

Collaborative learning



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Collaborative Learning Basically, from a personal stance, intrinsic to group work is the process of students working together to do a task whereby shared goals are realised through the sharing of knowledge. As stressed by both Ted Panitz (n. d) in his article ‘ Collaborative versus Cooperative Learning- A Comparison of the two Concepts which will help us understand the underlying nature of interactive learning’ and Olga Kozar (2010) in her article ‘ Towards Better Group Work: Seeing the Difference between Cooperation and Collaboration’, group work comprise two major aspects and there is a marked difference between cooperation and collaboration.

For the teaching of English Language, it most commonly the latter which is resorted to by teachers as a strategy to promote learning because of its several benefits. Nonetheless collaborative learning is not devoid of drawbacks. For the teaching of English Language/General Paper, group activities entailing group presentations on an essay topic, error analysis of peers’ written work, observations of sampled written works, are largely feasible when working towards essay writing.

But, when applied for the teaching of comprehensions and grammar, classes often do not require much collaborative work. Fundamentally, collaboration amongst peers in the classroom constitute an asset to boot learning especially in mixed-ability classes and it becomes a platform to cater for different intelligence types concurrently. Students who find it difficult to go beyond lower order thinking get the opportunity to draw ideas from their peers and to use other skills they might have.

A paradigm of this can be an English literature class. For example, Form IV and Form V students are timetabled for literature only 4 periods a weeks for

the study of three texts in the course of roughly one and a half year. In one chapter of a novel or a scene of a play, there is a lot to analyse in terms of characters, themes, style, etc. As such, one specific chapter can be taken and different groups of the class assigned one aspect to work on and to share with the rest of the class.

Since the sharing can be done in the form of posters, concept maps or orally, each individual in the group may bring a different kind of contribution to build the end-product. Synchronously, this instigates their knowledge to expand through the exploration of others' ideas and standpoints. In consonance with the above, collaborative learning which is generally coupled with the constructivist classroom, primarily has the advantage of engaging a whole class in a given task, contrarily to a teacher-centred approach.

There is a simultaneous active participation of practically the whole class – there is no passive reception of information which is dispensed by the teacher. Per se, the outcome is students' empowerment of their own learning. Students would take up the responsibility for their learning; though the teacher monitors the progress and acts as a facilitator, it is the group which decides upon the end product to be presented and the presentation mode. Responsibility for learning drifts from the teacher to the learner. In the collaborative model groups would assume almost total responsibility for answering the question. The students determine if they had enough information to answer the question. " (T. Panitz, n. d.) and " ownership and control of the work shifts toward the pupils themselves" (P. Blatchford, P. Kutnick, E. Baines and M. Galton, n. d.), though we may question the degree of maturity of students to determine to withdraw the right information.

Dialogue and negotiation help students confront their own points of view, ideas and think differently about a particular subject.

This is particularly relevant to help them find counter-argument and enhance their debating skills. Facing conflict or ideas conflicting with theirs helps push their analytical mind further and this view is supported by T. Panitz (n. d) according to whom collaboration helps students ‘ extend their critical thinking and reasoning skills’. For argumentative essays as well as for answering essay-type questions in literature, students are expected to be critical about their reading, and peer work gives them better opportunities to analyse a topic or a text critically

In mixed-ability classrooms, group work can be a buoy, some students learn better through their peers than through the teacher. As rightly stressed in the English Teaching Forum (No. 2 2010), ‘ being involved tends to increase their general motivation’ There is less pressure on the students; those with lower abilities participate more easily and some who are somewhat introvert by nature do not voice out as freely when addressed by the teacher as when they are among their classmates.

This amplifies the students’ freedom of expression since there is less fear of making mistakes. It can often be noticed that students who are overly quiet in class are less so when they work in small groups. There are also students who tend to absorb everything that the teacher dispenses as absolute knowledge too easily and group work gives the teacher the opportunity to unsettle those students in his or her attempt to promote learning.

Conversely, collaborative learning has its less lustrous side. Planning collaborative work for a class can be more demanding for the teacher than <https://assignbuster.com/collaborative-learning/>

planning a lecture-like class. Different factors have to be taken into account, namely preparation and resources (Preparing a lesson plan itself with the former strategy is more demanding), and time-management, classroom management, formative evaluation, all take a completely different turn.

In an English language class, to teach students how they should format a newspaper article, it would be much easier and less time-consuming to dictate or write down the requirements on the board than browsing and sampling newspaper articles, getting the students to discuss and report their observations, reviewing their observations as some features could be amiss. In this framework, P. Blatchford, P. Kutnick, E. Baines and M. Galton (n. d.) points out that there are ‘beliefs that group work is overly time-consuming’ (‘Towards a social pedagogy of classroom group work’).

As an extension to this, Rachael Ruegg (2009) in her article featuring in *The Language Teacher* 33-5 (May 2009) states that teachers should “promote four as the ideal group size” for English teaching. This can be confronted with the contextual reality: groups of four would mean eight groups or more with our class sizes and, with limitations in terms of resources, mixed-ability classes, 35-40 minutes classes, classroom size, to name only a few, monitoring can be rather difficult and reporting from all the groups will certainly go beyond the time allocated for that class.

Time consumption is further intensified with the need to change the traditional seating arrangements. A further setback with collaborative group work is that social talk can very easily supplant the subject matter to be worked on as managing what the students are actually talking about within the group can prove to be tricky for the teacher. As the students are

amongst friends, they can get side-tracked and talk about other issues while the teacher is monitoring another group instead of focussing specifically on the given task. This is stressed by P. Blatchford, P. Kutnick, E.

Baines and Maurice Galton (n. d): “ pupils can be drawn off-task by social talk”. If the students are given some samples of written work such as essays to browse through and to analyse and make out the different features of the structure, they might be keener to read the content than to do what they have been instructed to. Unequal contribution of the different members of a group can represent a major backlash of collaborative work; some students do not have the ability to work in groups. As stated by Olga Kozar (2010), ‘ collaboration often does not come naturally to our students’.

For example, if in a literature class, groups of five students have been set up and the group has been asked to do a critical study of an extract, and the same work has not been given as an individual assignment, it is because there are different angles from which this particular extract can be dissected. Often, it occurs that only two or three of these students participate and the rest simply acknowledge what their peers propose. As such, the end result is not forcibly achieved with some students not being involved in the task or acting out, resulting in the task being incomplete.

Vicki Randall (1999) also identifies this as a weakness: “ Making members of the group responsible for each other's learning. This can place too great a burden on some students. In mixed-ability groups, the result is often that stronger students are left to teach weaker students and do most of the work” (Cooperative and Collaborative learning: Some Critical Perspectives, 1999)

While collaborative learning definitely enhances the learning of both English

and English literature, and it brings about a number of positive things for our students.

But, though dynamism in the classroom is heightened, it is difficult to instantly assess what each group member has absorbed. The minutiae of planning and distrust of students' capacity to work collaboratively may hinder its implementation. REFERENCES BLATCHFORD, P. , KUTNICK P. , BAINES E. and GALTON M. , n. d. Toward a Social Pedagogy of Classroom Group Work. International Journal of Educational Research. Special Ed. BLATCHFORD, P. , GALTON M. , KUTNICK P. and BAINES E. , 2005. Improving Effectiveness of Pupil Groups in Classrooms. ESRC Project Ref: L139 25 1046. End of Award report.

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