

Group Collaboration in Education

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INTRODUCTION

When we collaborate, there is an interaction between two or more individuals who are working together to achieve a particular goal. “Teachers who use collaborative 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” (Smith & McGregor, n.d., ¶ 1). In certain environments, collaboration may be more difficult to achieve; it does not occur by simply putting individuals together and asking them to work collectively (Galagher, Kraut, & Egidio, 1990). Friend and Cook’s (1992) definition of collaboration emphasizes goal orientation: “Interpersonal collaboration is a style of direct interaction between at least two co-equal parties voluntarily engaged in shared decision making as they work toward a common goal” (p. 5). Collaboration is further defined as “a process through which parties who see different aspects of a problem [or issue] can constructively explore their differences and search for solutions that go beyond their own limited vision of what is possible” (Gray, 1989, p. 5).

Collaboration simultaneously accentuates the group while paying homage to the individual as a member of the group. This involves valuing group function while continually seeking ways to support individuals in their collaborative process. Productive collaborations occur when individuals understand group processes and are able to function well in a value-laden but diversely rich community. Individual processing skills vary, but people often reason by putting small pieces together to make wholes. Meaning is derived from this process; however, group perception varies with the individual, and many different meanings are possible within a group. Varied perceptions and interpretations are rich attributes of a collaborative process that carefully examines information and ultimately provides a broader perspective.

In an educational environment, collaborators seek to actively involve individuals in a learning process.

These individuals interact with each other, share ideas, seek information, verify information, make decisions, deliberate, and ultimately share their conclusions. Little (1987) observes, “The accomplishments of a proficient and well-organized group are widely considered to be greater than the accomplishments of isolated individuals” (p. 496). Group collaboration epitomizes the social nature of learning, emphasizing the importance of students working collaboratively in order to resolve problems, interact appropriately, and actively engage all group members. These joint intellectual efforts by students and teachers have experienced significant growth in recent years.

BACKGROUND

Educators are developing collaborative strategies with the advent of new technologies that are providing significantly enhanced platforms. The pursuit of improved methods of collaboration enhances learning as an interactive process based in communities of learning, where groups of individuals collaborate on matters of common interest (Moll, 1990). Technology will continue to refine group collaborations by offering a vast array of options that probe new depths of human interaction and understanding. In a setting of group collaboration, students can criticize their own and other students’ contributions, they can ask for explanations, they can give counter arguments and, in this way, they will stimulate themselves and the other students. Although each collaborative arrangement is distinct, they generally follow a common pattern where the group helps to illuminate the dynamics of collaboration. When a learning community increases its diversity of expertise and interests, individuals can advance their understanding by the increasingly significant knowledge base available to them. Group collaboration provides opportunities to share ideas, compare best practices, get questions answered, and collaborate.

While business selects collaborative tools that reduce costs and bring their products to market faster than the competition, education has a different purpose. Educational institutions must develop tools of collaboration that are pedagogically sound within an instructional delivery system that maximizes course underpinnings. New social norms are being defined by technology, as well as a new global interdependence, which educational institutions are just now beginning to realize (Cohl, 1996). Teachers utilizing collaborative methodology understand the evolutionary nature of the pedagogy, which requires practice, interaction, analyses, and modification (Rolheiser-Bennett & Stehahn, 1992). Linden (2002) mentions four challenges to collaboration as individual, organizational, societal, and systemic. Educational institutions of higher learning must be prepared to meet each of these challenges as they compete for students in an increasingly competitive and networked society. Group collaborations within this new context are a result of, and a response to, the complex needs of students whose technological knowledge and skills are quite advanced. Students can help structure the class experience through suggestions regarding class format and procedures. This is a level of student empowerment, which is unattainable with a lecture format or even with a teacher-led whole class discussion. Both businesses and institutions of higher education can utilize collaboration as they acculturate individuals into learning communities that work for improvement.

The Philosophical Bent of Group Collaboration

Group collaboration is a philosophy, not just a classroom technique. Philosophy in its purest form is an attempt to understand the world. It is the foundation by which people view the nature of things, learning to incorporate their intellectual, epistemological, and ethical considerations. As a comprehensive system of ideas about human nature and the nature of the reality, philosophy determines perspective and how people interact. Researchers have an interest in the philosophical bent of group collaboration, which examines how individuals view themselves, how they see others, and the processes they adapt. Philosophy is, moreover, essential in assessing the various standards of practice implemented by members of a learning community individually and collectively. Audi (2001) observes,

Wisdom, leadership, and the capacity to resolve human conflicts cannot be guaranteed by any course of study; but philosophy has traditionally pursued these ideals systematically, and its methods, its literature, and its ideas are of constant use in the quest to realize them (p. 5).

When individuals get together in groups, it is important to respect and recognize individual group members' abilities and contributions. Collaborative efforts require sensitivity to the diverse nature of its membership (Chang, 1993). There is an underlying premise of group collaboration, which requires consensus building through cooperation by group members. Teachers/facilitators learn to apply a philosophical approach in collaborative communities as a way of understanding, appreciating, and learning from other people. Learning is a process of participating in cultural practices, a process that structures and shapes cognitive activity (Lave & Wenger, 1991). It begins with an introspective examination of self to fully understand the lens through which we view the world. Our perception of other people is a deeply intrapersonal process. Nin (1961) states, "We don't see things as they are, we see them as we are" (p. 124). In our own lives we are impacted by our human nature, demeanor, personal experiences, self-perceptions, and various interpretations, all of which help form our perceptions of people. To a remarkable extent, our perceptions define us (how we think, how we understand, and how we interact with people). Learning how to respect all voices in the group, as well as understanding one's self, is an essential part of living in a collaborative community. Dewey (1929) notes that "true education comes through the stimulation of the student's powers by the demands of the social situations in which he finds himself" (p. 3).

Constructivism is a philosophy of learning that has been associated with sociology, anthropology, cognitive psychology, and education. The tenets of constructivism fit nicely within the pedagogy of group collaboration. The construction of knowledge takes place in a social context, such as might be found in the activities of group collaboration. Students acquire knowledge, connect it to previously assimilated learning, and, in this process, construct their own interpretation. Students learn to process information and create new ideas. This intellectual processing creates and nurtures information that is consensual, meaningful, and effective. By processing information cooperatively, students learn to become

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