

# Collaborative and Cooperative Learning

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## INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The last few years have seen massive changes in how undergraduate and postgraduate courses are delivered. It is now expected that much, or perhaps all, of the course content will be made available online. This change to online Web-based forms of delivery would seem to provide the ideal circumstances for non-traditional methods of teaching and learning to be re-examined.

Online collaborative and *cooperative learning* techniques are not widely practiced in undergraduate tertiary education, despite their many widely recognized advantages – see for example Panitz (2000). However, interest in such techniques is increasing, as evidenced by the biennial *Computer-Supported Collaborative Learning (CSCL)* conferences and recent books on the topic by Barkley, Cross, & Major (2003) and Roberts (2003, 2004).

An examination of the literature suggests that some authors writing about online *collaborative learning* are actually writing about online cooperative learning, and vice versa. This conflation of terms can make research results hard to assess. It, therefore, seems important to attempt to ascertain the similarities and differences between the two, so that theoretical and empirical research into their application in an online environment can be properly carried out and assessed.

## TRADITIONAL LEARNING

Traditional learning comes in a variety of forms, and, therefore, cannot be easily characterized. However, common to most forms of traditional learning is the idea of the sage on the stage, with information provided by the instructor during lectures, and the provision of printed course materials. The modes of *learner interaction* are, therefore, primarily learner-instructor and learner-content, with almost no learning taking place between the students themselves, at least as part of the formal learning process.

## COLLABORATIVE LEARNING

*Collaborative* is an adjective that implies working in a group of two or more to achieve a common goal, while respecting each individual's contribution to the whole.

*Collaborative learning* is a learning method that uses *social interaction* as a means of knowledge building (Paz Dennen, 2000).

Bruffee (1999) states that:

*Figure 1. Traditional learning*

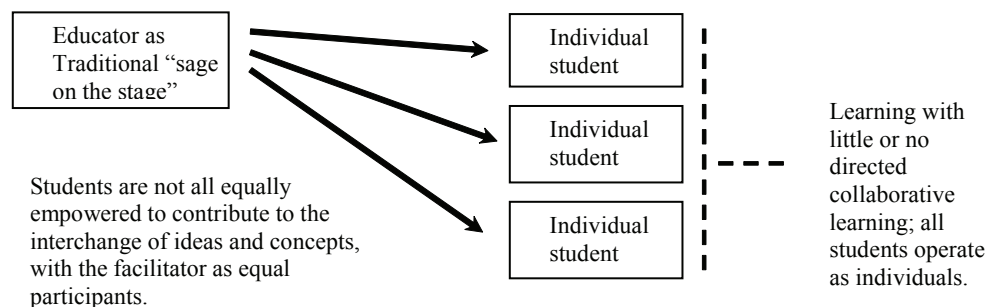
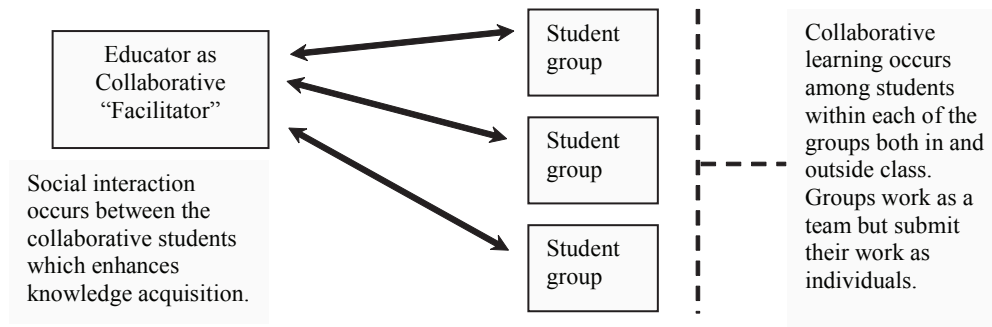


Figure 2. Collaborative Learning



*(educators must)...trust students to perform in ways that the teacher has not necessarily determined ahead of time.*

and further contends that:

*...collaborative learning therefore implies that... (educators)... must rethink what they have to do to get ready to teach and what they are doing when they are actually teaching. (Bruffee, 1999)*

## COOPERATIVE LEARNING

The term *cooperative* is often used interchangeably with collaborative, but they literally have different meanings. *Cooperative* is an adjective meaning to work or act together as one to achieve a common goal, while tending to de-emphasize the input of particular individuals.

Millis (1996) states that cooperative learning is a:

*generic term used to describe a situation where students work together in small groups to help themselves and others to learn;*

while Johnson and Johnson (2001) state that it:

*is the instructional use of small groups so that students work together to maximize their own and each other's learning.*

## MAIN FOCUS: COLLABORATIVE OR COOPERATIVE?

Those seeking to make use of the literature will be aware of the confusion that can arise between the terms cooperative and collaborative. Often the title of a paper may use the word cooperative, while the body of the paper discusses collaborative learning, or vice versa.

When trying to distinguish between the two terms, it is instructive to examine the viewpoints of some distinguished researchers and practitioners in the field. Ted Panitz, a long-time advocate for all forms of collaborative and cooperative learning, clearly distinguishes between the terms *collaborative* and *cooperative* in this manner:

*Collaboration is a philosophy of interaction and personal lifestyle where individuals are responsible for their actions, including learning and respect the abilities and contributions of their peers.*

and:

*In the collaborative model groups assume almost total responsibility...*

Whereas:

*Cooperation is a structure of interaction designed to facilitate the accomplishment of a specific end product or goal through people working together in groups.*

and:

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