

*Notes On Collaborative Learning**

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Collaborative learning is not simply a technique. It is not just a code word for “group work.” It is an approach to education that changes the climate and dynamics of the classroom. At best, a collaborative learning approach shifts the roles of both students and faculty in fundamental (and sometimes scary) ways.

There are many terms kicking around in the literature. “Cooperative learning,” “active learning,” “collaborative learning,” and “performance education”¹ are four. You will find all four terms used in the materials included in this packet. I’m afraid that I’m neither bright enough nor motivated enough to clarify the precise differences among them. However, their similarities are striking: **all seek to re-form the learning enterprise by empowering students and making them responsible for their own learning.** All four of the terms focus on the student—the learner.

The corollary of empowering the students is changing the role of the faculty from “instructors” and “professors” to facilitators or coaches. As Johnson, Johnson, and Smith (1991, reprinted in this packet) put it, instructing and professing assumes that education simply means transferring knowledge from faculty to student. The instructing and professing model or paradigm, asserts that education means information—that learning is the accumulation of information. The student, in this mode, is essentially a passive and isolated recipient of knowledge.

The model of instructing and professing is built into our academic titles (instructor and professor) and permeates the academy. It also permeates the traditional workplace. The parallel is not accidental. As William Rau and Barbara Heyl (1990, reprinted in this packet) point out, this model is reminiscent of Taylorism. “Such isolated workers (and students) are easier to control” (144). Even in the classrooms of “progressive teachers” who have discussions in class, they note, “teachers remain the center of the classroom universe, where student-to-student dialog on course content is as rare as an eclipse of the sun” (143).

The collaborative model, in contrast, asserts that learning takes place when knowledge is assimilated and becomes part of the student’s repertoire for viewing, understanding, and performing. This is an active process—learning is an activity. “Learning is conceived as something a learner **does**, not something that is done to the learner” (Johnson, Johnson, and Smith 1991). The collaborative model shifts the focus from the teacher to the learner.

* Introduction to Lehman and Levine, *Resource Materials for Collaborative Learning*, prepared for our Collaborative Learning Workshop at the annual meetings of the American Sociological Association, Toronto, Canada, August, 1997. These notes draw on my learning from a wide variety of mentors including Toni Haring-Smith and Toby Furwiler who got me started many years ago, Karl Smith, Barbara Walvoord, and, most recently, Dan Apple from Pacific Crest.

¹ “Performance Education” is a trademark of Pacific Crest Software, Inc., Corvallis, Oregon, <http://www.pcrest.com>.

This understanding is consistent with current thinking in cognitive psychology where the linear, additive understanding of learning (knowledge bricks adding up to a complete structure) has been replaced by schema theory. Schema are frameworks or maps we use in viewing, understanding, and performing. Everyone has schema. Learning takes place when new pieces (chunks) are added to existing schema. Growth takes place when the schema themselves are transformed—shifted to new levels of complexity and connection. I explore this more fully in “Will that be on the exam?” included in this packet.

I’m currently involved in the humbling experience of coaching a nine and ten-year-old girl’s softball team. I have learned a lot about schema theory and collaborative learning. The coaching role is a lot like the role of faculty in a collaborative model.

No amount of lecturing will turn these girls into softball players. Indeed, no amount of knowledge, *by itself*, will turn these girls into softball players. That doesn’t mean the knowledge isn’t important. They need to know where and when to throw the ball and that means mastery of a very complex set of rules.

Let me repeat: **knowledge is essential**. But, skills versus knowledge is a false dichotomy. Process versus knowledge is a false dichotomy. Theory versus practice is a false dichotomy. Without the knowledge of the complex set of rules, you can’t become a softball player, much less a good softball player.

However, it is also true that the girls on my team can begin to play softball before they have learned all the rules and all the complexities. We played something recognizable as softball the very first day. The move from novice to expert is a **process** of learning and growing. One important point here is that it is **ONLY** by playing softball, by practicing, by performing, that the knowledge and skills develop. Why would we think it was different in the sociology classroom?

This highlights one of the traps I fall into when teaching sociology: assuming that students need all sorts of knowledge (theories, concepts, facts, etc.) before they can practice. I profess then give them an example or exercise to apply or illustrate the knowledge. Doing sociology gets pushed to the end of the course or into more advanced courses. At the extreme, this is the senior seminar model in which students are asked, often for the first time, to do their own sociology at the end.

This trap is really only a more subtle version of the instructing and professing model. It assumes that knowledge comes first (build the foundation) and then practice. The collaborative model, like coaching my softball team, understands that true learning comes during constant practice, from the very first day. The sociology my students do on the very first day isn’t particularly good sociology, or developed sociology, or sophisticated sociology. But it is recognizably sociology.

My role is to structure and mentor the practice: assigning roles (play shortstop), encouraging (way to stay with it), suggesting (next time remember the force play at second), answering questions (you had to tag the runner because there wasn’t a force play at third), providing insights (you have to catch the ball before you can throw it), modeling (see how you can move better on your toes, try bouncing), and encouraging player-to-player collaboration (Kathleen would you practice throwing with Petra?).

These are the same roles built into an understanding of faculty as coaches or facilitators in the classroom. It is also why I like the term “collaborative.” Students collaborate with one another. Faculty and students collaborate with one another.

For me, “collaborative” also highlights an important truth: coaches are **not necessary** for learning to play softball. Likewise, faculty are not necessary for learning. That’s a bitter pill to swallow, but it’s true. Coaches and faculty *can* be helpful and useful. They *can* be inspiring. But poor coaches can be worse than no coach at all.

Just as bitter is the realization that the coach, ultimately, has no power, only authority. Weber reminds us that power is imposed—it is the capacity to force your will on others—whereas authority is consensual.² The players can leave or simply stop performing (see the first baseman playing in the dirt making designs?). For all of our rhetoric about shifting the power to the learner, the reality is that it’s not really a shift at all. If learning is an activity then the learner can always refuse to learn. I can punish her, but I can’t make her learn and grow.

That doesn’t mean there aren’t standards. Notice there are performance criteria and assessment in softball. Was the runner put out? How many bases did the batter take? How many runs were scored? Assessment is important in learning and growth—otherwise how does the learner learn how she is doing?

The most important criteria, however, are the ones developed by or agreed to by the players themselves (“I don’t want to strike out” may mean that hitting the ball, even if it is caught, may be success). The *next* personal goal may be to get a hit. Coaches (and faculty) can help create balance and perspective—performance criteria should push for learning and growth but also be attainable.

There is a balance between assessment that is too important (we are here to win) and not important enough (we won’t keep score). On the ball field it is easy to see that assessment (here’s what was good and here’s what needs improvement) is the key to growth but that evaluation (judgment) can destroy it. We often do not see this so clearly in the classroom.

Finally, I have realized that knowledge and expertise don’t make me a good coach. It is important for a coach to be a pretty good baseball/softball player. But it’s not enough. There are a lot more pretty good baseball/softball players out there than there are good coaches. In other words, knowing a lot about sociology, and being a pretty good sociologist, doesn’t make me a good sociology teacher (coach?). I’d be a poor one without the expertise, but I could be a poor one with it.

The assumption of the professing paradigm is that “any expert can teach” (Johnson, Johnson, and Smith 1991, reprinted in this packet). The collaborative paradigm suggests that “teaching is complex and requires considerable training.” I’d revise Johnson, Johnson, and Smith’s language and replace “training” with “learning and growth.”

² I don’t mean to suggest that faculty ignore the real power they have over student’s lives and life chances. This is a constant and powerful force in the classroom and can pose obstacles for collaborative learning. However, this should not be confused with power over learning. Again, I can flunk her but I can’t make her learn and grow.

We hope that this seminar will be an occasion for learning and growth for you. The materials in this packet are both philosophical and practical. They were chosen to give you a taste of different perspectives on collaborative learning as well as practical tips on what is possible and how to proceed.

We have included the Rau and Heyl article on the Humanistic Classroom as a wonderful combination of these elements. It is a seminal work on collaborative learning in sociology as well as a practical illustration of some techniques.

My article, "Will that be on the exam?" attempts the same sort of blend. As mentioned above, I explore schema theory and its implications in the classroom using an extended concrete example.

These two articles, along with the Johnson, Johnson, and Smith discussion of old and new paradigms of teaching, are meant to provide you with background as well as references for further reading.

The materials on roles in groups from Johnson, Johnson, and Holubec, from Krumseig and Baehr, and from Karl Smith illustrate three different approaches to role assignments and structuring groups. They also provide an illustration of how slightly different philosophical perspectives on collaborative learning effect the way people think about groups (and about the role of the faculty person).

Finally, we have a set of concrete collaborative exercises contributed by our presenters today. These are all thoughtful and stimulating and all quite different. It might be useful to think of them as reflecting the continuum between a progressive version of the traditional model of teaching and a fully collaborative model of learning.

Most of the authors of these collaborative exercises are with us for the workshop. They will serve as a valuable resource for our collaborative learning.