Collaboration in Adult Education

Utilizing Practices That Reflect 21st Century Learning Contexts

By John Tibbetts, Ed.D., and Anestine Hector-Mason, Ph.D.

Introduction

The great innovations of the 21st century have opened opportunities for changes to the fabric of education in the world and especially in the United States—a population representing a unique composite of world cultures. Flourishing innovations like the Internet and its affiliated social media—such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram— have (a) revolutionized our access to information; (b) advanced intercultural and intracultural interactions and communication; and (c) provided an information gateway for transforming our approaches to teaching and learning. These innovations not only beget new ways of thinking and communicating; they also introduce us to new educational and workforce demands—demands that require educators in all sectors to transform their instructional methodologies to those that center on the targeted needs of their students.

Collaboration is one key instructional approach derived from past research and practice that has been shown to address the targeted needs of students. The Encarta Dictionary (2015) defines collaboration as "the act of working together with one or more people in order to achieve something." This research review (a) presents a brief description of literature and research on collaboration; (b) delineates a few aspects of collaboration relevant to the practice of adult education, particularly in the context of the professional learning community (PLC); and (c) provides some guidelines for implementing a collaborative program.

Why Collaboration?

Collaboration can be considered one of the instructional principles from the 20th century that is most suited to technologically aware and diverse adult learner and teacher populations of the 21st century. To address the issue of why collaboration might be most suitable, it is first important to delve deeper into what collaboration means.

As an instructional approach that teachers use to support student learning, collaboration is made up of various techniques aimed at developing teamwork skills and promoting a sense of community in the classroom. Collaborative instructional strategies are sometimes referred to as "collaborative learning," "peer learning, "active learning," "cooperative learning," and "group work," all of which aim to promote student-centered practice. According to Brown (2008), student-centered practice is demonstrated when "the planning, teaching, and assessment revolve around the needs and abilities of the students" (p. 1). Teachers use these strategies to minimize use of the more traditional approaches to teaching (teacher-centered), maximize approaches that encourage student "voice," and promote student knowledge and interests in the classroom as well as their capacity to create and reflect on meaning (student centered).

Literature on Collaboration in Education. Pursued broadly, the search for information on collaboration in education generates a considerable amount of literature that attests to the merits and positive effects of collaboration on student outcomes (Herman, 2013; Jiang, 2014; Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec, 2008; Sears & Pai, 2012; Slavin, 1995; Slavin et al., 2013; Zuo, 2011). In a literature review on collaboration, Lai (2011) sites more than 35 references supporting collaboration in various settings. As a result of her research, Lai reports that "collaboration can have powerful effects on student learning, particularly for low-achieving students" (p. 40). She also finds that "collaboration is linked to a number of important educational outcomes, including critical thinking, metacognition, and motivation" (p. 40). In fact, the majority of literature on student-centered instruction identifies student collaboration or group work as an important instructional ingredient of student-centered practice (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005). Research on collaboration focuses mainly on K–12 and postsecondary education, not on adult education. Literature on collaboration in adult education (Goldstein & Schlessman-Frost, 1992; Sherrit, 1994; Uhl & Squires, 1994; Winer & Ray, 1994) is mainly nonresearch-based papers.

Although relatively few pieces of literature on the broader topic of collaboration are the direct outcome of research,

there is a broad corpus of research-based literature on the topic of *cooperative learning,* much of which shows that students achieve positive outcomes when cooperative learning is implemented in various subject areas—such as English language learning (AbdelWahab, 2014; Ning & Hornby, 2014), mathematics (Lavasani & Khandan, 2011; Slavin et al., 2013), and reading comprehension (Khan & Ahmad, 2014; Zuo, 2011).

In addition to collaborative practices in the classroom, collaboration among administrators, support staff, and instructors is at the heart of the concept of PLCs. In 2011, Melinda Burns reported:

> A large body of research shows that mandatory teacher collaboration, sometimes called 'professional learning communities' gets results. The world's best school systems foster a culture of sharing what works and what doesn't. In the high-scoring schools of Finland, South Korea, and Shanghai, studies show teachers are not like private emperors in their classrooms; they make their practice public, becoming 'learners of their own teaching' (p. 2).

As Burns shows, the programwide "culture of sharing" contributes to improved teaching and, ultimately, better student outcomes.

Relevance to Adult Education

Despite some limitations in the literature base regarding collaboration and adult education, there are key attributes of effective collaboration that are broadly identified across the literature that can apply to adult education. With respect to teacher collaboration, the literature shows that "collaboration is a key factor (of best practices) because a central goal is to reduce fragmentation of knowledge and learning across typical school subjects and to reduce isolation of learners in school and the community" (Stainback & Stainback, 1996, p. 289). Essentially, teacher collaboration is critical to student success, and teachers can collaborate on lesson planning, assessments, and other activities focused on enhancing the potential for positive student learning outcomes.

In terms of student learning, collaboration is mostly discussed in the literature as group work, cooperative learning, or collaborative learning, and several suggestions are provided in the general literature base vis-à-vis classroom strategies that support or involve collaborative practice, such as Think-Pair-Share (Slavin, 1990), utilizing cross-ability groups (Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001), and team-based learning (Davis, 2009), among many others. Programs and teachers vary in how they implement collaborative or cooperative practice depending on a variety of factors, such as teacher familiarity with the approach, program funding, and student interests and motivation. The next section provides some suggestions for collaborative programming in adult education.

Implementing a Collaborative Program

The literature provides an evidence base that supports the practice of collaboration in professional development as a beneficial strategy that promotes student outcomes. Mishkind (2014) describes two successful collaborative professional development models: PLCs and communities of practice. PLCs are based within local programs, and communities of practice can be regional or larger and conducted partially or entirely online, and are defined as groups of people "who share a concern or passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly" (Wenger, n.d., p. 1). Communities of practice are practical in many circumstances because they can be long- or short-lived, and can encompass a small local group or a broad regional or even international group based on a common concern. PLCs, on the other hand, may be more difficult to implement but are effective because of their concentrated local nature. PLCs have gained considerable momentum in the United States and have been widely promoted by DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, and Many (2010) and others, who have published many "how to" books on PLCs, particularly for K–12 programs. The success of K–12 PLC programs, followed by increasing professional development efforts in this area in adult education, have helped to spread the PLC approach, which seems to be the optimal model of collaboration for a school or program. The success of PLC implementation requires a systemic rather than a piecemeal approach. For the programwide implementation of PLCs, considerations must be given to three organizational levels: (1) leadership roles, (2) instructional team roles, and (3) the roles of students and instructors in a collaborative classroom.

Leadership Roles. The agency administrator must serve as the *catalyst and participant* in establishing collaborative teams and developing an agency climate of collaboration and trust. He or she must also be *supportive* and promote and engage in *community collaborations* (e.g., bringing community members into the school as guest speakers, creating advisory boards, and connecting with local businesses). Fundamental across all of these roles is the issue of *trust*. Combs, Harris, and Edmonson (2015) identify major trust-busters, including:

- Not listening, especially after asking for input
- Reprimanding the entire team for the actions of individuals
- Saying one thing but doing another (lip-service only)
- Breaking confidences

According to Goodwin (2015), "when it comes to getting quick results, directive leadership may be more effective. But when it comes to breaking through performance ceilings, empowering, collaborative leadership may be necessary"

(p. 74). Essentially, leaders must, as the cliché notes, do more than "talk the talk;" they must "walk the walk" and participate, when needed, in team deliberations.

Instructional Team Roles. According to Eaton (2015), "a true PLC is a community of learners, all contributing and collaborating toward a common goal. The PLC benefits from the collective intelligence of the group" (p. 1). To function optimally, team members need to *learn how to act collaboratively* as a team and take time for "team building"—establishing team behavior and focus (Nazzaro & Strazzabosco [2009] for protocols for team behavior). With respect to specific educational activities, one task of instructional team members is to *select key standards for each course and level.* The goal is that each teacher receiving a new student from a lower level should know exactly what that student has mastered. Once standards are selected, teams may brainstorm instructional strategies that help students master each standard.

Additionally, team members work collaboratively to determine appropriate assessments. The questions guiding this work are:

- What do the students already know about a standard?
- Did they learn in depth and are they able to apply the standard?
- What should be done if they did not learn?

Drawing on research and their own experience, teams focus their meetings on answering these questions and applying the results in the classroom.

The Roles of Students and Instructors in a Collaborative Classroom. As noted in the research above, collaboration within the classroom is just as important as collaboration outside the classroom. A 3-year study conducted by the American Institutes for Research (AIR) (2014) identified and studied five dimensions of learning: (1) mastery of core content, (2) critical thinking skills, (3) collaboration skills, (4) communication skills, and (5) independent learning skills. Four key findings (all statistically significant) were that students in collaborative classrooms showed (1) higher levels of engagement, (2) greater motivation to learn, (3) increased self-efficacy, and (4) increased collaboration skills.

The collaborative classroom reflects many of the same behaviors as the collaborative instructional team, except that in a collaborative classroom, teachers play the role of facilitators of student learning. Alber (2012) wrote that, "Deeper learning in a collaborative classroom is key." She describes a scenario in which students are "gathered at a table, engaged in a high-level task: discussing, possibly debating an issue, making shared decisions, and designing a product that demonstrates this deeper learning" (p. 1). Collaboration does not just happen because a collaborative task is assigned; it takes planning, and steps may include:

- Sharing the challenge with students
- Deciding on group norms and possible accountability for all
- Setting group roles such as leader, recorder, and reporter
- Teaching students how to listen, how to take turns, and about wait-time before interrupting
- Exploring how to ask good questions
- Negotiating and building consensus
- Analyzing and synthesizing information

Teachers may also consider engaging students in project-based learning (PBL) (Larmer & Mergendoller, 2010; Larmer, Mergendoller, & Boss, 2015), an activity that assumes that students learn best when they experience and solve real-world problems. Similar to cooperative learning, PBL is "a class activity in which students go through an extended process of inquiry in response to a complex question, problem, or challenge" (Thomas, 2000). Generally agreed-upon PBL steps include:

- Identification of an agreed-upon realistic problem or project
- Backwards planning leading to structured group work requiring self-management and collaboration
- Multiple assessments and feedback (e.g., rubrics and benchmarks)
- Presentation and possible revision

Miller (2014) notes that PBL is powerful because it "empowers students to be self-directed, lifelong learners" (p. 2). Johnson and Johnson (1998) reveal that more than a thousand studies support the impacts of PBL and collaborative learning in improving student achievement and promoting positive peer relationships across group lines. Although some K–12 schools use PBL exclusively as their curriculum, most make it part of a multifaceted approach. PBL can be an important addition to adult programs for creating a collaborative student experience.

Conclusion

Collaboration is important for teacher effectiveness and student learning and may require major changes for some programs and teachers. Thornburg (2002) tells us that "we need to work hard to strip our curriculum of content that is no longer relevant" (p. 109). He asserts that schools remain modeled after the Industrial Age (students clustered by age; subjects taught in isolation; students graduate at the end of an assembly line). Yet we have moved on to a Knowledge-Value Era that "requires students to shift from learning isolated skills for a particular career to learning a variety of skills that allow them to shift seamlessly from one career to another" (p. 93). We know that collaborative teaching and learning, as seen in PLCs and collaborative classrooms, requires willing participants, clear vision and goals, the gift of empowerment, and a supportive environment. The results have proven to be impressive, indeed.

References

AbdelWahab Mahmoud, M. M. (2014). The effectiveness of using the cooperative language learning approach to enhance EFL writing skills among Saudi University students. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research, 5*(3), 616–625.

Alber, R. (Ed.). (2012). Deeper learning: A collaborative classroom is key. Retrieved from http://www.edutopia.org/blog/deeper-learning-collaboration-key-rebecca-alber

American Institutes for Research (AIR). (2014). Study of deeper learning: Opportunities and outcomes. Retrieved from http://www.studyofdeeperlearning.org/

Brown, J. (2008). Student-centered instruction: Involving students in their own education. *Music Educators Journal, 94*(5), 30–35.

Burns, M. (2011). Teacher collaboration gives schools better results. *Pacific Standard.* Santa Barbara, CA: Miller-McCune Center for Research, Media and Public Policy.

Combs, J., Harris, S., & Edmonson, S. L. (2015). Four essential practices for building trust. *Educational Leadership.* Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Darling-Hammond, L., & Bransford, J. (Eds.). (2005). *Preparing teachers for a changing world: What teachers should learn and be able to do.* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Davis, B. G. (2009). *Tools for teaching* (2nd ed.), San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

DuFour, R., DuFour, R., Eaker, R., & Many, T. (2010). *Learning by doing: A handbook for professional learning communities at work.* Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree Press.

Eaton, J. (2015). *Seven steps teachers want to use to create PLCs.* Retrieved from http://www.accelify.com/Home/Article/6027

Encarta Dictionary (North America). (2009). Collaboration. Seattle, WA: Microsoft Corporation.

Goldstein, G., & Schlessman-Frost, A. (1992). Albuquerque's PACCT for Literacy: A demonstration model for successful collaboration. *Scope, 92*(1), 5–14.

Goodwin, B. (2015). To go fast, direct. To go far, empower. *Educational Leadership, 72*(5), 73–74.

Herman, K. (2013). The impact of cooperative learning on student engagement: Results from an intervention. *Active Learning Higher Education, 14*(3), 175–185.

Jiang, B. (2014). Web-based cooperative learning in college chemistry teaching. *International Journal of Emerging Technologies in Learning, 9*(2), 45–47.

Johnson, D., & Johnson, R. (1998). *Cooperation and competition: Theory and research.* Edina, MN: Interaction.

Johnson, D. W., Johnson, R. T., & Holubec, E. J. (2008). *Cooperation in the classroom* (8th ed.). Edina, MN: Interaction.

Khan, S. A., & Ahmad, R. N. (2014). Evaluation of the effectiveness of cooperative learning method versus traditional learning method on the reading comprehension of students. *Journal of Research and Reflections in Education, 8*(1), 55–64.

Lai, E. (2011). *Collaboration: A literature review.* Retrieved from http://images.pearsonassessments.com/images/tmrs/Collaboration-Review.pdf

Larmer, J., & Mergendoller, J. (2010, September). *Seven essentials for project-based learning.* Retrieved from http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational_leadership/sept10/vol68/num01/Seven Essentials_for_Project-Based_Learning.aspx

Larmer, J., Mergendoller, J., & Boss, S. (2015). *Setting the standard for project-based learning; A proven approach to rigorous classroom instruction.* Novato, CA: Buck Institute for Education.

Lavasani, M. G., & Khandan, F. (2011). Mathematic anxiety, help seeking behavior and cooperative learning. *Cypriot Journal of Educational Sciences, 2,* 61–74.

Marzano, R. J., Pickering, D. J., & Pollock, J. E. (2001). *Classroom instruction that works: Research-based strategies for increasing student achievement.* Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Miller, A. (2014). Tips for managing project-based learning. *ASCD Express, 10*(4).

Mishkind, A. (2014, September). *Evidence-based professional learning* (Research Brief No. 11). Retrieved from http://www.calpro-online.org/pubs/evidencebasedprofessionallearning.pdf

Nazzaro, A., & Strazzabosco, J. (2009). Group dynamics and team building. *World Federations and Hemophilia, 4,* 1–18.

Ning, H., & Hornby, G. (2014). The impact of cooperative learning on tertiary EFL learners' motivation. *Education Review, 66*(1), 108–124.

Sears, D., & Pai, H. (2012). Effects of cooperative versus individual study on learning and motivation after reward-removal. *Journal of Experimental Education, 80*(3), 246–262.

Sherrit, C. (1994). *Cooperative learning for ABE and ESL classes: Getting started.* Retrieved from http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED368862.pdf

Slavin, R. E. (1990). *Cooperative learning: Theory, research, and practice.* Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Slavin, R. E. (1995). *Cooperative learning: Theory, research, and practice* (2nd ed.). Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon.

Slavin, R. E., Sheard, M. K., Hanley, P., Elliott, L., Chambers, B., & Cheung, A. (2013). *Effects of cooperative learning and embedded multimedia on mathematics learning in key stage 2: Final report.* York, United Kingdom: Institute for Effective Education, University of York.

Stainback, S., & Stainback, W. (1996). *Inclusion: A guide for educators.* Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes.

Thomas, J. (2000, March). *A review of research on project-based learning.* San Rafael, CA: The Autodesk Foundation. Retrieved from http://bie.org/object/document/a_review_of_research_on_project_based_learning

Thornburg, D. (2002). *The new basics: Education and the future of work in the Telematic Age.* Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Uhl, S. C., & Squires, S. E. (1994, April). *Enhancing systemic change through effective collaboration: A formative perspective and approach to collaboration.* Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New Orleans, LA.

Wenger, E. (n.d.). *Communities of practice: A brief introduction.* Retrieved from http://wenger-trayner.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/06-Brief-introduction-to-communities-of-practice.pdf

Winer, M., & Ray, K. (1994). *Collaboration handbook: Creating, sustaining and enjoying the journey.* Saint Paul, MN: Amherst H. Wilder Foundation.

Zuo, W. (2011). The effect of cooperative learning on improving college students' reading comprehension. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies, 1*(8), 986–989.