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Recommended Citation

Armstrong, Joseph L. (2001). "Collaborative Learning from the Participants' Perspective," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2001/papers/3>

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Collaborative Learning from the Participants' Perspective

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Abstract: Collaborative learning is generally reviewed in the literature and researched from the perspective of the facilitator. This study looks at the phenomena of collaborative learning from the perspective of the participants. This results in a different understanding of the collaborative learning process.

Introduction

A great deal has been written in recent years using the term "collaborative learning." A review of this literature reveals two specific limitations. First, there are multiple and varied definitions of collaborative learning, and before writing about or researching collaborative learning one must first define specifically what one means when using the term. Second, nearly all of what is written is written from the perspective of the facilitator of collaborative learning. That leaves open the question of how participants of collaborative learning experience collaborative learning. This study used Peters and Armstrong's (1998) definition of collaborative learning to identify two collaborative learning groups and examined the process of collaborative learning from the perspective of the participants in those two groups.

Peters and Armstrong (1998) identify three types of learning, of which collaborative learning is one type. Borrowing from this framework, this study defined collaborative learning as two or more people laboring together to construct knowledge that is more than, and other than, the individuals involved could have known otherwise.

The study was constructed to answer the following primary research question: How do students who engage in collaborative learning experience the process?

Methodology

Phenomenological interviews with all class participants were conducted to collect data to answer the research question.

Research Participants

Participants for the study were eighteen members of two sections of a graduate education course taught at a large southern US university.

Group one had eight participants, five male and three female. Four participants were doctoral students, three were masters students, and one had an earned doctorate. Five were full-time

students and two were part-time students. Three participants were employed full-time, four were employed part-time, and one was unemployed.

Group two had ten participants, six female and four male. One was a doctoral student and nine were masters students. Nine were part-time students and one was a full-time student. Nine participants were employed full-time and one was employed part-time.

Data Collection and Analysis

Phenomenological interviews were conducted with each participant at the end of the course. Interviews were 30 to 60 minutes each and were focused on the participants' experience with and in their respective collaborative learning groups. The interviews allowed participants to describe their experience in their own words. At the conclusion of the interviews many participants expressed that the interviews were a positive experience, helping them to bring closure to their collaborative learning experience. Interviews were audio-tape recorded and transcribed.

The transcripts were analyzed in an attempt to understand the participants' perceptions of their experience. Following the coding model of Glesne and Peshkin (1992), data from the transcripts were separated into individual ideas, coded, conceptualized, and then recombined into related concepts and themes. As potential themes emerged, I returned to the transcripts to see if the themes were supported by what the participants had said in their interviews. If the theme was supported by the data it was kept. If not, it was dropped, and I returned to data analysis. After several revisions of concepts and themes three separate, but related, categories of themes emerged. These themes form a patterned gestalt that describes the participants' perceptions of their collaborative learning experience.

Three Categories of Qualitative Themes

Analysis of the data revealed three categories of qualitative themes. These are: 1) group process, 2) learning process, and 3) group facilitation. The group process category was defined by four themes: 1) cohesion, 2) trust and respect, 3) confusion and frustration, and 4) conflict. The learning process category was defined by three themes: 1) discourse, 2) engagement, and 3) questions. The group facilitation category was defined by two themes: 1) facilitator actions and 2) participants as facilitators.

Group Process

The group process category includes issues of the way in which individual participants became two groups and the nature of their interpersonal interactions. It contains issues concerning cohesion, trust and respect, confusion and frustration, and conflict.

Cohesion. Cohesion is a term for group relationship building (Yalom, 1995). The two groups in this study developed intra-group relationships that resulted in a sense of cohesion for the participants. Many of the participants recognized this and saw it as a necessary part of the collaborative-learning process. One participant illustrates this point well:

I mean you can't force two people to like each other. And you can't force groups to become cohesive. They've got to do it on their own. Like I say this one probably took sixty percent of the semester to do it.

He goes on to describe his experience in the group as being part of a family:

When you're sitting around with your family and you're talking about stuff only the family knows about, and if somebody outside comes in, they don't know what's going on. I don't necessarily mean a mother, father, sisters, or brothers. I mean even a family in a workplace where you've got a group of people that have worked together, shared experiences, and can talk freely.

Trust and Respect. Along with cohesion, trust and respect emerged as a theme. In the interviews participants in both groups talked about the development of trust over the course of each group's time together as participants took risks and these risks were met by other participants with respect. One participant summed up the development of trust by saying,

It was about trust. And I think it was a tenuous trust, that it could have shattered any moment. But in this group it so happened that it didn't.

But these participants are also saying that trust and respect go hand in hand. One participant put it this way:

I'm saying that we have respected each other and that at times we have held each other accountable for acting in the proper way. And that seems to have built our level of trust very quickly, more quickly than anyone could ever assume that trust level could be built.

The primary source of risk taking for participants in these groups was the risk taking associated with sharing thoughts and ideas that were not yet fully developed. Participants reported finding that the sharing of thoughts and ideas with others that were not yet "finished" difficult. A participant summed this up well:

I think that is a big part of what this whole thing is about. We've got to expose our thinking to each other, not only in the sense of telling what we think, but also expose in the sense of becoming susceptible to the influence of other's thinking. It's pretty scary, I think -- pretty uncomfortable.

Confusion and Frustration. A third aspect of this category of themes concerns a sense of confusion and frustration with the process. Many participants reported experiencing confusion and frustration with the process, voicing concerns that they were not accomplishing anything. They often reported feeling lost, that the group had no direction. Two perspectives on this, follow. The first perspective is

I didn't feel like I could understand why I was there. And I didn't feel like we were going anywhere. And I hate to say this because it sounds horrible, but I didn't care about what we were discussing. You know, to me it just seemed like we were going nowhere fast.

The second perspective is

What happened from my vantage point is that for the first several sessions none of us knew where we were going, and we were all sitting around waiting for somebody to lead a little bit more, and we wasted a lot of time. It's not that we were moving slowly, it's that we were moving in circles.

Conflict. Participants reported an experience of various forms of conflict. While most expressed a sense of discomfort with conflicts when they occurred, they seemed to feel that in the long run the conflicts, or more precisely, working through conflicts, allowed the groups to develop a sense of cohesiveness. Most expressed this conflict as a conflict of ideas. For example:

But at the same time before learning occurs you have to have challenges to your assumptions. You have to have challenges. I mean you have to have dissonance to your ideas. You have to have cognitive dissonance, otherwise you're not going to move. And your ideas are always going to be the same. And we could all sit around in a group and all talk about the same thing and all agree and all be good buddies and all be good pals, but we would never learn anything.

Learning Process

The second thematic category to emerge from the data analysis was termed the learning process. This category is not about the content, or what the participants learned, but is an expression of how the participants learned.

Discourse. Several participants described the nature of the discourse in these collaborative learning groups as a unique experience for them and as an integral part of their overall learning experience. The learning that occurred in the groups, according to participants, came almost exclusively as a result of the discourse among participants. They saw discourse as a significant part of the collaborative learning process. One participant from Group One described it this way:

It was almost like the conversation itself became alive, became an entity that we were all kind of interacting with. And you know, everything else was sort of, not really subordinate, but involved in it, so that it was kind of a collective whole. I know that's a bizarre thing to say, but it almost has a life of its own, you know the discussion.

Engagement. An important aspect of the learning process for participants was the level of engagement required of them as learners in collaborative learning groups. Rather than passive recipients of knowledge as in traditional learning situations, participants in collaborative learning must become active co-constructors of knowledge. One participant described being drawn into engagement with the group contrary to his intentions when he first entered the class:

But to get in this group, this collaborative-learning group, and go to one meeting and get all

stirred up for whatever reason. I mean I'm thinking, aw hell, I didn't want to do that, I just wanted to go to class. And it was like what I most wanted to avoid. That is this sort of profound involvement. I found myself right in the middle of it from the first get go, you know. So it was so--I mean I was aware of it--so surprising I would invest that much in it at the beginning.

Questions. During the interviews nearly all participants discussed the importance of questions in collaborative learning. Similar to discourse and engagement, participants saw questioning as an activity that differentiates collaborative learning from other types of learning. They reported that the primary difference was that participants ask questions of one another, rather than just the teacher asking questions of students, as is the case in many traditional learning situations. Participants characterized the purpose of questioning to be to move the learning process along and to inquire into each others' ideas and assumptions. They also found this a difficult thing to do well. One participant described her struggle with this by saying, It becomes the challenge of asking the right question. That's really--that's really where the skill comes in. It's not ever coming up with the answer. It's coming up with the question.

Several participants saw a change in the nature of their questions over the span of the semester. One participant from Group Two described this in his phenomenological interview by comparing the fourteenth class session, which he felt was the group's best session, with earlier sessions in the semester:

I think we were more open. It was easier to talk and ask questions and to challenge things, and people weren't getting defensive as much. I think initially somebody would say something, and somebody else would challenge that person, and that person would feel like they were intentionally trying to hurt them. But towards the end of the semester, and especially that night, people realized that these questions are not meant to hurt you, not meant to put you on the spot. They are meant to illicit some more information to make you think about it. And I think people started accepting that premise and working under those guidelines. It was give and take. You're looking at the idea, not the person.

Group Facilitation

The third category of themes to emerge from the data analysis concerned the topic of group facilitation. The category was defined by two different aspects: that participants felt the facilitator acted in such a way as to give them space to work and develop together and that participants came to assume group facilitation responsibilities.

Facilitator Actions. In their interviews participants reported noticing changes in the amount of involvement of the facilitator in the groups' conversations. One participant addressed this issue by saying,

One of the things was [the facilitator's] willingness to leave the class and let the class take over for itself. I think that that probably promoted our class growth as much as anything did. But I also realize that you have to get a group to a certain place before you could assume that progress would continue.

Participants as Facilitators. Initially most participants were reluctant to assume any responsibility for the group, looking to the facilitator to assume the traditional role of directing class activities. However, as the facilitator created space for participants to assume facilitation responsibilities many willingly accepted them. One participant, describing a session when the facilitator was late getting to class said,

And so we just took off and started doing it and said 'you can catch up when you get here.' That was another sign, it just dawned on me. I just remembered that now. That was another sign that the group, not that [the facilitator] was unnecessary, but that the group could function without him. So we just carried on class that night.

This same participant went on to speculate that not only was the group able to function without the facilitator, but that it really wasn't the "facilitator's group". The group had assumed a life of its own.

So it wasn't his group anymore, and I don't know if it was his group at the beginning because we weren't a group. It was his students, it was his class. But I don't ever know if it was his group. Because when we became a group, we almost cut the umbilical cord. It was the group's group.

Discussion of Findings

The collaborative learning process for the participants in this study may be characterized best by the two terms evolution and change. This was true for group process, learning process and for the way the groups were facilitated. Initially the participants were not two groups, but two collections of individuals. By the end of their time together they had become cohesive groups.

Participants' sense of trust of others in the group changed over time. While participants were able to treat one another in a respectful manner from the beginning, they were reluctant at first to disclose much about their thinking to others. Trust came as a result of participants taking risks in the groups and of having their risks met with respect from other participants.

Yalom (1995) claims that the primary source of risk taking in groups concerns sharing personal information with others. Participants in this study did share personal information with one another, but few experienced that as risk taking behavior. Instead, they found sharing incomplete thoughts and ideas with the group to be the primary source of risk taking. Discussing ideas as they were formulating them (or "thinking out loud") initially led many participants to feel that they were vulnerable to the criticism of others in their group. When individual participants took the risk and shared their underdeveloped thoughts and ideas, other participants treated their risk-taking behavior with respect. This show of respect helped to create an environment that allowed trust to grow and develop.

Peters and Armstrong (1998) have speculated that relationships in collaborative learning groups develop "in terms of learner to learner, learner to group, and group to learner" (p.79). The findings of this study support the first two aspects of relationship in this characterization, but not the third. Perhaps further research will shed light on relationships in collaborative learning. The learning process also evolved over time. In collaborative learning the process of learning is knowledge construction.

Knowledge construction involved knowing that, knowing how, and knowing from within conversationally developed contexts created by the participants. Knowing that refers to having knowledge of rules, facts and beliefs; knowing how is practical knowledge. For participants in this study knowing that involved learning about collaborative learning. Knowing how for the participants was knowing how to implement the skills necessary (discourse and questioning) for collaborative learning. The participants became aware of themselves learning the first two kinds of knowledge. They also became aware of interactions within their respective groups and how these interactions contributed to their knowing that and their knowing how. Thus, the participants developed a third kind of knowledge, which is referred to by Shotter (1993) as "knowing from within". Shotter has described such knowledge as,

the kind of knowledge that one has only from within a social situation, a group, or an institution, and which thus takes into account and is accountable to others as to whether its expression or use is ethically proper or not. (p.7) [emphasis in original]

Through their discourse participants established relationships and developed shared meanings that became the background and context from which they constructed new knowledge. By doing so they created their own culture from which they learned.

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