Collaborative Learning

Collaborative learning as a pedagogical approach first emerged in Britain in the 1960s. A group of secondary teachers and a professor of medicine are credited with first recognizing the methodology. The latter noticed that her students were better able to diagnose patients and learned the relevant skills more quickly when given the opportunity to discuss it with their peers. A boom of interest in the new methodology resulted as the population of college-bound students grew more diverse and educators sought a way to accommodate all levels of student ability – from the unprepared to the well-prepared (Stewart, 59-60).

So, what is collaborative learning? Perhaps it can best be defined by what it is not. "Collaborative learning is not unstructured learning; it replaces one structure, the traditional one, with another, a collaborative structure" (Weiner, 61). In other words, collaborative learning marks a change from the traditional classroom structure that grants the majority of authority (if not all of the authority) to the teacher-figure. Therefore, students must take some responsibility for their own learning. For collaborative learning to be successful, teachers who utilize this pedagogy should be thoroughly prepared and provide students with a concrete structure. Otherwise, students may (or rather, will) stray from the topic.

In the area of composition, collaborative learning can take a variety of forms. Trimbur notes that collaborative learning in practice will result in such techniques as "reader response, peer critiques, small writing groups, joint writing projects, and peer tutoring in writing centers and classrooms" (Stewart, 59). Many of these forms are used both in and out of the writing classroom. The danger with peer tutoring and other forms of collaborative learning that take place outside the classroom lies in the fine line between collaboration and the ultimate academic sin, plagiarism. Peer tutoring can also result in problems other than discerning authorship. As Kail notes, a writing tutor, who is only using the methodologies that she was taught, may contradict the intentions of the tutee's professor. Therein, the professor may "los[e] a bit of control over his classroom" when the writing tutor "cannot help but... exert her own influence as critical audience" (Kail, 596-7).

[It is important to note that collaborative learning differs from collaborative writing. The first seems to be not only an accepted, but also an encouraged pedagogy, a way to empower students and give them an active role in the learning process. The latter, however, is still somewhat frowned upon in academic circles. Lunsford and Ede note, "Of course, we hardly need demonstrate that the humanities in general and English in particular valorize and reward single authorship and disregard collaboratively produced texts" (Lunsford and Ede, 237).]

One of the prominent scholars on the topic of collaborative learning is Kenneth Bruffee. Bruffee asserts that knowledge and authority are socially constructed "artifacts." Humankind has arrived at knowledge through a series of conversations.
Therefore, learning (and the methodologies that teachers employ) should reflect this highly socialized process. According to Bruffee, "Collaborative learning provides a social context in which students can experience and practice the kinds of conversation valued by college teachers" (Bruffee, *Conversation*, 642). In other words, collaborative learning imitates normal conversation and is an effective initiation into the academic discourse community, which communicates through a type of extended conversation. To join this community, students must avoid its (the academic community’s) *abnormal discourse* ("what happens when someone joins in the discourse who is ignorant of the conventions governing that discourse 'or who sets them aside'" [Bruffee, *Conversation*, 648]). Students can gradually achieve a sense of *normal discourse* through conversation.

Additionally, Bruffee claims that reflective thought can be considered an internal conversation. It would then follow that, to be able to think well, a person must also demonstrate the ability to converse. "To think well as individuals we must learn to think well collectively - that is, we must learn to converse well" (Bruffee, *Conversation*, 640). Thus, in giving our students an opportunity to converse with a social community in the form of their peers, we thereby improve their ability to think as individuals.

In the classroom, one of two collaborative situations usually emerges. One possibility is in-class peer evaluation and review. In the ideal situation, the teacher will provide the students with a framework or rubric to help them evaluate the work of their peers. This evaluation may include such questions as 'Is the thesis clear, concise and located at the end of the introduction?,' 'Does the author use topic sentences in each paragraph?,' 'Does the argument make sense?,' and 'Are quotes incorporated properly?" Students work in groups of three or four, read through each of their peers' papers, as well as their own, and provide feedback in the forms of praise and constructive criticism. In “Collaborative Learning: Some Practical Models,” Bruffee mentions the evaluation procedure for one of his own classes: "The final evaluation of each paper was not based, then, on the views of a single judge, the teacher, but was comprised of [sic] the views of a small jury of students as well" (Bruffee, 638). In peer evaluation, students are given the authority not only to teach, but also, in a sense, to grade the work of fellow students.

Another example of a collaborative assignment occurs when a teacher organizes students into groups, giving each group a problem to solve or a question to answer. "The teacher sets the problem and organizes students to work it out collaboratively" (Bruffee, *Conversation*, 637). At the end of an allotted time period, the class regroups and each small group reports its findings or conclusions to the class. As Stygall notes, educators must take caution in these situations because students will, "in the absence of instruction to the contrary... us[e] the social roles they bring to the classroom" (Stygall, 255).

Stygall goes on to comment that, "it would appear that insofar as women are less powerful than men in middle-class American culture, so is their language less powerful, more oriented to relational issues" (Stygall, 257). This means that female students may instinctively take a backseat to their male counterparts in a collaborative classroom. The danger would not be as prevalent in a traditional classroom because the "instructor can mediate inequalities by articulating, modeling and enforcing the rules of respectful, relevant exchange and development of positions" (Stygall, 253). Therefore, when placing students into collaborative groups, a teacher should be sensitive to gender (as well as race and other) issues.
Other critics of the methodology, such as Stewart, have a variety of concerns. Stewart in particular warns that English teachers, usually a similar Meyers-Briggs' personality type, run the risk of imposing their personal style of learning on students. (Stewart, 78). He also observes that American society, which places such a high value on individualism, may not be ready for a teaching style that emphasizes social constructionism (Stewart, 74). Additionally, students are not innately equipped with "the insights to criticize the language in which one is immersed from social collaboration" (Stewart, 71). To me this suggests that the success of collaborative learning is commensurate with the knowledge and abilities of the brightest student in the group. Phrased differently, without the assistance of the instructor, there is a limit to the amount that students can learn in the collaborative classroom.

Collaborative pedagogy offers an alternate form of teaching and learning to that of the traditional classroom structure. As long as instructors are sensitive to both the concerns raised by critics and the needs of students, collaborative learning can be an effective pedagogical tool if implemented properly.
Annotated Bibliography


This book is divided into two sections: Principles and Pedagogy. The first section discusses what happens in practice, i.e. student and teacher experiences. The second section focuses on how to go about using the pedagogy in the classroom setting. The final chapter in the second section takes it beyond the classroom, "Exhortation: Beyond the Small Group - Personal Pedagogical and Professional Lives."


This book begins by defining collaborative learning and its place in a writing classroom. The first section also deals with peer tutoring and provides "A Basic Model of Classroom Collaboration." The second section of the book is entitled "Higher Education, Interdependence, and the Authority of Knowledge" and addresses topics relating to collegiate academia. Like Bruffee's "Conversation of Mankind" article, the seventh chapter is entitled, "Education as Conversation."


Essay argues for the use of collaborative learning in the classroom because it imitates the course humankind took in creating knowledge. In other words, knowledge is a "social artifact." Students should be taught the "normal discourse" of both the academic community and their future career communities. Bruffee points out that conversation and thought are related, that reflective thought is somewhat like an internal dialogue, a conversation with one's self.


In this early essay, Bruffee discusses the role of the teacher in the writing classroom. Under one section, he demonstrates how to incorporate collaborative pedagogy over the course of a semester. Other important ideas include: divergence from the traditional "patterns of dominance and passivity"; teaching as a form of learning; and peer evaluation as more memorable than teacher evaluation.

This book includes chapters on freewriting and the process of writing. The chapter "The Teacherless Writing Class" has numerous subheadings of various lengths. These passages make the chapter seem to be a hybrid between an outline and a conversation. Even the dedication, "to those people who actually use it – not just read it," implies that Elbow intends for this book to be a practical handbook with exercise suggestions (instead of an argumentative essay.)


In this short article, Gebhardt argues for more collaborative work at early stages in and throughout the writing process.


This brief article deals with the problems that arise from peer tutoring. Among these issues are uncertain authorship and different writing styles that may contradict or call in to question the credibility of the pedagogy used by the professor.


Article discusses collaborative writing in the workplace. They argue that the hierarchical process of writing, which involves a linear progression of the document from one writer to the next, is masculine. Lunsford and Ede argue that another form of collaboration, which involves a "dialogic" process, is "potentially at least, deeply subversive" and "predominantly feminine" (236).


THisook is a general introduction to collaborative learning, not specifically collaborative learning in the composition class. It discusses the psychology behind the choice to adopt collaborative learning, and how to incorporate it in the curriculum. The book also includes a chapter on "Interdisciplinary enquiry" or including collaborative learning in interdisciplinary study.

A collection of essays from a range of scholars. This book explores such topics as "Computer-Based Conversations and the Changing Nature of Collaboration," "The Androgynous Collaborator: The Impact of Gender Studies on Collaboration," "Laboratory Life and the Determination of Authorship" and "For Profit and Pleasure: Collaboration in Nineteenth Century Women's Literary Clubs." These essays seem to focus more on collaborative writing than collaborative pedagogy.


A critical approach to collaborative learning. In this essay, Stewart raises concerns about historical naivety ("collaboration" once meant that a person assisted the Nazis in WWII); the ultimate goal of teaching (produce academic discourse that is abstruse); and student inability to fully comprehend and criticize language without guidance from an outside authority (collaborative learning can only teach as much as the brightest student knows – who, most likely, does not know nearly as much as the teacher). Stewart is also concerned with the ethical problems that may arise from collaborative learning and the fact that we, as English teachers, may be trying to impose the style of learning that is associated with our personality type on to our students.


Deals with issues of gender in collaborative learning. More specifically, if students are not given structured directions in a collaborative classroom, students may resort to traditional roles. A female student may withdraw and be less vocal than a male peer, whereas in the traditional structure, the teacher can ensure equal time for all students.


This essay primarily discusses how teachers who use collaborative learning pedagogy should be evaluated. In other words, it seems to provide advice for administrators in how to judge whether or not a teacher has effectively incorporated the methodology in the classroom. It is valuable in that it discusses what the teacher's role should be, as well as the relationships between students and between teacher and student.