



Open access Journal

International Journal of Emerging Trends in Science and TechnologyIC Value: 76.89 (Index Copernicus) Impact Factor: 2.838 DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.18535/ijetst/v3i11.06>

Empowering Students Success through Collaborative Learning

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ABSTRACT

Collaborative learning is when a group of students works together towards a common goal, usually to help one another learn academic material. The effects of collaborative learning on student achievement are debated. The effectiveness of collaborative learning in the classroom has as much to do with the teacher as it does with the students in the groups. There is an ongoing discussion surrounding the effectiveness of group work in the classroom and its effects on student learning. Collaborative learning covers a broad territory of approaches with wide variability in the amount of in-class or out-of-class time built around group work. The teacher is the one that must not only teach them a subject, but also the different methods of learning. The positive effects of collaborative learning are evident and there is little question that collaborative learning can be a useful tool and should be utilized in the learning environment.

Introduction

The concept of collaborative learning, the grouping and pairing of students for the purpose of achieving an academic goal has been widely researched and advocated throughout the professional literature. The term "collaborative learning" refers to an instruction method in which students at various performance levels work together in small groups toward a common goal. The students are responsible for one another's learning as well as their own. Thus, the success of one student helps other students to be successful. Proponents of collaborative learning claim that the active exchange of ideas within small groups not only increases interest among the participants but also promotes critical thinking. According to Johnson and Johnson (1986), there is persuasive evidence that cooperative teams achieve at higher levels of thought and retain information longer than students who work quietly as individuals. The shared learning gives students an opportunity to engage in discussion, take responsibility for their own learning, and thus become critical thinkers (Totten, Sills, Digby, & Russ, 1991).

Collaborative Learning

It is an instruction method in which students work in groups toward a common academic goal. "Collaborative learning" is an umbrella term for a variety of educational approaches involving joint intellectual effort by students, or students and teachers together. Usually, students are working in groups of two or more, mutually searching for understanding, solutions, or meanings, or creating a product. Collaborative learning activities vary widely, but most center on students' exploration or application of the course material, not simply the teacher's presentation or explication of it. Collaborative learning represents a significant shift away from the typical teacher centered or lecture-centered milieu in classrooms. In collaborative classrooms, the lecturing/ listening/ note-taking process may not disappear entirely, but it lives alongside other processes that are based in students' discussion and active work with the course material. Teachers who use collaborative learning approaches tend to think of themselves less as expert transmitters of knowledge to students, and more as expert designers of intellectual experiences for students-

as coaches or mid-wives of a more emergent learning process.

Collaborative Learning Approaches

Collaborative learning covers a broad territory of approaches with wide variability in the amount of in-class or out-of-class time built around group work. Collaborative activities can range from classroom discussions interspersed with short lectures, through entire class periods, to study on research teams that last a whole term or year. The goals and processes of collaborative activities also vary widely. Some faculty members design small group work around specific sequential steps, or tightly structured tasks. Others prefer a more spontaneous agenda developing out of student interests or questions. In some collaborative learning settings, the students' task is to create a clearly delineated product; in others, the task is not to produce a product, but rather to participate in a process, an exercise of responding to each other's work or engaging in analysis and meaning-making.

Collaborative Learning: Challenges and Opportunities

Creating a collaborative classroom can be a wonderfully rewarding opportunity but it is also full of challenges and dilemmas. Stepping out of the center and engaging students in group activity is hard work; especially at first. Designing group work requires a demanding yet important rethinking of our syllabus, in terms of course content and time allocation. If some of the classroom time is considered an important social space for developing understandings about course material, or if some of the out-of-class time is devoted to study groups or group projects, how should we design the rest of the class time (lectures, assignments, examinations)? How do we ensure students are learning and mastering key skills and ideas in the course, while at the same time addressing all the material of the course? Teaching in collaborative settings puts front and center the tension between the process of student

learning and content coverage. As we become more involved in using collaborative learning, we discover what radical questions it raises.

Collaborative learning goes to the roots of long-held assumptions about teaching and learning. Classroom roles change: both teachers and students take on more complex roles and responsibilities. The classroom is no longer solo teacher and individual students- it becomes more an interdependent community with all the joys and tensions and difficulties that attend all communities. This degree of involvement often questions and reshapes assumed power relationships between teachers and students, (and between students and students), a process that at first can be confusing and disorienting.

Not only is course content reshaped, so are our definitions of student competence. Because the public nature of group work makes demonstration of student learning so continuous, collaborative learning both complicates and enriches the evaluation process. Challenges to collaborative learning at the classroom level are compounded by the traditional structures and culture of the academy, which continue to perpetuate the teacher-centered, transmission- of-information model of teaching and learning. Student-student interaction; extended, careful examination of ideas; the hearing-out of multiple perspectives; the development of an intellectual community - all these are hard to accomplish under these constraints. The lecture-centered model is reinforced by institutional reward systems that favor limited *engagement* in teaching, and give greater recognition to research. Achievement for teachers and students alike is assumed to be a scarce honor, which one works for alone, in competition with peers. This assumption of scarcity is the platform for norm-referenced grading, or "grading on the curve," a procedure that enforces distance between students and corrodes the trust on which collaborative learning is built.

The desire to motivate students by getting them more actively engaged. Nonetheless, wanting to

be a facilitator of collaborative learning and being good at it are very different things.

As with all kinds of teaching, designing and guiding group work takes time to learn and practice. And for students, learning to learn well in groups doesn't happen overnight. Most teachers start with modest efforts. Collaborative classrooms stimulate both students and teachers. Learning collaboratively demands responsibility, persistence and sensitivity, but the result can be a community of learners in which everyone is welcome to join, participate and grow.

Collaborative Learning in the Classroom

The effectiveness of collaborative learning in the classroom has as much to do with the teacher as it do with the students in the groups. There is an ongoing discussion surrounding the effectiveness of group work in the classroom and its effects on student learning. Some teachers praise collaborative efforts, while others have a strong disdain for group work. There are five key components to successful collaboration in the classroom:

- Positive interdependence (each individual depends on and is accountable to the others—a built-in incentive to help, accept help, and root for others)
- Individual accountability (each person in the group learns the material)
- Promotive interaction (group members help one another, share information, offer clarifying explanations)
- Social skills (leadership, communication)
- Group processing (assessing how effectively they are working with one another)

Recommendations

- Teachers must take the time to assess the students in the classroom and attempt to determine which students will work best together. With an understanding of group dynamics, experience in the classroom, trial and error, assessment techniques, and perhaps even teacher development

programs it is possible to best guess optimal student work groups.

- Teachers, first and foremost, must contract with the students. Transparency of the intent, method, and desired outcomes is essential to all student work groups before work is started.
- Students have a responsibility to contract internally as well. The teacher may have to walk them through the process, but it may result in the same shared understanding as with the teacher/student contract.
- Keep trying. The classroom learning environment is a complex amalgamation of variables that are constantly influencing each other. There will not be a perfect answer from one year to the next or even one semester to the next.
- Teachers within and across academic institutions need to form a community of practice and share strategies on how to build student groups, contract with students, assess the results of collaboration, and anything else that may transform ineffectual group work to synergistic collaboration.

Conclusion

Collaboration in the classroom has the potential to elevate the learning of students past the superficial and into the deeper learning that remains for a lifetime. The students have been working in groups since their primary education days, but it is likely that no one has taught them how to maximize the potential of a group in higher education. The teacher is the one that must not only teach them a subject, but also the different methods of learning. Not all teachers have an understanding of what it takes to foster effective collaboration. Some teachers apply the same group work method over and over with some positive and some negative results, because they are not accounting for the group dynamics that are ever changing in the classroom. An understanding of group dynamics on the part of the teacher

coupled with collaboration methods can help them form student teams that can get to the next level of learning through collaboration.

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