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Recommended Citation

Lee, Moira (2000). "Collaborative Learning in Three British Adult Education Schemes," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2000/roundtables/22>

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Collaborative Learning in Three British Adult Education Schemes

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Abstract: *This qualitative case study research is located in three British adult education schemes. The focus of the research is on the values of collaborative learning and the roles of facilitators and participants in collaborative learning communities.*

At the genesis of this research my review of the literature noted that previous research concentrated on assessing the impact of collaborative learning and its practices in a range of disciplines without the benefit of a coherent account of the values and roles entwined in this adult learning approach. This research has focused on two questions: “What are the values of collaborative learning for adult learners?” and “How does collaborative learning affect the roles of the learning community, both participants and facilitators?” This research has identified from the three schemes studied a set of nine values of collaborative learning organised under two overarching values.

Cultivating critical openness encompasses five other values: Stimulating Thinking through Dialogue; Re-evaluating Belief Systems; Appreciating Diverse Perspectives; Dwelling with Questions; and Rethinking Power Issues. *Engaging the whole person in learning* encompasses four other values: Touching the Affective; Working with Experiences; Strengthening the Cognitive; and Enhancing the Social.

This research has illuminated that values and roles are integrally interrelated. Facilitators and participants in the three schemes enact the values of collaborative learning through their roles, sometimes embodying differentiated roles, sometimes merged ones. This research identified a range of fifteen roles. There are *differentiated roles* for facilitators and participants. **Facilitators** engage with seven roles: Functioning as Change Agents; Orienting Participants into Collaborative Learning; Modelling Collaboration in Co-Facilitation; Integrating Content into the Collaborative Learning Process; Inhabiting the Content; Inviting the Group to Explore Further; and Reading Group Process. **Participants** engage with five roles: Fully Engaging with Collaborative Learning; Listening to Oth-

ers in Collaborative Learning; Opening Heart and Mind to New Learning; Widening the Content Pool; and Offering Tentative Understanding.

Shared roles among facilitators and participants span three dimensions: Creating A Conducive Climate; Designing the Learning Task; and Raising and Responding to Questions.

Reshaping Collaborative Learning

Through the process of distilling the research analysis, I noticed that what I call a “reshaping of collaborative learning” involves three interrelated contours: (1) The Core Value of Recreating Relationships; (2) The Core Process of Dialogue Across Difference; and (3) The Shifting Roles of Facilitators and Participants.

The Core Value of Recreating Relationships

“Recreating relationships” is the core value that subtends all the other values. Recreating relationships is also the core role that subtends all other roles of participants and facilitators in collaborative learning communities. The three schemes showed that facilitators and participants are motivated to engage more fully with their various roles when they appreciate the relational dynamics within their respective learning communities. In the words of a facilitator: “Each relational encounter builds upon what was previously there but moves beyond and recreates a life of its own.”

The Core Process of Dialogue across Difference

Evidence from the three schemes show that the core process in “recreating relationships” is dialogue. Dialogue creates degrees of understanding across difference. A participant remarked: “In collaborative learning there emerges a quality of relationship that creates a safe middle space to talk through issues, risk making mistakes, recognise differences, and sometimes fail and falter.” A “middle ground”

develops in relationships built with others over time. It appreciates diversity and recognises that “differences stimulate us to work towards new meaning ... because each person brings a fragment of meaning and each bit is a little different it ends up producing a new meaning which is more than where the individuals are at.” In collaborative learning the value of each individual voice is upheld. Hearing each others’ voices, appreciating differing perspectives and interconnecting these voices with personal experience creates a relational acoustic.

Shifting Roles of Facilitators and Participants

Through the process of collaborative learning, and as the quality of relationships develops, role shifts may occur. A participant pointed out that “roles will change depending on where individuals are at and the relational tone of the group.” The spectrum of

roles for facilitators and participants may be situated along a continuum. Differentiated roles are typically manifested at the opening phases of the continuum. During this initiation phase the source of power for action and ideas resides largely with facilitators. During the early phases of collaborative learning, facilitators tend to function as change agents and intentionally orientate participants towards collaborative dynamics. However, over time there emerges a gradual movement along the continuum. There is a constant vacillation from differentiated roles to shared roles.

“As partners-in-learning we are on a pilgrimage.
We need one another; we relate to each other;
we look after each other; we learn from each
other.”