

Basic Principles of “Collaborative Learning”

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to give a general overview on the basic principles and the implementation of one of the most recent learning techniques such as “Collaborative Learning”. More than thirty years on, it is interesting to look at the legacy of the communicative approach and to observe how current practice has been affected by its basic principles. It has become a popular approach to the organization of the classroom around the world and recently in Albania as well. Collaborative Learning, and its Techniques (also referred to as CoLTs) play an important role in the learning process as a social activity. This article is designed to discuss the “What” (definition), “Why” (purpose), and “How” (manner) collaborative learning questions. The three of these questions will be answered and analyzed step by step in the following article.

Introduction

While teaching and learning are no longer restricted to the formal settings, this does not mean that we should ignore other classic models. In fact, it operates hand in hand with other methods and techniques such as “Audio Lingual”; “Group Arrangements” etc. According to John Seely Brown and Richard Adler (2008), social learning areas can “co-exist with and expand traditional education”.

As a young university instructor, I am always looking for innovative ways to motivate my students and encourage them to collaborate with their peers. And it is not just me. There is a whole generation of teachers trying to improve learning and teaching techniques in and out of the classroom, aiming the increase in educational quality in Albania. This technique is considered as an integral part of the philosophy of “Aleksander Moisiu” University and the Faculty of Education as well.

What does it mean?

Collaborative learning is a situation in which two or more people learn or attempt to learn something together. More specifically, collaborative learning is based on the model that knowledge can be created within a population where members actively interact by sharing experiences and take on asymmetry

roles. Put differently, collaborative learning refers to methodologies and environments in which learners engage in a common task where each individual depends on and is accountable to each other. It is a derivative of the most up-dated student-centered approach, that of “Communicative Learning” which came to be applied as an alternative to the previous teacher-centered approaches and methods such as “Grammar Translation”, “Total Physical Response”, etc.

In educational terms, it is a student-centered approach and as such its purpose is that of managing to meet the language learning process to the students’ needs and requirements. Its main objective is that of fostering cooperation among students through interactive activities rather than competition in learning.

Collaborative learning is commonly illustrated when groups of students work together to search for understanding, meaning, or solutions or to create an artifact or product of their learning. Further, collaborative learning redefines traditional student-teacher relationship in the classroom which results in controversy over whether this technique is more beneficial than harmful.

It operates on basis of collaborative learning activities that can include collaborative writing, group projects, small/whole-class-groupings, joint problem solving, debates, study teams, and many other activities. In this point, a close relation to the “Group Arrangement” technique is exercised.

Basically, collaborative learning is any approach to education in which students work together in small groups to solve problems. It is a strategy that permits students and instructors to make good use of communicative forms. It does so while keeping

human relationships, both among students and between students and instructors, at the center of the educational process. As such, it is a particularly important approach for those educational institutions and faculties which are interested in preserving the traditional social and intellectual values of a liberal education (as the philosophy of “Aleksander Moisiu” University clearly states).

Why is it important to implement this technique?

One of the main reasons we are discussing about Collaborative Learning is that it serves as a good practice in undergraduate education (as our main area of teaching activity). In such terms, this technique offers many advantages in the high education process. If we would rank them in order of importance we would say that it:

1. encourages contact between students and faculty,
2. develops reciprocity and cooperation among students,
3. encourages active learning,
4. gives prompt feedback,
5. emphasizes time on task,
6. communicates high expectations, and
7. respects diverse talents and ways of learning.

WHAT results are expected from this method?

Two of the major outcomes we receive due to the implementation of this method in the language classroom are:

- academic achievement
- increased self-esteem (Sharan and Slavin 1994 Research)

In addition, positive outcomes of this strategy include:

- Critical thinking skills
- Problem solving skills
- Group process skills
- Mutual support and motivation
- Peer accountability
- Laboratory for 'real life' knowledge work
- Reflective insight into the learning process

Some other outcomes are to be considered as well. For instance, we must agree on the fact that it is able to promote an interaction that enables learners to effectively collaborate in problem-solving. Moreover, students create their own knowledge and are not merely empty receptacles for teachers to fill.

These positive outcomes are intended as guidelines for faculty members, students, and administrators to improve teaching and learning. Collaborative learning offers an additional instructional strategy for college instructors.

How it works?

There are different theories on how collaborative learning improves the educational and psychological outcomes for students. These can be broadly described as cognitive, social constructivism, and motivational.

Cognitive approach: For learners to retain and comprehend

knowledge, it must be placed in a conceptual framework (Cooper, et al., 1997; Slavin, 1995). In the small group setting, the learner has the opportunity to rehearse his understanding with others and to be exposed to other conceptual constructs.

Social constructivism: For knowledge to be internalized and a framework established, a social discourse must first take place. It is this discourse that leads to the conceptual framework in which to relate the new knowledge (Bruffee, 1992). As MacGregor states, "Knowledge is shaped, over time, by successive conversations, and by ever-changing social and political environments." (MacGregor, 1990).

The motivational theorists believe that the inherent structure of cooperative learning creates an environment which motivates learning. For instance, if group and individual performances are components of the final assessment, individuals are motivated not only to learn the material but also to encourage all group members to understand the basic underpinnings of the knowledge. Hence, there is a driving force to foster positive interdependent relationships between group members. That is, cooperative learning creates a "One for all and all for one attitude." (Alexandre Dumas)

How can it be implemented?

The manner in which it can be implemented asks for a lot of efforts from a number of different units which collaborate to manage to meet the curriculum to the principles of collaborative learning. Action planning with strategies in mind is required through all steps of its implementation.

As far as implementation is concerned, the teachers are preferred to work in groups themselves (collaborative teaching). First, the teaching team, through their ongoing research and planning, ensures I are familiar with the recent research and literature on:

- collaborative learning
- co-operative learning
- student voice
- negotiated curriculum
- democratic classrooms
- 'middle years' issues of alienation,

Secondly, I should consider some common ways to meet the challenge of collaborative teaching:

- teaching team to two (not more);
- Teacher no need for power or control,
- flexible, not easily offended etc(teachers' psyche, character);
- useful reading materials;
- present your honest-self (not ideal);
- what kind of collaborative learning activities each one is willing to undertake;
- review your criteria for grading

Moreover, teachers should in the know of the components of an effective lesson design. These components serve as a guide for instructors during the implementation of this technique. Some of them are:

- Opening
- Questioning
- Student voice
- Grouping
- Monitoring and assessing student progress
- Evaluation

In addition, for the teachers, it is important to create productive learning environments through collaborative learning groups by orienting students, structuring the learning tasks, and facilitating student collaboration.. The learning environment promotes independence, interdependence and self motivation. As Barkley and her group stress, “embarking upon collaborative learning should be a reasonable adventure – stimulating, challenging, and requiring thoughtful advanced planning”.

Through a long process of continuous research, it has been noticed that students learn best when:

1. The learning environment is supportive and productive
2. The learning environment promotes independence, interdependence and self-motivation
3. Students’ needs, backgrounds, perspectives and interests are reflected in the learning program

4. Students are challenged and supported to develop deep levels of thinking and application
5. Assessment practices are an integral part of teaching and learning
6. Learning connects strongly with communities and practice beyond the classroom

As a consequence, students recognize that:

- they classroom is a democratic environment
- they know that my voice will be heard in this classroom
- they will be able to work in a supportive collegial environment
- they will be supported to learn independently
- they will be supported to work co-operatively
- they will have a say in what they learn, how they learn, how they are taught, what they are taught and how they are assessed

To sum up, we may say that these principles can be used by schools, teams of teachers and individuals to reflect on practice and support professional dialogue to strengthen pedagogical practices.

Activities that are commonly used in this technique.

Teachers promote collaborative learning technique by means of various class exercises and activities such as:

- large/small group-work,

- peer-evaluation/assessment,
- small/large group discussions,
- student-led discussions,
- jointly-authored papers,
- joint-test taking,
- out-of class study groups, etc.

There is a total of 30 collaborative learning techniques for discussion, techniques for reciprocal teaching, techniques for problem solving, techniques using graphic information organizers, and techniques focusing on writing. The most common activities that can be introduced in this method are: pair work, small groups, whole class groupings, discussions, dialogues, etc. Collaborative learning activities can include collaborative writing, group projects, joint problem solving, debates, study teams, and other activities as well.

During these activities the teacher's role will be to facilitate and then to monitor, usually without interruption, and then to provide feedback on the success or otherwise of the communication and, possibly, on the linguistic performance of the learners in the form of post-activity error correction. The teacher needs to be a lecturer, explainer, facilitator, team-mate, participant, monitor, coordinator, provider, group leader/member, quality controller, organizer, prompter, consultant, instructor, resource, etc. at the same time in order to achieve the desired outcomes from the collaborative learning technique into the language classroom.

Teaching is a complex, multifaceted activity, often requiring us as instructors to juggle multiple tasks and goals simultaneously and flexibly. Teachers frequently wonder: "What can I do, in a

practical way, to engage students actively in collaborative learning?”

In terms of the organization of the lesson, the classic present, practice and perform model, where careful input of a particular structure is typically followed by controlled, less controlled and freer practice is likely to have been replaced by a more task-based approach, possibly on the lines of test, teach, test, where the learners are given a communicative task which is monitored by the teacher and then their language use while performing the task is fine-tuned by the teacher in a lesson stage which focuses on error correction or a particular form that is causing difficulties. This is typically followed by a further task-based stage, where the initial task is repeated or a similar task is performed, ideally with a greater degree of linguistic accuracy than during the first attempt.

What collaborative skills will be emphasized?

- turn taking
- clarifying ideas
- disagreeing in an agreeable way
- sharing
- positive feedback
- helping others
- negotiating

How are groups formed?

Depending on the kind of lesson that teachers have to teach, most of them use these learning arrangements:

- whole class teaching
- small group work
- pair work

Normally the groups are relatively small. According to Bruffee, research indicates that five or six is the optimal number for a group primarily dedicated to discussion, while task groups assigned to produce a tangible group project or product should have no more than three members.

The “Faculty of Education” Survey Results.

In order to have a general view of the grounds for the implementation and practice of the Collaborative Technique in the Faculty of Education, University of Durrës, I have recently conducted a survey based on 5 issues represented by 5 alternative questions which lecturers (instructors) answered this way:

1. Did you use to practice collaborative activities (such as: group work, pair work, discussions, etc) when you were students? (During your studies) 46.7% always used to practice collaborative activities as students. 40% of them sometimes used to practice such activities during their own studies. Only 13.3% did not often use such activities during their university studies.

2. Do you (as teachers) use collaborative activities into the class? 66.7% of the teachers always use collaborative activities within the class. 26.7% sometimes use such activities. Only 6.7 % do not often use them.

3. Which of these collaborative activities do you use most?

Discussion is the most common used type of collaborative activities in our faculty with 86.7%. Other activities commonly used are pair work (33.3%) and small groups (33.3%) followed by dialogues (26.7%). As far as whole class grouping is concerned, it is not a common way of organizing students with a percentage of 6.7%.

4. Which of these difficulties did you face during your attempt to implement this technique? Difficulties related to classroom conditions and equipments are on the top list (53.3%) of this faculty professors following with the problem related to the number of students (46.7%) and the cultural diversity among students (20%). The lack of teacher training (13.3%) and the type of subject (13.3%) are also problematic issues that teachers face during their teaching process.

5. Do you think that further teacher training policies should be undertaken by the institution you are working for? 33.3 % think that further teacher training policies are necessary whereas. 66.7% think that it would be a good idea for the institution we are working for to offer such trainings.

Conclusion

As a conclusion, I would like to summarize the key moments of this article on which we based our discussion. Firstly, we tried to give a definition of the notion of Collaborative Learning by refereeing to various perspectives with a common basis, that of “student collaboration in achieving the common goal in learning”, with its intention to reduce teachers’ talking time to a minimum and maximize the opportunities for communication. Secondly, we focused on the reason why it is important to implement such a technique in our educational practices. Two of the major outcomes we receive due to the implementation of this method in the language classroom are: academic achievement and increased self-esteem (Sharan and Slavin 1994 Research). Then, we analyzed the cognitive, social and motivational approaches on collaborative learning outcomes. Moreover, we focused on the way we could implement this technique in the curricula and the role of the teacher as an essential part of this implementation and realization of the collaborative environment which is not a simple task for the teacher considering the problems that may arise due to the lack of training, classroom conditions and equipments, number of students, type of subject, age level and cultural diversity among students etc as also noticed in the survey results. On considering activities generally practiced in collaborative learning, we mainly focused our attention on various shapes of group arrangements. As a conclusion, this up- to date learning technique offers a productive result for the realization of the learning process. Perhaps the most enduring legacy of the communicative approach will be that it has allowed teachers to

incorporate motivating and purposeful communicative activities and principles into their teaching while simultaneously retaining the best elements of other methods and approaches rather than rejecting them wholesale.

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