What is Collaborative Learning?

1. Definition
Collaborative Learning is an educational approach where students engage in interactive tasks or activities that foster shared understanding, meaningful communication, and cooperative problem-solving. In this context, learning becomes a social endeavor, as individuals work together to construct knowledge, share perspectives, and build on each other's insights.

2. Assumptions about Learning
Though collaborative learning takes on a variety of forms and is practiced by teachers of different disciplinary backgrounds and teaching traditions, the field is tied together by a number of important assumptions about learners and the learning process.

2.1. Learning is an active, constructive process: To learn new information, ideas or skills, our students have to work actively in purposeful ways. They need to integrate the new material with what they already know-or use to reorganize what they thought they knew and create something new with the information and ideas. These acts of intellectual processing-of constructing meaning or creating somethingnew-are crucial to learning.

2.2. Learning depends on rich contexts: Collaborative learning activities immerse students in challenging tasks or questions. They usually begin with solving problems and being practitionners. Instead of being distant observers of questions and answers, or problems and solutions, students become immediate practitioners.

2.3. Learners are diverse: Students bring multiple perspectives to the classroom-diverse backgrounds, learning styles, experiences, and aspirations. The diverse perspectives that emerge in collaborative activities are illuminating for our students.

2.4. Learning is inherently social: As Jeff Golub points out, “Collaborative learning has as its main feature a structure that allows for student talk: students are supposed to talk with each other and it is in this talking that much of the learning occurs.” (1988)

3. Goals for Education
Collaborative learning promotes a largereducational agenda.

3.1. Involvement. Involvement in learning, involvement with other students, and involvement with faculty are factors that make an overwhelming difference in student retention and success in college. By its very nature, collaborative learning is both socially and intellectually involving. It invites students to build closer connections to others.

3.2. Cooperation and teamwork. In collaborative endeavors, students inevitably encounter difference, and must grapple with recognizing and working with it. Building the capacities for tolerating or resolving differences, for building agreement that honors all the voices in a group, for caring how others are doing -- these abilities are crucial aspectsof living in a community.

3.3. Civic Responsibility: Collaborative learning encourages students to acquire an active voice in shaping their ideas and values and a sensitive ear in hearing others.

4. Collaborative Learning Approaches

Collaborative learning covers a broad array of approaches which vary in the amount of in-class or out-of-class time of group work.

4.1. Cooperative Learning

Cooperative learning represents the most carefully structured end of the collaborative learning continuum. Johnson et al. (1990) defined it as “the instructional use of small groups so that students work together to maximize their own and each other’s learning.”

In cooperative learning, the development of interpersonal skills is as important as the learning itself. Many cooperative learning tasks are put to students with both academic objectives and social skills objectives. Many of the strategies involve assigning roles within each small group (such as recorder, participation encourager, summarizer) to ensure the positive interdependence of group participants and to enable students to practice different teamwork skills.

4.2. Problem-Centered Instruction

Problem-centered instruction, widely used in professional education, frequently is built around collaborative learning strategies. Many of these spring from common roots, especially the work of John Dewey in the early part of this century. Dewey endorsed discussion-based teaching and believed strongly in the importance of giving students direct experiential encounters with real-world problems. Guided Design, cases, and simulations are all forms of problem-centered instruction, which immerse students in complex problems that they must analyze and work through together. These approaches develop problem-solving abilities, understanding of complex relationships, and decision-making in the face of uncertainty.

4.2.1. Guided Design: The approach asks students, working in small groups, to practice decision-making in sequenced tasks, with detailed feed-back at every step.

4.2.2. Cases: A case is a story or narrative of a real life situation that sets up a problem or unresolved tension for the students to analyze and resolve.

4.2.3. Simulations: Simulations are complex, structured role-playing situations that simulate real experiences. Most simulations ask students, working individually or in teams, to playthe roles of opposing stakeholders in a problematic situation or an unfolding drama. Taking on the values and acting the part of a stakeholder usually gets students emotionally invested in the situation. Following the simulation, there is usually a lengthy discussion where students reflect on the simulation and explore their own actions and those of others.

4.3. Writing Groups

Both in theory and practice, the most concentrated effort in undergraduate collaborative learning has focused on the teaching of writing. The writing group approach, (known variously as peer response groups, class criticism, or helping circles) has transformed thousands of college writing classes.

Peer writing involves students working in small groups at every stage of the writing process. Many writing groups begin as composing groups: they formulate ideas, clarify their positions, test an argument or focus a thesis statement before committing it to paper.

This shared composing challenges students to think through their ideas out loud, to hear what they "sound like," so they will know "what to say" in writing. Writing groups also serve as peer response groups. Students exchange their written drafts of papers and get feedback on them either orally or in writing.

4.4. Peer Teaching

The process of students teaching their fellow students is probably the oldest form of collaborative learning in American education. The following examples represent three of the most successful and widely adapted peer teaching models.

4.4.1. Supplemental Instruction: In the Supplemental Instruction approach, the university invites advanced undergraduates who have done well in their classes to become "SI leaders." These students are paid to attend the class, and to convene Supplemental Instruction sessions at least three times a week at hours convenient to students in the class.
4.4.2. Writing Fellows: The Writing Fellows approach is a peer teaching approach somewhat parallel to Supplemental Instruction. The writing fellows are upper-division students who are strong writers. Afterextensive training, these students are deployed to an undergraduate class (generally in thediscipline of their major) where they read and respond to the papers of all the students.

4.5. Discussion Groups and Seminars

The terms ***discussion group*** and ***seminar*** refer to a broad array of teaching approaches. In college settings we usually think of discussions as processes, both formal and informal, that encourage student dialogue with teachers and with each other.

Globally, all the approaches we have described above involve discussion. Most, however have distinct protocols, goals, or structures framing the activity. What we are describing here-more open-ended discussion or seminars-puts the onus ***on*** the teacher or the students to pose questions and build a conversation in the context of the topic at hand. There is enormous variability, then, in terms of who sets the agenda, who organizes and monitorsthe discussion, and who evaluates what. Some discussions or seminars may be heavily teacher-directed, others much more student-centered. There are myriad possibilities for discussions, and many good resources on strategies exist.

4.6. Learning Communities

Collaborative learning practitioners would say that all collaborative learning is about building learning communities. However, we use the term ***learning community*** here in a broader but more specific sense, in terms of intentional reconfiguration of the curriculum. In the 1980's, a number of US colleges have recognized that structural factors weaken the quality of undergraduate learning and inhibit the development of community. These schools have attacked the problem by developing learning communities, a "purposeful restructuring of the curriculum to link together courses so that students find greater coherence in what they are learning and increased interaction with faculty and fellow students" (Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, and Smith, 1990). As such, learning communities are a delivery system and a facilitating structure for the practice of collaborative learning.

Learning community curriculum structures have two common intentions. They attempt to provide intellectual coherence for students by linking classes together and building

relationships between subject matter, or by teaching a skill (e.g., writing or speaking) in the context ofa discipline. Second, they aim to build both academic and social community for studentsby enrolling them together in a large block of course work.

5. Collaborative Learning: Challenges and Opportunities

Creating a collaborative classroom can be a wonderfully rewarding opportunity but it is also full of challenges and dilemmas. Few teachers experience collaborative work and much of their training reinforced the teacher-centered model of college teaching. Hence, stepping out of the center and engaging students in group activity is hard work, specially at first.

Designing group work requires rethinking of our syllabus, in terms of course content and time allocation. If some (or a great deal) of the classroom time is considered an important social space for developing understandings about coursematerial, 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 that classroom roles change: both teachers and students take on more complex roles and responsibilities. The classroom 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. Collaborative learning both complicates and enriches the evaluation process.

What really has propelled teachers into collaborative classrooms is the desire to motivate students by getting them more actively engaged. 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 does not happen overnight.

At their best, 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.

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