Chapter 14. Positions of Change: How a Coupled Collaboration Disrupted the Dissertation System

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> If the shoe doesn't fit, must we change the foot?
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> *– Gloria Steinem*

The two of us wait in a narrow hallway. We are seated in separate chairs—our bodies situated shoulder to shoulder, our backs against the yellowing beige brick wall—and we look toward the small room where minutes earlier we concluded our five-chapter dissertation defense. The door to the room remains closed. We know our dissertation committee is discussing our presentation—our final shared act of a years-long process where we have positioned ourselves as the first-ever co-researchers in composition studies to collaborate throughout each stage of the dissertation process.

In a hotel room just miles from us, Laura's mother watches our two-year-old daughter, Elyse. Here, in a seemingly unpopulated campus building of Indiana University of Pennsylvania, we anticipate the moment our dissertation chair will emerge from the defense room, and we will learn if our non-traditional dissertation meets our institution's doctoral credentialing criteria—and if we have re-positioned ourselves as new PhD scholars in the academy.

In the silence of the hall, we read through part of the presentation that opened our defense:

> Laura Mangini's dissertation text—*Collaborative Dissertations in Composition: A Feminist Disruption of the Status Quo*—communicates intertextually with Sabatino's dissertation text: *Composition and The Cooperative Dissertation Study: Our Collaborative Resistance.*
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> As co-researchers, we enacted what we are calling a *cooperative dissertation study*—a social constructionist narrative inquiry that responded to these main research questions:
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> • How does a collaborative dissertation challenge the status quo in composition?

- When two people collaborate on a composition dissertation, what experiential data can they gather through narrative inquiry?

As researcher-participants, we collaborated throughout the processes of researching and writing our dissertation chapters and intertexts (in-between chapters) as we composed two separate dissertation texts that shared the same data.

We positioned our "independent" dissertations as intertextual artifacts that worked together, sharing the same epistemology, methods, and critical-feminist advocacy for collaborative dissertations in composition.

Ahead, we step back a bit from our five-chapter defense day to show our *coupled collaboration* in action, demonstrating how composition's resistance to a collaborative dissertation is real, contextual, and can be negotiated. We then define coupled collaboration, reflecting how our lived dissertation experiences had to happen first before we could identify, name, and understand this positioning of ourselves and our research.

And the chapter ends where it began, with us: a blending of then and now and the ongoing nature of our continued collaborations in work and life.

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From the start of our shared dissertation journey, we knew our status as ABD students would limit the scope of our agency—given how we were questioning and resisting a hierarchical system designed to evaluate and, potentially, credential us. We also knew our roles as researcher-participants would play an integral part in not only getting our research proposal approved but also in generating the narrative data we needed to resist the status quo of solo-authored dissertations.

We had to interpret how our doctoral program and graduate school system constructed rhetorical situations and genres that privileged specific ways of being, doing, and knowing—and constrained the worldviews and actions we wanted to explore in our dissertation research.

Below are the "eight steps" of our institution's traditional composition dissertation model where one PhD student:

1. selects research topic;
2. invites three scholars to sit on his dissertation committee;
3. writes and submits a Research Topic Approval Form;
4. submits an Institutional Review Board Application;
5. writes the first three chapters of the dissertation;
6. participates in a three-chapter defense where the three-person committee determines if the student receives a rating of pass, revise, or fail;

7. writes chapters four and five; and
8. participates in a final defense of the dissertation.

Our proposed collaborative dissertation would not fit into this traditional model. So, we crafted a proposal that articulated how a reimagining of the dissertation genre—processes and products—could not only create situated spaces for our inquiry but also yield rich data to inform the graduate school's future decisions to approve or not approve collaborative work at the dissertation level.

When the Dean of Graduate Studies rejected our initial proposal for a collaborative dissertation—one study, one text—he suggested we collaborate on the research and then write two "independent" dissertation texts. Agreeing with this suggestion would have displaced us and our work: ushering us into the paradigm of lone authors working in different dissertation spaces.

In response, we requested and were granted an in-person meeting, which, ultimately, included the graduate school dean, the assistant dean, the assistant dean for administration, and a member of our proposed dissertation committee. At the meeting, we presented our rationale: if we wish to answer our research questions about the experiences of two ABD students collaborating through a narrative inquiry to collect experiential data about the dissertation system's resistance to our positionality, we must situate ourselves as researcher-participants who partnered throughout each of the eight steps provided above.

From there, our dissertation chair joined us in negotiating a common ground with the graduate school dean: we were permitted to collaborate throughout the processes of writing and researching the dissertation if we also composed two separate, individually titled texts that were clearly labeled to illustrate 60 percent solo-authorship.

One dissertation study, two dissertation texts.

For our three-chapter and five-chapter defenses, we would meet with our committee at the same time to enact a joint defense, a phenomenon our dissertation chair noted had never occurred before in our doctoral program.

Within this new landscape, we restarted our dissertation process by creating two distinct "paper trails" through the submission of individually titled and written Research Topic Approval Forms and Institutional Review Board forms—a nontraditional process of dual submissions that further distinguished our work as "independent."

Upon completing this process, our initial research explored whether our dissertation was still collaborative, co-authored, or something else altogether.

In time, we decided on the term *cooperative.* We considered this term to be the most accurate way to position our work—as it included both co-authored and collaborative writing and research.

It wasn't long before we posted a sign on the wall of our home office that read: collaborative processes + co-authored texts = cooperative study.
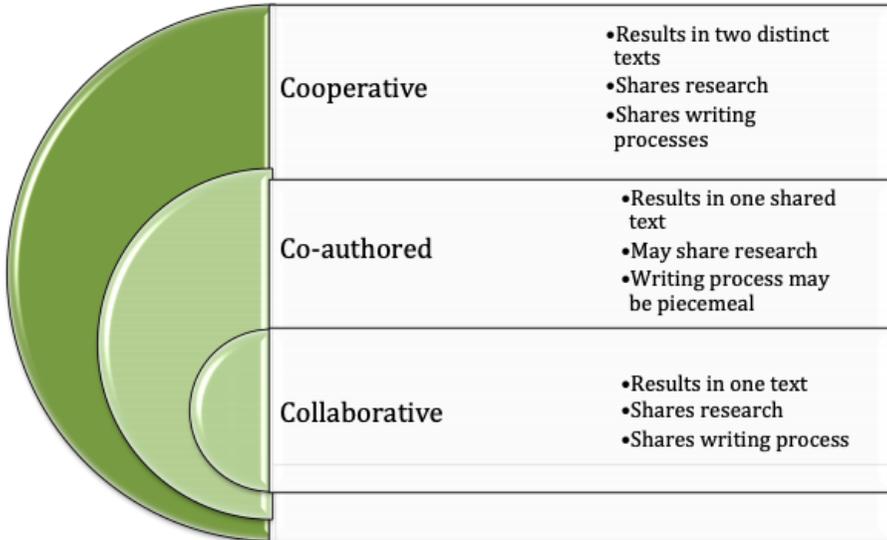
Figure 14.1. A graphic representation of cooperative, co-authored, and collaborative within the context of our dissertation study

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In terms of the dissertation products, the primary five chapters in each of our "independent" texts are both collaboratively and individually written. To identify "authorship" in the dissertation texts, we used a script-like format to distinguish between each of our voices with our collaborative third voice. We labeled the sections of our writing as *Sabatino*, *Laura*, or *Collaborative*.

We also authored 10 total intertexts, in-between chapters, that shared the varied genres and processes we used to talk and write, agree and disagree, and collect and analyze data. Two of these intertexts were collaboratively written. Of the remaining eight, four solo-authored intertexts appeared in Sabatino's dissertation and four other solo-authored intertexts appeared in Laura's dissertation.

If Chapters 1-3 positioned us as academic writers engaged in traditional dissertation practices—standard academic discourse, rational argumentation, contextualizing and locating gaps in the literature—then Chapters 4 and 5 and our intertexts allowed us to bring our full selves to the study.

Chapters 4 and 5 were formatted as roundtable discussions. We continued our use of the script format from Chapters 1-3 but now added the voices of our research participants and secondary sources. Throughout these pages, we interweaved our semi-structured interviews, conference roundtable discussion, and emailed follow-up questions and responses into a multivocal dialogue where we added our voices to the ongoing conversation about collaboration at the dissertation level.

Our intertexts became immersive, multigenre spaces that animated our coupled collaboration: lists, private voice memo transcriptions, research journal

entries, writing process descriptions and reflections, dissertation blog posts, images, excerpts of our co-authored annotated bibliography, photos of handwritten notes in book margins, doodles, transcription processes, and on.

The intertextual spaces positioned our dissertation processes and products—the seen and unseen work of the research and writing, how we inhabited our coupled collaboration—within the pages of our cooperative texts, and allowed us to express who we are, what we value, and why.

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Our coupled collaboration, among many dissertation practices and experiences, allowed us to co-motivate each other, support our sense of belonging as we worked from home, advocate for the social nature of authorship and intellectual property, demonstrate how our non-traditional dissertation did not impede our careers, and further cultivate our relationships as husband and wife, new parents, fellow professors, and collaborative writers.

Below we share a lived experience that narrates these themes. Following this story, we explore two important concepts we developed and applied in our study: our *power check-ins* and our *coupled collaboration*. What we learned from this narrative data is the necessity of cultivating a communicative relationship in our partnership. We also learned the importance of being attentive to each other's malleable positions within the collaboration and being adaptable within the professional and personal spaces that shaped our ways of working together. We hope that by sharing what we have learned from our research we can provide a supportive resource for those who wish to collaborate in their own settings.

Our story: Just two years shy of our dissertation completion deadline, Laura faced challenges with postpartum depression that significantly impacted her ability to work on our dissertation. Laura's symptoms mirrored textbook postpartum experiences: feeling overwhelmed, numb, hopeless, and at times, even suicidal. These feelings were intensified by the pressures of staying on track with a dissertation already facing resistance.

In her private journal, four months postpartum, Laura shared the impact on her dissertation work. She described feeling unable to concentrate, overwhelmed by guilt, and avoiding the topic altogether to cope. And, due to the stigma attached to mental health issues, Laura delayed getting treatment. During this time before seeking help, Laura shared in her journal:

> It's like I've lost my ability to read more than two sentences. My mind can't stay on one thought before I start to spiral. What else should I be doing? Was that Elyse crying? Is she breathing? What if I drop her when I'm walking down the stairs? I'm scared I won't be able to write anymore. I'm scared I'm ruining this for Sabatino. Our collaboration isn't supposed to be like this.

Elyse was almost a year old when Laura admitted the depth of her experience to Sabatino and sought treatment.

It was a challenging time for both of us. Getting mental health treatment was tough for Laura. There were long waiting lists, and some doctors didn't want to "deal" with postpartum issues. And it wasn't just Laura dealing with it—Sabatino felt the pressure too, often hesitant to discuss the dissertation with Laura for fear of worsening her condition. When he worked on it alone during Laura's tough times, he too felt isolated. It was hard for him to share ideas or progress unless he caught Laura in a rare moment of feeling hopeful. We both struggled to be productive scholars while our focus was on supporting each other through a tough time.

As we experienced postpartum depression together while working on our dissertation study, our positionality within academia and parenthood influenced our journey. Coupled collaboration became part of Laura's path to recovery. She acknowledges that without a partner—someone relying on her to contribute and stay active as a scholar, all while maintaining empathy for her as a mother, a wife, and a human being—she might have abandoned the dissertation entirely. With talk therapy, medication, and the support of her partner, she was ultimately able to return with enthusiasm to our work with a renewed appreciation for the merits of collaboration.

Our power check-ins: The material realities of our personal and professional lives—from the severity of postpartum depression to the ongoing responsibilities of job schedules and childcare commitments, etc.—posed a recurring challenge for us to collaborate in the same place, at the same time. This meant each of us occupied spaces and different roles at different times, in all areas of our lives, which impacted our partnership.

Even when we agreed on concepts related to our dissertation, for example, we had to negotiate power dynamics in our collaboration. Perhaps one of us had read a bit more about a theory or had transcribed more of a particular interview or had built off a previous idea we were working through to introduce a new idea—by the nature of his or her more situated knowledge on the subject this person would then gain more ethos in that moment of the conversation.

In our dissertation, we documented the processes we used to negotiate these shifts in our shared roles, but we relied mostly on what we called *power check-ins* as a meta-mechanism to help us sustain an equitable approach to our coupled collaboration.

Whether in person or writing, we found it most helpful when we asked each other questions, such as:

- "Am I overtaking the direction of the work here?"
- "Do you feel as if you've been able to voice your ideas in full?"
- "Should we take some time to reflect on this and talk again later?"
- "You didn't respond to my comments. Does that mean you do or do not agree? Do you need more time to process this?"

- "When I revise this section, should I note in the margins the concepts we just shared so we use the same contextual lens to view the work?"

This type of open dialogue helped us inhabit the mindful, empathetic spaces we needed to sustain our coupled collaboration in ways that were equitable and shared.

Our coupled collaboration: We feel that through our research and conversations with our participants, we developed a better understanding of the myriad ways scholars define collaboration. Here, we add our definition of a coupled collaboration, which occurs when the construct is:

- *intimate* (two people are romantically involved, sharing their lives, and enacting an equitable and empathetic partnership);
- *inhabited* (two people live together while working on the same project);
- *indefinite* (two people cannot delineate when and where the collaboration ends).

Our criteria are contextual, fluid, and interconnected. The definition presented here is not the sole form of what a coupled collaboration could be; we encourage scholars to adapt or redefine our definition to fit their coupled collaborative situations. In the context of our cooperative dissertation study, our coupled collaboration was:

- *intimate* because of our
  - marriage;
  - mutual dependence on completing the dissertation due to shared livelihoods;
  - social and emotional interconnectedness of dissertating and living together;
- *inhabited* because of our
  - physical proximity in our collaborative efforts, as we live in the same home;
  - shared workspace, whether in our home office or at the dining table;
  - collaboration beyond work hours, feeling how the dissertation stays with us at all times, influencing our daily life and conversations;
- *indefinite* because of our
  - joint undertaking of every aspect of the dissertation, reflecting the open-ended nature of our collaboration;
  - ongoing process of sharing thoughts, considerations, definitions, sources, and even word choices in our writing without a need for one of us to claim ownership over any of these contributions;
  - partnership not ending with the five-chapter defense, as evidenced by this book chapter.

From the time of our dissertation until now, we have learned that our coupled collaboration has benefitted not only our shared scholarship but also our shared

lives, namely how we interact with and speak to each other as husband and wife—and, as parents, with our children (Elyse and Caius, our son, born one year after our five-chapter defense). We believe the affordances of such an intimate, inhabited, and indefinite collaboration are abundant and worthy of further research.

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The door opens. We stand. Our dissertation chair walks toward us. With a large smile, he takes turns shaking our hands and says, "Congratulations, Doctor Mangini and Doctor Mangini. You both passed with distinction."

The rest of the committee joins us to hug and celebrate. In time, the two of us walk outside into Oak Grove, a part of campus that is filled with lush green grass and sky-reaching trees and past times we shared as doctoral students. In this moment, as we hold hands and take in the June sun, we do not know the future. We aren't moving into the days ahead: a time when our ongoing coupled collaboration will help us in our journey toward tenured professorship. We aren't thinking about how we will integrate classroom pedagogies that meet students where they are, or how we will craft college-wide writing curricula that promote inclusivity and diversity. On this day, we are most eager to reunite with Elyse, so much a part of our dissertation story, and the life story we will continue to write together.