



For Teachers and Students: Collaboration to Enrich Learning

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Collaborative teaching has long been considered best practice (DelliCarpini, 2008), with evidence that its inherent efficiency is one of the primary catalysts for productive pedagogical change (Gajda & Koliba, 2008). Teacher reflection, a natural product in the collaborative cycle, also contributes to improved instruction (Campoy, 2010).

Despite this consensus, collaborative teaching is often approached with reluctance. Common reasons to avoid collaboration include communication and scheduling issues; hesitation to work with others because of personality, culture, or teaching style; and the perception that extra time and effort will be required (Bagheri, Rostami, Pour Kivy, & Lahiji, 2015). Teachers who have engaged in such collaborative work often “burn out” after a short period of time because of the drain of increased social interaction and/or meetings, and little time or place to decompress and reflect after these activities. According to Godsey (2016),

Some statistics suggest that 41 percent of teachers leave the profession within five years of entering it. Teacher attrition among first-year teachers has increased about 40 percent in the past two decades—a trend that’s coincided in part with the growing emphasis in classrooms on cooperative and student-driven learning and on “collaborative overload” in general. (para. 12)

However, studies have also shown that collaboration and reflection result in a variety of benefits, including the following.

Student Benefits	Teacher Benefits
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Acquisition of multiple modalities, or language <i>and</i> content of a subject area (DelliCarpini, 2008)• Learning to navigate (while interacting safely in) the flexible learning environment dominant in many environments in which English is the lingua franca	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Shared background knowledge from students and what they have already brought to the table• Empowerment in a democratic style of decision-making• New strategies in practice rather than just in theory• Shared burden of counseling and

	helping lower students' affective filters (Honigsfeld & Dove, 2010)
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In our intensive English program, we have cotaught in both traditional team-teaching settings and linked course approaches (Bagheri, Rostami, Pour Kivy, & Lahiji, 2015), each over a period of several semesters. To facilitate our collaboration and reflection, we meet approximately twice a week: once to design lesson plans, and once to reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of completed activities, making decisions for the next lessons based on those reflections. This collaborative routine, similar to Murray's (2015) collaborative reflective teaching cycle, has allowed us to efficiently delegate preparation tasks, leaving more time to explore new technology, create innovative materials, and apply what was learned in personal reflection.

Tips to Get Started

- Agree on “terms” of collaboration, including the format of lesson plans, how much flexibility is given to implement plans, and appropriate timing for collaboration. (Hint: Friday afternoon is probably not best!)
- Trust your colleagues. Don't be a perfectionist—allow your co-collaborators some autonomy in this process.
- Avoid “too many cooks in the kitchen,” or collaborating with too many others!
- Start small by creating short interactive activities, rather than full-length projects with multiple discrete tasks.

Three Steps to Collaboration

We have collaborated in a variety of teaching contexts, and in each of these contexts, we follow the same three steps: Divide the preparation, meet to revise, and meet to reflect.

1. Divide the preparation of all materials	2. Meet to revise	3. Meet to reflect
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Handouts • Visual aids/presentation activities • Games/activities • Tests • Rubrics • Homework assignments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Materials, after creation • Lesson plans, after all sections are completed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lesson plans and materials, after all sections of the course are completed • Overall student morale, problems, successes

Teachers: Maintaining Collaboration

The great challenge of collaboration is finding ways to maintain the collaborative activities you and your colleagues have worked so hard to prepare. First, *maintain* whatever “terms” of

collaboration you have found work well. This includes the format of your lesson plans, the flexibility to implement your plans, and when to meet your co-collaborators.

Second, *depend* on your colleagues. Remember not to be a perfectionist and trust what you and your colleagues have already decided on.

Next, insist on *staying focused* when meeting and set a time limit for your meeting. This will drastically cut down the time spent meeting with your collaborators (and is likely to keep everyone more content). And finally, *remember* these goals.

Students: Encouraging Collaborative Projects

Just as teachers may dread collaborating, students often complain about collaborative projects, particularly when there is an important grade attached to it. Although students can reap the same benefits as teachers when collaborating (shared knowledge, empowerment, shared burden of work), the type of pair or group work expected of them in our classrooms may be quite different from what they have experienced in educational contexts in their home country. Our role in student collaborative projects is to teach them how to effectively navigate the collaborative process.

In our experience, collaborative assignments are best done when heavily scaffolded by the teacher and when the benefits of the collaborative process are shared explicitly with students. Students need directions on how to divide work appropriately, and after assigning a collaborative project, we never let them leave the classroom without designating a time to meet to review their progress with their peers. In these meeting times, we can point to ways that the burden of work is lessened for all. It is also a good idea to have groups select a leader and give the specific tasks that leaders are responsible for (such as setting up a group texting chat, aligning format or compiling pieces into a single file, being a liaison to the professor) and which tasks can be delegated. This process can lead to empowerment of individuals to work through their own tasks and be a meaningful contributor to a finished project.

We have also found it helpful during the course of a project to give students time during class, whether as few as 5 minutes or as many as 30 minutes, to discuss and revise among themselves. Meeting in class also gives teachers the opportunity to monitor the process, anticipate interpersonal conflicts, and guide groups in the right direction when they need it.

Students can also benefit from reflecting on a project once it has been completed. Generally before grades have been posted (to avoid feelings based solely on grades), students can participate in a group or class discussion reflecting on their successes and failures. Students may also benefit from the opportunity to create an individual reflective assignment or survey.

Final Thoughts on Collaboration

The process of collaboration is not one-size-fits-all, so it is essential to remember to have patience with yourself and your colleagues when navigating new collaborative situations.

Modeling this process with students, particularly in team teaching, can be a powerful way to illustrate the benefits of collaboration to them as well. Happy collaborating!

References

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