AN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE ON COLLABORATIVE LEARNING

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Abstract

This article provides an analysis of how collaborative learning has developed in terms of practice, discourse, and social relationship across historical stages. It explores how collaborative learning has been positioned over time in relationship to larger national reform efforts for students. Approaching the history of collaborative learning developmentally from these three perspectives sheds light on how today's emphasis on collaboration and multiple certifications intersects with what it means to teach in a diverse society and what it means to prepare teachers to meet the needs of every student by applying different approaches of collaborative learning.

Key Words: Historical Perspective, Collaboration, Collaborative Learning

Introduction

The origins of collaborative learning can be traced back to ancient civilizations. However, it was replaced by other learning philosophies both in the West and in the colonized East. This reflected a position in the 1970s and early 1980s, where cognition was seen as a product of individual information processors, and where the context of social interaction was seen more as a background for individual activity than as a focus of research in it. More recently, the group itself has become the unit of analysis and the focus has shifted to more emergent, socially constructed, properties of the interaction. In terms of empirical research, the initial goal was to establish whether and under what circumstances collaborative learning was more effective than learning alone. Collaborative learning was granted a new lease of life in the second half of the 20th century when research showed that students learned faster and retained more when they

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became partners in the process of teaching and learning instead of remaining mere receivers of knowledge from their educators.

In Ancient India, life of a man has four stages. The first stage of life began with the 'second birth' after a boy went through his thread ceremony (akin to confirmation) around puberty. The stage, called *Brahmacharya*, began the student's learning process under the tutelage of a 'guru.' In gurukul system, a group of scholars lived and learned together within the premises of the guru's ashram.

Learning in gurukul had no school hours. Every aspect of the student's life, from his waking to his ablutions to his nutrition, his clothing, his activities and friendships were opportunities for learning. The gurukul student lived to learn and learned to live with his guru, his guru-ma (the guru's wife or the guru-mother) and his guru-brothers. Learning groups such as the gurukul were the norm in ancient traditional societies from Ancient Greece in the West to China in the East. Through the ages, prophets and seers have taught by example and experience to small groups of disciples. In traditional societies, small, close-knit communities made it possible for wise men like Confucius, Jesus, Buddha, Muhammad, Nanak & Kabir to foster learning through personal experience from social interaction rather than through scriptures, which were recorded later for posterity. Pertinent examples of this sort of social learning through cooperation and collaboration could also be the Filipino concept of *Bayanihan* (being a 'bayan' loosely translated to a community spirit of cooperation) and the Malaysian/Indonesian idea of *Gotong royong* (the spirit of mutual help in a society or community).

With the advent of urbanization small, close communities disappeared all over the world and formal school systems with standardized curricula began to develop. The ancient forms of collaborative learning disappeared, making way to a new paradigm of individual and competitive learning through a system of lectures, texts, and tests. The contemporary concept of collaborative learning began to interest educators in the West after theories of personality development, group dynamics and social cognitive mechanisms began a fresh thought process into learning mechanisms and classroom techniques. Though there is no one point of origin that can be attributed to the process of Collaborative Learning, but many related ideas that have helped the formation of this concept.

Collaborative Learning in the 20th Century

Dewey's explorations into the social nature of learning, through discussion and through hands-on problem solving; Elwin's social inter-dependence concepts and Deutsch's ideas on cooperation

and competition can be seen as early seeds of the Collaborative Learning process. Alpert described interdependence among members as he studied Group Dynamics and social psychology and about the reasons behind the success and failure of groups. Piaget talked about intellectual development that was fostered by social interaction and if disequilibrium comes one can think again, thus expanding and enhancing their experience and comprehension. Vygotsky supported the idea of learning as a social process. According to his sociocultural theory, one can learn first from social interactions and then carry that learning to individual level.

Generally speaking, these thought processes can be bundled under the theory of Constructivism, which serves as the foundation of the structure called as Collaborative Learning. In Constructivism one learn from their own experiences; viz., learning is active; make meaning of the world from what one see, feel, hear, smell etc and by asking questions, exploring new ideas and evaluating of existing knowledge. Every time new experiences add to one's knowledge of the world and can modify one's perspective and give a fresh belief. According to the constructivist, man is not passive absorbers of knowledge given by others but active contributors to the learning process and this process is affected by the context of the experiences from which it began. Thus, learning is a social process, enhanced by interpersonal relations and encounters. (Banerjee & Forsyth 2012)

Different notions of collaborative learning vary from perspectives focusing on individuals that participate in group activities to perspectives focusing on groups that consist of individuals. Collaboration necessitates that participants are engaged in a co-ordinate effort to solve a problem or perform a task together. This coordinated, synchronous activity is the result of a continued attempt to construct and maintain a shared conception of a problem (Roschelle & Teasley, 1995). In many of the studies demonstrating positive effects of social interaction for individual learning (Light, Littleton, Messer & Joiner, 1994; Roschelle & Teasley, 1995), collaborative learning has been interpreted as a single learning mechanism. In terms of empirical research, the initial goal was to establish whether and under what circumstances collaborative learning was more effective than learning alone. Researchers controlled several independent variables (size of the group, composition of the group, nature of the task, communication media, and so on). However, these variables interacted with one another in a way that made it almost impossible to establish causal links between the conditions and the effects of collaboration. Hence, empirical studies have more recently started to focus less on establishing parameters for effective collaboration and more on

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trying to understand the role which such variables play in mediating interaction. This shift to a more process-oriented account requires new tools for analyzing and modeling interactions.

The concept of collaborative research is based on social constructivist theory (Dale, 1997). Collaborative research employ on constructivist strategies such as pursuit of student questions, activities rely heavily on primary sources, students are viewed as thinkers with emerging theories about the world and students mainly work in groups and collaboratively solve problems which might be unsolved individually (Hurley, 1999). According to Erickson (1997), constructing something that has a purpose contributes an element of authenticity to a task and that provides the motivation, criteria and justification for students to critique and improve the construction. Through collaborative learning, students focus on developing and improving skills such as locating information, creating new information, analyzing and organizing information, sharing information with others, reflecting and its connection with others (Erickson, 1997). Main emphasis of constructivist beliefs is the need to embed learning in real-world situations where learners function as a community helping to solve real-world problems (Jonassen, Davidson, Collins, Campbell & Haag, 1995). Trent (1996) believes that collaborative learning strategies are most effective when students and teachers work together and learn from each other and student needs to learn how to collaborate effectively because the real world workplace is competitive and cooperative in nature. In collaborative learning activities the teacher's responsibility is to become a member, along with the students of a community in search of knowledge (Barkley, Cross & Major, 2005).

Approaches of Collaborative Learning

Collaborative learning is used as an umbrella term for a variety of approaches in education that involve joint intellectual effort by students or students and teachers. It is commonly illustrated when groups of students work together to search for understanding, meaning, or solutions or to create an artifact or product of their learning. Further, collaborative learning redefines traditional student-teacher relationship in the classroom which results in controversy over whether this paradigm is more beneficial than harmful. Collaborative learning activities can include collaborative writing, group projects, joint problem solving, debates, study teams, and other activities. Different theoretical positions between the individual and the group: socio-constructivist, socio-cultural and shared (or distributed) cognition approaches.

Socio-constructivist approach

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The socio-constructivist approach enhances the role of interactions with others rather than action themselves. This approach deals with interacting and coordinating his/her approaches to reality with others, so that the individual masters new approaches (Doise, 1990). It shows that individual cognitive development is seen as the result of a spiral of causality which makes new individual states and more possible sophisticated social interactions. So peer interaction produces superior performance on individual post-test than individual training, and subjects who are at the same level of cognitive development but with different perspectives also benefit from conflictual interactions.

Socio-cultural approach

The socio-cultural approach focuses on individual development in the context of social interaction and causal relationship between social interaction and individual cognitive change. The basic unit of analysis is social activity, from which individual mental functioning develops. Vygotsky said that development appears on two planes: first on the inter-psychological, then on the intra-psychological. Internalization refers to the genetic link between the social and the inner planes. Social speech is use for interaction with others, inner speech is used to talk to ourselves, to reflect and think. Inner speech serves the function of self-regulation. Each learner stores the conversations conducted during collaborative problem solving and re-instantiates elements from the dialogue for its own reasoning.

The shared cognition approach

The concept of shared cognition is intertwined with the situated cognition theory. Some researchers said that the environment is an integral part of cognitive activity, and not only a set of circumstances in context-independent cognitive processes are performed. This approach offers a new perspective on the socio-cognitive and the socio-cultural approaches, and focuses on the social plane where emergent conceptions are analyzed as a group product.

Collaboration is viewed as the process of building and maintaining a shared conception of a problem (Roschelle & Teasley). While the previous approaches were concerned with the inter-individual plane, the shared cognition approach focuses on the social plane.

Conclusion

Collaborative learning is a method of teaching and learning in which students work together as a team to explore a meaningful result, a group of students from different schools working together on a shared assignment are both examples of collaborative learning. Collaborative learning is the broadest and most general term, which refers to a wide range of formal and informal activities

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that include any form of peer student interaction. The term described any classroom activity that involves student peer-to-peer involvement. Generally, these thought processes can be bundled under the theory of Constructivism, which serves as the foundation of the structure we call Collaborative Learning. At the core of Constructivism is the idea that we learn from our own experiences; that learning is active; that we make meaning of the world around us from what we see, feel, hear, smell etc. and by asking questions, exploring new ideas and evaluating our existing knowledge. Every time we have a new experience, we try and fit it into what we already know. The new experience can either add to our knowledge of the world as we already know it or it can modify our perspective or give us a fresh belief. According to the constructivist, we are not passive absorbers of knowledge given to us by others. We are, on the contrary, active contributors to the learning process. This learning process is affected by the context of the experiences from which it began. Thus, learning is a social process, enhanced by our interpersonal relations and encounters.

Collaborative Learning and its origins, then, are synonymous with the educator's attempt to bring Constructivist theories into practice in the classroom.

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