Collaborative learning: Teaching to build new partnerships

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Abstract

The advantages of collaborative learning are well documented in terms of the development of social skills, the depth of academic learning achieved and preparation for the workplace. Many students, however, are not familiar with working in groups and thus the delivery of courses in whole or in part through collaborative learning poses serious problems of group dynamics and student uncertainty, and for some students group learning processes are incompatible with their learning style preferences and goals. Addressing these problems and teaching students specific skills is crucial for learning collaboratively.

This poster will demonstrate the value of Collaborative Learning:
Working Together in Small Groups, a CAUT-funded video produced for the purpose of facilitating collaborative learning in tertiary settings.

It is fundamental to the accomplishment of learning tasks that groups understand the process and the dynamics operating as they set about reaching the group’s objectives. This video and booklet provide a useful four part model for developing that understanding.

The video can be used by teachers as a discussion starter to encourage students to develop this awareness of group processes but can also be viewed by individuals or groups as part of their own development.

Extract from the video cover

Collaborative learning, working together in small groups is a 23 minute video which combines drama and documentary to facilitate collaborative learning in tertiary courses (MacCallum & Macbeth, 1996). It was professionally produced to a script developed in conjunction with an experienced video production company.1 In this paper I outline the rationale for such a video, the storyline and how the video can be used to facilitate collaborative learning.

Rationale

The advantages of collaborative learning are well documented in terms of the depth of learning achieved and preparation for the workplace (Candy & Crebert, 1990; Cook, 1991; Resnick, 1987; Sharan, 1990) and group work is included in the educational objectives of most educational institutions. Many students, however, are not familiar with working in groups and the delivery of courses in whole or in part through collaborative learning poses serious problems of group dynamics and student uncertainty, and for some students group learning processes are incompatible with their learning style preferences and goals (MacCallum, 1994). Addressing these problems and teaching students specific skills is crucial for learning collaboratively.

A number of authors (eg Schmuck & Schmuck, 1992; Tidman & MacCallum, 1993) have shown that groups do not just happen but develop over time and pass through a number of stages of development. Awareness of the stages of group development and valuing of the skills necessary to move the group forward appear to be fundamental to the effectiveness of group learning. A feature of education in the 1990’s is the extensive use of audio visual material not only in wider society but in tertiary education. Thus the video format is ideal for letting students witness a 'group' as it develops from four individuals into a functioning team.
The purpose of the video is to give students a structure within which to understand their own group dynamics and to encourage them to be metacognitive about their experience. Thus the expected educational outcomes for students include enhanced learning within collaborative learning contexts, along with less student stress and uncertainty. The video and the accompanying Users' Guide are intended to assist teaching staff in the facilitation of group dynamics and contain a number of messages for tutors and course designers in the way that collaborative learning is facilitated and delivered.

The development stages or life cycle of well-functioning work groups provides the basic structure of the video and the means for understanding and facilitating group learning. The four stages are:

- Stage 1 finding common ground,
- Stage 2 roles and goals,
- Stage 3 getting the job done, and
- Stage 4 reflecting.

These stages form the basis of the four segments of the video and each follows the pattern of drama, tutor and graphic, and interviews. The drama sequences, about half the video, follow the development stages and allow exploration of problems faced by members of collaborative work groups and the development of specific skills needed for collaborative learning. Each segment models certain types of behaviour and suggest that students interact in their own groups such that they observe, listen, negotiate and reflect in order to develop those skills. The interviews with staff and students who have been involved in collaborative assignments complement the drama and explore issues raised in the action preceding and/or following the interviews. A graphic and tutor sequence is used between the drama and the documentary to reinforce the group development cycle and comment on the stage of development depicted in the drama.

The storyline
The messages about collaborative learning are ‘carried’ by the storyline of the drama. The four students are engaged in a group project over a period of about two months. They initially face a difficult task coming to grips with different levels of commitment and motivation and different orientations or approaches to the topic. The biography below shows how the characters represent common features of tertiary students studying in Australia in the late 1990’s. The four students are joined by another key character, their tutor, who is included to illustrate the potentially positive facilitating role that should be played by academic staff.

JESSICA: Age 20. Bright and energetic, Jessica entered University directly from a middle class suburban high school. While friendly,
outgoing, and keen, she is cold when ill at ease. Her listening skills still need some developing but she is a keen reader and concise note taker.

TAN: Age 26. Tan’s affluent Singapore family have high expectations of him and while his command of English is good, he finds Australian slang hard to comprehend; he does not get all of the jokes. Conscientious but quiet in class, he believes the teacher knows best.

DEAN: Age 20. From a working class background, Dean did well in his final year at a government high school but usually doesn’t realise his full potential. He has a dry Australian sense of humour which he uses to deflect responsibility.

HELEN: Age 38. Helen has come from a rural background and was previously an external student. This is her first time studying on campus as the family has just moved to the city with her husband’s transfer in his job. She is very self-sufficient and not used to working with other students.

TUTOR (DIANE): Age 50. Professor Clarke is aware of the need for staff to help students with the process of collaborative learning as well as with the content of the topic chosen. She is knowledgeable, focussed, and committed.

The drama opens with the four students arriving for their first meeting, a situation that generates considerable tension because of the conflict that arises from the different approaches of the students. Things get worse as Dean and Tan disagree before Helen brings everyone up short. It is at this point that in a flashback the tutor reminds us that groups do need to spend time getting to know each other before they can possibly get down to work. Our four students heed this reminder and spend the next ‘couple of hours’ doing just that.

We next meet the four students in class disagreeing over definitions and different approaches to knowledge. They are arguing from their own preconceptions and getting nowhere until Jessica intervenes to suggest that they really need to do some research and then meet again.

This is followed by the tutor talking to us over a graphic sequence, both of which depict aspects of the four stages of group development. The segment ends with a series of interviews with students and staff in which experiences in relation to stages 1 and 2 are outlined.

Upon return to the drama, we find the four students again arguing, but this time about the validity and importance of the research they have done. They are also expressing the frustration of seeming to make little progress. In the next class
Dianne suggests they start looking at the process of how they work together, not just the content. There is also a recognition here that the 4 stages ‘work’ at the micro or individual meeting level. That is, in each meeting, a well functioning group will move through all four stages.

In the middle sequences we see a more cooperative spirit emerge. With the passage of time and a lot of hard work by the group on both process and content, we see a very dramatic change in the relationships and in the ability to get work done. Our four students have put in the effort needed to address their initial conflicts. In doing this work on process they are able to get down to the job and pursue their academic goals. The graphic and interview sequences deal with such issues as conflict over roles, learning to listen, appreciating each other's strengths and weaknesses, workload and grades.

In the last segment we see our group at Helen’s house where they are not only sharing tasks but seeking each other's help in being more effective as individuals. They have developed enough trust to ask another for comments on what they have written. Their project is coming together and we next see the tutor talking over the graphic while emphasising the need for reflection and self-evaluation at the end of the project. The study guide has provided a format for evaluating their work and also for deciding on how they will share the final grade. In this case, even the ‘hard-liner’ Tan agrees that in the end they all did contribute equally and that they should share the grade equally.

The move from open ‘warfare' to effective teamwork and trust might seem a bit overdramatic but according to evaluations by Murdoch students this 'dramatic licence' doesn't detract from the messages the video carries (some students' comments are included in the next section). Not all groups will face an ‘open warfare’ stage and others will never do as well as they might have. As this video portrays, however, groups that effectively manage the process of working together can develop a working relationship that is satisfying personally and productive academically.

Facilitating collaborative learning

The video makes a number of points relevant to the facilitation of collaborative groups:

• recognition of the stages of group development aids understanding of how to work more effectively in collaborative situations;

• effective staff monitoring and facilitation is at least as important as tutoring for content;

• printed materials, both instructional and for facilitation, are
important in aiding the development of effective collaborative learning groups provision of resource materials for students;

• "classroom climate" needs to be supportive of collaboration;

• it is important to make provision of class time for groups to work together;

• reflection and self-assessment are essential elements of collaboration; and

• issues of assessment of collaborative projects need to be addressed.

The accompanying Users' Guide takes up these points and serves to facilitate students and staff in their use of the video. It provides an overview of the video itself, notes for staff and notes for students to guide their use of the video, and copies of worksheets for use by staff and students. The chapter on notes for staff begins with suggestions for the design and implementation of courses using group work and suggestions for introducing the video. It also contains detailed notes to guide classroom discussion of the video and the collaborative learning issues raised.

The following text is taken from the notes for staff in A Users' Guide (Macbeth & MacCallum, 1996, pp. 17-18).

Roles and goals (06.27)

This segment is about clarifying roles and also about understanding the goals each has. This is reflected partly in what people do and how they want to organise group functioning but partly in what perspectives they take in the academic discussion. The differences, for example between Tan's marketing orientation and Jessica's environmental position are here matters of conflict that later can become sources of rich diversity in the work they produce. Here it is just conflict and stalemate. The drama reopens with a double conflict over process and content, although Jessica again takes an organiser role.

The main process issues raised in this segment are:
• questioning the value, validity and quantity of each other's contribution, what constitutes fair and reasonable input;
• differences in approaches to work and to time; for the video group they resurface here;
• problems of at what depth ideas should be pursued;
• unwillingness to recognise (and therefore deal with) conflict;
• the need to reflect on how meetings operate to help find strategies to solve problems and move the group on; the tutor reminds the group to use their evaluation form to help discover why they seem to argue all
the time (note that the form shown is from Helen’s point of view and considerable time has passed during this class; forms to assist in the reflecting process are included in chapter 8 of this guide);
•the times at which it is appropriate to divide up work; our group did manage to divide up the work, although remember they weren’t able to do so at the very beginning;
•differences in ways of communicating or of not communicating what each wants to do or is good at;
•reactions against the efforts of some members to control and set agendas; setting ground rules or making them explicit is one way of dealing with interactions; reflecting back on the ground rules can help to bring control issues out in the open;
•disagreements about the goals of the activity and best means to achieve them;
•the need for everyone to have the opportunity to talk about their ideas and for each to listen to each other and their ideas;
•learning about oneself and others may be a painful experience;
•taking turns to be chairperson of meetings; giving fair and reasonable

turn at speaking; these are less important issues once a group gets working effectively.
The main academic issues are:
•academic argument and attitude to each other’s definitions (If you have seen the companion video Critical Thinking in Context, you will realise that Tan and Jessica have not yet studied critical thinking and don’t have that way of seeing knowledge to help them over the academic conflict in this video.); and
•assumptions that there must be one correct answer, approach or definition.

Over the last six months the video has been shown to students and tutors involved in a number of university courses using collaborative group work. The response has been overwhelmingly positive. Some of the main themes expressed by students are contained in the following comments:

It was well presented and dispelled a number of fears I hold about group project work.

Pre.warned is pre-armed. If these problems arise in my group I will understand that it is quite normal and therefore be able to work through it easier.

Helpful, really represents the problems I am facing currently in doing the group project. Feels better knowing that you are not alone in facing such problems.

It felt very familiar. It was also quite amusing.
Good to watch with other members of your group as it brings up issues you might not want to raise such as attendance and joint effort.

Covers all aspects of group work - both negative and positive.

Not bad for a university movie!

Tutors also found the video and, more recently, Users' Guide very helpful in raising their awareness of the issues they needed to take account of and be prepared to deal with over the duration of a group project. But as anyone who has engaged in collaborative learning knows, the process of learning about groups and collaborative work appears never ending. One course coordinator asked when we were going to produce the next video to further address the important issues of collaborative writing and assessment of group work! The work continues... collaboratively of course!

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References

1 The script writing team included Judy MacCallum, Jim Macbeth and Sarah Veitch from Murdoch University, and Robert Bull and Laura Black.
from Gripping Films.