Toward a Philosophy of Collaboration

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ABSTRACT

The authors find themselves in the midst of a global social transformation that is shaping the common perception of reality. The development of technology-enabled collaborative networks, virtual collaboration, structured collaboration processes, and digital team collaboration affects every part of society. Research on collaboration and collaboration systems has achieved sufficient maturity and scope that an overall conceptual definition of collaboration is now needed and possible. This article proposes a conceptual approach and terminology as a step towards bridging isolated communities of collaborating researchers in various fields. The authors offer a fundamental philosophical description of what collaboration is (and is not) based on relevant epistemological, metaphysical, and axiological insights derived from a synthesis of existing collaboration research, and the authors outline the most obvious needs for further research toward formalizing a more fully-realized philosophy of collaboration.

KEYWORDS

Collaboration, Collaboration Cosmology, Collaboration Paradigm, Epistemology of Collaboration, Ethics of Collaboration, Metaphysics of Collaboration, Philosophy of Collaboration

1. INTRODUCTION

We find ourselves in the midst of a global social transformation that is shaping our common perception of reality. The development of technology-enabled collaboration systems, virtual collaboration, structured collaboration processes, and digital team collaboration affects every part of society. The awareness of this shift is greatest within the economic process of society. The information systems (IS) life cycle, for example, requires intense collaboration among success-critical stakeholders and practitioners use specialized collaboration systems for every phase, from requirements negotiation through system design, development, testing, deployment, operation, maintenance, and management. Collaborative learning support systems are now standard at universities around the globe, and technology-supported collaboration is deeply embedded within modern military practice: "To defeat a network, we had become a network. We had become a team of teams." (McChrystal, Collins, Silverman, & Fussel, 2014, p. 298). Decades of collaboration research in the IS literature and elsewhere have brought understandings to a sufficient level of maturity that work can begin toward a philosophy of collaboration.

The philosophy "of" a given branch of knowledge considers the general philosophical questions in the specific context of that domain. This paper aspires to map out a research stream, a first step toward developing philosophical foundations for collaboration and collaboration systems. We frame philosophical questions about aspects of collaboration and propose preliminary answers to some of those questions to demonstrate the scientific and practical utility a fully realized philosophy of collaboration could provide. We offer these answers not as settled, but to initiate discourse about the philosophy of collaboration; to highlight the relevance of the philosophical questions to IS and collaboration research; to demonstrate that they are answerable and worth answering. A fully realized philosophy of collaboration will require the efforts of many scholars. This article is a first step. A philosophy of collaboration may also useful beyond IS and collaboration systems researchers whose needs it is developed to serve. It could ultimately inform any domain where collaboration is valuable, e.g., social sciences, organizational operations, and political discourse.

1.1. Methodology

Philosophical method is similar to the scientific method in that it uses both deductive and inductive reasoning as tools of inquiry. This paper undertakes a multi-perspective approach. We define key collaboration concepts, then use deduction and induction to link the literature about these concepts to a subset of philosophical questions. From the IS collaboration literature and our own work, we sketch the outlines of a Paradigm of Collaboration, and propose a direction for follow-on research by the IS and Collaboration Systems community and others to realize a Philosophy of Collaboration and to make explicit the prevailing collaboration paradigms in our research community.

1.2. Definitions of Collaboration

The English word, collaboration, is a noun of action derived from the Latin word '*collabōrāre:* to work with" composed of the words, '*col'* together with the word, '*labōrāre'*, 'to work' (Dictionary, 2015). We define collaboration as joint effort toward a group goal (Vreede, Briggs, & Massey, 2009 p. 122). In the context of our definition for collaboration, effort is defined as 'intentional exertion of mental and physical power toward some end.' Joint effort is effort contributed by two or more people toward the same goal.

A goal is defined as a desired state or outcome (Locke & Latham, 1990). Much collaboration research focuses on goals in the context of, for example, group formation (Hahn, Moon, & Zhang, 2008), motivation (Victor Harold Vroom, 1995), continuity (Lodewijkx, Rabbie, & Visser, 2006), productivity (Wheelan, 2009), satisfaction (R. O. Briggs, Reinig, & de Vreede, 2008), and success (Levi, 2013).

We distinguish between group goals and private goals. A group goal is a state or outcomes toward which group members have committed to work together. A private goal is a state or outcome desired by an individual group member. It may be the case that no members of a collaborating group desires the group goal for its own sake; but only to achieve their private goals. Consider, for example, the Parable of the Car Factory:

An automobile designer, who wants worldwide recognition (private goal), joins a machinist, who wants financial security (private goal), and an entrepreneur, who wants to build wealth (private goal), to design and build high-performance automobiles (a group goal). None of them, though, wants an automobile; indeed none can get what they want until they get rid of the cars they have agreed to build.

In the context of this definition of collaboration, a group is a collection of people committed to work jointly toward the same goal. By this definition, a group would not exist until at least two individuals commit to work together toward at least one joint goal. The term, commit, (an individual-

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