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Collaborative Learning in the Classroom: A Guide to Evaluation

Over the last decade collaborative learning has become an important method for college English teachers, who now realize that their own education rarely taught them how colleagues work together to learn and to make meaning in a discipline, and who have rejected philosophically the kinds of approaches to teaching that isolate learners instead of drawing them together. In addition, the problems for education in the seventies and eighties—the changes in student populations, the growth in the number of nontraditional learners in the collegiate body, the alienating nature of learning in large classrooms with too many students, the acknowledged decline of freshmen entry-level skills in reading, writing, speaking, listening, and thinking—these and other challenges to an earlier educational paradigm have shaken our faith in conventional teaching strategies and have called to question our obsession with the major metaphor for learning over the last three hundred years, “the human mind as the Mirror of Nature.”

As Ken Bruffee has put it, this old metaphor insists that teachers give students as much information as they can “to insure that their mental mirrors reflect reality as completely as possible” and also insists that we help our students “through the exercise of intellect or development of sensibility, to sharpen and sensitize their inner eyesight” (“Liberal Education” 98). In this ground-breaking essay, Bruffee, drawing upon the works of Thomas Kuhn, L. S. Vygotsky, Jean Piaget, M. L. J. Abercrombie, and Richard Rorty, advances an alternate concept of knowledge as *socially justified belief*. According to this concept, knowledge depends on social relations, not on reflections of reality. Knowledge is “a collaborative artifact” (103) that results from “intellectual negotiations” (107). Bruffee explores the curricular implications of knowledge collaboratively generated, always with one eye on the classroom and the other on the philosophical underpinnings of the new paradigm.

But Bruffee’s model, built on the delicate and necessary tension between theory and practice, may not, I suspect, have guided much of what teachers are calling collaborative learning today. I mention this suspicion out of my recent investigations into the issue of assessment generally as a force in postsecondary

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education and also out of my recent frustration as formal observer of classroom teaching performances in a university-mandated system of evaluation for promotion, retention, and tenure. I realized as I watched these attempts at instruction through collaboration that to apply to the new paradigm the standards we had in place for the old was inappropriate. Our elaborate student evaluation forms and classroom observation checklists had little relation to the classroom activities I observed. What was worse, I realized that we had not established either as an institution or as a profession any standards for judging our attempts to implement the evolving concept of teaching and learning as a social act. Hence the question I intend to address in this essay: How do we assess the effectiveness of collaborative teaching models in the classroom?

Asking this question on evaluation now, as collaborative learning grows more and more popular, is to seize an advantage we have missed many times before. Formal assessment has always been the stepchild of the profession. In the past we have given up important evaluation activities for certifying the success of our students as learners and of ourselves as teachers. Professional testing agencies, for example, not classroom teachers, develop, and oversee college entrance tests for graduates and undergraduates. Despite the obligatory committees of teachers and researchers who are invited to establish standards in general terms and to highlight areas of learning, professional test writers are the ones who produce specifications on most commercially prepared large-scale examinations. Worse still, legislatures, seeing a void, have leaped in to define competencies we have not. In many states, legislatures, not teachers, have mandated and overseen the development of tests for college writers. The Florida Department of Education, for example, has created the College Level Academic Skills Test (an essay and an objective test) for all students in the state, and has prescribed the number of pages to be written each week in writing classes. Georgia has a similar test in progress. Even current measures for judging a teacher's classroom effectiveness have been influenced insufficiently by the teachers themselves who are being judged. Administrative committees, education school faculty, and evaluation specialists often develop the standards for classroom observations and create atomistic, overly-generalized checklists for use in assessing teaching. Or, institutions develop no standards whatsoever, and classroom observation is an exercise in a senior professor's effort to characterize someone else's teaching by means of some vague, unarticulated, and as yet socially unjustified vision of perfection. Even useful efforts by the profession are often too late to do as much good as they might have done had they flowered earlier. The evaluation instruments developed by the Conference on College Composition and Communication's Committee on the Evaluation of the Teaching of Writing, for example, reached English teachers ten years after The City University of New York's faculty negotiating unit, the Professional Staff Congress, wrote an evaluation system into the University's faculty contract, long after precedent set most of the institutional evaluation procedures in cement.

By advancing collaborative learning as a productive instructional mode for teaching literature and writing, however, English teachers have a rare opportunity to evolve a set of standards by which to judge classroom performance in

the new paradigm. Our first obligation is to define for ourselves what we see as efficient classroom models for collaborative learning. Our next obligation is to pass on to beginners the standards by which we measure our own performances so that new teachers seeking membership in this intellectual community have a clear paradigm to study. And, finally, we are obliged to lay out for classroom observers what to look for as hallmarks of collaboration so that any judgments evaluators make about teaching performance are judgments our community has justified through thoughtful, disciplined discussion.

In an effort to move forward this evolution of standards for appropriate collaborative teaching models and to provide a temporary set of guidelines for the classroom observer of collaborative learning, I will look at the teacher's role in a collaborative session sequentially. I will confine my remarks to one of the most common kinds of collaborative learning, collaborative group work. Here, students perform some common task in small study and discussion groups. The class is divided into clusters of three to seven students each. Each group chooses a recorder to take notes on the conversation and, when the discussion ends, to report the group's deliberations to the whole class. The time required for a collaborative effort depends on the task, but fifteen or twenty minutes is a bare minimum. The teacher helps the class compare results, resolve differences, and understand features of the task that students did not work out on their own.

The Teacher as Task Setter

The success of the collaborative model depends primarily upon the quality of the initial task students must perform in groups. Hence, the instructor's role as task-setter is one that any observer must view with great attention. "What is essential," Bruffee writes, "is that the task lead to an answer or solution that can represent as nearly as possible the collective judgment and labor of the group as a whole" (*Short Course* 45).

The group's effort to reach consensus by their own authority is the major factor that distinguishes collaborative learning from mere work in groups. What is consensus? Unfortunately the word is widely misunderstood as a dimension of collaborative learning. It is not an activity that stifles differences or intends to make conformists out of divergent thinkers. John Trimbur asserts that those new to collaborative learning often miss

the process of intellectual negotiation that underwrites the consensus. The demand for consensus that's made by the task promotes a kind of social pressure. Sometimes, to be sure, this pressure causes the process of negotiation to short circuit when students rush to an answer. When it works, however, the pressure leads students to take their ideas seriously, to fight for them, and to modify or revise them in light of others' ideas. It can also cause students to agree to disagree—to recognize and tolerate differences and at best to see the value systems, set of beliefs, etc. that underlie these differences.

Consensus, he points out, “is intellectual negotiation which leads to an outcome (consensus) through a process of taking responsibility and investing collective judgment with authority.”

Certainly methodology in education for many years has depended upon group work, but it is generally not an activity that demands collective judgment. In elementary and secondary schools, for example, teachers of reading, spelling, and mathematics divide students into groups for skills instruction, each group at a different level. Such groupings permit those with like abilities to investigate topics at the same rate and with the same intensity as their peers. But this kind of group work is by no means collaborative learning. It merely subdivides the traditional hierarchical classroom into several smaller versions of the same model. Despite the groups, the teacher remains the central authority figure in the students’ attempts to acquire knowledge. Other popular yet perhaps more imaginative types of group activity—clusters of students working on a common project or experiment, say—also rarely build upon the idea of a learning community that leads to joint decisions. Much group work on projects and experiments of this sort is only the sum of its parts, each student contributing his or her piece without the vital “intellectual negotiation” that “places the authority of knowledge in the assent of a community of knowledgeable peers” (Bruffee, “*Liberal Education*” 107). Students put into groups are only students grouped and are not collaborators, unless a task that demands consensual learning unifies the group activity.

To assure that the teacher in a collaborative learning classroom is guiding students to collective judgments in groups, evaluators are right to insist that the task be written down. A written task provides the language that helps to shape students’ conversations. An observer asked to judge a class session in collaborative learning must first scrutinize the task and then comment on it in the evaluation report in the same way he or she would comment on the teacher’s preparation for any lesson. To look only at the outward manifestations of the collaborative classroom—the fact that students group together and talk within their groups—is to look at the activity with one eye closed.

Peter Hawkes points out important differences between collaboration and group work and these differences inhere in the nature of the task:

Sometimes in mere group work the teacher sets a task or poses a question that has an answer that the teacher has already decided on. Groups take on the role of the smart kid in class who guesses what’s on the teacher’s mind. The evaluator should examine the task assigned and the way the teacher responds to the student reports in the plenary session to see whether the authority of knowledge has been shifted temporarily in the classroom. In CL, the teacher should ask questions that have more than one answer or set problems that are capable of more than one solution. In other words, sincere questions rather than pedagogical ones. The CL teacher is interested in the way the students come up with their consensual answer, the rationale for that answer, the opportunities for debate among groups, the suggestion of how knowledge in a discipline is arrived at rather than in

leading students toward an already acknowledged 'right answer.' CL changes the student-teacher relationship; mere group work appears to but does not.

A good written statement of task will probably have a number of components: general instructions about how to collaborate in this particular activity; a copy of the text, if a single text is the focus of the collaboration; and questions appropriately limited in number and scope and offered in sequence from easier to more complex, questions requiring the kind of critical thinking that leads to sustained responses from students at work in their groups. Since collaborative group work normally should move toward consensus, instructions almost always should require a member of the group to record this consensus in writing. But although one member writes the report, the group as a whole shapes it. Some experienced collaborative learning teachers insist that the recorder do something more like a performance after the work in the group ends—a formal presentation to the class, participation in a debate with recorders from other groups, or some other responsible social activity that may be subjected to group judgment. When recorders must perform, these teachers argue, the recorders keep the groups functioning smoothly and efficiently.

The teacher's role as task-setter often must go beyond simply writing the assignment down and distributing it. This is especially true when students consider varied texts collaboratively (their own papers, for example). The instructor may have to guide the manner in which students attack the task by reviewing some of the principles that need attention if activity is to move forward before the group work begins. For example, in a typical collaborative session, dividing students into small groups to read and provide commentary on the coherence of a practice essay, an instructor might explain to the class at the beginning of the hour some of the principles of coherence in expository writing. Or, if students are to comment on drafts of each other's essays, the teacher could begin by asking student groups to generate a *Reader Response Guide*. Asking the class "Which two or three vital questions do you wish to have answered about your draft so that you can take it to the next stage" and then collecting the questions for everyone to see is effective because it reviews whatever was taught in an earlier class or in advance of the assignment; it highlights for the whole class the major issues to be addressed in this writing task; it calls attention immediately to the students' own most pressing concerns; and it gives the class an opportunity to buy into the collaborative process as shapers of their own learning.

For evaluators the key issue here once again is that the task and the teacher's role in setting it must stimulate active learning that leads to an important outcome: consensus (either agreement or agreement to disagree) on the issue at hand. Many collaborative settings I've witnessed do not pay much attention to consensus. Students divided into groups to examine drafts and to "discuss" their papers, but who lack specific guidelines, will flounder. I saw one class session like this where students told to discuss their drafts discussed only their errors in spelling and sentence structure, probably the least valuable things to talk

about in the early stages of composing. Perhaps even more troublesome than activities inappropriate to the task is no collaboration at all. The risk is great that, without clear guidelines, students will just pat each other on the back, attack each other counterproductively, or fall silent.

An observer in a collaborative setting, then, must consider the task set by the teacher as the first essential element in any evaluation. The task must figure very prominently in judgments about the class. Questions an observer might ask about the task are: is it clearly worded and unambiguous? does it split the exercise into workable segments? do students know what to do and how to do it? is the task pertinent to the students' needs, goals, and abilities? does the exercise move toward consensus? do the questions students deal with stimulate critical thinking? and, perhaps most important of all, does it call on what students can be expected to know in a way that will lead them together beyond what they already know—is the task difficult enough to challenge but not too difficult to stonewall conversations?

The Teacher as Classroom Manager

The second aspect of collaborative learning for evaluators to consider is the teacher as classroom manager. With the task laid out, how does the teacher implement the actual act of collaboration? How does the teacher organize the social relations in which learning will occur? Have students learned to form groups easily and with relative speed? Are chairs organized in well-spaced clusters so that group conversations do not drown each other out? Do group members demonstrate an ability to work together, one person talking at a time, others listening? Are time limits clear and generally adhered to, and yet flexible? Does the teacher check on how much more time the groups may need as the prescribed end point draws near, and perhaps urge the groups to move on to complete their tasks? If a recorder or reporter is required—the member of each group who acts as synthesizer of the discussion—are his or her functions clear? Does the recorder or reporter take down statements carefully and check with group members for accuracy?

The Teacher's Role During Group Work

The third aspect of collaborative learning that evaluators should examine carefully is the teacher's behavior while the groups are working. Most teachers I have observed travel from group to group answering questions from students, participating in discussions, probing with further questions, guiding responses, and focusing students' attention on the task. Although some of these steps may be necessary from time to time, the teacher's presence as a group member challenges one of the basic tenets of collaboration in the classroom. "The purpose of collaborative learning . . ." Bruffee points out "is to help students gain authority over their knowledge and gain independence in using it" (*Short Course* 49). In the classroom "teachers create social structures in which students can learn to take over the authority for learning as they gain the ability and confidence to do so" (49). A teacher joining a group can easily undermine the development of that

authority and that confidence. All attention will turn to the teacher as the central figure in the learning process. Usually, collaboration advances best when groups are left pretty much to the students themselves. At this point in the process, in most cases the best teacher is usually the seemingly most idle teacher, busy with other tasks or even going out of the room from time to time as the groups conduct their business. Evaluators, then, should not judge harshly a practitioner of collaborative learning who reads papers or who leaves the class during small group discussions.

An observer can learn a great deal about prior instruction by watching how students engage in the group task. The noise level in the room, the arrangement of furniture, the ease with which the groups are formed, the tone of conversation among students, the nature of reports emerging from groups all indicate how much the class has practiced efficient collaborative schemes in the past. Evaluators, therefore, should note very carefully how students behave in their groups as a signal of the teacher's advance preparation. Group management is the teacher's responsibility and the collaborative learning teacher pays careful attention to dynamics and composition. Are there too many monopolizers in one group? too many withdrawn students? too many unprepared students? If a group is not working at the task or if a group delivers a weak report, how does the teacher respond? Evaluators should pay particularly close attention to the reporter's role after group activity ends. If selected students make thoughtful, responsible, well-planned presentations to the whole class, the evaluator knows that the teacher has built collaboration theory into the structure of the course prior to the evaluation session. Student behavior in groups and at the reporting stage is an important signal for the teacher's skill in the uses of collaborative learning.

The Teacher as Synthesizer

The fourth aspect of collaborative learning that the classroom observer must consider is how the teacher performs in the role of synthesizer after the activity in groups is complete. Once the groups finish their work, it is important for each recorder to share the group's consensus with the rest of the class. With this done, the teacher must help the class as a whole to make sense and order out of the sometimes conflicting and contradictory reports. Writing the points raised by each group on the chalkboard or on a transparency for the overhead projector (or asking recorders themselves to do this) allows everyone to discuss and evaluate the conclusion arrived at by the groups. Even when a consensus report does not follow inevitably from the task, when, for example, students read their drafts aloud to each other for revision, a report on the process itself or on what people think they learned from it may be useful. Questions from the teacher like "What were the general recommendations made to members of the group?" or "What did readers of your paper suggest that you do to take it to the next stage?" help to reinforce what has been learned as well as to establish the value of learning communities and of peer review in any intellectual process.

How the teacher conducts this plenary discussion is very important to the success of collaborative learning. First, the teacher helps students synthesize each group's results with the results produced by other groups. The teacher should lead the class to consider the similarities and contradictions in the recorded points of view and should unite them all, if possible, into a larger vision. The instructor must help students see their differences and to reconcile them. Here "the teacher acts as a referee, directing the energies of the groups on two sides of a divided issue to debate the matter until the parties either arrive at a position that satisfies the whole class or until they agree to disagree" (Bruffee, "Liberal Education" 52).

With agreement, then, the teacher's role once again changes. The teacher now must help the class move further toward joining another community of knowledgeable peers, the community outside the classroom, the scholars who do research in the discipline, who establish the conventions of thinking and writing in those disciplines, who write books and articles and read papers on the problem at hand. "What happens when we learn something," Bruffee writes, "is that we leave a community that justifies certain beliefs in a certain way and join another community that justifies other beliefs in other ways. We leave one community of knowledgeable peers and join another" ("Liberal Education" 105). By synthesizing results of the individual groups, and comparing that synthesis with the consensus of the larger community of knowledgeable peers—the teacher's own community—the teacher helps complete the movement into this larger community.

An observer considering these last two features of the teacher's role—as synthesizer and as representative of the academic community—must be prepared to evaluate the teacher's knowledge of content as well as the teacher's ability to bring the class to perceive differences and similarities in the conclusions of the groups. The teacher must guide students to classify the ideas presented by the various groups without judging one idea right and the other wrong, but by helping the class to investigate the reasoning used to develop and shape the ideas. The teacher also must lead the class to consider how their consensus differs from the consensus of the larger community, and must lead the class to speculate about how that larger community might have arrived at its decision. The skill with which the teacher manages the stages of collaboration is directly related to the teacher's knowledge of and commitment to the philosophical principles upon which collaborative learning is based (see Bruffee, "Collaborative Learning"). An instructor who understands and believes in knowledge as a social construct will see group reporting as an important means of advancing knowledge in the classroom. On the other hand, an instructor willing to experiment with group work but clinging to the Mirror-of-Nature-metaphor will find it hard to avoid using the group setting as anything other than a microcosm of the lecture hall. Many teachers who attempt collaborative learning but abandon it are frequently trying to achieve the same ends in groups that they tried to achieve in the more familiar lecture-recitation session or Socratic dialogue. Thus, an appropriate evaluation should consider the teacher's understanding of collaboration as a

means to generate knowledge as a social construct and not simply as the use of a new configuration of students in the classroom.

Yet a one-hour class does not always easily reveal a teacher's knowledge of the rationale for collaboration. Evaluators, therefore, may find it useful to consult with teachers either before or after the class in order to uncover the roots of the particular program of learning for the session. Furthermore, the evaluator's interests must extend to the whole course of study and should not be confined exclusively to a single hour's instruction. Too often collaborative activities are a chain of exercises, unrelated to each other. Thus, in a conference with the teacher an evaluator should aim to discover the goals for the course as a whole and the relation of those goals to the collaborative task just observed.

Summary

I am not unaware of the problems that inhere in the kind of evaluation that this essay is advocating. Collaborative learning is messier in practice than in theory; no one can "live" the theory as clearly as the model suggests. As Harvey Kail points out:

One doesn't simply eradicate the 'mirror-of-nature metaphor' from one's life as if one were changing from Crest to Colgate. Sometimes I find myself back in the old world, the one where knowledge is 'out there' and my job is to find it and my students' job is to model my search. Other times, more frequently now, I see conversation, its give and take, as the central manufacturing process of knowledge and appropriate ways of talking (and writing) as the goal. At the same time, I also believe that the lecture is a perfectly legitimate mode of teaching, even within the boundaries established by CL theory. So . . . I contradict myself . . . very well. . . .

Certainly, a commitment to collaborative learning is based on a desire to confront the traditional view of knowledge in our own lives. Like all confrontations, this too is anything but smooth and simple.

Yet my purpose here is to move the practitioner of collaborative learning to an ideal model that will help students achieve knowledge in the classroom. Toward that end, I wish to summarize the features of the collaborative session that an outside evaluator should consider:

1. the nature and quality of the task statement.
2. the social setting of the collaborative activity and the behavior of students during the execution of the task.
3. the teacher's behavior during the execution of the task.
4. the teacher's role in group composition and management.
5. the nature and quality of the reports made by each group.
6. the teacher's performance as synthesizer and as representative of the academic learning community.
7. the relation of the collaborative activity to the design of the course.

8. the teacher's knowledge of and commitment to the rationale of collaborative learning.

The critical underlying principle for evaluators is that in the collaborative learning classroom the instructor is in no sense a passive figure. Collaborative learning is not unstructured learning; it replaces one structure, the traditional one, with another, a collaborative structure. The roles I have attempted to outline here define some of the elements to consider in evaluating a teacher's effectiveness as a leader of collaborative learning within this new structure. Expecting students to engage in productive conversation simply by reshuffling chairs, by telling them to work together in groups, or by requiring, without further guidance, that they read each other's papers, can easily stymie collaboration and not stimulate it. I have seen reflected in the attitude of teachers inexperienced with collaboration and inattentive to its complexities as a mode of learning an often unfulfilled plea to students: "Don't just sit there—collaborate!" Neither inactive nor nondirective, the teacher in the collaborative classroom must plan and organize the session so that students know that the end is not simply to work in groups but to work in groups in an effort to reach consensus for an important task. The effective collaborative learning teacher is one who understands the basis and structure of collaborative learning and who knows how to lead students to work productively within it.¹

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1. I have based my comments in this essay upon many years' experience in observing college English teachers as part of a required program of classroom observation as well as upon my work in supervising teachers across the curriculum in LaGuardia's ongoing faculty development effort, the Integrated Skills Reinforcement Project. But I have shared this paper with a number of colleagues who have long been at the forefront of collaborative learning—including my mentor in all this, Kenneth Bruffee (Brooklyn College), and Marian Arkin (LaGuardia Community College), John Bean (Montana State University), Peter Hawkes (Dutchess Community College), Harvey Kail (University of Maine at Orono), Carol Stanger (John Jay College), and John Trimbur (Boston University). Of course, I assume all responsibility for the points made here, but I acknowledge with gratitude the thoughtful comments and suggestions of my colleagues as this paper evolved from draft to draft.