

# Reflections and collaborative learning



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## Reasons for Studying in the University

The world is dynamic and ideas keep on changing as human beings are rational in nature. The free will gives man freedom of reason, and this freedom urges him to want to know more about the surrounding or the environment. Due to the thirst for knowledge, it is important to join a higher institution of learning.

People attend universities for different reasons. For instance, some attend to gain knowledge about their preferred careers, which will enable them to meet their needs or live a better life. Others go to universities for having fun, or making friends, while there are also those who join university so as to attain a certain status or a promotion at work place, or just to own the title of a “ graduate.”

Though I agree that all the above mentioned reasons may seem worthwhile, I have my own reasons for studying in the university, which include the following. Firstly, the university is a place where I can gain relevant knowledge about my career as the instructors, who are highly qualified, offer proper guidelines pertaining to the career of my choice. Therefore, I will be able to gain the necessary technical or vocational skills that are required to compete in the global job market.

Secondly, the university offers flexible courses. For instance, if my “ dream career” is no longer relevant, I can simply switch to a different career course. This helps a person in planning a career.

Additionally, the university offers an “ open ground” and favourable environment for exchange of ideas and development of interpersonal skills. These ideas are relevant in the modern society, hence broadening my worldview. For instance, through group discussions or presentations, I am able to improve my communication skills as “ communication is not only what is said but heard.” This is because through the participation of each person in a class or group setting, I am able to learn how to relate and respect others’ opinions without being judgmental. Also, the learning skills will help me develop a critical mind/thinking; hence, I will be able to reason in decision-making.

Finally, the university prepares me for brighter future as, at the end of the academic program, I will be able to attain a certificate indicating that I am qualified in the field of study. Besides, having attained the relevant skills, I will be able to compete in the global job market. This will enable me to live a quality life, being independent and avoiding “ dependency syndrome,” which is common among the uneducated people as they have to depend on others for support.

#### Application of Content Being Covered to Your Own Learning Experiences

The content being covered is of great importance for qualification in a career choice. It is also relevant as it empowers or motivates students in their daily life. This is because the course covers such significant learning skills as communication skills, critical thinking, and creative thinking skills. Therefore, I can apply the content of what is being covered to my learning experiences.

For instance, communication entangles all the aspects of life. Through the communication, people are able to connect, spread ideas, and receive feedback. However, poor communication can lead to misunderstandings due to miscommunication of ideas. Hence, by learning the proper skills, I can now communicate my thoughts either verbally (through writing like I am doing now) or non-verbally without fear of being misunderstood.

Additionally, I am able to reflect on and even research further the topics being covered in class. Reflection also helps me relate the content covered in different courses and evaluate its relevance based on the objectives/goals of each course. As a result, I have developed deeper interest in learning as I am able to formulate relevant questions.

Additionally, this course involves learning of proper communication skills, which are important during presentations or group assignments.

Communication involves transferring of thoughts from a receiver to a recipient, and this course gives me proper skills of analysing a situation, choosing the proper medium of transferring the message, careful listening, evaluating the messages, speaking, and reading. Therefore, I am able to effectively pass information not only during class presentations but also in a daily life while acknowledging the importance of feedback.

Additionally, in this course, I am able to acquire the relevant abilities needed to collaborate as the world has become a “ global village” due to the technology development. Collaboration skills like decision-making, delegation, goal setting, and resolving conflicts are important as they will help me in relating with others while reviewing or evaluating whether the

goals in each course have been achieved. Group presentation or class setting requires knowledge of conflict resolution skills. Though I am not anticipating any conflict, team building or conflict resolution skills are relevant in daily life as we always interact with others as “ no man is an island.”

Finally, class presentations help me in applying new knowledge in meaningful and relevant situations as I am able to demonstrate my understanding of what has been taught. This is because I formulate or come up with “ meaningful” situations based on a topic as the relevance of my work is linked and demonstrated in learning.

#### Relationships between this Course and other Courses

All courses in the university require learning skills, reflection, writing, and researching. However, these skills have to be well coordinated for effective communication either verbally or non-verbally. For instance, every course has assignments/exams/presentations which require proper writing or research skills or application of what has been learned in class. Therefore, the skills gained in this course are relevant.

The ability to think critically is crucial in analysing information as well as in arguing, contrasting and comparing, describing, defining and solving problems, which are helpful in handling tough tasks or assignments. For example, courses like philosophy require critical thinking skills so as to communicate a philosophical idea. The skills help to remain open minded and develop positive attitude; hence, it is important for students to reason before drawing conclusions.

How can one learn without being creative? This course helps in developing a creative mind through imagination and acquiring problem solving skills by the use of creative abilities like questioning, which significantly helps a person to move from the field of the unknown to the known in search of knowledge. For instance, with the help of creative thinking and the problem solving skills I am developing in this course, I am able to answer questions and find appropriate solutions for different issues in other courses.

Consequently, creative and critical thinking enables a person to connect theory with the real world through asking the right questions in all courses or exams and assignments. For instance, I have found that creative thinking is crucial in answering questions as a creative mind makes reasoning and application of knowledge easier.

Additionally, learning skills are helpful in handling group assignments, which are common in all courses. Since the group members are interacting with each other, patience is required in decision-making. Hence, interpersonal skills gained during the course are helpful in relating and accommodating ideas of others, which once again proves that this course is relevant to other courses. Finally, the researching and writing skills learnt in this course are important as all courses require writing and researching. Therefore, the skills gained from other sources of information are important in increasing knowledge and understanding. It also helps in acknowledging other sources, hence avoiding plagiarism, which is an offence. In conclusion, this course is helpful in developing a reflective attitude and different learning skills, which is essential in other courses.

## Collaborative Learning

### Introduction

Engleberg and Wynn (2003) note the difficulty in defining collaborative learning and provide a definition of collaborative learning based on the meaning derived from the word ‘ collaboration’, which means two or more people working together towards achieving a goal (p. 30). Therefore, from this perspective, collaborative learning is learning that involves a group of students that are working together on achieving or completing a task, creating a new product or who are involved in solving a problem.

Additionally, Fernandez, Wegerif, Mercer, and Rojas-Drummond (2002) point out that there is an ambiguity in the meaning or definition of collaborative learning due to the scale of interactions and the components of collaborative learning, which are quite uncertain (p. 45).

### Background of Collaborative Learning

According to Curtis and Lawson (2001), collaborative learning is based on the following arguments:

- learning is a social act;
- learning is an active process;
- through collaboration, learners are able to benefit from other viewpoints and knowledge;
- active involvement and dialogue promote learning;

- and lastly, learning usually takes place when learners are able to critically reflect on their knowledge. It also plays a key role in online education system (p. 31).

Additionally, some scholars argue that collaborative learning usually tends to favour social sciences and humanities as it has borrowed a lot from Piaget's socio-constructivist theory of the cognitive developmental stages of children. The theory maintains that social/cognitive interaction causes conflict that triggers growth (Barab, Kling, & Gray, 2004, p. 54). This is because students gain roles and skills through the instructions they receive from a teacher; hence, there is a lot of reflection. Also, the students learn by drawing connections through interaction with group members in a class setting.

### Qualities of Collaborative Learning

Collaborative learning involves students simultaneously working together on the same task as opposed to parallel portions of the task. However, Beebee and Masterson (2003) note that spontaneous division of labour might be witnessed especially during presentation (p. 213). Also, though there might be a division in cognitive processes due to the different perspectives of the group members, there is maintenance of coordination. Additionally, there is an interaction and negotiability between the instructor and the students as common misunderstandings can be important learning points, and finally, the individuals work towards a common goal (Curtis & Lawson, 2001, p. 27).

### Collaborative Learning Techniques/Strategies



A. Brainstorming It is usually designed to generate a range of ideas within a short period of time. It is useful in collaborative learning as it allows roundtable formula of sharing ideas. According to Engleberg and Wynn (2003), it begins with the faculty asking questions, then the students write down the answers and say them loud.

B. Case studies Case studies are educational stories used to teach students. They give personal history of an institution, a business or a person that is faced with a specific problem that needs to be solved. The teacher's main goal is to help students analyse and work through facts while considering possible solutions and consequences of the actions to be undertaken.

C. Dyadic essays Dyadic essays were developed by L. W. Sherman and involve a dyadic essay confrontation (DEC) technique as the students have to formulate essay questions based on information from a previously covered course (Leidner & Fuller, 2006, p. 156). Students write essay questions followed by a follow up, which is characterised by students exchanging the questions after answering them, then reading, discussing, and comparing the answers.

Fernandez et al. (2002) support this by saying that “ the two students read while comparing and discussing the answers while looking for the differences between the responses of what has been prepared before class and what has been generated in the responses made in class” (p. 41). As a result, this structure promotes critical thinking, which is required by students in learning opportunities and confronting differing ideas, while delivering immediate feedback about the student's intellectual responses to a specific research material.

D. Group reports In group reports, the group chooses one person who acts as a spokesperson in explaining the group's findings, while the rest

of the group members distribute posters or materials with relevant information to the rest of the members in a class setting. Also, the members alternate in playing the role of the group's spokesman (Lee & Smagorinsky, 2005).

E. Guided Peer Questioning It involves open ended questioning that is designed to promote contrast/comparison and exploration of other contexts in a small group setting. It was developed by Alison King who advocated for the importance of guiding students through questioning (Rau & Heyl, 2000, p. 147).

F. Online community It is often perceived as the best form of web-course or e-learning as the participants create their own form of collaboration and conversation based on their understanding of the group conversations under the guidance of an expatriate.

G. Problem- solving It requires more time and planning in a group setting. Groups are selected and assigned roles in a particular task, which has been clearly explained to the students.

H. Think -Pair-Share

It involves asking of open-ended questions by an instructor who then gives the students time to reflect on them. Then, the students discuss the question, while the instructor finally reacts to the problem.

### Benefits of Collaborative Learning Strategies

According to York-Barr, Ghore, and Sommerness (2007), collaborative learning can either obstruct the success of others or have no effect on the failure or success of others (p. 324). This implies that the individuals may be working in unison (cooperatively) to accomplish the shared learning goals or working competitively (against each other) in achieving a limited goal that is only achievable by one person or a few, and finally, a person may be working

individually (by oneself) so as to achieve a goal(s) different from that of others.

Additionally, the benefits of collaborative learning vary depending on the group size. For instance, the advantages of a large group include: more diverse ideas can be generated; more people complete a task; there is a greater opportunity for group members to connect or interact with each other; and greater variety of skills is available. Consequently, the advantages of small groups include more equal participation, increased participation by each group member, and minimal time in decision-making. Finally, managing a meeting is easier due to the fewer schedule considerations.

### Challenges of Collaborative Learning

Collaborative learning situations expose students and faculty to different challenges. For instance, the time factor can be a challenge as the faculty may feel that there is not enough time to develop activities, to teach group dynamics, to implement collaborative learning activities, and for students to work on some projects in class (Engleberg &Wynn, 2003). This is common especially at the beginning of collaborative language session.

Additionally, the student's academic and interpersonal skills in a class vary as “ some students are introverts, while others are extroverts; hence, collaborative learning creates anxiety on the introverted student as it requires verbal communication” (Bruffee, 2003, p. 647). Thus, some students may be disengaged or passive.

Additionally, self-motivated or academically competitive students might resent collaborative learning for fear of heavy work load or fear that the other group members will “ hitchhike” on their achievement. Therefore, there is a need for students to understand the effects of group participation on grades (Beebee & Masterson, 2003).

Additionally, there is a loss of autonomy in decision-making or a loss of instructional autonomy due to the number of group members as different people have different opinions. Finally, the differing philosophies and beliefs among teachers about professional practice and orientation can be a great challenge (Rau & Heyl, 2000, p. 148).

## Conclusion

In conclusion, though collaborative learning is complex, it can have a great impact on students who are low-achievers. The techniques used, such as problem-solving, group reports, dyadic essays, case studies, and brainstorming, encourage the development of collaboration skills, such as conflict resolution, problem-solving, coordination, communication, and negotiation skills. Collaborative learning also promotes motivation, critical thinking, and metacognition.

However, collaborative learning usually faces challenges such as conflict in time, fulfilling different / conflicting purposes/ goals, formulating similar goals and assessing collaboration in a group setting. Therefore, in order to overcome the challenges, it is important for an instructor to consult “ collaborative learning mentors” and follow their advices (Lee & Smagorinsky, 2005). Also, the instructor can observe these mentors in a class setting.

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Finally, if there are no “ collaborative learning mentors,” a person should consider an electronic mentor.