Building collaboration with students into the teaching process brings with it many benefits for learning, but it also requires accepting the risk and unease that comes from redefining the roles of students and teachers.

Learning in the Company of Others: Students and Teachers Collaborating to Support Wonder, Unease, and Understanding

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As a community of professionals and scholars, teachers have come to embrace, almost universally, the idea that collaborative practices promote deeper and more integrated learning among students. You would be hard pressed to find an elementary, secondary, or postsecondary environment that promotes solitary over cooperative learning. Indeed, “Collaborative Assignments and Projects” is one of the High Impact Practices (Kuh 2008) proven to improve student retention and engagement. At the core of this practice is the idea that students benefit from learning in the company of others, listening seriously to their insights, and taking into account their varied backgrounds and experiences. And because we believe in this pedagogical approach, we create support structures and frameworks to make it possible.

The same attitude can and should be applied to the work of teachers. Now more than ever before, teachers and schools, departments and institutions, and systems and communities are embracing the value of collaborative structures in support of teaching, learning, and collective development. From group mentorship to faculty learning communities, from lesson study to the scholarship of teaching and learning, teachers the world over have found that learning in the company of others provides the rigorous engagement, creative provocation, and critical perspective that leads to fulfillment, improvement, and excellence. Lee Shulman (2004a) reminds us, “with teachers, authentic and enduring learning ... requires collaboration. When teachers collaborate, they can work together in ways that scaffold and support each other’s learning, and in ways that supplement each
other’s knowledge” (p. 515). Shulman also points out that “collaboration is a marriage of insufficiencies, not exclusively ‘cooperation’ in a particular form of social interaction. There are difficult intellectual and professional challenges that are nearly impossible to accomplish alone but are readily addressed in the company of others” (p. 515).

But what happens when you combine these perspectives, merging the idea of student collaboration, teacher collaboration, and student–teacher collaboration to produce a learning environment that empowers students to see themselves as equal partners in the educational enterprise, as true collaborators in the classroom? Perhaps the “marriage of insufficiencies” that is collaboration among teachers, the grappling of many minds and hands in concert, could lead to new learning opportunities for all participants. The result is undoubtedly something beyond group work and peer learning, beyond the student–teacher experience, and beyond the learning communities of faculty development, requiring a shift in identity and a redefinition of the role of student and teacher. Furthermore, such a step involves a reconsideration of the nature of risk and trust and uncertainty, as well as the need, ultimately, to embrace an unprecedented level of student agency.

Student agency, autonomy, and intentionality are of course among the greater goals of higher education. Our mission statements and student learning outcomes reach far beyond the instrumentality of career preparation and skills development into the realm of formation and transformation. We believe, as a profession, that we are working to help our students develop a clearer sense of themselves and their place in the world, as well as a greater capacity for critical reflection and active participation (even control) in their own destinies. As Maxine Greene (2001) put it, “we are interested in breakthroughs and new beginnings, in the kind of wide-awakeness that allows for wonder and unease and questioning and the pursuit of what is not yet” (p. 44). With this in mind, the opportunities presented by a greater confluence of learning and teaching, a more integrated approach to the student as teacher, are indeed legion and full of potential. So, too, are the prospects for scholarship, wherein faculty, their students, and the students they all teach, investigate the various learning impacts of multilevel collaboration together in an otherwise traditional pedagogical environment. The idea links to a myriad of other research perspectives, ranging from the group brain and collective cognition to student voice and distributed leadership. But at the core, the question of collaboration with and for students as teachers is one of learning, first and foremost.

**Group Work and Peer Learning**

It is hard to imagine a university course that does not include some kind of collaboration as a key feature of the pedagogical process. At the very least, this includes peer-to-peer conversation and problem solving; most
frequently, it takes the form of group work, wherein students share a common objective (often a presentation or project), developed collaboratively.

Collaborative learning combines two key goals: learning to work and solve problems in the company of others, and sharpening one’s own understanding by listening seriously to the insights of others, especially those with different backgrounds and life experiences. Approaches range from study groups within a course, to team-based assignments and writing, to cooperative projects and research. (Kuh 2008, p. 10)

For many disciplines and professions, collaborative learning is the coin of the realm. It would be difficult to conceive of a business program that did not embrace and celebrate the importance of teamwork, a chemistry department that avoided the cultivation of shared investigation and critique, or a theater program that eschewed support of multiple voices contributing to production and performance. But in most of these cases, the goal is the improvement of individual student learning, regardless of whether or not the assessments and outcomes include collective achievements or only solo accomplishment. And rarely do these collaborative structures involve the teacher as anything more than a directing influence, or the students as full partners in the pedagogical process.

Many universities have come to appreciate the importance of peer learning in providing students with an alternative access point for understanding, one that comes from another student. Most often, peer learning takes the form of peer tutoring or cooperative learning.

Peer tutoring (PT) is characterised by specific role-taking as tutor or tutee, with high focus on curriculum content and usually also on clear procedures for interaction, in which participants receive generic and/or specific training.

Cooperative learning (CL) … is likely to involve the specification of goals, tasks, resources, roles, and rewards by the teacher, who facilitates or more firmly guides the interactive process. (Topping 2005, p 632)

Some of the best work on the structure and efficacy of peer learning has been done in the medical professions, which have embraced the benefits and necessity of peer and near-peer teaching for decades. Among other outcomes, peer learning has been demonstrated to support cognitive development, psychomotor confidence, and client confidence, to name only a few (Secomb 2007). Indeed, education is a profession committed wholeheartedly to the practice of peer learning and its improvement through rigorous scholarly investigation.

But it is the very nature of peer learning that distinguishes it from collaborative teaching. Students who serve as peer teachers are indeed academic, social, and intellectual peers; they generally hold the same standing
as those being taught (especially in the undergraduate context), have limited autonomy with regard to content and structure of the material being taught, and are not held accountable for the learning that results from the peer-to-peer interaction. They are assistants in the pedagogical process, augmenting the role of the teacher and supporting the outcomes of the course. Peer learning, in fact, insists on a similar identity for those who are learning and those who are supporting that learning, and the benefits of this practice are often tied explicitly to the correspondence between both roles (even when one of the peers has supplemental knowledge, experience, or training). Suggesting that students take on the role of collaborative teachers assumes at the outset that there will be a change in roles, responsibilities, relationship, and ultimately identity.

Identity, Risk, and Uncertainty

According to Maxine Greene (1973), “nothing could be more antithetical to the attitude of the functioning teachers than . . . indifference. The importance of what he (sic) does must consciously be defined. He (sic) must become passionately engaged in prompting younger people to take initiatives and to act mindfully” (p. 7). Inherent in this view of the teacher is a clear sense of identity and purpose; it articulates a level of intentionality, significance, consequence, engagement, and responsibility that is distinct from any other profession, any other role. This is something well understood by those responsible for training future primary and secondary school teachers, and the construction of a teaching identity holds a significant place in their literature (Beauchamp and Thomas 2009). For students who choose teaching as a profession, this dynamic process of identity formation becomes an integral part of their learning, preparation, and professional practice. Even students engaged as teaching assistants while pursuing graduate degrees generally engage in teaching with intention, usually in concert with some form of mentorship and training.

The same cannot be said for students who take on the role of collaborator in the teaching processes of a typical undergraduate classroom. Although some may be destined for work as educators, the majority see themselves in other fields, other professions. For these students, taking on the role of teacher involves a significant shift in perspective and the embracing of an identity that is likely both foreign and dangerous. How then can students reconstruct their own classroom identities to enable such a shift from learner of, to purveyor of, information, knowledge, and meaning? The answer lies at the very heart of the teaching enterprise and defines the teacher as learner.

In order for students to see themselves as collaborators, they need to first understand that teaching is a reciprocal process of critical understanding, where teachers facilitate not answers, but questions. This shift is not an easy one, even for teachers. “Learning involves making oneself
vulnerable and taking risks, and this is not how teachers often see their role. When they encourage students to actively explore issues and generate questions, it is almost inevitable that they will encounter questions that they cannot answer—and this can be threatening” (Bransford, Brown, and Cocking 2000, p. 195). But if it is difficult for teachers to acknowledge what they do not know, how much more difficult must it be for students who are taking on the role? Ambiguity and discomfort, uncertainty and constant reassessment are all part of the learning process for students and for teachers. This is a strength, not a weakness. Perhaps the first step is for students to learn how to recognize, understand, appreciate, and even celebrate, the “not knowing” in their teachers, so as to allow themselves to “not know” as well. This is just one of the reasons that student/teacher collaboration needs to be carefully negotiated, guided, and embraced. Students who take on this role need to be aware of the impact it will have on their own learning and the learning of their peers; they need to accept the responsibilities of teaching and learning and contribute fully to the practices such responsibility entails. Additionally, teachers who embark on this journey need to relinquish some of the control so often exercised in the classroom, allowing student/teachers to exercise thoughtful direction and critical variation as they develop a new role and a new level of engagement.

Confidence and Trust

In order to achieve this goal, students must come to terms with the limits of their own knowledge and the challenges of their own learning. After embarking on her own study of students in a teaching role, one scholar (Elmendorf 2006) remarked on a number of key insights into student learning, many of which are particularly useful to consider when preparing students for their role as collaborators. One insight is that students learn differently when they are in the role of teacher, taking more responsibility for the learning process (their own and others’) and privileging the act of discovery over finding the right answer. Another is the affective impact of students’ cognitive work as teachers, which tends to manifest as a sense of responsibility for the learning of others. Finally, students are able to see and better understand the thinness of their own knowledge. “Typically, students focus on what they know and either remain unaware of the limits of their knowledge (the gaps) or hope they won’t be noticed by the professor. But when they teach the subject, they come to see gaps as areas ripe for exploration as they develop an understanding of the topic that will hold up to the rigors of teaching” (Elmendorf, 2006, pp. 38–40). All these insights, and more, contribute to student learning, of course, but they also create a sense of confidence on the part of these young teachers. And that confidence contributes to the trust they must cultivate among their peers.

But there are other features of trust at play in this collaborative scenario, and they are vital to the ultimate goals of this pedagogical experience.
Teachers must trust their students as collaborators, providing them with all the information necessary to succeed, all the training required to perform, and all the responsibility required to contribute to the creation and assessment of the curriculum. This is not a task that can be taken lightly, and it may form the real boundary between actual collaboration and the kind of experiential learning that provides students a defined parcel of pedagogical freedom, a limited sense of autonomy and agency amid the sweeping landscape of predetermined content, curriculum, and critique. Although there will always be aspects of the teaching process that remain unavailable to student/teachers, authentic collaboration requires that students have as much power as possible, including: content choice, curriculum design, pedagogical practice, assessment of learning, and, above all, voice and authority. This is the level of trust that defines collaborative practice.

In both the emotional and collaborative aspects of learning, the development of trust becomes central. Learners must learn both to trust and to be worthy of trust. If learners are to employ their achievement of the goals of liberal and professional education to take on the responsibilities of leadership in a democratic community and society, their good judgment needs to be exercised in a context of trust and interdependence. (Shulman 2004b, p. 79)

And it is this link, between confidence and trust, trust and interdependence, and interdependence and agency, which may be the most important aspect of student/teacher collaboration.

**Teaching, Learning, and Agency**

In 1938, John Dewey addressed “the meaning of purpose” in education, saying,

There is, I think, no point in the philosophy of progressive education which is sounder than its emphasis upon the importance of the participation of the learner in the formation of the purposes which direct his [sic] activities in the learning process, just as there is no defect in traditional education greater than its failure to secure the active cooperation of the pupil in construction of the purposes involved in his [sic] studying. (Dewey 1997, p. 67)

On the one hand, involving students as full participants in the teaching process can be seen in this light as the ultimate intentional act of learning. But learning is never an end in itself. Rather, we learn in order to do, to perform, to accomplish, and above all else to change. Teaching is more than the preparation of an experienced and well-prepared labor force, and learning reaches far beyond content knowledge and cultural literacy.

The meaning of purpose in education is agency; helping our students realize their place and potential in an ever-changing and never-finished
environment, society, planet, space, and time. Our job, as teachers, is to facilitate the power of our students to do and be and influence their surroundings as knowledgeable, thoughtful, critical, compassionate, and imaginative participants.

It may be our interest in imagination, as much as our interest in active learning, that makes us so eager to encourage a sense of agency among those with whom we work. By that I mean consciousness of that power to choose and to act on what is chosen. I mean a willingness to take initiatives, to pose critical questions, to play an authentic part in ongoing dialogues—to embark, whenever opportunity arises, on new beginnings. (Greene 2001, p. 110)

In the classroom, students have the power to choose and act on their choices, pose questions, and play an authentic part in their learning. Or, at least they should. Collaborative student–teachers have not only these powers, but also the power to make these things happen. They can, and should, see agency in every moment, potential in every choice, new beginnings in every question. For them, there is no event horizon, only possibility.

**Opportunities for Scholarship**

Perhaps one of the most exciting possibilities presented by student/teacher collaboration is that of scholarship; the systematic investigation of student learning. This has been a feature of teaching for millennia, and remains the best, and most compelling, approach to understanding and improving student learning. And there is no doubt that the investigation of student/teacher collaboration has yielded volumes of useful research findings, and might well generate even more inquiry into the link between identity formation and intentional learning, the value of uncertainty in learning design, and the recognition of thin knowledge as a motivator for deep learning.

But the real opportunities for scholarship centered on student/teacher collaboration lie not in students as the subject of research, but as full participants in the research enterprise. Indeed, student collaborators are in the unique position of being true participant observers, a method “in which a researcher takes part in the daily activities, rituals, interactions, and events of a group of people as one of the means of learning the explicit and tacit aspects of their life routines and their culture” (DeWalt and DeWalt 2011, p. 1). This is a somewhat anthropological perspective, but it serves for the kind of pedagogical inquiry suggested above.

The method of participant observation is a way to collect data in naturalistic settings by ethnographers who observe and/or take part in the common and uncommon activities of the people being studied. The method of participant observation requires a particular approach to the recording of observations (in field notes), and the perspective that the information collected
through participation is as critical to social scientific analysis as information from more formal research techniques such as interviewing, structured observation, and the use of questionnaires and formal elicitation techniques. (DeWalt and DeWalt 2011, pp. 2–3)

DeWalt and DeWalt go on to point out that participant observation is “rarely, if ever, the only technique used by a researcher” and it is this idea of triangulation (using multiple data sources in addition to observation) that enables a researcher to make sense of the entire field of experience. Teachers can rarely be authentic and accurate participant observers because of the power differential inherent in their role, but student/teacher collaborators have the unique perspective of insider and outsider, peer and perceiver, engaged member of the class and critical collaborator.

There are, of course, many more issues to be examined with regard to student/teacher collaboration, ranging from the pedagogical to the practice, the ethical to the social. Likewise, there are far greater responsibilities that need to be addressed by the faculty member at the heart of such collaboration, including physical and psychological safety, and the orchestration of complex relationships and power dynamics. Then there are the students themselves, who might have a thing or two to say about the whole idea. But amid all this there is the kernel of possibility, the chance that students and faculty will learn better in company than they do in isolation. As a profession, we tend to believe that many hands make light work, and putting our minds together is the best way to solve a problem. If we really do want to promote wonder, unease, and questioning, with a large helping of autonomy and agency thrown in, then student/teacher collaboration, responsibly executed and carefully observed, is a shared step in the right direction.

References


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