

Chapter 13

Learning Together: Confucius and Freire Collaborate to Redefine a Community of Learning

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, the writer unfolds and develops a fundamental praxis of collaboration. Drawing on the wisdom of Freire and Confucius, the author of this chapter on collaboration delineates it from three different perspectives: liberative, practical, and philosophical. Through these three perspectives, she discusses collaboration as a necessary component of online education and offers key principles to shape effective and successful collaborative efforts. Confucian humanism lays the foundation and context for Freire's liberative pedagogy in education; the writer brings these two theoretical practitioners into conversation to offer practical principles for collaboration between educators and students in online spaces.

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, the writer unfolds and develops a fundamental praxis of collaboration. She comes from a practical and constructive point of view in regard to epistemology and pedagogy; therefore, she will approach the boundaries of collaboration from practical and constructive perspectives. While collaboration in any educational setting demands common understanding among those involved, collaboration in online educational and online professional settings calls for a particular set of agreed-upon and shared commitments. Much can be said about the power and impact collaboration has on pedagogy, didactics, and learning, and collaboration is used in different contexts and fields to work toward a similar goal: to achieve symbiotic results. The unique context of online education is that, unlike participants¹ in on-ground education or on-ground institutions, participants in online education and online institutions do not have the physical proximity to their peers to collaborate. This aspect makes collaboration tricky and necessitates participants communicating more carefully and frequently than participants in physical classrooms. Communication modes and methods for online collaboration are important to consider, but the foci of this chapter are more fundamental matters than communication in collaboration.

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This chapter is divided into three major sections that address fundamental principles involved in a praxis of collaboration. In the first major section, the writer claims that collaboration in education, not only in online education but education in general, must be liberative. The liberative task of collaboration includes being rooted in the community of which the members are a part. All educative efforts must speak to, challenge, inform, and transform communities, because learning is a communal task. The communal aspect of education also entails an awareness of power and privilege. Without understanding and becoming aware of power and privilege in the world, collaborative efforts cannot be liberative. Thus, the first part of this chapter will conclude by grappling with the liberative aspect of collaboration as it is related to power and privilege.

The second major section offers practical guidelines, principles, and examples of collaboration in an online setting with specific methods and modes of exchange. These methods include not only communication modes, but also what online collaboration might look like in praxis. Utilizing the reflection-action cycle to draw boundaries and to practice praxis, the writer borrows ideas from Reg Revans' (1982) Action Learning Model to redefine the roles of educators and students as well as learning.

The third section of this chapter addresses probably the most fundamental commitment in collaboration: honoring the intrinsic goodness of humanity. Readers may wonder why this section is placed last, since an understanding of human goodness needs to undergird the liberative task of collaboration. The first two sections, in which the author unpacks the dimensions of power, privilege, and community with regard to liberation and offers practical suggestions and an understanding of collaboration, will give both the breadth and depth needed for considering this philosophical presupposition. Therefore, the commitment to human goodness is placed last, not first.

BACKGROUND

Collaboration is a broad concept that needs concrete definitions and boundaries. In this chapter, the broad boundary for collaboration is all types of work done by two or more people in an educational setting, whether traditional or nontraditional. Traditional educational settings include any higher education institutions (both online and on-ground), professional learning and training sessions, and continuing education for professionals. Nontraditional educational settings encompass any community-organized training sessions, workshops led by faith and civic organizations, and any type of learning gathering outside a formal educational institution. The narrow boundaries for collaboration discussed in this chapter include classroom discussions, online higher education discussion boards, student projects (written or using other media), conference participation that involves working in groups (e.g., panel presentations, committees, and organizing), publishing with one or more partners, professional projects completed by educators and researchers, and lectures and lessons taught in physical classrooms and online courses.

The author purposely includes on-ground situations in the definition of collaboration because many of the concepts and principles that guide on-ground and in-person collaboration transfer to the online setting. In addition, online technology is often incorporated into on-ground and in-person collaboration. So, it is crucial that no definite demarcation between online and on-ground collaboration is made; the lines have been blurred between them, as most communication takes place online via emails, video conferencing, and cloud or online document sharing programs (like Google docs, Dropbox, and learning management services), whether in-person contact is possible or not.

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