

COLLABORATIVE LEARNING COMES OF AGE

BY ZELDA F. GAMSON



My relationship to collaborative learning is a very personal one that is related to my own development as a teacher and citizen in the various worlds of higher education. My story may be unique in its details, but I believe I share with many others a growing realization of the transforming potential of collaboration.

THE PRACTICE WITH NO NAME

It begins with a graduate course on innovations in higher education that I began teaching in the early 1970s at the University of Michigan. I believed vaguely in the importance of student participation, so I taught the course as a seminar in which each student made a presentation at the end of the term, after we had covered the literature on innovations in organizations. The connections between student presentations and the earlier part of the course and between each other were weak, and I was struggling with this issue when several students came to see me about the course for the next semester. They were experienced in the use of workshop formats in

business and community organizations, and they came to me with suggestions for what they called "exercises," such as having students work in small groups on cases and make recommendations about them. I started creating all sorts of exercises for the seminar when I taught it again. It was fun for me and fun for the students. They seemed to be more involved and learning more. So I just kept doing it with my graduate courses.

But I never talked to anyone about it. Then when I started teaching undergraduates at the Residential College (RC), a small innovative college at Michigan, I tried using groups with undergraduates. The students took to working together immediately, especially in a course I taught on social science research methods. RC students began telling me about other faculty members in the college who used groups in their courses.

But my colleagues and I never talked about it.

In the late '70s, the interdisciplinary Social Science Program at the RC, where I taught, received a grant from the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE) to start the Student-Faculty Research Community. This program brings a group of students together for a semester with a faculty member to carry out an original research project. When several research groups go on in the same semester, they meet together occasionally to learn research skills, exchange ideas about their progress, and report their results. When I led a research group in 1978, there were two other groups and a program coordina-

tor. The coordinator made sure that we received some training in how to work as groups and helped the groups when they ran into trouble. She also brought the faculty together to talk about what was going on.

This was the first time that my colleagues and I reflected together about our teaching.

On the heels of this experience, I agreed to direct a national project of FIPSE's on liberal learning. It was to be a deliberate collaboration that brought together 14 very different programs in a variety of colleges and universities to examine new ideas about liberal education. This project was a formative experience for me that extended my understanding of collaboration. It turned out that many of the 14 programs had created communities of students and faculty like the Student-Faculty Research Community. The presence of Patrick Hill, the founder of the Federated Learning Communities at SUNY-Stony Brook—one of the most important contributions to subsequent work on learning communities—helped the rest of us see our work as reaching for a new kind of academic community. The jointly written book that resulted from this project, *Liberating Education*, describes how the various programs created the cultural and structural conditions for academic community, most notably for first-generation students, adult learners, and people of color. It draws on the ground-breaking work of Russell Garth and his colleague, Clark Bouton, in *Learning in Groups*, and of Kenneth Bruffee with collaborative writing.

But *Liberating Education* did not have a name for these practices.

Zelda F. Gamson is professor of education and director of the New England Resource Center for Higher Education at the University of Massachusetts at Boston. The author wishes to thank Jean MacGregor, Roberta Matthews, Karen Romer, and William Whipple, who commented on an earlier version of this article. The author retains the copyright to this article.

It wasn't until 1983 when Karen Romer and William Whipple invited me to address a conference on collaborative learning at Brown and, soon after, when Carol Schneider invited me to speak at a conference at the University of Chicago, that I realized I was a little like Moliere's *Bourgeois Gentleman*, who discovered that he had been speaking prose all his life! The Brown conference brought together a number of projects on collaboration funded by FIPSE. I learned about an emerging network of educators in very different colleges and universities, in diverse disciplines and departments, including honors programs, who were working on how to help students collaborate with one another and faculty collaborate with students. They called themselves Collaboration in Undergraduate Education (CUE). The great and wise Joseph Katz was an advisor to this group, and he had also worked with Patrick Hill at Stony Brook on the Federated Learning Communities. We were all starting from an intuitive sense that more student involvement, especially in groups, was essential to learning. The sense of excitement at finding one another was extraordinary, one that I was to repeat again and again with CUE and other collaborative projects.

Parvenu that I was in 1983, however, I found myself, in preparing for the Brown conference, going to the dictionary for a definition of collaboration. I still have my notes for that talk, which I began by quoting from the dictionary that collaboration meant not only "to work together, especially in a joint intellectual effort" but "to collaborate treasonably, as with an enemy occupying one's country." In their important paper, "Collaboration Across the Power Line," Romer and Whipple remind us that collaboration is often impeded by the inability to get past power differences between students and faculty, a somewhat treasonable idea on the typical campus where students and faculty think of each other as occupying different, often conflicting, territories.

This was all happening while I was serving as one of seven members of the Study Group on the Conditions of Excellence in American Higher Education, appointed by the U.S. Department of Education. My growing preoccupation with community as a way of im-

proving teaching and learning led to the fifth recommendation of the 27 in *Involvement in Learning*, the Study Group's report. The recommendation states that: "Every institution of higher education should strive to create learning communities, organized around specific intellectual themes or tasks." Such communities are smaller than most units, have a sense of purpose, help overcome the isolation of faculty members from one another and from their students, and encourage faculty members to relate to one another as specialists and as educators, thus enabling "the development of new faculty roles," continuity and integration in the curriculum, and group identity and cohesion.



By 1984, when *Liberating Education* and *Involvement in Learning* appeared, I had been elected to the board of the American Association for Higher Education (AAHE). Several of us on the board urged AAHE to focus on the undergraduate experience and to take as its agenda, for the next few years, the diagnoses and recommendations of *Involvement in Learning* and the flood of reports on undergraduate education that were appearing from national associations like the Association of American Colleges, regional associations, and states.

AAHE made special efforts to attract more faculty to its annual conference. One of the ways of drawing in more faculty was to build on the strategies that made AAHE's ethnic and women's caucuses so successful. These strategies are not terribly different from those enunciated by the Study Group in its fifth recommendation: bring people together according to their common interests, provide them with some resources and a place to get together at the national conference, and give them some visibility in the conference pro-

gram. These ideas led to the formation of "action communities" to bring together people working on similar ideas or projects at the annual AAHE conference. Lou Albert, the AAHE administrator responsible for the annual conference, nurtured the action communities, giving them not only a chance to get together but the opportunity to organize sessions and workshops.

One of the first AAHE action communities was CUE, Collaboration in Undergraduate Education, which to this day publishes an occasional newsletter and presents workshops and other sessions at AAHE's annual meetings. Individual members of CUE have written about collaboration and made important contributions to practice. A project at Lesley College, funded by FIPSE and directed by Anita Landa and Jill Tarule, helped move their work forward. Several have also participated in the extraordinary work of the Washington Center for the Improvement of Undergraduate Education at Evergreen State College. The Washington Center was founded with the encouragement of Patrick Hill, who had moved from Stony Brook to become provost at Evergreen. Under the leadership of Barbara Leigh Smith and Jean MacGregor, the Washington Center has carried the ideas and practices of learning communities to the state of Washington and throughout the country.

THE EARLY DIFFUSION OF COLLABORATIVE LEARNING

We know from studies of social movements that having a name is the first step in getting recognition of an issue. Kenneth Bruffee, in *Collaborative Learning: Higher Education, Interdependence, and the Authority of Knowledge* (1993), dates the recent discussion of collaboration in education to Edwin Mason, a British educator who wrote in the late 1960s about the comprehensive and grammar schools. Many of the educational innovations in this country in the '60s, such as cluster colleges, free schools, and interdisciplinary programs, made use of social forms of learning and drew their inspiration from the works of John Dewey (1963) and Paulo Freire (1970). Much of the development of group work, however, took place in elementary and secondary schools and has only recently trickled up to higher education. These ideas were being

deepened and tempered during the '70s with the crucial support of FIPSE and a growing number of other foundations.

By the late 1980s, the stage was set for the rapid diffusion of the language of collaboration and community, and we are still seeing the results. Collaborative learning and learning communities are names in general circulation in higher education, and they have come into general circulation in fewer than 10 years. Faculty in various disciplines who are dissatisfied with simply lecturing, searching for a way to reach the current generation of students, or struggling to teach a new subject may start using groups in their courses or may work with students to develop a syllabus or carry out research. From different starting points and from different disciplines, faculty across the country have discovered, as I have, collaborative or cooperative learning.

What lies underneath the names? Like many social movements, those in the collaborative learning movement insist that overcoming old power relations is crucial to collaborative learning, in contrast to cooperative learning. To quote from a statement from William Whipple in a letter to me about this article:

Cooperative learning means noncompetitive learning, in which the reward structure encourages students to work together to accomplish a common end. Collaborative learning is always cooperative, but takes students one step further: to a point where they must confront the issue of power and authority implicit in any form of learning but usually ignored. Either mode may employ group work; neither depends entirely on this technique. Collaborative learning always takes both the student and the professor "into enemy territory"; cooperative learning generally maintains traditional authority structures.

In reading the literature for this article, I came across a rich collection of articles in teaching journals and newsletters from disciplinary associations in the social sciences, humanities, natural sciences, and professional fields. Books and reports are appearing at a rapid rate on writing groups, group analysis of case studies, simulations, the use of peer groups in mathematics, the guided design approach to problems in engineer-

ing, and problem-centered instruction in medical education. In these publications, I found a lot more sophistication about the practice of collaboration and the use of groups in classrooms than had been evident a decade before.

The practice of putting students in groups without a notion of the relevance of the groups for learning—one of the dodges of the lazy teacher—has given way to greater understanding about when groups are appropriate and not appropriate, how to construct them, and how to design effective exercises and problems. Less commonly, some faculty members have learned how to collaborate with students in the construction of course syllabi, in peer teaching, and in experiential programs.

Extradisciplinary sources spread the word about these practices and expand the context for them. The CUE newsletter, the Washington Center's newsletter, and the newsletter on cooperative learning published at California State–Dominique Hills cross disciplines.

Administrators and policymakers are more likely to recognize the benefits of cooperative and collaborative learning as the evidence for such benefits becomes known—and there is more evidence almost every day, as the works of Bruffee, Matthews, and the Washington Center make clear. The fact that these approaches improve student retention brings a special glitter to the eyes of tuition-hungry administrators. We know that these approaches have important cognitive, affective, and social effects on students: complexity of thinking increases, as does acceptance of different ideas; motivation for learning goes up; a sense of connection among students, even when they are quite different from one another, is enhanced. These results hold for older and younger students as well as for poorly prepared and well-prepared students from different class, ethnic, and racial backgrounds.

THE CHALLENGES TO COLLABORATIVE LEARNING

To this point I have argued that collaborative learning, after being practiced by individual faculty members in an unconscious, unrecognized way, has become a conscious and well-developed set of practices carried out by a growing number of practitioners from many disciplines. A set of national organiza-

tions, most notably FIPSE and AAHE, and key members of those organizations helped extend these practices to new audiences and provided resources for their further development and diffusion. A growing body of evidence supporting the effectiveness of collaborative learning has attracted new faculty adherents and has appealed to administrators and policymakers as possible solutions to institutional problems.

These are extraordinary achievements, accomplished in a very short time, but they should not be exaggerated. The preferred teaching method in higher education is still the lecture. Most faculty, even those who are interested, still have a long way to go in doing collaborative learning effectively. Those who try it and fail are often more disillusioned than those who never try it. Even faculty who succeed find some kinds of collaboration exhausting and need breaks from it on occasion. An additional difficulty is that, while the evidence for the impact of collaborative learning is growing, it is still quite sparse.

These are certainly serious problems, but the path to their solution is clearly marked. The more challenging issues are just being identified. I will devote the remainder of this article to these issues: the need for a more theoretical understanding of collaborative learning and its effects, increasing the institutional impact of collaborative learning, and using collaboration for enhancing democracy.

Issue 1: Need for More Theory

We know that collaborative learning has significant effects, but we do not have a theoretical basis for understanding how and why they occur. It is time for us to explore some promising theoretical approaches that might help make sense of the effects of collaboration in learning. The cognitive effects might be illuminated by works such as Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule's *Women's Ways of Knowing* (1986), which analyzes the effects of "connected learning" on high levels of intellectual functioning. *Women's Ways of Knowing* takes off from William Perry's influential book, *Forms of Intellectual and Ethical Development in the College Years*, and combines it with the developmental insights of Kohlberg and Gilligan. Howard Gardner's *Creating*

Minds (1993) looks at how creative people discover new ideas.

Caine and Caine's *Making Connections* (1991), a basic synthesis of research on cognition, discusses the impacts of groups and immersion in complex projects for high levels of learning. The growing influence of the "situated cognition" line of work discussed in Brown, Collins, and Duguid's article (1989), which argues that learning is influenced by the content and activity in which it occurs, suggests a set of questions that could be fruitfully investigated in various collaborative and noncollaborative learning situations. The body of work by the sociologist Melvin Kohn and his colleagues on the effects of complex tasks and self-direction on increasing cognitive complexity would help clarify why certain kinds of learning affect students more than others.

The social effects of collaboration could be understood from the application of group process theories to cooperative learning groups. An impressive example is the adaptation of decades of research on group dynamics in the Johnsons' writings (1989; 1991) on cooperative learning. Another well-developed example, less known but equally cumulative in its understanding, is Elizabeth Cohen's theoretically grounded research (1986) on the positive effects of carefully designed heterogeneous work groups in schools.

My own starting point would be to look for theoretical clues to the way collaborative learning leads to changes in authority relations between students and teacher and between students and knowledge. I would look to social psychological studies of socialization to subordinate roles and how higher education reinforces or challenges such socialization. Another fruitful approach is that of the social constructivists. Richard Rorty's gloss on John Dewey in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979) and his subsequent writings analyze the social basis for warrants about what constitutes knowledge. Social constructivists in anthropology, sociology, and literature might help us account for how collaborative learning helps students see that knowledge is not a fixed, immutable substance.

I make these suggestions about the need for more theoretical work out of the belief that there is nothing so practi-

cal as a good theory, as Kurt Lewin, the founder of the study of group dynamics, put it. Nowhere are good theories needed more than in education. Educational innovations are notoriously short-lived and cyclical. There are many reasons for this, not the least of which is the lack of grounding of educational practices in theories that might help explain why they work and don't work, how their effects carry over into other settings, and how they might be adapted to new populations and situations. The importance of this point will, I hope, become apparent below, as I discuss other directions that work on collaboration in higher education might take.

Issue 2: Increase the Institutional Impact of Collaboration

The next challenge focuses on the extent to which collaborative approaches have changed the way faculty members relate to one another and how colleges and universities operate. Most of the work on collaboration is focused on individual teachers and classes. There is no doubt in my mind that those classrooms and those teachers have been transformed. Few of them can go back to the old ways. If enough faculty members in an institution use collaborative approaches in their teaching, there is a sense in which their institutions are operating in a different way. Most faculty members would say that this can only happen in small classes run like seminars. (But how many seminars do we know in which the teacher is still as the center, lecturing?) Collaborative learning demonstrates that, even in large classes, students can be at the center of the action.

The application of collaborative learning to classes of all sizes is probably the most important institutional implication of collaborative learning. Like the retention benefits of collaborative learning, its implications for increasing class size without losing the benefits of the active learning that takes place in some small classes appeals to the pocketbook. If this were the only institutional impact of collaborative learning, administrators at least would be happy enough.

But I am not satisfied to stop here. The problem is that even in colleges where a lot of collaborative activities occur, an ongoing institutional culture of collaboration may be missing, even with respect to teaching. This is because

the classroom—even a noisy "groupy" classroom—is a realm that is invisible to anyone other than the people in it. Learning communities have a greater potential for institutional change since by design they require that two or more faculty members coordinate with each other in teaching the same group of students, thus making teaching and learning more public and visible.

Since faculty—even noisy groupy ones—do not necessarily talk about their teaching with others in their institution, we have little reason to think that collaborative learning will spread across an institution beyond those who are currently practicing it. I have more faith in the students who experience collaborative learning; they are more likely than faculty to share what they are learning with other students and to carry the word, as RC students did, to other faculty.

One challenge, then, for collaborative learning in the future is to increase its institutional effects beyond the classroom by actively sponsoring campus discussions about teaching in general and collaboration in particular, by engaging new faculty in collaborative teaching—in other words, the challenge is to deliberately create a collaborative teaching community. Talking about it is a first step, but much else is required: Faculty need to learn the highly refined skills of designing and facilitating group work; they need support from their colleagues and their institutions; and they need to be recognized and rewarded for doing so. Those who want to be left alone will resist vehemently. But many more will respond, perhaps cautiously at first but with greater enthusiasm as time passes. Many commentators have noted the yearning for community among the faculty. Almost all of the efforts I am aware of that bring faculty members together (especially if they are from different disciplines), such as planning a new general education curriculum or designing an interdisciplinary program, generate excitement among the faculty involved in them. Collaborative projects benefit the faculty as much as, if not more than, the students.

Collaborative approaches can also be extended beyond teaching into other aspects of life in colleges and universities. I am very impressed by the fact that collaboration among students, when it works well, involves self-consciousness

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about purposes, mutual interdependence, the capacity to benefit from differences, and the ability to resolve conflicts. Wouldn't it be wonderful if faculty, even those who do collaborative learning, could learn these skills in their own collective lives? The collective life of higher education is deeply flawed today. A sense of community is hard to find anywhere, even in small colleges. Collaborative projects among faculty often fail because of competitiveness, jealousy, and territoriality. The gap between faculty and administration grows wider as resources shrink, and willingness to take responsibility for the health of the institution shrinks along with the resources. Life in departments is often an exercise in parallel play. Pathologies in the larger society—family tragedies, substance abuse, racism, domestic violence—are overwhelming the healthy aspects of student culture. A more collaborative culture would help enormously.

For me, collaboration and community are important values in their own right. But I would also argue that a more collaborative culture is a precondition for solving other problems facing higher education today. Discussions in the media and reports critical of higher education assume that colleges and universities can respond in a collective manner. However, the fragmentation of universities and colleges—among departments and within departments, between professional and liberal arts schools, among faculty members, staff, administrators, and students, and among students—prevents meaningful collective responses.

The fragmentation of colleges and universities can be overcome by integrative structures that cross the usual boundaries. We have good evidence for the positive effects of integrative structures in other settings, as Rosabeth Kanter (1983) has told us, but have yet to apply them systematically to higher education. A few examples of such integrative structures are offices that combine student affairs and academic affairs, freshman year programs that encompass most aspects of first-year students' lives, living-learning programs, interdisciplinary courses, and learning communities. These structures imply a new kind of leadership and a willingness to reach beyond accepted borders; a number of us in CUE have called this

“collaborative leadership,” and others like Bensimon and Neumann (1993) term it “team leadership.”

These suggestions may seem utopian, but I believe that they open up a route to solving the hard issues facing higher education in our time. The need to reduce costs, to deal with an increasingly diverse student body, to introduce new bodies of knowledge and new “delivery systems” all demand structural and cultural change. Faculty members need to become more self-conscious about teaching. They need to do more useful research and provide more professional service for outside communities. Administrators need to find ways to conduct business that hold costs down while increasing quality. Students need to learn to live together in spite of differences in race, ethnicity, gender, age, and sexual preference.

At the moment, higher education is stuck with the consequences of the post-World War II period that reinforced competition, hierarchy, and growth. Few colleges and universities have been able to break out of this culture. In this situation, governments and other agencies have increased their control over higher education through legislation, setting standards, and cutting financial aid and other funding. If we do not find a way to deal with the serious problems facing us, the external bodies will tighten their grip. Collaboration can help us define our problems as shared, create the structures that will help us overcome them, and heal the rifts that prevent us from acting.

Issue 3: Enhance Democracy

I have pinned a lot of hope on the benefits of collaboration for colleges and universities internally. I would like to end with a plea for the promise that collaborative approaches hold for the larger society. First, it is urgent that discussions of collaborative learning make the link between what students are learning in the classroom and the larger society. Students in collaborative settings are clearly learning specific skills that could prepare them for living “in community” and for being of service to others. They are also learning the meaning of civic responsibility.

For these larger societal impacts to occur, the implications of collaborative learning must be drawn more ex-

plicitly. Some courses already do this; for example, learning communities on science, technology, and values or ethical issues in health care clearly make connections to society. Exercises in democratic education, such as the work of the Governors Schools under the leadership of Cheryl and Jim Keen and the honors semesters developed by Bernice Braid with the National Collegiate Honors Council, explicitly teach public expression, critical analysis of public issues, and political strategies for change. But they also teach collaboration, though they may not talk about it directly. The American Social History Project in the City University of New York, the Institute for Democracy in Education at Ohio University, Educators for Social Responsibility, and Teachers for a Democratic Culture work on ways to enhance higher education's contributions to democracy through collaboration and participation.

Outside of colleges and universities, there are lively attempts to strengthen several aspects of collaboration and democracy. Conflict resolution and mediation programs teach the skills of democratic participation. The Kettering Foundation encourages thoughtful discussion of public issues. The Highlander Center for grassroots activists has created training and education programs over the years. College and university people working on collaborative projects would deepen their impact if they applied some of the skills developed in these non-collegiate organizations. The support for national service in the Clinton administration offers an extraordinary opportunity for those using collaborative learning to build connections with such organizations.

In a world of social breakdown, where random violence and irresponsibility toward others have become a part of ordinary life, Americans have withdrawn from the public sphere. If it is true, as Alfie Kohn (1986) and many others have argued, that increasing cooperation has “prosocial” effects, then collaborative learning has many valuable contributions to make outside of higher education.

I have presented a very ambitious agenda for collaborative learning in the years ahead. If it could truly help to revitalize democracy, collaborative learning would have more than fulfilled its promise! ☐