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A Definition of Collaborative vs Cooperative Learning

Ted Panitz (1996)

I have been searching for many years for the Holy Grail of interactive learning, a distinction between collaborative and cooperative learning definitions. I am getting closer to my elusive goal all the time but I am still not completely satisfied with my perception of the two concepts. I believe my confusion arises when I look at processes associated with each concept and see some overlap or inter-concept usage. I will make a humble attempt to clarify this question by presenting my definitions and reviewing those of other authors who have helped clarify my thinking.

Collaboration is a philosophy of interaction and personal lifestyle whereas cooperation is a structure of interaction designed to facilitate the accomplishment of an end product or goal.

Collaborative learning (CL) is a personal philosophy, not just a classroom technique. In all situations where people come together in groups, it suggests a way of dealing with people which respects and highlights individual group members' abilities and contributions. There is a sharing of authority and acceptance of responsibility among group members for the groups actions. The underlying premise of collaborative learning is based upon consensus building through cooperation by group members, in contrast to competition in which individuals best other group members. CL practitioners apply this philosophy in the classroom, at committee meetings, with community groups, within their families and generally as a way of living with and dealing with other people.

Cooperative learning is defined by a set of processes which help people interact together in order to accomplish a specific goal or develop an end product which is usually content specific. It is more directive than a collaboratve system of governance and closely controlled by the teacher. While there are many mechanisms for group analysis and introspection the fundamental approach is teacher centered whereas collaborative learning is more student centered.

Spencer Kagan in an article in Educational Leadership (Dec/Jan 1989/1990) provides an excellent definition of cooperative learning by looking at general structures which can be applied to any situation. His definition provides an unbrella for the work cooperative learning specialists including the Johnsons, Slavin, Cooper, Graves and Graves, Millis, etc. It follows below:

> "The structural approach to cooperative learning is based on the creation, analysis and systematic application of structures, or content-free ways of organizing social interaction in the classroom. Structures usually involve a series of steps, with proscribed behavior at each step. An important cornerstone of the approach is the distinction between "structures" and "activities".

> "To illustrate, teachers can design many excellent cooperative activities, such as making a team mural or a quilt. Such activities almost always have a specific content-bound objective and thus cannot be used to deliver a range of academic content. Structures may be used repeatedly with almost any subject matter, at a wide range of grade levels and at various points in a lesson plan."

John Myers (*Cooperative Learning* vol 11 #4 July 1991) points out that the dictionary definitions of "collaboration", derived from its Latin root, focus on the process of working together; the root word for "cooperation" stresses the product of such work. Co-operative learning has largely American roots from the philosophical writings of John Dewey stressing the social nature of learning and the work on group dynamics by Kurt Lewin. Collaborative learning has British roots, based on the work of English teachers exploring ways to help students respond to literature by taking a more active role in their own learning. The

cooperative learning tradition tends to use quantitative methods which look at achievement: i.e., the product of learning. The collaborative tradition takes a more qualitative approach, analyzing student talk in response to a piece of literature or a primary source in history. Myers points out some differences between the two concepts:

> "Supporters of co-operative learning tend to be more teacher-centered, for example when forming heterogeneous groups, structuring positive inter- dependence, and teaching co-operative skills. Collaborative learning advocates distrust structure and allow students more say if forming friendhip and interest groups. Student talk is stressed as a means for working things out. Discovery and contextural approaches are used to teach interpersonal skills."

> "Such differences can lead to disagreements.... I contend the dispute is not about research, but more about the morality of what should happen in the schools. Beliefs as to whast should happen in the schools can be viewed as a continuum of orientations toward curriculum from "transmission" to "transaction" to "transmission". At one end is the transmission position. As the name suggests, the aim of this orientation is to transmit knowledge to students in the form of facts, skills and values. The transformation position at the other end of the continuum stresses personal and social change in which the person is said to be interrelated with the environment rather than having control over it. The aim of this orientation is self-actualization, personal or organizational change."

Rocky Rockwood (*National Teaching and Learning Forum* vol 4 #6, 1995 part 1) describes the differences by acknowledging the parallels they both have in that they both use groups, both assign specific tasks, and both have the groups share and compare their procedures and conclusions in plenary class sessions. The major difference lies in the fact that cooperative deals exclusively with traditional (canonical) knowledge while collaborative ties into the social constructivist movement, asserting that both knowledge and authority of knowledge have changed dramatically in the last century. "The result has been a transition from "foundational (cognitive) understanding of knowledge", to a nonfoundational ground where "we understand knowledge to be a social construct and learning a social process" (Brufee, Collaborative learning: Higher Education, Interdependence, and the Authority of Knowledge, 1993). Rockwood states:

> "In the ideal collaborative environment, the authority for testing and determining the appropriateness of the group product rests with, first, the small group, second, the plenary group (the whole class) and finally (but always understood to be subject to challenge and revision) the requisite knowledge community (i.e. the discipline: geography, history, biology etc.) The concept of non- foundational knowledge challenges not only the product acquired, but also the process employed in the acquisition of foundational knowledge."

> "Most importantly, in cooperative, the authority remains with the instructor, who retains ownership of the task, which involves either a closed or a closable (that is to say foundational) problem (the instructor knows or can predict the answer). In collaborative, the instructor--once the task is set-- transfers all authority to the group.In the ideal, the group's task is always open ended."

> "Seen from this perspective, cooperative does not empower students. It employs them to serve the instructor's ends and produces a "right" or acceptable answer. Collaborative does truly empower and braves all the risks of empowerment (for example, having the group or class agree to an embarrassingly simplistic or unconvincing position or produce a solution in conflict with the instructor's)."

> "Every person, Brufee holds, belongs to several "interpretative or knowledge communities" that share vocabularies, points of view, histories, values, conventions and interests. The job of the instructor id to help students learn to negotiate the boundaries between the communities they already belong to and the community represented by the teacher's academic discipline, which the students want to join. Every knowledge community has a core of foundational knowledge that its members consider as given (but not necessarily

absolute). To function independently within a knowledge community, the fledgling scholar must master enough material to become conversant with the community."

Rockwood concludes:

"In my teaching experience, cooperative represents the best means to approach mastery of foundational knowledge. Once students become reasonably conversant, they are ready for collaborative, ready to discuss and assess,...."

Myers suggests use of the "transaction" orientation as a compromise between taking hard positions advocating either methodology.

"This orientation views education as a dialogue between the student and the curriculum. Students are viewed as problem solvers. Problem solving and inquiry approaches stressing cognitive skills and the ideas of Vygotsky, Piaget, Kohlberg and Bruner are linked to transaction. This perspective views teaching as a "conversation" in which teachers and students learn together through a process of negotiation with the curriculum to develop a shared view of the world."

It is clear to me that in undertaking the exercize of defining differences between the two ideas we run the risk of polarizing the educational community into a we versus them mentality. There are so many benefits which acrue from both ideas that it would be a shame to lose any advantage gained from the student-student-teacher interactions created by both methods. We must be careful to avoid a one-size-fits-all mentality when it comes to education paradigms.

As a final thought, I think it behooves teachers to educate themselves about the myriad of techniques and philosophies which create interactive environments where students take more responsibility for their own learning and that of their peers. Then it will become possible to pick and chose those methods which best fit a particular educational goal or community of learners.

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