

Essays on Teaching Excellence

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Collaborative Learning: Reframing the Classroom

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There have always been social dimensions to the learning process, but only in recent decades have specially designed collaborative learning experiences been regarded as an innovative alternative to the lecture-centered and teacher-as-single-authority approaches typical to most college classrooms. With increasing frequency, students are working with each other, and alongside their teachers, to grasp subject matter or deepen their understanding of it. In the process, they are developing their social skills as well as their intellectual ones. Students and their teachers are involved in a common enterprise, that of mutual seeking of understanding. Because many minds are grappling with the material at once while working toward a common goal, collaborative learning unleashes a unique intellectual and social synergy.

Roots of Collaboration in Education. As the 1990's begin, interest in collaborative learning has never been greater. This expanding work, however, is not based on a single theoretical foundation or even a very clear history of practice. The work on collaboration in education is more like an arbor of vines growing in parallel, crossing or intertwining. Many of the vines are rooted in experiential learning and student-centered instruction, whose major proponents in this century have been philosopher John Dewey, and cognitive psychologists Jean Piaget and L.S. Vygotsky, each of whom

advocated the creating of active learning contexts where students could successively reconstruct their understanding of the world around them. Closely connected are the vines of cooperative learning. Its roots are in social psychology, especially in the small group theories of Kurt Lewin and Morton Deutsch. Different but related vines spring from undergraduate curriculum reform efforts, attempts to re-structure both course work and classroom practice for greater intellectual coherence and active student involvement. Early experiments led by Meiklejohn in the 1920's, and Tussman in the 1960's have numbers of recent new shoots, at The Evergreen State College and in dozens of "learning community" curriculum initiatives around the country. At the same time, problem-centered learning, case methods and peer feedback approaches have been appearing and expanding in various disciplines and professional degree programs, particularly in writing, mathematics and the sciences, and business and medical schools. And, all these efforts are finding growing philosophical confirmation in the pedagogical implications of social constructionism and feminist theory.

Designing Collaborative Work. Collaborative learning flourishes in so many contexts that it defies precise definition. During a lecture, students might be asked to turn to a neighbor to formulate responses, draw connections to other material, raise questions, or solve problems. Students might work in teams to conduct and write up a laboratory, field study or longer research project. Or, they might meet regularly to prepare homework, critique each other's writing, hold seminar discussions or prepare a presentation. What is essential to all these activities, though, is positive interdependence between students, an outcome to which everyone contributes, and a sense of commitment and responsibility of the group's preparation, process and product.

For the faculty member, designing collaborative learning experiences requires careful thought about what active (and interactive) learning might entail in the course or discipline. A first task is to examine the scope of a whole course: where and in how much of the course would student collaboration be appropriate? Second, framing the actual tasks or problems for collaborative work requires thinking through the particular kind of intellectual experiences or thinking tasks that students might undertake together. Most teachers realize

that unstructured, free-wheeling explorations do not sufficiently focus student energy, or challenge students to use what they know. Students are most stimulated when challenged with absorbing or puzzling tasks or questions, and when they have a clear sense of the expected product. It takes some practice, and repeated observation of students grappling with tasks, for teachers to find those points of access, or "zones of proximal development," as Vygotsky called them, where students are challenged to move from what they know into the realm of what they don't quite know yet.

A third facet in design work concerns feedback and accountability, critical elements in any collaborative enterprise. If multiple small groups are working on problems or exploring issues simultaneously in a classroom, what will the process be for sharing the results of work? When and how might the faculty member provide clarification, evaluation or extension of the work that has been accomplished? Will the students have an opportunity to evaluate the nature of their own work, as well as their effort as an interdependent group? Individual accountability is critical: how will the teacher carry out individual student evaluation when students are spending significant time working in teams?

The richest guides for teachers are their own experiments with teaching, the advice and experience of colleagues, and most importantly, formal and informal feedback from the students themselves. Indeed, the collaborative classroom, brimming with data about the content and quality of student learning, is an on going lab for "classroom research." The public learning taking place provides immediate feedback for the discerning teacher to use in improving collaborative designs.

Reframing the Student Role. While productive, engaged communities of collaborative learners are a worthwhile ideal, teaching and learning in this mode is not without significant demands. Because high expectations about participation and collaboration require substantial role shifts for students, it is not unusual to encounter student resistance to group work. Embedded in student expectations about classroom culture, and the inertia of their own ingrained habits, such resistance should be taken seriously. As they move into collaborative learning settings, students

grapple with such shifts as those:

- From listener, observer, and note-taker to active problem-solver, contributor and discussant;
- From low or moderate expectations of preparation for class to high ones;
- From a private presence in the classroom (and few no risks therein) to a public one, with many risks;
- From attendance dictated by personal choice to that having to do with community expectation;
- From competition with peers to collaborative work with them;
- From responsibilities and self-definition associated with learning independently to those associated with learning inter-dependently;
- From seeing teachers and texts as the sole sources of authority and knowledge, to seeing peers, oneself, and the thinking of the community as additional and important sources of authority and knowledge.

These shifts are especially problematic for younger college learners. To them, the adjective "cooperative" has unfortunate residual connotations from high school. Relative to authorities, being cooperative has to do with obedience; relative to peers, it means cheating. The idea of cooperation as helping and sharing for positive goals is both unfamiliar and intimidating. Many students have difficulty accepting that collaborative learning with peers is real learning, so acculturated are they to "teacher-as-source-of-knowledge." The faculty member, then, needs to set the context and norms for collaborative work, so that students can reflect on both its rationale, value, and immediate goals.

Reframing the Teacher Role. Whether novice or veteran at collaborative learning, faculty members engaged in this work have their own reframing to do, with regard to coverage, classroom roles, evaluation and numbers of other issues. Particularly challenging is the process of reconciling one's sense of responsibility about course coverage with one's commitment to enabling students to learn on their own. Too often, faculty members think of course coverage in zero-sum terms, neglecting to ask whether students are really

comprehending and integrating all that is being "covered." Teachers who build their courses around group work do not belittle or abandon coverage or skills; indeed they and their students are seriously and directly confronting matters of understanding and comprehension all the time. But the burden of "covering," (and explicating and relating), has shifted from resting almost entirely with the teacher to a shared enterprise which involves both teacher and students.

If this shift of responsibility helps to "dissolve the Atlas complex," i.e. teachers feeling endlessly responsible for the class's entire intellectual agenda (Finkel and Monk, 1983), it also poses interesting questions. Authority and expertise, power and control—highly intertwined matters for any teacher— all come up for examination and redefinition in the collaborative classroom. As students together begin assuming more responsibility for their learning, and as classroom time is more taken up with conversational inquiry, the teacher begins to sense subtle but powerful shifts in her role. As students begin to take up their part in the learning enterprise, the teacher begins to see that she is not relinquishing control so much as sharing it in new ways. She discovers that the lines of authority are not so much blurred as they are reshaped.

As teachers work in collaborative settings with students over time, they continuously revisit these tensions of the locus of control and authority, between collaboration and competition, and individual growth and community responsibility. In the process, teachers come to new understandings about the meaning and potential of student-centered learning, and about how students learn to think in their disciplines. They relish the ways students emerge as confident, competent learners, who in turn stimulate them to re-examine their own work and thinking.

References

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