

What can we Learn from a Master Chef About Collaboration

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Ferran Adria is widely recognized as one of the best chefs in the world. His former restaurant, El Bulli, famously attracted patrons from across the globe. They traveled to Roses (Girona, Spain) to sample not only Adria's cuisine, but also his innovative methods for creating and delivering a unique dining experience. El Bulli closed in 2011 at the height of its success and, while Adria's reputation as a world master has continued to grow, his influence has accelerated into a broader sphere of creativity. Adria founded and heads the El Bulli Foundation, which is an international and interdisciplinary lab that aims to rethink the cuisine with an innovative and design-based approach, where new ideas and projects are designed and lifted into reality. One of the most compelling indicators of Adria's influence is the recent map identifying the locations and work of over a thousand "Bullianos" – those who are former employees or associates of the foundation. Bullianos are shaping modern notions of creativity and design, challenging professionals in varied fields and across a fractured world to rethink their work in response to contemporary opportunities and challenges.

As education scholars in Barcelona Spain, Madison Wisconsin, and San Diego California, we have developed an ongoing collaborative research relationship that has drawn considerably from Adria's approach. Our research collaboration has been

less project-based (i.e., tied to a specific grant or study) than it has been relationally and philosophically tied to a way of working together. We have learned four lessons that drive our work and are illustrated by Adria's experience -Humility, Diversity, Generosity and Risk-. We suggest that this emergent Adria-inspired way of collaboration contributes to understanding international collaboration and can significantly inform other education researchers who similarly seek substantive impact in their fluid and complex settings.

The first two lessons that we have drawn from Adria's work relate to his notions of *humility* and *diversity*. Adria is unquestionably a genius who, in developing an entirely new way of cooking ("molecular gastronomy"), has shaped his entire field. But Adria remains humble, continually and systematically deconstructing and reconstructing his core ideas about work and creativity. In cooking, Adria achieved success by reexamining the very form, function, and integration of common ingredients. Even as Adria's innovations spread, he focused on reflection and new learning, commonly leaving work after many hours lamenting that "I don't know anything!"

On a related note, Adria's humble, ongoing pursuit of learning is and has always been anchored in his value for *diversity*. Like education researchers, many leading chefs tend to spend time with and learn from chefs who use similar methods and focus areas. But at the height of El Bulli, Adria would close the restaurant for nearly half of each year in order to develop his craft. He would often travel the world with colleagues to learn about food in vastly different settings. Adria views

varied contexts, cultures, natural resources, differing perspectives, and people as the richest sites for new learning.

We seek to similarly center humility and diversity as our informal research collaboration has evolved over the past eight years. We leverage diversity between our three settings and the contexts they serve to regularly reflect upon and develop. We actively seek out new perspectives that challenge our thinking and push us to question assumptions about what has come before. In our work together we see ourselves as not being defined by our differences, but in the spirit of Adria, being strengthened by them. We embrace diversity in many ways not only for the rich learning opportunities it provides, but because the more we learn about innovation the more we understand the value of differing perspectives. Our learning comes not despite difference, but rather because the differences open up new pathways of understanding. This is not an easy task, but one that is perhaps the most rewarding in our work as we seek to understand, empathize, and grow together.

A third lesson that we have learned from Adria is to anchor collaboration in a shared commitment to professional generosity. The worldwide network of “Bullianos” has evolved not because of any formal expansion, but rather as core to Adria’s commitment to sharing his time, ideas, and social support with others. He gives without expecting return and in doing so is repaid many times over.

Adria’s international recognition and worth is unparalleled in his field. He certainly does not need to “network” with others to maintain his professional status – and few would critique Adria for holding tight to the innovative ideas that launched his career. However, Adria is renowned for his generosity and openness

with those who are committed to creativity and taking a path of experimentation. A diverse array of chefs, artists, scientists, leaders, and other influencers travels to learn with and from Adria each year. He views their collaboration as having mutual benefit—his ideas are shared, vetted, and spread all while his protégés tailor new ideas that relate to and expand upon the foundation laid by Adria.

We attempt to similarly offer professional generosity in our collaboration by sharing research practice not only with each other during our semi-regular video conferences and international trips, but also with each others' students and communities. For example, during this years we have worked in common projects, we have introduced each other to co-workers and establish new relationships and opportunities, we have shared lectures abroad to our graduate students, spread instruments to improve School performance, partner with the local administration. We have gathered together with others to learn and partner, written together, struggled together, and also shared a beer together and have occasionally done all three at the same time.

It is both the formal tasks and projects we have undertaken as well as the informal time to share and get to know each other on a different level. In our time together beyond completing projects and writing pieces we have shared the death of parents, birth of children, moves, major career shifts, and promotions. It is the combination of the professional and personal that bonds us and from our vantage points makes our work better.

This learning across boundaries focuses not just on “what works” in different settings, but on deeper questions of *why* the work is done and *how* people come

together when it is done. While not comparable to the worldwide Bullianos, we focus on expanding our research network by starting from a place of giving to those who ask. We know we do not hold all the ideas and knowledge, to think so is the antithesis of what we strive to create, and so we seek to grow, to give, to learn, and to share. The work of improving educational systems worldwide is complex and requires new models and ways of being that we strive to design and grow in the same way the Bullianos do in creating new culinary advances.

Finally, the fourth and most challenging of Adria's lessons to us as education researchers is to take risks. He closed El Bulli, one of the world's most famous and admired restaurants because he felt called to address more fundamental aspects of the creative process. El Bulli Foundation does not focus on food – he has moved on to an altogether new field. This change is no small risk, if not to his financial standing than to his legacy as a master chef. Like his commitment to humility, diversity, and generosity, Adria describes risk as an essential aspect of his continuing development as an authentic contributor to creative enterprise.

We too are challenged to take risks in education research and we have strived to provide each other with support in this regard. If we really unpack the idea of risk at its heart is vulnerability. We view vulnerability at the birthplace of innovation, creativity, and change and it is our ability to be vulnerable with one another that allows risk taking to happen. For example, we have spent time in one another's settings as a way to push ourselves out of comfort zones and well established patterns. We strive to create the conditions for each of us to feel psychologically safe and open through actively listening and seeking to understand.

Not only is this orientation central to our own work, but is critically important in the efforts we undertake in the field.

These lessons from Adria are instructive from our vantage point. None of us considers ourselves or the work we do to be that of a master Chef, rather we see ourselves as learners as the learned are perfectly suited for what currently exists. Pushing ourselves professionally and personally to grow and change in a supportive and nurturing context is at its core what makes for productive learning. The lessons of Ferran Adria provide a jumping off point to for us to reflect on what brings us together and in doing so we hope both encourages and nurtures others to consider these lessons.