 1990s. It was funny, because we were both teaching in Montreal—Sandra at Concordia, me at McGill—but it took a conference ‘somewhere else’ to bring us together. That ‘somewhere else’ is no small point in our collaborative writing relationship. Over the course of the almost 12 years we have been collaborating, we have written book chapters on British rail between London and Lancaster, mapped out the outlines for two books, *That’s Funny You Don’t Look Like a Teacher* (Falmer Press, 1995) and *Reinventing Ourselves as Teachers* (Falmer Press, 1999) in one weekend in a hotel room in London, Ontario, wrote one act of a play in New Orleans and the other in London, and so on. Recognizing the importance that getting away in order to write seems to have taken on for us, we have even managed to check into a hotel room in Old Montreal (our own city!) for 23 hours in order to conceptualize a SSHRCC grant application. Along the way, of course, we also manage to check out interesting restaurants, visit an art gallery or two, see a play, go to a movie. And—this is the



part that always amazes us—at the end of it, we have almost always managed to come up with a whole new idea for thinking about something. Even shopping for clothes has generated new writing. Skipping the last session of the day at an AERA conference in New Orleans, for example, we found the perfect metallic silk garments for our play ‘Accessorizing Death’ (Weber & Mitchell, 2003) in a lovely little shop, Les Fleurs de Paris, just off Bourbon Street. We weren’t deliberately shopping for costumes for our play at that point—they just jumped out at us.

Our colleagues and even family members often ask us about our collaborative process—how do we come up with the ideas? How do we actually write? Our ideas ‘are born,’ as noted above, in many different geographic locations, but also in a lot of different ways. We each play different roles at different times. I have to highlight, though, that Sandra, as the phenomenologist, has a wonderful way of capturing the particular: playing school, drawing teachers, dressing for the prom. The actual writing comes out of a great deal of talking. We really work through an idea as fully as possible, and it is at this point that we might end up shopping, going to a movie, visiting the Botanical Gardens—anything to avoid actually getting down to write! When we finally get to the actual writing, we usually find a way of dividing up the work. It is always some combination of “one of us” takes the lead and then the other comes in. Mostly, though not always, we go off to write separately. Then we almost always switch documents. Sometimes the resulting end product bears no resemblance to what the person who “took the lead” started out with, and sometimes, it bears no resemblance to anything we thought of at all at the beginning. Sometimes we out and out poach each other’s paragraphs for use in the section of a book or article for which we are responsible. And sometimes we end up with multiples—double the output. *That’s Funny* and *Reinventing Ourselves* were conceptualized together, as were the book proposals for *Just Who Do We Think We Are?* and *Not Just Any Dress*. Two of our plays, *Elsie Never Had a Prom Dress* and *When the Shoe Fits*, have come together as one two-act play, *Accessorizing Death: A Monologue for Two Voices*. And, two of the video documentaries we have worked on, *Dress Fitting* and *Canadian Pie*, are companion pieces. In the end, it isn’t that one is recognizably Sandra’s or mine, so much as the fact that we often see two different ‘entry points.’

Do we ever disagree? Absolutely. One of us (we can’t agree on who!) once made the statement, “If I ever write a book about collaboration, I will do it by myself!” Our voices, we are told, usually grow louder and louder as we work through the creative tensions of generating new ideas, although we hit the same high volume, we are also told, when we agree too. We try to be productive about our disagreements, though, and at least one of our disagreements got turned into a dramatic performance called *The Tunic Wars*

that we performed at the Canadian Association for the Study of Women in Education (CASWE) in 2002. Deadlines—and a shared commitment to getting the job done—almost always settle our differences. Perhaps because we have written so much together, we seldom regard any one piece as the be all and end all. If either one of us feels that passionately about something, maybe it really needs to be the subject of a whole article, book, research proposal, conference presentation, or performance. We have each become more skilled, I think, at listening to the other on this. At the same time, we manage to avoid some potential tensions, perhaps, because we don't teach in the same institution. Although McGill and Concordia are only a few blocks away, we don't spend that much time in each other's departments in any official capacity. We serve on some graduate committees together, but not all. We rarely are teaching the same courses, or even the same semesters, so that often there is one or the other of us who has a little more time to devote to initiating something.

And sometimes, one or the other of us just puts the lid on things—something we call 'the Indian restaurant' dialogue. We use the term to refer to a dinner we had in a little Indian restaurant down on Bishop Street one evening during a very hectic semester when we each confessed to the other that we were tired of doing x or y or z. Enough. Do we really need to give this paper or that? How do we balance doctoral students and teaching? And how to actually have a personal life? It was the first time that we gave ourselves permission to refrain from just generating more ideas! Now it is a regular feature of our work. We give each other *carte blanche* to put the reins on something, to say, "Do you/we really want to be spending the month of June doing this?" Or, "Where are you going to be, anyway?" But things still do keep getting out of hand! One evening not long ago when we were both on a high from finishing a rather extensive co-authored chapter on visual methodology and self-study, over drinks, we somehow managed to convince ourselves that we could also finish off two books, five chapters and three journal articles in between March and June! Trudging up towards our respective homes through the February cold, we both say together, "Maybe it is time for a visit to the Indian restaurant."

Maybe it was the topic of the conference where we first met—narrative and biography; maybe it was that it was 'somewhere else'—Toronto; maybe it was the subject of her talk that day (but I can't quite remember), or what she was wearing (which she will now probably deny). Whatever it was that kick-started this collaboration, I have no trouble generating a long list of adjectives to answer the question: what's it like to collaborate with Sandra Weber? "Stimulating," "generative," "creative," "aesthetic," "constructivist," "embodied," "bold," "funny," "mind-stretching," and "never a dull moment" all come to mind—along with "so many projects, so little time."

## What is it like to collaborate with Claudia Mitchell?

Although we each joke that the next time we collaborate, “I’ll do it my self,” and indeed, we have begun writing a paper with that very title, the fact remains that Claudia Mitchell is a co-researcher, co-author and colleague par excellence—or at least, that’s my assessment. I can not speak for her other partners—the more recent collaborations she has undertaken with Jacqui Reid-Walsh, June Larkin, and Ann Smith—but the very fact that we are so many, and that, not only are we all on good speaking terms, but we have all signed up for further ventures, speaks volumes to her ability to motivate collaboration, sustain multiple long term projects, and engage in meaningful, stimulating dialogue, something I witness in her work with graduate students as well.

Claudia’s interests, like mine, are varied and many. I love the breadth of her knowledge, the innovative, interdisciplinary, and increasingly artistic quality of her methods, and the depth of her thinking. Her work ranges



from close readings of popular cultural texts, to visual studies of the everydayness of teaching, to the production of powerful documentaries of social significance, to literary autobiographic writing, to the re-conceptualization of research methodology for the self-study of teaching praxis, to problematizing conceptions of health, girlhood, learning, and aging, to applications of cultural studies, semiotics, literary criticism, post colonial perspectives, feminisms, dress studies, body studies and queer theory to a wide variety of educational and political issues—especially those related to gender, health, and violence in Canada and in other countries

including South Africa and Russia. If I hadn’t witnessed with my own eyes most of what she has undertaken (I probably haven’t—every time I think I know all that she is doing, she springs a few new projects on me!), I might be sceptical that one person could do so much so well. She does not seem to need much sleep, she reads incessantly and critically, remembers most of what she reads, knows how to plan and manage large-scale projects in a way that delegates tasks and empowers her co-investigators, and has boundless energy and a contagious enthusiasm for creative and rigorous scholarship. I almost wish I were exaggerating, but I am not. It is just who and how



she is. I sometimes speculate that she must hail from another planet of “super people” . . . (well, she IS from Gopher Creek, Manitoba. I keep meaning to go and sample the water there. Maybe bottle and sell it after I have drunk my fill).

Our work together is both incredibly difficult, because we both thrive on intellectual challenge, yet also remarkably easy. We seem to finish each other’s sentences and travel great distances on the same wavelengths (as well as on the same train or airplane). We are great friends, share the ability to wax enthusiastic on a variety of topics and phenomena at the drop of a hat, and enjoy each other’s company in a workaholic sort of way that others might find scary. Yet we are each very autonomous and independent thinkers, and although we seldom clash radically, we do have different styles, different backgrounds, and differing opinions. Which makes for some very interesting conversations and thrashing out of ideas. We really DO co-author—trading drafts back and forth, initially heading up different chapters or sections, but then discussing and re-writing each other almost cheerfully (although sometimes not so cheerfully!). In discussions before, during, and after the writing, we spark each other, generating ideas, acting as the other’s sounding board or mirror, never quite knowing where it will all end up but having total faith that it will take us somewhere worthwhile, even exciting. Eventually, we lose track of who wrote or said what, and our work is replete, not only with “blended” sections, but also with blended sentences. We each seem to feel we know what the other meant to say and have no compunction about “helping” the other one find the right words. Offense is seldom taken. Gratitude is more often the order of the day. We try to remember to alternate whose name goes on first, but neither of us is much into peeing on bushes to stake out a territory, to keep the other out. And if it’s got both our names on it, whatever the order, you can be sure we BOTH worked on it like crazy, even if that means emailing and telephoning incessantly back and forth across oceans and continents. I don’t think either of us feels swallowed up by the other. . . . We each manage a bit of solo writing, perhaps to keep our individual voices limber and alive, perhaps for the novelty or solitude, but mainly because the opportunity presents itself or we have a burning opinion or separate issue we want to pursue alone for a while.

Presenting our work together, whether for a conference, a play, or a course, is special for me, and I suspect, for Claudia too. It just isn’t the same to invite only one of us—although we actually do many of our presentations solo and they seem to go well enough. But there is something compelling about our joint public presentations and performances, although we have yet to adequately describe it. Maybe it’s something about the spontaneous way we work off each other that takes us and the presentation in a direction

neither of us would likely have taken alone. We always learn so much, take such risks, and become so enthusiastic, that it inevitably leads us afterwards to evaluate and reconsider our work in a new light. Our public aural discourse acts as a springboard for our written work and is perhaps the most interesting aspect of our collaboration, or at least, that is what comes to me now, as I write this. I wonder if Claudia would agree? Or our audiences?

In terms of our inter-disciplinary work together, what unites us, I think, is our mutual and often intuitive understanding that the wide range of topics we investigate are interconnected, something we have yet to convince many others of. We see, for example, important connections between writing an autobiographical play about the minutiae of clothes and fabrics and issues of curriculum and educational policy. We are fascinated by resonance between supposedly unconnected scholarship in dress studies, body studies, and curriculum theory. So excited are we by these connections, we cannot seem to stop ourselves from initiating or undertaking further projects: as of this writing, for example, we are putting the finishing touches on a lengthy chapter on methodology, "Using Visual Artistic Modes of Representation for Self Study," (Weber & Mitchell, in press) and working flat out on chapters and introductions for two books: *Not Just Any Dress: Explorations in Body, Identity, and Dress* (in press, Peter Lang) and *Just Who Do We Think We Are?* (O'Reilly Scanlon, Mitchell, and Weber, Routledge Falmer). I could go on, but I won't. It is perhaps more exhausting to contemplate the work we plan to do than it is to actually do it, so I'll just get on with it. There, that's our secret.

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