FOCUS ON METHODOLOGY

Collaborative autoethnography: The potential for health professional education research

B. Fox[1], P. Mahoney[2], R. Bellingham[1], A. North-Samardzic[3], S. Scarparo[4], D. Taylor[5], M. Thomas[1], M. Volkov[6] & M. Bearman[2]

Abstract

Collaborative autoethnography (CAE) is a qualitative methodology that enables new knowledge through a process of collective meaning making. Common in higher education, the paucity of CAE in health professional education scholarship indicates that its value remains underexplored in the field. This paper describes the experiences and processes underpinning one example of CAE applied in higher education and how this approach informed the use of CAE as part of a clinical education research project. We offer one means of conducting CAE, highlighting our own experiences as well as the potential for health professional education scholarship. In the context of a centrally sponsored curriculum redesign project that promoted online modes of teaching, we detail how CAE data can be generated through a mix of written reflections and structured collaborative conversations over a defined period of data collection. Data was analysed individually, collectively and iteratively and, ultimately, drew on theory. We experienced shifts in our relationships and selves as the university increased its online and blended modes for teaching and learning, impacting both professional and personal identities. We then describe how the CAE processes have been translated into the health professional education context. In conclusion, the rich collaborative conversations inherent in CAE offer more than just the exploration of research questions: they foster collegiality and professional relationships that resonate well beyond the study period. In this paper, we illustrate how CAE can be a robust method in educational research when it is undertaken systematically and over time, allowing for non-hierarchical conversations and collective analysis to form new knowledge.

Keywords: collaborative autoethnography; CAE; health professional education; education research

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[1] School of Education, Deakin University, Burwood, VIC, Australia
[2] Centre for Research in Assessment and Digital Learning (CRADLE), Deakin University, Melbourne, VIC, Australia
[3] Melbourne Business School, University of Melbourne, Parkville, VIC, Australia
[4] Deakin Business School, Deakin University, Burwood, VIC, Australia
[5] Deakin Learning Futures, Deakin University, Geelong, VIC, Australia
[6] La Trobe Business School, La Trobe University, Bundoora, VIC, Australia

Correspondence: Brandi Fox brandi.fox@deakin.edu.au

Introduction

Collaborative autoethnography (CAE) is a methodology increasingly employed across social sciences research. Autoethnography—the study of self to generate new knowledge based on insights only grasped through experience—is relatively better known in health professional education (see Farell et al., 2015). The addition of *collaborative*—or the group experience—shifts this process to joint meaning making. This allows the self-study to embrace multiple perspectives and a collective means of deeply understanding a research phenomenon.

This paper describes the experiences and processes underpinning a CAE in higher education, surrounding experiences of participating in a university-sponsored curriculum redesign project that focused on online and blended modes of teaching. We then detail how these methods were translated into a CAE in the context of studying feedback in clinical education. In the process, we offer one means of conducting a CAE, highlighting what it can achieve, the underlying methods and the potential for health professional education research.

CAE is a relatively well-known methodology in higher education and education, more broadly. The types of insights that can be gained from CAE range from understanding teaching and assessment of reflective practice in higher education STEM subjects and degrees (Hains-Wesson & Young, 2016) to exploring the impacts of Covid-19 on teaching and learning in higher education (Godber & Atkins, 2021). There are only a few examples in health professional education. A study exploring the experience of a UK medical student with dyspraxia undertaking CAE with a medical doctor and medical sociologist found that CAE had unintended therapeutic benefits as they gained deeper knowledge and understanding of dyspraxia, each other and their own selves (Walker et al., 2020). More recently, Ibrahim et al. (2023) undertook a cross-continental CAE with four academics, stemming from an online workshop to address the challenges of teaching qualitative research methods to medical students in the UK and Australia. Ibrahim et al. found that CAE fostered a reciprocal sense of value in participants' experiences, which strengthened their desire for their students to utilise qualitative research methods in their practice.

Chang et al. (2012) define CAE as "a qualitative research method in which researchers work in community to collect their autobiographical materials and to analyse and interpret their data collectively to gain meaningful understanding of sociocultural phenomena related in their autobiographical data" (p. 23–24). CAE builds on autoethnography, a method where researchers use self-reflection on ethnographic data to understand sociocultural phenomena (Ellis et al., 2011). Lapadat (2017) suggests CAE addresses ethical and methodological shortcomings of autoethnography, such as the researcher being too closely related to an experience and unable to interpret fieldwork data with nuance. Furthermore, researchers working in a multi/interdisciplinary team can offer further interpretation of the data, adding rigour to a study (Lapadat, 2017).

Collaboration and conversation as method are longstanding features of educational action research (Feldman, 1999). For example, Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993) discuss collaboration and conversation as "oral inquiry processes" that are used in schools in conjunction with short reflective essays and journal entries, enabling "teachers [to] build on one another's insights to analyse and interpret classroom data and their experiences in the school. … For teachers, oral inquiries provide access to a variety of perspectives for problem posing and solving" (p. 30). In higher education, CAE addresses professional isolation (Hannigan et al., 2016) and is also closely aligned with collaborative action research groups as a method for transformation and change and the significant role of conversation in the generation of new knowledge and understanding (Feldman, 1999). In our experience, collaboration and generative conversation underpin CAE but can do so in simultaneously emergent and structured ways.

This paper outlines an approach to CAE undertaken by the authors, however it is not intended to take the form of a simple "how-to-do". Rather, it seeks to illustrate how particular processes can facilitate a deep collective scrutiny of self. We, the authors, wish to expose the internal workings of a group of interdisciplinary academics engaged with CAE. In our study, CAE enabled us to explore, in a safe and collegiate space, the complex and nuanced questions arising from our experiences of becoming educators online. It fostered collective work where we could contribute our independent voices and experiences, reflecting on ourselves and our co-participant researchers' experiences together. Chang et al. (2019) assert "CAE as a social science research method [that] preserved the unique strengths of self-reflexivity associated with autobiography, cultural interpretation associated with ethnography and multi-subjectivity associated with collaboration" (p. 17). In our study, this method ensured that we, as participants, were researching *with* each other rather than being researched *on*.

The non-hierarchical requirements of CAE enabled truth telling in our research group and ensured data integrity. Lapadat (2017) further explains how CAE enables collaboration that supports its researchers as they participate in sharing their stories:

> The method flattens power dynamics in the team because all the coresearchers are vulnerable in sharing their stories. In this way, it supports team building and the development of trust. A supportive, trustworthy set of equally vulnerable colleagues can provide invaluable support when the focus of the research is on sensitive or stigmatizing issues. (p. 522)

Moreover, CAE also allows for a degree of anonymity in the publication of findings. This may then offset issues of performativity and social desirability during the research phase (Lapadat, 2017). In our study, we came into the room initially as passive colleagues or strangers. However, through the sharing of our experiences, we built trust and respect that put us all on equal footing—able to be vulnerable and truthful. Away from the watchful eye of our university superiors, we found collective agency.

We now expand upon the detail of our experience, offer our reflections and then draw from these rich descriptions to outline CAE's value for health professional education more broadly.

The context of our CAE

Our context was a collaborative self-study by eight academics, from multiple disciplinary backgrounds at one Australian university, exploring what it means to be an online educator in contemporary higher education as academics engaged in a university-sponsored program for curriculum redesign (Fox et al., 2021). It was a disturbance felt more intensely for some than others, but it was something we all shared. CAE was chosen as the primary research method because of its inclusion of participant-researchers both generating and analysing the data together around a shared experience, in this instance, involvement in the centrally sponsored course redesign project. As we progressed, it became apparent CAE enabled much more than the intended outcomes of a research study. Our collaborative participatory approach to research empowered each of us in our professional capacities as well as our identities as higher education academics. This resonated well after the data collection and analysis phase was completed.

The CAE process: Data generation and analysis

CAE requires establishing trust between participant-researchers. Therefore, a key element needed is time. The study took place over 12 weeks, but the initial study conception and recruitment phase occurred over multiple months prior to the first meeting. The group members were all involved in the university's centrally sponsored project, which was being undertaken in conjunction with an evaluation of new online course units in 2019 (Fox et al., 2021). Participants in this project, including ourselves, attended workshops on potential opportunities in the scholarship of teaching and learning on the project. The rich conversations occurring between staff members across faculties included their grappling with their understanding about what it meant to learn new ways of teaching online and what it meant to be an educator online. As a consequence of these workshops, we—a subset of attendees—turned to CAE to explore questions of practice and identity as they emerged while online teaching was unfolding over the trimester. This project was approved by the Deakin University Faculty of Arts & Education Human Ethics Advisory (HAE-19-119).

Our participatory research group met for 90 minutes once a fortnight, seven times in total over a period of 10 weeks. In the first session, BF and MB sent the other six participant-researchers provocations that arose from the dialogues in the earlier workshops relating to the online curriculum redesign project. Each researcher responded with a text of approximately 500–1000 words, which were shared with the research group. These reflections formed the basis of our collaborative meaning making. At the conclusion of this meeting, and for the next four meetings, various themes arising from the meeting were distilled into new provocations to prompt individual reflective texts over the following week. The team prepared for each new discussion by reading the transcripts and the reflective texts.

Figure 1, below, illustrates the 2-week data generation cycle that was repeated five times, for a total of 10 weeks.

Figure 1

Data Generation Cycle

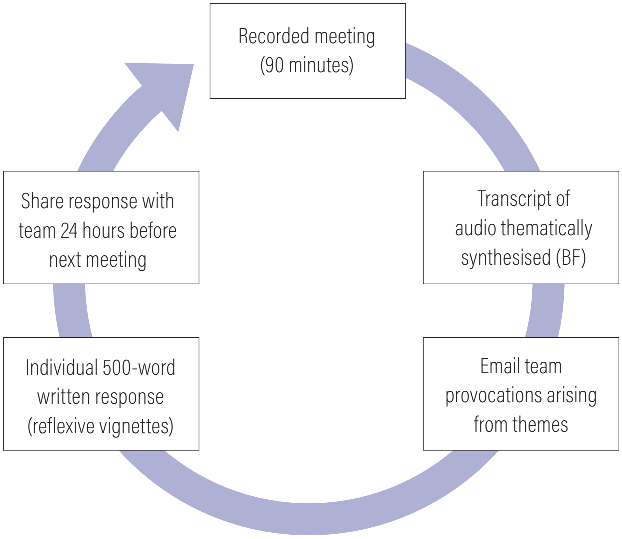
Recorded meeting (90 minutes)
Transcript of audio thematically synthesised (BF)
Email team provocations arising from themes
Individual 500-word written response (reflexive vignettes)
Share response with team 24 hours before next meeting

Table 1

Provocations, as Published in Fox et al. (2021)

Meeting One
How has the redesign project changed the way you approach your teaching?
How has the redesign project changed accountability in your unit(s)?
Have any power dynamics changed in relation to redesign project unit(s)?
How has technology changed the boundaries of your work?
Was there a time you felt these boundaries were overstepped?
Meeting Two
Who do you think you are as an online educator?
Discuss a moment/moments this week that you have had that are generative and positive with your online teaching?
Describe a time this week when your offline practices crossed over online?
Do you think there is a paradigm shift and where?

Meeting Three

Reflecting back over the last week or so, is there an example of something that is working better now in the online unit(s) that was originally an obstacle or not working well that I needed to overcome?

Is there a time this week I felt positively with my teaching or good about being a teacher?

Interrogating how/if learning and teaching on-line fundamentally shifts to something else . . .

- What matters to me about learning?
- Do I feel it is fundamentally different between online and face-to-face?

Is there an example from the last couple of weeks that illustrates the challenge, disconnect, conflict or convergence?

Meeting Four

What happens when we put ourselves in the shoes of the students?

What do we imagine the students do? Think? Feel? In response to our teaching?

What are the implications of this imagining for teaching?

How do we know if students are doing OK?

What is a marker that was used during the last few weeks to check how they were achieving?

What do relational aspects of teaching look like when mediated through a screen?

Meeting Five

Reflecting on the last eight weeks, where to now?

The final two meetings were for the purpose of bringing together our analysis. Before the last meetings, we were each assigned one transcript that we individually inductively coded using thematic content analysis, an accepted approach for analysing qualitative CAE data (Duffy et al., 2018). During these meetings, we discussed our findings and compared the themes arising and recurring from the weekly transcripts, identifying the common themes and their relationships to one another. We then discussed the findings with respect to our sensitising notions of a sociomaterial assemblage to facilitate a combined analysis.

Data were analysed individually and collectively. CAE emphasises time for group reflection and analyses the reflection as well as the data/issue itself over time. The cross-disciplinary construction of our CAE participant-researchers meant that, during the reflective process, we could each offer multidimensional analysis and knowledge that might not be included through shared disciplinary analysis. Chang et al. (2012) stress the importance of the analysis process as iterative, interpretive and occurring over time, as individual researchers analyse the data through their own disciplinary lenses. We were "co-researchers work[ing] together through cycles of action and reflection" and "engage[d] in an 'extended epistemology' of experiential, presentational, propositional and practical ways of knowing" (Heron & Reason, 2008, p. 367). As we were inductively coding across multiple individuals, we coded the transcripts individually.

Table 2

Data Collection and Analysis Cycle

Data	Analysis and/or Review	Who	Frequency
Transcriptions from 90-minute meeting	Synthesise data and pull out themes (BF)	BF circulates to whole team	Weekly
Written reflections	Verbally unpack in meeting	Whole team	Fortnightly
Individual transcripts	Each member of the research team assigned one meeting transcript to thematically analyse	Whole team	Twice
All transcripts	Team members meet to discuss themes from the individual transcript review, finding reoccurring themes and forming an analytical framework	Whole team	Once
Analytical framework	Analytic framework applied to all transcripts	Whole team	Once
Theoretical framework	Team reads literature related to analytical frame; deliberates and discusses theoretical framework	Whole team	Once
Draft paper	Paper circulated to team prior to final analysis meeting for comment and review	Whole team	Once

In our reading of the transcripts and initial analysis, we identified that we had constantly discussed the differences between the human and non-human and the on-campus and online contexts. Upon reflection of our own research interests, we moved away from a dualistic view of the human and non-human to think within a post-humanistic framework. This was a struggle, as we grappled with theory and experience in our daily lives. Some of us had considerable theoretical expertise—and not always with the same ontological orientation. But we approached this, as we had learnt together, with openness. Ultimately, this resulted in five key themes, as outlined in Fox et al. (2021): our corporeal selves, constructing texts, materialising, ourselves in time and our shifting practices and transforming identities.

Reflecting on the CAE experience

In the first two meetings, there was a lot of “structured whinging”. This was all prompted by reading each other’s responses to the provocations. We were not unhappy teaching online, but we did feel the difference. We were often drawn in to conversation around surveillance and privacy. As we unpacked what this meant in our teaching, we drew in our everyday experiences within non-professional online spaces, such as social media, giving more and more of ourselves online:

> I think it’s a reflection of life with everything email and social media and AI and biometrics. It’s not just this; I think this is just kind of illustrative of how we’re progressing in terms of communicating with people and holding data and being able to look at people’s social media and everything, because we’re a lot more open these days. Whether we like it or not.

We reflected on the change over time and how perhaps our understanding of privacy has now changed, something we needed to "get over" and accept: "There just isn't, and whether because of the time where we grew up, and we experienced privacy, maybe it's just something we have to get over". We had to remind ourselves of what it means to live synchronically and how "in real life" encompasses as much online life as off. We reminded each other what this means for teaching: that we always have students in our class who do not engage, and we can miss them in a lecture theatre or a seminar room just as we can in an online forum. What was it, then, that we were holding on to?

While we ruminated together, we were able to identify moments of change where we began to make new meaning from our shared and individual experiences within the group. One of us noted, "The experience of the group illuminated my short sightedness about the scope of topics and how the conversations would enable [me] to be both sounding board and participant". We came into each subsequent meeting knowing more about each other than we had before. And through these conversations and exchanges, we not only learned more about each other, but more about ourselves—through reflecting on how we felt about our teaching, our role in the university, our respective background knowledge on teaching and learning and not just our discipline.

We disclosed more and more over the 10 weeks that we met. We wrote more truthfully and reflexively. We knew our writing would be shared, but we also understood that in the CAE, we were no longer professional acquaintances and had shifted to become trusted colleagues. We wrote honest reflections and then spoke to them in our groups:

> It was really interesting because I found it was hard actually to say, who am I? What's my identity as, specifically, as an online educator because somehow, it's hard to separate. But then thinking about it, to me what I find intriguing, and I liked some of the responses that … I write after I wrote mine. I like writing mine and read[ing] what other people say.

What we lacked in institutional support, we found in the group. One of us noted, "It takes time away from these other things that our managers expect us to do. But we do it anyway because we kind of do give a [expletive]". We concluded that we had taken up the call to investigate further what it meant to go through a process of curriculum and pedagogical redesign, in our own disciplines, because we care about our students: "Because we're passionate, we're being super-sensitive and critical". We were united in care and wanting to build and maintain connections with our students. These connections, we felt, were taken from us in part or in full in the transition into online teaching.

Challenges to participating in CAE

CAE is not necessarily easy. It can be logistically difficult and personally uncomfortable. Chang et al. (2012) outline the challenges faced in CAE, and we all made sure to read their experience and learn from their expertise before commencing our study. Here, we describe the challenges as we experienced them: building trust, logistics and managing ethical considerations.

The first challenge was building trust within the group. As one of our group members reflected, “I’d say I was dubious about the intention from the outset”. We had to first move beyond doubt and suspicion and create a space where we could come together in trust and confidence. Ultimately, the same group member commented, “Glad I did it, and I was grateful for the opportunity”. The logistics and the hierarchal structure of the group also meant some apprehension in the beginning. One group member reflected, “I questioned how this would work. How staff from across faculties and university portfolios would engage with each in the meetings”. The group comprised academics from different disciplines but also different career stages—from early career sessional (non-permanent) staff to professors and course directors. However:

> Through conversation we found multiple shared experiences in our past and current career trajectories. … [I felt] that my experiences as a university educator, and early career researcher matter, and that across seniority and discipline spaces, we have multiple shared experiences and emotions that take away the hierarchy ingrained in the university system and put us all on an even plane.

An additional challenge was logistics. This included the labour required to undertake the analysis and coordination, and we were fortunate that funding ensured that this work could be performed without exploitation. The university is also spread across multiple regional campuses. This meant that meetings needed to be held on alternative campuses, and sometimes participant-researchers needed to attend via video conference. Attending via screen, however, brought an attentiveness to the same online experience that we were experiencing in our teaching.

We constantly had to interrogate the ethical nature of our conduct and ensure confidentiality. Our institution required us to submit our study for ethical review, which, despite the bureaucracy, forced us to consider issues of consent, data storage and withdrawal. The potential for coercion, peer pressure, performativity and scrutiny were always present, but, ultimately, it did not feel like these factors impinged on us. We felt open:

> I found the discussions extremely open, honest and raw—I felt like we were all willing to share our vulnerabilities and really interrogate the emotional aspect of teaching, and what teaching means to them as a professional, but more powerfully, to their personal identity.

We created a space for each of us to “feel safe” in disclosing our experiences:

> We were able to discuss, share and reflect on our experiences in a safe space, without judgement. I personally do not have many opportunities to discuss my teaching experiences and practice in the department, so the group allowed me to be able to

> reflect and share these reflections. It also provided the opportunity to not feel alone and isolated in a journey of change that has been challenging for most of the times [*sic*] and rewarding at times.

The effects of CAE

Despite the challenges, we ultimately experienced significant benefits throughout our CAE study and upon reflection of our experience in the research group. These benefits included support and comfort during a time of transition and uncertainty, as we taught online in redesigned units. One of us noted:

> The process has been one of emotional support and mutual academic exchange and inquiry. The ability to reflect on the process of teaching the [redesigned] unit while I was teaching it and having a difficult experience doing so gave me psychological and emotional comfort as I was grappling with a class not going well for the first time.

The interdisciplinary composition also allowed for further critical engagement with the experience:

> Working in a multi-disciplinary team, too, was incredibly enjoyable, as I was able to see different perspectives as well as shared experiences. Having education scholars in the group really afforded a deeper dive into the topic and the experience that otherwise would not have occurred.

Despite difference in disciplines and position, "everyone was equally engaged in the process. I did not feel there were slackers or people not fully invested in it". It was this investment in the group and respect for each other's shared and divergent experiences that fuelled the benefits of the CAE:

> It was the first time in a long time—or maybe the first in my memory—that I could meaningfully engage in a community of scholars, working together on research that we were equally passionate about but all bringing something different to the situation. We were able to discuss issues that were broad sweeping, as well as specific. I was introduced to new concepts, theories and bodies of knowledge that I was unfamiliar with.

We learnt from each other—together—because we were able to focus not only on the work of the group but also on the solo work that is achieved outside of collaboration. Chang et al. (2012) argue that researchers reflect both with and in an iterative process of meaning making, and that this creates "rich texture [in] the collective work" (p. 24). Our data were generated concurrently, individually and collectively. In our study, the reflexive nature of both written and verbal collaborative methods highlighted how our reflections changed what we did and how we thought of ourselves as higher education academics.

Reflexive considerations

Reflexivity—the intersection between the researcher and the researched—is at the heart of autoethnography. A privileged starting point for the analysis is based on the subjectivity of the researcher: their scientific location, assumptions, emotions and strategies. The focus of knowledge production lies in "the knowing relation between the researcher and the researched. The quality of the research is directly a result of the quality of the relation" (Gunzenhauser, 2006, p. 633). In collaborative approaches, it encompasses an understanding of the interaction dynamics.

Within our group, we had voices. We were heard as distinctive and diverse, remaking the CAE process. For some, the bureaucratic structures around us seem to hold less weight—both personally and professionally. However, how much of that was an illusion? How much power did we really hold? Our publication has reached into the world, but where does the boundary of our collaboration begin and end? Our experience suggests CAE is a particularly effective method during times of uncertainty and change.

Our experience was not unique. DeFrancisco et al. (2007) used CAE in their study with 10 participant-researchers studying women's self-esteem. They emphasise that the method allowed participants to first examine and reflect on their own stories and experiences and concluded that through their study:

> Our group embodied what we consider a profound movement: a movement toward a space where the women, including ourselves, could get far enough beyond our performance anxiety about the group and deeply share how such anxiety haunts our everyday lives, in relationships and in work. This sharing prompted affirmation, but also, we think, a deeper appreciation for the struggles with which individual women contend, still contributing wonderful selves to the world. Through autoethnography, we became, we learned, and we grew as persons and as researchers. (p. 241)

Implications for health professional education

So, what does this mean for those wishing to undertake CAE in health professional education? We start by emphasising that CAE is experienced uniquely and that each group will need to find its distinctive dynamic, its own means of collaboration. There is no "how to" or recipe. For example, the other examples from health professional education scholarship rely more heavily on interviews (Ibrahim et al., 2023; Walker et al., 2020) than our approach, which relied on generating data in the midst of the experience itself. However, at the same time, investing attention in logistics through clear structures and processes can support this fluid and emergent form of collaborative self-study.

Motivated by the previous CAE, PM and MB brought the detail of our CAE methods into the health professional education context. At the time this paper is being submitted, we have not completed analysis of this second iteration of the CAE, and it is yet to be seen how this will diverge from or converge with our other experiences. However, following

Fox et al.'s (2021) CAE, the key operationalisation of data generation remains the same, and we detail this below.

Whilst studying clinical feedback in specialty training, another research team reinterpreted the same means of cyclical data generation across a defined period of time. The major elements remained the same: provocations before meetings, written responses and team meetings to discuss and debate. There were other similarities: roughly the same team size (large for a CAE) and meeting whilst a parallel experience was happening. However, there were significant differences between this new CAE and the previous iteration. In the clinical feedback study CAE, a long-standing research team with strong pre-existing group dynamics and shared expertise undertook data generation *in parallel* to longitudinal qualitative data collection with clinicians. Thus, the team discussed personal reflections on both the data and the data collection process as part of the CAE, and this brought different ethical and confidentiality considerations. For example, the team was mindful that we should, as far as possible, keep the identities of any participant-clinicians confidential when we discussed the data, as although we were all on the research team, there was only access to de-identified transcripts. In addition, the impact of logistics was particularly challenging in the second instance of CAE. Members of the research team were spread across four time zones, and the very senior roles of several team members limited their availability. This meant there were no face-to-face meetings, and it was inevitable that not all team members could attend every CAE meeting.

Written responses to provocations helped to mitigate any absences and ensured the reflections of all team members were shared with the group, but there were fewer same-time conversations and no opportunities for shared meals with incidental chat. Given the team's longstanding dynamic, and the topic being one that we were deeply intimate with, it seems (at least MB, who participated in both iterations) that the sense of the second CAE was different, less transformational in terms of understanding others' perspectives but providing a deeper integration of joining expertise and personal experience. This again illustrates how different each CAE is, in that each collaboration has a distinctive set of processes that come together within the experience.

Conclusions

This paper illustrates how CAE has potential for health professional education research, giving an overview of the method and how it has been utilised in higher education to advance knowledge through reflective meaning making, strengthened by collaboration. The detailed CAE and subsequent CAE outlined here provide readers with examples of how CAE can be a robust approach to educational research—including health professional education—when it is done systematically, over time, allowing for non-hierarchical conversations and collective analysis to form new knowledge. Researchers wishing to undertake CAE should, thus, consider the practicalities of scheduling and implement clear structures to minimise logistical challenges. Finally, the rich collaborative conversations inherent to CAE offer more than just exploring research questions; they foster collegiality and enduring professional relationships.

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