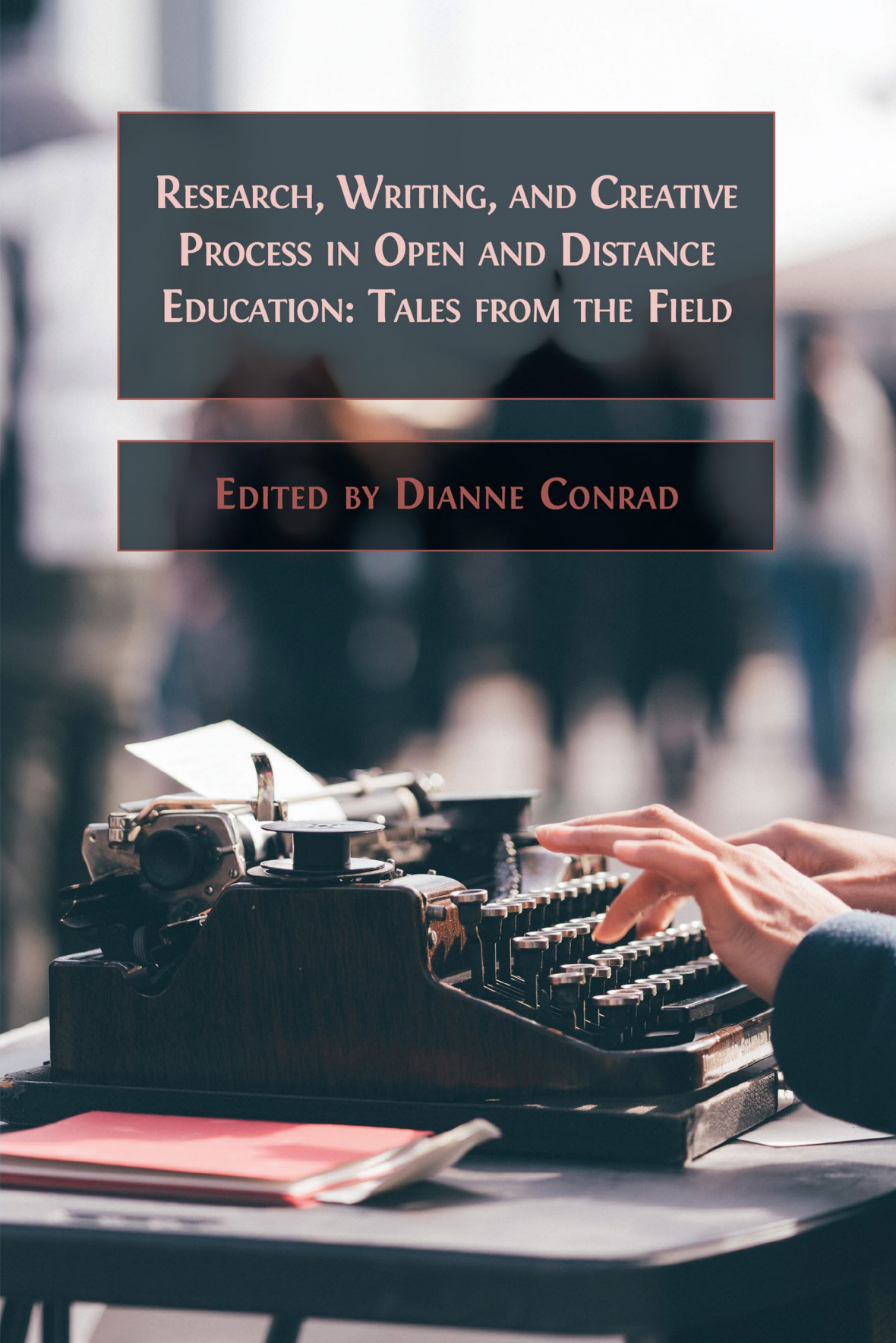
# Research, Writing, and Creative Process in Open and Distance Education: Tales from the Field

Edited by Dianne Conrad



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# 10. A Collaborative Approach to Research and Writing

*D. Randy Garrison*

As I begin this chapter, I offer this caveat as it will become evident that I have little experience writing in a personal manner: I have always been told to write in the third person and be objective. As a result, in writing this chapter, I am not exactly building on my scholarly strengths. Moreover, my approach to research and writing is self-taught and developed in the crucible of scholarly critique, shaped by the focus on simplicity of communication. The strategy is to answer the research question and communicate that insight as clearly as possible. Moreover, I take a more intuitive approach to my work as opposed to following a standard plan of attack. I am always looking for new ways to think about a problem and exploring these insights. This approach means taking a systemic view of things and not getting caught up in the minutiae. This also translates into making connections and creating coherent perspectives. It should become evident that my approach to research and writing is driven by curiosity and the search for explanation. Ideally, it is a search for the key concept that provides coherence, understanding, and the means to explore further. I note this at the outset because what I have to offer here is more strategic than tactical. Therefore, my advice regarding specific writing techniques will be limited. That said, I believe my approach may be better appreciated with an understanding of my background and how I became a researcher.

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## My Educational Journey

I ended up in academia largely by chance. I was forty years old when I accepted a temporary university position. I never previously considered an academic career. However, I was always curious which unintentionally prepared me for a career as a researcher. My curiosity was the basis for my love of learning. However, I was never a very good student because I never much cared for being told what to learn. When I was growing up, studying was largely a memorization process which I despised. This is important to mention as I believe it had a profound impact on my learning and success as a researcher. This aversion to memorization revealed a need to understand and very much shaped my independence of thought and how I approach research and writing.

As an undergraduate, I majored in mathematics education but developed a particular interest in cognitive psychology and the learning process. This interest in learning significantly shaped my future studies. After graduation, I became interested in computer applications in education. I must note that this was in the early 1970s and before the proliferation of the microcomputer. I was offered a scholarship at the University of Calgary and went on to develop and evaluate a computer-assisted physics programme to qualify for a master's degree. After this, I continued my career in education with a move to a college setting, teaching adults. This was career-changing as it stimulated my interest in adult education and paved the way to completing a doctorate in the subject. While earning this degree was never intended as a career move, it unexpectedly opened the door to an academic career and provided the philosophical and theoretical foundation for my research interests.

Consistent with my systemic approach to research, it may be useful to note that I believe a significant reason for my success was based upon an ability to see things back to front. I attribute this to my background in statistics and being able to assess a viable means to analyze data and the best way to answer the question. This is where I felt I had an advantage as I tended to see the problem back to front. That is, I had a very good idea of the data I needed and how these could be analyzed to best inform the question at hand. This perspective expedited my graduate programme research and made my research career more productive. I have found that not seeing the research process systematically is a

significant weakness of many graduate students. Too often they ask interesting questions but in a way that may make it very difficult to gather, analyze, and get good results.

## My Academic Career

My university career began with a one-year temporary appointment as director of distance education at the University of Calgary in 1984. This appointment was to replace a faculty member going on academic leave. Much to my good fortune, the faculty member did not return, and I was offered a tenure-track position beginning in 1985. What was equally fortuitous was that I found myself in a field that needed fresh thinking. It was an area to which I could bring my knowledge of learning and educational technology. As a result, I wrote my first book, *Understanding distance education: A framework for the future* (Garrison, 1989). While the sub-title was a bit pretentious for a relative newcomer, I believe it was a timely critique of distance education with its dependence on independent learning. At the time, distance education was described by Otto Peters (1994) as an industrialized form of education based on the advantages of efficient mass education. While I understood the necessity of such an approach at the time, emerging technologies were mitigating the dependence on independent study. I argued that education was inherently a transaction, and I chose to emphasize the importance of interaction and collaboration for an authentic educational experience. This perspective fundamentally shaped my research direction and educational views.

Perhaps the defining characteristic of my research approach is collaboration which I had first learned through sports. I played both individual and team sports (tennis, basketball) but appreciated the camaraderie of the latter. From a research perspective, I saw that thinking and working cooperatively had numerous advantages. While we never truly work alone as we benefit indirectly from the work of others, it is enormously beneficial to be stimulated by the knowledge of others through direct and shared experiences. Collaborative discourse not only encourages deeper thinking, but I also find that it is more satisfying. It simply makes too much sense to me not to benefit from the expertise of others. The challenge is finding the most productive means to work

together. Productive collaboration will require negotiations based on the personalities and abilities of the group members. A simple example is that when drafting an article, I preferred to have the first author do the initial draft (regardless how incomplete) and then allow others to contribute. The reason for this was my inability to write collaboratively in real time, which, for me, did not give me time to reflect and allow a flow of ideas.

To be clear, I developed many of my ideas individually but was never reluctant to share and work with others to refine them. The first significant work in this regard was in the field of distance education with my colleague Doug Shale. I believe we significantly reshaped the field by focusing on the educational transaction and considering distance as a constraint, not a defining characteristic. Doug had worked with Athabasca University and had important insights into the advantages and disadvantages of dedicated open distance education institutions. His brilliance was exciting, and we produced a book titled *Education at a Distance* in 1990, where we argued that distance should be considered a structural constraint and not a defining characteristic of the experience.

Collaboration, however, reached new heights when I assumed the position of Dean, Faculty of Extension, at the University of Alberta in 1996. While I had two colleagues at the university, Terry Anderson and Walter Archer, there was little expectation of collaborative research. The beginning of our collaboration was grounded in the challenge of implementing an online (actually blended) graduate programme. At that time, there were few programmes that had implemented this model and there were few examples of how to do this.

The justification for delivering a quality learning experience online was the catalyst for the Community of Inquiry framework. I had explored some of the core concepts before arriving at the University of Alberta, but the synergy of my colleagues and circumstances created the environment that allowed us to bring these ideas together. We began by meeting for lunch at least once a week to keep things moving. Sharing ideas in such a setting was inspiring. However, what moved this work forward was a research grant that Terry Anderson was awarded. This provided the funds to hire a graduate student, Liam Rourke, who proved instrumental in the literature review and testing of our concepts. This

team of four coalesced in the late 1990s and was crucial to our ambitious research project.

I also regard supervising graduate students as another potential area of collaborative research in academia. With my graduate students, I followed the practice of being clear as to how we would work together and outlined the implications for any publishable work to follow. To oversimplify, I offered two approaches. The first was that students already have a good idea of what they want to do and how to proceed. In this case, I would be a resource and do all I could to expedite the development of the thesis topic. An example of this approach was with Terry Anderson, whom I supervised and with whom I had the pleasure to work after his graduation.

The second alternative was a more collaborative approach where I would offer more guidance from defining a "doable" research question to co-authoring a publishable article. The explicit understanding was that the graduate student would always be first author. Two other notable examples of this approach are Norm Vaughan and Zehra Akyol. I am proud of the fact that we also continued to collaborate on notable subsequent research projects such as blended learning and shared metacognition, respectively. Clearly both collaborative approaches can work successfully.

Collaboration has been enormously beneficial for me in another perhaps surprising manner. I must confess that I have never been comfortable giving presentations. I am a reflective person and giving presentations requires a degree of performance art with which I am not comfortable. I have always been more comfortable listening to others' perspectives and being challenged to make sense of a new idea or perspective. Leaning on my colleagues when doing presentations is where I was most at ease. This collaboration also made an inherently one-way communication at least feel like it was more of a dialogue. My fear was to bore people or be off-topic in terms of what the audience expected or wanted. Notwithstanding that an audience expects to be provided with key information, my preference is to try to make a presentation more interactive. In a dialogue, one can adjust and address the interests of the participants. Unfortunately, at research conferences this is most often impracticable.

## Philosophies that Guide my Work

While collaboration had been a consistent theme in my work, this was not always the case. As an undergraduate, I was very much interested in critical thinking and the research behind it. Along with my background in math and science, individual cognition prepared me for my work in the field of computer-assisted learning. At the time, I was not fully conscious of the fact that computer-assisted learning was largely supporting independent and self-directed learning. However, as I matured as a teacher, I recognized the importance of engagement in the educational process and shifted my focus to the educational transaction.

This shift in thinking goes back to my first teaching experience where there was a crucial inflexion point in understanding education as a transaction and the importance of focusing on the activities of learners. Although I was trained in secondary mathematics education, my first teaching position was teaching an elementary class. Not having any training in this area, I stood at the blackboard (yes, this was 1969) and started basically lecturing to the class. Within minutes, I had totally lost the attention of the students. At the time, I was lost. However, it then became apparent to me that learning was based on learner engagement and not directly on teachers talking. I realized that the challenge was to engage the students in meaningful learning activities. This experience shaped my educational philosophy and led to the collaborative-constructivist approach that I use in my research.

As time went by, it became more apparent to me that I was very much in tune with the thinking of John Dewey, the American educational philosopher. Dewey (1933) emphasized the importance of experience, collaboration, and critical reflection. The unifying concept for Dewey was inquiry as reflected in the pragmatic application of the scientific method. Most importantly, he did not distinguish between the individual and the group. Personal learning and development were dependent upon the group dialogue. On a larger scale, Dewey argued that society was dependent upon the educated individual being capable of critical thinking. Therefore, personal reflection and collaborative discourse are organically and inherently connected. This unity of reflection and discourse became the foundation of my personal perspective and eventually, the core of the Community of Inquiry framework.

Notwithstanding this fundamental shift in my view of educational practice, as an academic, I was oriented to the theoretical side of the research process. I see myself as a theorist in the sense that I try to make sense of complex educational transactions and develop models that parsimoniously describe unified individual and group dynamics. Subsequent research has used these frameworks and constructs to test this understanding theoretically and pragmatically. This perspective has provided a window for researchers to develop research projects and relevant hypotheses. The final piece of this approach was to develop tools such as the Community of Inquiry survey instrument and the Shared Metacognition instrument (https://coi.athabascau.ca/coi-model/coi-survey/) to assist in the precise and efficient study of these topics.

Research for me has been driven largely by connecting ideas and making sense of complex dynamics such as teaching and learning. For this reason, I do not believe worthwhile research questions are hard to generate. I would emphasize the necessity of staying focused on the big picture and not to be distracted by shiny objects. For example, I have not spent much time addressing the latest software such as Twitter or Facebook. There was always some innovation that was supposed to transform educational practice, but it never did. Rather, the question for me was why most technological developments did not have a transformational influence. For this reason, I focused on the essence of the educational experience and contextual influences. The challenge was to ask the right question such that it could be resolved in reasonable time and effort. My research was never dependent on research grants, although a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) grant facilitated the first phase of our work validating the Community of Inquiry framework.

## Writing Strategies

Writing is a test of one's thinking. Conversely, clear thinking leads to good writing. This reciprocal relationship reflects my approach to writing. My approach is a matter of clearly understanding what you want to say and then saying it as succinctly as possible. This focus on ideas requires considerable research and reflection. The key is to be grounded in viable and relevant constructs. In this regard, I am shaped

by my philosophical and theoretical assumptions while still searching for and remaining open to new ideas and perspectives. This approach provides fidelity of thought and has proven to be productive in guiding my thinking and the communication of my ideas. This focused but open approach provides the means to creating coherent knowledge frameworks and reflects my minimalist writing style. In terms of my style, I have always tried to communicate my thoughts as clearly and simply as possible, sometimes at the expense of clarity. Notwithstanding this limitation, it was important for me not to embellish or digress from the theme of the manuscript: Keep the primary message in mind and bring things back to your main ideas and argument.

From a pragmatic perspective, I must admit that the greatest tool that allowed me to be a passable writer is the word processor. When I was a graduate student in the early 1980s, I got access to an early version of a word processing programme (on a mainframe computer) and thought I had gone to heaven. I could make major and minor edits with impunity. This was an absolute lifesaver that allowed me to mask my deficiencies as a writer who is not naturally gifted. I could do as many edits as needed. Moreover, the university was covering the cost of printing so I could bang out multiple draft copies of my thesis. This expedited my progress enormously. Considering the editing powers of modern word processing programmes (e.g., grammar and spell checks), there is little reason one cannot be a passable writer. The key is to know your subject and maintain focus on the topic. Do not try to cover too much content or become enamoured with a thought or phrase that does not fit.

To understand my approach to writing, it is essential to appreciate that I was not driven by outcomes. I stayed in the process of exploring and making sense of things. I believe that writing strongly depends on one's passion for and knowledge of the subject. That is, writing helped me to make specific connections and justify my arguments. Writing for me was always a journey and exploration with the goal being to make sense of a problem and offer evidence for my thinking. This approach encouraged rigorous thinking. Engage in the process and do not dwell on the outcome. It is through the flow of the writing dynamic that insight and expression emerge. While I admit it is a thrill to see your work in print, this was not my primary motivation. This elation did not last long and in short order I had trouble remembering exactly what I

had published. Notwithstanding the pressure to publish, stay true to answering your research questions and find excitement and satisfaction in the process.

More specifically, the advice I offer is to establish a daily routine for writing. While this protocol is not new, it contributed greatly to my productivity, especially considering the administrative responsibilities I had throughout my career. The best way to get yourself in the zone is a regular schedule. A routine makes it easier to get started and get back into the flow. The other thing is that, at the end of a session, make a note of where you want to go when you start the next session. A routine also means you generally do not have to block off large chunks of time. In this regard, my advice is to try and do a little every day; but if this daily writing is not possible, try not to leave extended periods between sessions. Whether it is getting up early or working late at night, it is helpful to have familiar blocks of time. Not only does a routine sustain motivation, but it is surprising how much can be accomplished by doing a little every day. Finally, regarding routine, I very much valued a block of time on the weekends where I could focus on more challenging tasks such as getting started on a manuscript.

Another tactic that worked for me was not to edit my work as I went along. Just get your thoughts down and worry about how it reads later. In terms of getting started, I got my mind in the right space by doing the appropriate reading and reviewing my notes. I certainly always had an idea of where I wanted to go, notwithstanding those invariably new insights that emerged, and I often went in unexpected directions. But writing for me is a creative process, and so, as I explored ideas and how they could relate to and inform the topic at hand, I was always having to rearrange the order of ideas and passages and do more research on ideas where necessary. However, pauses and explorations for such purposes were often constructive in giving perspective and direction to the writing challenge.

Counter-intuitively, taking a step back to assess how ideas are, or are not, fitting together can expedite progress. Reflecting on the overall structure allows a check on the flow from one idea to the other. This is important when approaching writing in a more spontaneous manner that does not rely on a comprehensive outline. When approaching writing in this way, creating transitions is a constant but important

challenge to maintain the flow and integrity of the manuscript. In fact, it is a check on the logical flow of the text. My approach is not the way writing is taught. I seldom make a detailed outline and follow it without question. To be clear, I do not recommend any particular approach but encourage you to find what best works for you.

A significant barrier for many academics is trying to be perfect, which, in my view, seriously restricts creativity and productivity. The burden of perfection is related to my previous comments regarding flow and editing. Do not let your ego get ahead of you. My advice is to be open and let others provide feedback — especially early in the process. The longer you wait, the harder it is to be open to feedback; as your expectations rise, the greater the fear of submitting for publication review. Be prepared to get rejected and learn from the experience. I learned this early on when I tried to publish my doctoral research. I crammed too much content into an esoteric manuscript; not surprisingly, it was rejected. I learned that I had to communicate more clearly and not try to appear smarter than I was. Most importantly, parsimony will help you to think more deeply and clearly. Because I never considered myself to be a good writer, I never had much of an ego regarding putting something out there and getting feedback. As time went by, I did get a little better at expressing myself and organizing my thoughts, but I never had excessively high expectations regarding my prose. In short, manage your expectations with humility.

Regarding writer's block, my experience is that writers block is simply not being prepared in terms of breadth and depth of knowledge. There are no shortcuts to preparing for a productive writing experience. My approach was never to force the process. I would step back and review my material and perhaps do more reading to get my mind in the right space. I strongly believe that the most important stimulus for research is to immerse oneself in the material. Reading widely in a variety of related fields is also important. This breadth of reading provides new ideas and connections that are the source of much creativity. When reading, do not get caught up in the minutiae. My approach was to keep the big picture and core principles in mind. The challenge is to create coherent cognitive structures that will in turn provide guidance to making sense of the specifics.

As noted, much of my work has entailed collaborative journeys which have been — often powerful but challenging. There are many advantages of collaboration in the creative process. Collaboration provides a powerful and immediate means to go deeper and challenge questionable ideas and reasoning. However, specific to the writing process, it can be challenging to manage input from multiple authors. In this regard, working from a shared document is essential. As noted previously, decide who will be the lead author and assign that person to provide a draft, regardless of how complete. This strategy allows others to contribute effectively and move the process forward in an efficient manner. Not only is this productive and efficient, but it can avoid the development of hard feelings.

My final comment here may sound somewhat mystical and it may be. As a science major, I did not have much formal training or practice in terms of writing. As a result, I developed a natural or intuitive approach to writing. For me, this meant putting my subconscious mind to work and trusting it. This insight came about in my first year of university when I was in the library trying to solve a physics problem. I was blocked and, somewhat out of frustration, took a break. I did not consciously think about the problem but when I got back and looked down at my notes, I immediately saw the solution. This revelation had an important influence on my creative process. There appeared to be an interplay of the conscious and subconscious mind that I could not explain but it worked for me. From that point on, I learned to rely on my subconscious mind to let things settle. After focusing on a problem, inevitably ideas will emerge, often at times you would least expect it. I try to tap into what I refer to as my subconscious mind when I write. Related to this, and when getting into the "zone," I found that writing can be enormously satisfying. I discovered the more writing I did, the more I enjoyed the process. Once I got into that mind space, I lost myself in the process.

## Conclusion

The takeaway from this discussion is to follow your own path. While we certainly can learn from others and adopt various techniques, I believe that each person must discover an approach to research and writing that

works for that individual. I have attempted to share how I approach research and I hope this may resonate with some of you. Writing is essential to the research process as it adds rigor to one's thinking and understanding. Not discounting the importance of independent thinking, an important aspect of my approach is to work collaboratively. On the surface, this may appear as somewhat of a contradiction as personal reflection and scepticism are essential to creative thought. However, the key is to bring the personal perspective to the collaboration and discourse. In this way, I found that I could go deeper and explore new directions of inquiry.

Finally, let me say that I worked until I was seventy. Now that I am retired, I have continued to keep updated with research associated with the Community of Inquiry framework and shared this on a regular basis on the CoI blog. On the blog, I highlight significant developments in Community of Inquiry research. Consistent with my approach to research, I focus my attention on the assumptions and essential constructs of the Community of Inquiry framework such that we are not deflected by suggestions that violate the basic principles of collaborative inquiry and theoretical parsimony. With the encouragement of my colleagues, I have tried to stay current and contribute to developments in the field. In this regard, I am particularly indebted to my colleagues, Marti Cleveland and Norm Vaughan, who keep in touch and include me in their scholarly activities — one of the lasting benefits of collaborative approaches to research.

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