

Reflections on research

Research collaboration at a distance

by Christine Maheu, RN, PhD

In this reflection, I share insights from my experience with the process of leading nursing research projects in two provinces at the same time. Let me begin by providing a bit of context. In 2008, while on faculty at the School of Nursing at York University in Toronto, I joined the Cancer Survivorship Centre at Princess Margaret Hospital, as holder of the Butterfield/Drew Fellowship in the Electronic Living Laboratory in Interdisciplinary Cancer Survivorship Research (ELLICSR) (<http://ellicsr.ca/>). This fellowship provided not only space at ELLICSR, but also multiple research opportunities to bring a nursing perspective to collaborations with other cancer survivorship researchers. In 2010, I took a sabbatical year in Marseille, France, moving my young family there for a year for the opportunity to experience another country, as well as engage in international studies with a group of cancer researchers. During that year, I had my first taste of collaborating from a distance. With the help of technology, I continued monitoring one of my intervention studies in Toronto while conducting new studies in Marseille.

Upon our return from Marseille, my family and I decided to move to Quebec for both personal and professional reasons, and I was fortunate to obtain a position with the Ingram School of Nursing at McGill University. The directors of both the Ingram School of Nursing and ELLICSR agreed that I could keep my fellowship and continue the research work that I have built over the years. While keeping research work active in one province while living in another province, and sometimes living on another continent might bring challenges, it has, nonetheless, brought a lot of advantages for shared work and learning.

Both on a personal and professional level, distance collaborations require organization and support to effectively work on a long-term basis. As most of my travel to my research laboratory in Toronto involves

a stay of two days, this requires that I anticipate and plan for all the possible needs of the home life, beginning with preparing six lunches—two per child for the two days out of the house! Professionally, I have no lunches to prepare but my own, but there is preparatory work to be done before departure date to maximize my time while I am physically at my research office. Planning involves a lot of scheduling. While the technology has really helped in keeping the research team connected virtually, as well as allowing for research engagements such as conducting presentations, there are other meetings, including those with collaborators and research assistants that are best done in person. Most of the times, those two days at the research laboratory are quite full with meetings, strategic planning, and conducting any of the active research interventions still in place.

The frequency of the travelling is largely dependent on the needs of my research studies. For some of my studies, I conduct weekly group interventions that last more than six weeks. In those instances, I commit to physically being at my research laboratory weekly for two days at a time. When there is no active group work in progress, I am there every two weeks, on average. In between the travelling, to follow through on the work that conducting multiple research projects entails, I rely on help from my research assistants and a few volunteer nursing students I mentor in research in exchange for physical time in Toronto. We also take advantage of information technology that facilitates sharing the work, such as the conferencing software WebEx, distance connections to my research computer, and email.

Making the most of your time also includes maximizing work during travel time. Most of my travel between Toronto and Montreal has been by train. Those five-hour train rides become wonderful opportunities to prepare for upcoming meetings or to complete manuscripts I have been waiting to find time for. With the use of the

Wi-Fi now available on trains, I can get a lot done without interruption. On those occasions when my schedule does not permit an overnight stay and I need to take a flight home, the new airlines with direct flights between the city of Montreal and downtown Toronto make distance work even more feasible.

Notwithstanding the challenges that come from keeping a program of research active from a distance, I find that there are many advantages academically. Now that I have begun to build a research network in Montreal, we have started working on joint research projects between the two cities. Presenting some of the work that is taking place in Toronto sparked interest among some of my new Montreal clinical colleagues to engage in multi-site studies. In the last two years, with the director, Dr. Pamela Catton, we have also invited a few scholars from Montreal to visit ELLICSR for a week to exchange knowledge in cancer survivorship care and research. This possibility to be connected across two major cities that are both leaders in cancer care provides for “serendipitous and planned” opportunities for scientific exchanges and collaborations.

Overall, the main key to success is keeping constant with the work and the contacts, be it virtually or physically. And, in this modern world, all kinds of new possibilities are opening up for collaborating across provinces. ❏

About the author

Christine Maheu, RN, PhD, Associate Professor, Ingram School of Nursing, McGill University, and Butterfield/Drew Fellow, Breast Cancer Survivorship Program, Princess Margaret Cancer Centre.
Address for correspondence: McGill University, Ingram School of Nursing, Wilson Hall, room 401A, 3506 University Street, Montreal, Quebec H3A 2A7. Email: christine.maheu@mcgill.ca