Can Collaboration Be Taught?

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Cooperative learning specialist Pat Wilson O'Leary once reminded an audience about how we used to teach students to engage in cooperative learning. "OK, class!" she would mimic. "Sit together in groups. Now, I want you to cooperate. Everyone say it." And she would mime a choral repeat with her adult audience as we all intoned the word co . . . op . . . er . . . ate!

Unfortunately, that parody of '60s instruction may not be too far off the mark from what is happening in some schools today as we engage teachers in collaborative work.

To form site councils, advisory groups, restructuring committees, and school improvement teams without teaching members the basics of working collaboratively is to invite disaster. How could a baseball team function if its members didn't know the difference between a bunt and a grand slam? What if they didn't know the role and skills required to play first base as compared with center field? Or that the point of the game was to accumulate more runs than the other team?

Every craft has its fundamentals. Mastery requires knowledge and continuous practice. Musicians practice the scales, basketball players dribble, football players run. Collaboration, too, has its fundamentals: communication skills, structures for inquiring, deciding, problem solving, resolving differences, capacities for self assertion, integration, metacognition, and self control.

For students to benefit from adult collaboration, educational communities must learn to collaborate. Some of this can be taught. Some not. Staff developers can strive for the following three goals that evoke the spirit, skills, and benefits of collaboration.

First, faculties need to know what collaboration means, what it is

not, and why it is important. Second, they must be familiar with the collaborative terrain which includes content and process knowledge, a thinking environment, mastery of collaborative fundamentals, and co-cognition. Toward each of these, the staff developer can teach.

The third and least known but most potent goal develops the mental or metacognitive skills of collaboration. While these can not be taught, they can be learned.

1. What collaboration is and is not. Collaboration means working together to solve problems, invent, create, build models, and produce results. Why is collaboration important? Adults learn more when they collaborate, work harder, support one another emotionally, and commit to cumulative efforts and effects.

Teachers collaborate when they:

• Research to learn why 200 of 1,800 high school students are failing multiple classes and how teachers can correct this.

• Meet regularly to explore mental models about learning.

• Study samples of student work and ask if the work is up to standard, how they know that, how hard they should push for better work, and how they might do that.

• Meet with parents to bring together their best thinking about a student.

• Work together to address a perennial learning challenge. Why does it take so long to learn long division? What does it take to know the reasons for seasons?

Just as swimming is more than waving one's arms in the water, collaboration is not achieved by engaging in activities such as committee membership or peer coaching. These activities qualify as collaboration only when they produce results. For this to happen, players must see each other as having different resources (information, cognitive styles, cultures, decision making authority, etc.) but know that they come together as equals to do a job.

In Michigan, a teacher told me how her faculty stayed until 7:00 in the evening to develop a rubric for student writing. Such effort was previously unheard of in this school, and the teachers were ecstatic about their achievement and spirit of team work.

In California, a first-grade teacher, who had been adamant about needing an instructional aide, told peers that she would give up her aide time so selected third-grade students could be tutored in reading "if it will really make a difference." In both settings, the faculties were within their first year of learning and implementing collaborative efforts.

Today's problems can only be approached through community effort. It used to be said that for every action there is a reaction. Today, for every action, there is a hurricane of unpredicted and often unpredictable responses. Many problems are too complex for simple, linear responses and heroic forms of leadership. Multiple perspectives are required to understand the current situation, imagine futures, and develop strategies to achieve them. Above all, we need the commitment that comes from collaborative work in order to follow through on our plans.

2. Know the collaboration terrain. Collaboration moves us from isolation to integration, making decisions by preferences to making decisions by principles, from focusing on episodic student benefits to cumulative effects. The staff developer's agenda becomes finding ways to incorporate the following four elements that must be present for collaboration to exist.

• *Knowledge and skills.* The group must have knowledge and skills about the content that is the focus of their collaborative effort as well as the processes of working together. Some groups spend a year studying principles of learning before beginning to make decisions.

The most effective task forces are front loaded with learning about processes before beginning their tasks. One national group insists on two weeks of training for committee members before turning them loose on improvement projects.

Bruce Wellman and I have been trying to determine the minimum input necessary in order to create a potent, self-sustaining and self-improving group. We see good results from four- or five-day sessions that get them started on basic skills. But this is not enough time for collaboration to take root.

We consider as basic: (a) seven norms of collaboration, (b) distinguishing dialogue from discussion, (c) three meeting structures, (d) managing the environment, (e) templates for group development, and (f) a range of planning and problem-solving models (Garmston & Wellman, 1997).

• *Create thinking environments.* When teachers have experienced an environment that supports group efforts, they can recreate it for themselves and their students. A thinking environment includes clear purpose or task, a place, and a set of tools.

A few of the basic tools include:

• Meeting rooms unadorned with permanent art, slogans, mission statements, and the like.

• Blank walls available for posting ideas on chart paper, norms the group wants to remember, or problem-solving models they might adopt at certain stages of their deliberations.

• Flip charts and water-based pens are in the room. Even small groups of two or three periodically like to think on paper. Relationships and sequences can often only be understood if drawn. Language holds still for analysis and refinement when printed before a group.

• *Achieve mastery by practicing fundamentals*. Collaboration requires certain skills, behaviors, and activities. To state one’s ideas clearly is a thinking skill. A paraphrase is a listening skill. A behavior is an aggregate of skills employed in service of some purpose.

To listen in order to understand, for example, calls on the skills of paraphrasing, clarifying, and certain physical skills of signaling one's

attention to the other. Activities are patterns or structures in which these behaviors occur. Peer coaching is an example of an activity. An advisory council is another.

To "teach" collaboration, staff developers command a curriculum of collaborative skills, behaviors, and activities. They support groups in making these norms. Norms are skills and behaviors that have become habits, expected behaviors. They set standards for new group members and offer orderliness and safety for conceptual risk taking.

• *Co-cognition: When two minds are more than three*. When those three factors–knowledge of content and process, thinking environments, and mastery of fundamentals–lead to solving problems, inventing, creating, building models, and producing results, then co-cognition or thinking together is present.

Co-cognition requires working directly with the assumptions, generalizations, and images that influence group members' understanding of how things work and what actions they should take. Thinking becomes ours, not yours or mine. Ideas are presented, elaborated by others, and accepted as group formulations.

It is said that Jonas Salk of polio vaccine fame was once in conversation with Gregory Bateson–an anthropologist, psychologist, and a pioneer in systems thinking. "Where does thinking occur?" asked Salk. After a moment of reflection, Bateson pointed to the space between them and said, "I think it occurs right here."

3. The most potent curriculum. Work in the cognitive sciences is bringing classroom instruction and staff development of age. To employ collaborative skills requires developing specific capabilities.

Capabilities are the invisible skills needed to effectively use skills, behaviors, or activities. The staff developer’s goal is to support teachers in developing the capabilities of collaboration so they are performed instinctively in varied settings with unconscious competence. Just as accomplished chess players can envision several possible moves on the board without consciously employing step-by-

step strategies of analytical thinking, our goal is make collaboration automatic.

Being effective collaborators requires being aware of one's thoughts, feelings, intentions, behaviors in-the-moment, and the influence these are having on others. Can these skills be taught? No. But they can be mediated. In our work with developing adaptive schools (Garmston & Wellman, 1997), Bruce Wellman and I are testing a round-robin reflection process designed to accelerate the development of these skills.

In this process, after an interaction, each person silently reflects on two questions: "What are some of the decisions I made about my participation, and what are some of the influences of these decisions on me and the group?"

After a time, one person speaks. The group is silent for a moment. Then another group member, paraphrases, and inquires for deeper understanding. A brief dialogue ensues. Then the person to the right or left of the first speaker speaks and the process is repeated.

We have been amazed at how quickly this simple process increases mutual respect and the quality of interactions and group productivity. The results have been astoundingly rapid, long lasting, and satisfying.

Yet This is Not Enough

To sustain collaboration requires a change in school culture. To achieve this requires changing educators' minds about student learning and how adults can work together to support it. Caine and Caine (1997) surmise that what keeps schools stuck in old ways of doing things is deep and unexamined assumptions and generalizations about how learning occurs.

While each educator can espouse theories of learning, each will only sometimes act congruently with these espoused theories. But we always behave congruently with our mental models. Only dialogue, a sustained, learnable and *collaborative* inquiry into these mental

models will create school change.

References

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