Chapter 7

Collaborative Learning as a Pedagogical Tool to Improve Students’ Learning

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ABSTRACT

There are many approaches to teaching and learning available to teachers. However, educators and educational researchers have focused attention on approaches that ensure active learning of students and social interaction in the teaching-learning process. One of the approaches that promote students learning through active engagement and social interaction is collaborative learning. The chapter attempts to help teachers and pre-service teachers to understand collaborative learning as an inductive approach to teaching and learning. It examines important issues like meaning and elements of collaborative learning; collaboration and cooperation; advantages and challenges with implementation of collaborative learning. Teachers’ role in the implementation of collaboration learning as well as collaborative learning techniques is also covered.

INTRODUCTION

Learning is a cognitive change, that is, some addition to a learner’s knowledge structures or reorganization and reconstruction of that learner’s existing knowledge and the quality of this learning experience is influenced by the quality of interactions that go on in the classroom (King, 2008:73). Improving the quality of teaching and learning in schools has become an issue of concern over the past three decades. It is for this reason that the school curricula around the world have been undergoing series of restructuring, and the need for new teaching theories has also emerged. Over the past four decades, constructivism has become an important theory, and the principles of constructivism have underpinned most school curricula. One way in which this theory of learning has been conceptualized into the classroom is through
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cooperative or collaborative learning. There is a large body of research to support cooperative learning. For example, Gillies (2003:35) suggests that collaborative learning has become a widely recognized pedagogical practice that promotes learning and socialization in schools.

Johnson and Johnson (2002) also allude to the fact that collaborative learning experiences are crucial to preventing and alleviating many of the social problems related to children, adolescents, and young adults. This chapter, therefore, examines how collaborative learning can be as a tool for improving students’ learning. More specifically, this chapter examines the differences between collaborative and cooperative learning, theoretical and conceptual perspectives, advantages and challenges in implementing cooperative learning, the role of the teacher in cooperative learning and collaborative teaching techniques.

DEFINING COLLABORATIVE LEARNING

The two words ‘collaboration’ and ‘learning ’ are known by many educators and researchers since the words are widely represented in educational writings-books and research works. Indeed, as has been indicated by Judd, Kennedy & Cropper (2010), the issue of peer-based cooperation and collaboration in student learning, understanding, and achievement has received considerable attention in the literature. However, it is not easy to find a commonly accepted definition of the term ‘collaborative learning’ Different authors view and describe the concept differently. As was rightly indicated by Strijbos and Fischer (2007), collaborative learning is a multidisciplinary field in the learning sciences including researchers from many and diverse fields as psychology, education, sociology, anthropology, computer and communication science. People from these different backgrounds hold different views on collaborative learning since each of the disciplines reportedly offers a unique perspective on the concept of collaborative learning.

A search for the meaning of the concept begins with keeping oneself abreast with the perspectives of the different authors who have written on the collaborative learning. It is not enough to end the search for understanding of the concept with just its meaning and definitions. It is important to look at ways in which collaborative learning differs from the traditional approach to teaching and learning as well as elements of collaborative learning. All these will help one to construct an informed understanding of what collaborative learning represents.

To begin with, what does it mean to collaborate? According to Kane & Harms (2005), to collaborate means to labor as an associate of another, to co-labor with one another to compose a jointly accredited work” or “to join in a rigorous and willful desire to co-labor in the field of knowledge together” (p.9). Smith and McGregor (1992) consider collaborative learning as an umbrella term that encompasses a variety of educational approaches, which are based on a joint intellectual effort by students, or students and teachers together in the teaching/learning process. Collaborative learning is also viewed as an approach to the process of teaching and learning in which groups of learners, who are at various levels of performance, work together in small groups for a purpose. (Laal & Laal, 2012). Again, Diaz, Brown & Salmons (2010) consider collaborative learning as an instructional approach in which student work together, in teams, on an assignment. The common purpose or task, which brings the students together to work in small groups, can be to solve a problem, complete a task or to create an innovative product (Laal & Laal, 2012). Rather than working individually, students engage actively in learning activities by working in groups.

Reading the literature, one will come across many different terms since collaborative learning is associated with many different terms. According to Goodsell & Maher (1992, p. 7) collaborative learn-