
Methods to Improve Communication Skills and Group Dynamics

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Abstract

Every successful individual knows that his or her success depends on community of people working together. The advances in technology and changes in the organizational infrastructure put an increased emphasis on teamwork within the student community. Students need to be able to think creatively, solve problems, and make decisions as a team. Therefore, the development and enhancement of communicative skills and critical-thinking skills through collaborative learning is one of the primary goals of education. The present paper is designed to study the effectiveness of collaborative learning as it relates to learning outcomes at the college level, for students in technology.

Keywords: Collaborative Learning, Communication Skills, Group Dynamics.

Introduction

Collaborative learning is a method in which students try to learn something. The concept of collaborative learning, the grouping and pairing of students for the purpose of achieving an academic goal has been widely researched and practiced. The term collaborative learning refers to method in which students at various performance levels work together in small groups to achieve a common goal. The students are responsible for one another's learning as well as their own. Thus, the success of one student helps other students to be successful.

Promoters of collaborative learning claim that the active exchange of ideas within small groups not only increases interest among the participants but also promotes critical thinking. The co-operative teams achieve higher levels of thought and retain information longer than students who work as individuals. The shared learning gives students an opportunity to engage in discussion, take responsibility for their own learning, and thus become critical thinkers.

Collaborative learning is generally defined as a teaching arrangement in which small, diverse groups of students work together to achieve a common goal. Students encourage and support each other, assume responsibility for their own and each other's learning, employ group related social skills, and evaluate the group's progress. The basic elements are positive interdependence, equal opportunities, and individual accountability. Human beings are social creatures by nature and cooperation has been used throughout history in all aspects of our lives. Therefore, it follows that cooperative learning groups in schools would be used as a logical teaching method. Some of the authors opine that collaborative learning and co-operative learning are similar whereas some people say that co-operative learning is a part of collaborative learning.

It is the students' responsibility to manage their own work. The lecturer acts as a coordinator to supervise each task and provide advice and general guidance to the students but does not undertake responsibility for managing the work. Regular monitoring and support processes are an integral part of the project management. Students therefore assume ownership of the task and the development of a solution, an important aspect of task.

If students are provided with specific criteria as to what makes an exemplary group work the quality of the interaction among the members will improve and consequently the quality of the group work. Clear criteria for the evaluation of the product, without removing the open-endedness of the task, should be made available to the groups in the pilot project. In this particular task the majority of assessment marks are for the group as a whole but there are two elements of individual assessment contributing thirty percent of the overall mark. Ten percent of this relates to the final oral presentation and this was considered an appropriate method of assessing individual knowledge and understanding of the overall outcomes of the project. The remaining twenty percent relates to a reflective account of the individual student's group experience. A peer evaluation is also incorporated into the assessment schedule to address the issues of individual participation and accountability in the group. Both product (written and oral reports) and process are assessed. This mix of group and individual evaluation was intended to ensure that students in this collaborative work feel that the evaluation is fair.

Effective intra-group communication is essential for a successful outcome in collaborative learning but students must be helped to develop these skills. The students should be taught the skills that are necessary for group assignments i.e stages in group work, team building, conflict resolution, the decision making process, time management, coping with language skills, religions and Interest. The factors that determine the effectiveness of external monitoring were the team's ability to self- evaluate their progress and their internal processes, their willingness to openly discuss their issues, and their motivation to accept and follow up on external feedback. Face-to-face meetings were still the basic communication medium for all groups. The quality of the discussion and the variety of techniques used to promote effective discussion, however, varied from group to group. This had an effect on the quality of decision making, leadership, the level of motivation, and the eventual

outcome for the group that the quality of group discussion has an effect on the quality of the final product.

If collaborative learning is implemented in colleges, the students will learn how to work cooperatively and support each other's learning which is fundamentally a social activity. Learn best by building their knowledge, understanding and skills through working with other students Develop effective teamwork and communication including interpersonal skills. Assimilate multiple views to deepen knowledge and promote critical thinking Foster individual accountability to the team Develop Independent learning strategies Put in increased effort, Develop positive relationships. Being able to learn and work with other people are highly regarded competencies, both in the world of work and in social contexts and cooperative learning helps young students develop the interpersonal skills and attitudes required in a world that is increasingly pluralistic and diverse.

Collaborative learning is not a soft option. It is demanding for both teachers and students

and requires teachers to be less controlling and students to be autonomous learners who take more responsibility for their learning. Research shows that collaborative learning can reap great rewards, both academically and in young people's ability to operate effectively in the world beyond college. Some students may face problems in working together and intervening where necessary to increase the effectiveness of groups. As the students are from different educational background and social background, some students may dominate other students. All though they may be motivated there may be considerable variation in their level of participation. But students are aware of the fact that to function as a team they need to recognize that each member had different skills, knowledge and abilities and that all members add value to the given task. Collaborative learning places different demands on students. It requires the group or class to become a community of learners that takes more responsibility for their learning, motivation and behaviour.

When collaborative learning method is used, the outcome would be developing communication skills leadership, decision-making, building trust, and conflict management in students. But moving from a classroom culture where the students are totally dependent on the teacher and work individually to one where there is an emphasis on collaboration involves disciplined effort. May be implementing this method would take some days for some classrooms to get it right. It can require a fundamental change in thinking, behaviour and beliefs.

The changing role of the teacher requires them to use new techniques, skills and strategies. It involves: more planning and design work in advance forming different kinds of groups for different purposes using different methods to compose and recompose groups working out ground rules with students to help them move from debate and discussion to dialogue training peers to teach peers taking time to give more feedback on the process of learning as well as the product of learning and on how well students work together.

The idea of classrooms as learning communities goes against the grain of how most classrooms and colleges actually operate. To encourage and support lecturers to work more collaboratively with students, they need to experience what it is like to work in a collaborative community themselves. If teachers are expected to control less, so must college and education authority management. Many principals already know that top-down management does not empower teachers to create vibrant and innovative learning environments.

The collaborative learning model is useful if it is implemented in right way. The lecturer should first acquire good understanding over the method. Dividing groups in a way and assigning tasks/topics which are suitable for this method among groups and guiding in proper manner gives good results. The method is useful to improve social skills such as communication that is both verbal and non-verbal, sharing ideas, respect for other's opinion, flexible thinking and team work etc. The method is useful in understanding others perception. The collaborative learning method may have certain limitation and it may not satisfy skilled students in a group as they are the only resourceful in the group. And every topic is not suitable for this method. Sometimes conflicts may occur among group members resulting indiscipline This method is sometimes time consuming and delays completion of syllabus. Keeping all these benefits and limitations learning experiences are to be implemented. In spite of some limitations the collaborative learning is a good method to acquire communication skills and group dynamics.

The outcomes have been evaluated by pre-test and post test. The learning levels of students may be evaluated not only in content they acquire but also in terms of active participation, inter personal communication, data collection, team work etc. This will help us to rethink into objectives and method of organizing and bring positive changes in the method adapted and implemented. There is significant evidence to suggest that where collaborative learning is done well, students become self-motivated and much less reliant on the teacher. They have greater autonomy for their own learning and also understand how to be team players. In collaborative learning the role of the teacher changes. Although pupils become the crew rather than the passengers, the teacher still remains the pilot, setting the classroom on course and ensuring that the pupils work and learn together effectively. Paradoxically, the less controlling the teacher, the better the students will perform.

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