

Collaboration in Classroom

Fahimeh Marefat

"Learners do not learn in isolation; the individual learns by being part of the surrounding community and the world as a whole... collaborative learning has a possibly deep epistemological basis and focuses on social relationships in a community of learners"
Oxford (1977, p.447)

Abstract:

Due to their nature, writing classes are often boring for the students and teachers find it so challenging and still the least rewarding. For sometime now studies that focus on the processes a learner engages in when constructing meaning are best valued among researchers. Seen in this light , collaboration is a useful tool for reinforcing student language abilities and a good vehicle for increasing student confidence. Collaboration provides conditions for students to learn WITH each other. The interactions that lead to a final solution are in this way more important than the final solution. Teachers often find it difficult to implement theories in their classes. So any attempt to describe ways to encourage student interaction

is worth undertaking. The present paper aims at introducing collaboration. In so doing, it characterizes collaborative classes. Next, a detailed relevance is made to the new roles defined for teachers and learners, both. The article comes to an end with the theoretical foundations of collaboration.

Effective communication and collaboration are necessary for becoming a successful learner. Students become knowledgeable, strategic, and self-determined when they take part in dialogs and examine different views. Moreover, involving students in real-world tasks and linking new information to prior knowledge requires effective communication and collaboration among teachers, students, and others (Berryman, 1993; Duncan, 1996). Collaborative learning affords students a lot of advantages not found in traditional instruction. In fact, a group can accomplish meaningful learning and solve problems better than any individual can alone. Researchers into collaborative learning continue to favor its benefits. Fraser (1994) states that current reviews of research into collaborative learning lead to strong claims for its advantages. He continues, "where it [collaborative learning] is encouraged, it is said to have a favorable impact on learner's motivation, and attitudes to learning" (Fraser, 1994, p. 506). The purpose of this paper is to elaborate what classroom collaboration

means, to describe its characteristics, student's and teacher's role, and to end with the theoretical background underlying collaboration.

Collaborative classrooms seem to have four general characteristics. The First two concern changing relationships between teachers and students. The third one characterizes the teacher's new approaches to instruction, and the last one addresses the composition of a collaborative classroom.

1. Shared knowledge among teachers and students.

In traditional classrooms, the teacher is information giver ; knowledge flows only one way from teacher to student. In contrast, in collaborative classrooms the base is shared knowledge. The teacher has vital knowledge about content, skills, and instruction, and provides that information to students(Barrel,1995; Tinzmann et al ,1990). Collaborative teachers also value and build upon the knowledge, personal experiences, language, strategies, and culture that students bring to the learning situation. Describing the importance of students' prior knowledge, Barrel (1995) concludes that " giving learners the opportunity and responsibility of contributing to the class proves to be a major factor in generating high levels of motivation, participation and communication in the

language classroom"(p.3).

2. Shared authority among teachers and students.

In collaborative classrooms, teachers share authority with students in very specific ways. In most traditional classrooms, the teacher is largely responsible for setting goals, designing learning tasks, and assessing what is learned (Tinzmann et al, 1990). Collaborative teachers differ in that they invite students to set specific goals ,to provide options for activities and assignments that capture different student interests and goals, and to encourage students to assess what they learn (Duncan, 1996). Collaborative teachers

encourage students' use of their own knowledge, ensure that students share their knowledge and their learning strategies,treat each other respectfully, and focus on high levels of understanding. They help students listen to diverse opinions, support knowledge claims with evidence, engage in critical and creative thinking, and participate in open and meaningful dialog" (Tinzmann et al, 1990, p. 15).

3. Teachers as mediator.

As knowledge and authority are shared among teachers and students, the teacher mainly emphasizes mediated learning. Successful mediation helps students connect new information to their experiences and to learning in other areas. It helps students figure out what to do when they are stumped; it helps them learn how to learn. Above all, the teacher as mediator adjusts the level of information and support. In this way, the

student is enabled to take responsibility for learning. This characteristic of collaborative classrooms is so important.

4. Heterogeneous groupings of students

The perspectives, experiences, and backgrounds of all students are important for enriching learning in the classroom. Researchers attribute significance to the integration of such pieces of information and maintain that "giving learners the opportunity and responsibility of contributing to the class proves to be a major factor in generating high levels of motivation and participation, and communication in the language classroom" (Barrel, 1995,p.7). Learning beyond the classroom surely requires understanding various perspectives so, it is essential to provide students with opportunities to do this in multiple contexts. In collaborative classrooms, everyone learns from everyone else, and no student is deprived of this opportunity for making contributions and appreciating the contributions of others. Thus, a critical characteristic of collaborative classrooms is that students are not segregated according to supposed ability, achievement, interests, or any other characteristic. Segregation seriously weakens collaboration and deprives all students of opportunities to learn from each other. Students who are called unsuccessful in a traditional classroom learn from "brighter" students,

but, interestingly, the so-called brighter students do learn from their average peers. Teachers beginning to teach collaboratively often express delight when they observe the insights revealed by their supposedly weaker student (Duncan, 1996). Thus, shared knowledge and authority, mediated learning, and heterogeneous groups of students are essential characteristics of collaborative classrooms. These characteristics define new roles for teachers and students and, accordingly, lead to interactions different from those in more traditional classrooms.

5. Teacher Roles in a Collaborative Classroom

Mediation is described here as facilitating, modeling, and coaching. Most teachers engage in these practices from time to time.

Facilitator: Facilitating, as implied by Tinzmann et al (1990) involves creating rich environments and activities for linking new information to prior knowledge, providing opportunities for collaborative work and problem solving, and offering students a multiplicity of authentic learning tasks. This may first involve attention to the physical environment. For example, teachers move desks so that all students can see each other, thus establishing a setting that promotes true discussion. Teachers may also wish to move their desks from the front of the room to a less

prominent space. Additionally, teachers may structure the resources in the classroom to provide a variety of views, to use and build upon cultural artifacts from the students' homes, and to organize various learning activities. Thus, in a collaborative classroom everyday objects might be employed in meaningful ways to solve real problems. Also magazines, journals, and newspapers would serve as resources. Facilitating in collaborative classrooms also involves people. Inside the classroom, students are organized into heterogeneous groups with roles such as Team Leader, Encourager, Reteller, Recorder, and Spokesperson. Creating learning tasks that encourage diversity, and involve decision making and problem solving that are best accomplished in collaboration. "These tasks enable students to make connections to real-world objects, events, and situations in their own and an expanded world, and tap their diverse perspectives and experiences. Learning tasks foster students' confidence and at the same time, are appropriately challenging". (Tinzmann et al, 1990,p17).

Model: Modeling refers to sharing one's thinking and demonstrating or explaining something. However, in collaborative classrooms, modeling serves to share with students not only what one is thinking about the content to be learned, but also the process of communication and collaborative learning. Modeling

may involve thinking aloud _sharing thoughts about something_ or demonstrating _showing students how to do something in a step-by-step fashion (Duncan,1996). As far as the content is concerned, Tinzmann et al, (1990) agree that teachers might verbalize the thinking processes they use to make a prediction about a scientific experiment, to summarize ideas in a passage, to figure out the meaning of an unfamiliar word, to represent and solve a problem, to organize complicated information, and so on. Just as important, they would also think aloud about their doubts and uncertainties. This type of metacognitive thinking and thinking aloud when things do not go smoothly is invaluable in helping students understand that learning requires effort and is often difficult for people,even the teacher. A major challenge in mediating learning is to determine when it is appropriate to model by thinking aloud and when it is useful to model by demonstrating. If a teacher is certain that students have little experience with, say, a particular assignment, then it may be appropriate to demonstrate it before students engage in a learning task. If, on the other hand, the teacher believes students can come up with the procedure themselves, then he or she might elect to ask the students to model how they solved the problem; the teacher may give students hints or cues.

Coach: Coaching involves giving hints or cues, providing

feedback, redirecting students' efforts, and helping them use a strategy. Berryman (1993) notes that cognitive coaching is based on the idea that meta cognition "or being aware of one's own thinking processes " fosters independence in learning (p. 123). One can see that a major principle of coaching is to provide the right amount of help when students need it--neither too much nor too little so that students retain as much responsibility as possible for their own learning.

Student Roles in a Collaborative Classroom: Students also assume new roles in the collaborative classroom. Their major roles are collaborator and active participator. It is useful to think how these new roles influence the processes and activities students conduct before, during, and after learning. For example, before learning, students set goals and plan learning tasks; during learning, they work together to accomplish tasks and monitor their progress; and after learning, they assess their performance and plan for future learning. As mediator, the teacher helps students fulfill their new roles.

Goal setting: Students prepare for learning in many ways. At this point, goal setting is especially important. It is a critical process that helps before-, during-, and after-learning activities. Although teachers still set goals for students, they often provide students with choices. When students collaborate, they should talk

about their goals.

Designing Learning Tasks and Monitoring: While teachers plan general learning tasks, students assume much more responsibility for planning their own learning activities. Ideally, these plans derive in part from goals students set for themselves. Students are more likely to engage in these tasks with more purpose and interest than in traditional classrooms.

Self-regulated learning is important in collaborative classrooms. Students learn to take responsibility for monitoring, that is, checking one's progress toward goals, and adjusting changes students make, based on monitoring, in what they are doing to reach their goals. Such activities are critical for students to learn today, and they are much better learnt within a group that shares responsibility.

Assessment: While teachers have assumed the primary responsibility for assessing students' performance in the past, collaborative classrooms view assessment much more broadly. That is, a major goal is to guide students to evaluate their own learning. Thus, a new responsibility is self-assessment, a capability that is fostered as students assess group work.

Self-assessment is an indication of one's progress toward achievement of learning goals. In a collaborative classroom, assessment means more than just assigning a grade. It means

evaluating whether one has learned what one intended to learn, the usefulness of the materials used in a task, and whether future learning is needed and how that learning might be realized (Barrel, 1995). Collaborative classrooms are natural places in which to learn self-assessment. And because decisions about materials and group performance are shared, students feel more free to express feelings of success, and uncertainties than when they are evaluated only by a teacher. Furthermore, the sense of cooperation (as opposed to competition) that is fostered in collaborative work makes assessment less threatening in comparison to a traditional class.

Interactions in a Collaborative Classroom

The critical role of dialogue in collaborative classrooms is obvious and such a classroom is alive with two-way communication (Oxford, 1997). A major mode of communication is dialogue, which in a collaborative classroom is thinking made public. Fraser (1994) addresses the value of student collaboration and interaction. He argues that the increased social interaction should be viewed as an essential aim in its own right, rather than a by-product. In relation to group work social interaction should be viewed as an essential work. He concludes "the lesson taught, the student was supposed to work quietly in isolation. But that part really did not work out as planned; students clustered together,

sought advice from peers, and showed off their skill or product"(p.496). Hearing one student's logic prompts the other students to consider an alternative interpretation. Students are thus challenged to re-examine their own reasoning. When three students in a group ask a fourth student to explain and support her ideas, that is, to make her thinking public, she frequently examines and develops her concepts for herself as she talks. When one student has an insight about how to solve a difficult problem, the others in the group learn how to use a new thinking strategy sooner than if they had worked on their own. Thus, students engaged in interaction often exceed what they can accomplish by working independently. Teachers, in their new roles as mediators, spend interactions with students. They guide students' search for information and help them share their own knowledge. They move from group to group, modeling a learning strategy for one group, engaging in discussion with another, giving feedback to still another.

Challenges and Conflicts:

When teachers move from traditional to collaborative instruction, several important issues are likely to arise.

Classroom Control: Collaborative classrooms tend to be noisier than traditional classrooms. Some teachers believe that noisy classrooms indicate lack of discipline or teacher control. In such

situations, they argue, students cannot learn. Collaborative classrooms do not lack structure. Students need opportunities to move about, talk, ask questions, and so on. Thus, the noise in a smoothly running collaborative classroom indicates that active learning is going on.

Preparation Time for Collaborative Learning: Teachers and administrators believe that new lesson plans must be formed for these classrooms. To a certain extent, they are correct. Griffin (1995) describing changes in paradigms acknowledges that implementing changes has been met with some resistance because "so much is tied to the existing paradigm, textbook, methodology, etc." (p.82). Indeed, teachers can also share their plans with each other. If we expect students to collaborate, we should encourage teachers to do the same!

Individual Differences Among Students: Many teachers still doubt that individual differences can be better addressed in collaborative classrooms than in traditional classrooms with homogeneous grouping. A major question people have is the advantage collaboration affords gifted or high-achieving students (Tinzmann et al ,1990). There are two tough issues here. First, many teachers do not believe that low-achieving students have much to contribute; they have no prior experiences or knowledge of value. Second, teachers worry that high-achieving students will

be held back and demotivated. Duncan (1995) points out that many collaborative teachers have expressed surprise when seemingly less-able students had insights and ideas that were beyond what teachers expected. Furthermore, if each student contributes something, the range of knowledge will indeed be rich. As for the second concern, data suggest that high-achieving students gain much from their exposure to diverse experiences and also from peer tutoring (e.g., Berryman,1993). Also, students who may be high achieving in one area may need help in other areas.

Assessment: Students are used to being graded for individual work. In collaborative classrooms, it is often difficult to assign individual grades. Some teachers give group grades, but many students and parents are uncomfortable with these. Ideally, assessment practices should be changed so that they are consistent with collaboration(Barrel,1995).

What Is the Research Base for Collaborative Learning?

Vygotsky, a developmental theorist and researcher who worked in the 1920s and early '30s,contributed significantly to social constructivist epistemology. His principal premise is that human beings are products not only of biology, but also of their human cultures. Vygotsky(1986) focused on the individual deeply rooted in the group context. To him, The Zone of Proximal

Development(ZPD), scaffolding, and dialogue are especially useful concepts or frameworks for learning. ZPD is " the realm of potential learning that each learner could reach within a given developmental span under optimal circumstances and with the best possible support from the teacher and others in the environment "(Oxford,1997,445). Scaffolds include " all devices or strategies that support student learning" (Duncan,1996,p.70). Vygotsky observed that effective teachers plan and carry out learning activities within children's zones of proximal development, through dialogue and scaffolding. For Vygotsky, the teacher actually facilitates or guides learning. Connecting school learning to everyday life, Vygotsky also provides us with a framework for thinking about an important function of teaching and the multicultural perspective. Effective teachers help students make these connections by scaffolding and dialogue. In fact, these are the essence of mediating. Teachers plan learning activities at points where students are challenged. Teachers plan activities and experiments that build on the language of students' everyday lives through familiar examples and behaviors. Teachers demonstrate, do parts of the task students cannot do, work collaboratively with students where they need help, and release responsibility to students when they can perform the task independently.

A last word. Tinzmann et al (1990) remind us of the fact that

In these ways, instruction is changed not because of an a priori decision to use collaborative groups or cooperative learning but because the content lends itself to teamwork. Students are usually not satisfied merely with a right/wrong answer to an interesting problem; they wish to discuss it, they want to share their methods of solution, and they want to know whether others thought the same way.



Reference

- Barrel, J. (1995). *Critical issues: working toward student self-direction and personal efficacy as educational goals*. White Plains, NY: Longman.
- Berryman, S.E. (1993). *Cognitive apprenticeship models*. New York: Institute on education and economy.
- Duncan, S.L. (1996). Cognitive apprenticeship in classroom instructions: implications for industrial and technological teacher education. *Journal of industrial teacher education*, 33 (3).
- Fraser, B.J. (1994). Research on classroom and school climate. In D. Gable ed. *Handbook of research on science teaching and learning*. New York: McMillan, 493-541.
- Griffin, M. (1995). Shifting the Paradigm in Writing classrooms. [Online].
- Oxford, R.L. (1997). cooperative learning, collaborative learning, and interaction: three communicative strands in the language classroom. *The Modern Language Journal*, 81 (4), 443-456.
- Tinzmann, M.B., B.F. Jones, T. F. Fennimore, J. Baker, C. Fine, and J. Pierce. (1990). *Reconnecting Teachers and learners*. NCREL, Oakbreek.
- Vygotsky, L.S. (1986). *Thought and language* (rev. ed.). A Kozulin (Ed.). Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.