Collaborative Learning and Teaching

Alex Gitterman

Collaborative Learning and Teaching[1]

by Alex Gitterman

Substantive expertise of a subject is often equated with the ability to teach it. When we embark on our teaching careers, we often begin with this comforting, but mistaken, assumption. This belief is widely held, perhaps because teaching is frequently equated with sharing one's knowledge. As most of us quickly and often painfully discover, while knowledge is an essential requisite, it is not in itself sufficient. How to teach someone else what you know requires specialized knowledge and skills. To make this distinction, Granrose shares his experience with going to a master banjo player for lessons. During each lesson, the master would play several instrumentals at full speed, share experiences as a young banjo player, and urge a great deal of practice. What the master did not, and, apparently could not do, was to slow down his playing enough for me to learn how he made the wonderful sounds he did with the instrument. Nor could he talk clearly about what he was doing. His knowledge of the banjo was in his fingers. Now, that is probably the best place for a banjo player's knowledge to be; with a banjo teacher, however, things are different. A banjo teacher—any teacher—needs to be consciously aware of what he or she is doing (Granrose 1).

This complex relation between subject matter (i.e., what is to be taught) and teaching methodology (i.e., how it is to be taught) is a pervasive and persistant issue in education.

About the Author

Alex Gitterman is the Zachs Professor of Social Work and Director of the Doctoral Program at the University of Connecticut School of Social Work. Alex has published The Encyclopedia of Social Work with Groups (co-editor, forthcoming); The Life Model of Social Work Practice: Advances in Theory and Practice, 3rd ed. (co-author, 2008); Mutual Aid, Vulnerable and Resilient Populations, and the Life Cycle, 3rd ed. (co-editor 2005); The Handbook of Social Work Practice with Vulnerable and Resilient Populations, 2nd ed. (2001); and Public Health Social Work in Maternal and Child Health: A Forward Plan (co-editor 1986).

60

Dewey on Education

Dewey *(The Child)* offers a brilliant insight into this issue by proposing that students' learning needs and life experiences provide the organic link between learners and the curriculum. For this link to be actualized, Dewey formulated two educational principles: experience and interaction. With the principle of experience, Dewey *(The Child)* posited that, for meaningful learning to take place, the "abstract world" of concepts had to be connected to the "real world" of personal experiences. People learn by moving from their personal experiences to organized concepts and theories, and concomitantly, from abstract ideas to their personal meanings.

Through the second principle, interaction, Dewey *(The Theory)* further formulated that for learning to take place, the learner had to interact with the subject. For meaningful interaction to occur, the teacher creates structured opportunities for students to interact with the subject and to personally experience its abstractions. For example, in the primary grades, children are required to memorize explorers of geographic areas. As adults, we often forget these memorizations because we have not personally experienced them. We do not "own" them. Children could more effectively learn about the discovery of a geographic area by actually reenacting the explorer's journey than by simply memorizing relevant facts. By re-creating, experiencing, and interacting with an abstraction, it becomes part of the learners' lives and integrated with their very beings. For another example, children are often introduced to the world of colors by an adult who imparts knowledge by identifying the various color combinations in relationship to the primary colors. However, these remain the adult's insights until the child grasps the relationship her/himself. Alternately, an adult might introduce the world of colors by putting out two primary colors, encourage the children to mix these colors, and make the discoveries for themselves. At this moment, they experience an "Aha" or insight, and have personalized their learning. We tend not to forget our own creations and discoveries.

Dewey, however, cautioned that one did not simply "learn by doing" *(Experience* 16). He added a significant caveat: experience and interaction do not in themselves represent education; rather, the quality of the experience and interaction determine learning. While Dewey *(The Child)* posited that learners required some degree of freedom, he believed that a correspondent degree of structure was equally essential. Freedom and structure (students' interests and needs and subject demands) must be integrated rather than made "antagonists." A flexible structure provides learners with the opportunity to make discoveries for themselves. Therefore, for the teacher, a primary teaching task is to structure the students' learning opportunities to interact with the subject and to personally experience its abstractions. The teacher serves

as a leader (guide) who adds knowledge and structure to the enterprise. Essentially, to fully engage learners with their subjects, teachers invite them to actively and collaboratively participate in the educational journey.

Collaborative Learning

For collaborative learning to evolve, the teacher must be willing to give up the role of being the only expert in the class. Attention to the classroom spatial design is the first step in creating a climate conducive to collaborative learning. The typical classroom set up with a lectern up front and chairs in rows is "probably the least conducive to learning.… It announces…that the name of the game here is one-way transmission" (Knowles 15). A semi-circle or circle arrangement of chairs, desks or tables immediately prescribes a different set of expectations—that student participation is valued and expected and that something different is going to take place in this class. Well-lit, ventilated, comfortable, and clean classrooms also support collaborative learning.

Collaborative learning begins in the first class when the students take their seats and can see each other's faces. Collaborative learning is put into practice when the instructor invites student reactions to the course syllabus and encourages their input into course planning. Out of this discussion, the instructor and students forge an initial mutual understanding about course lines of inquiry, and teaching and learning responsibilities. In developing an initial mutual understanding, an explicit discussion about the instructor's commitment to collaborative learning and an explication of its advantages goes a long way to creating the desired climate. In these early discussions, the teacher attempts to create a supportive and trusting psychological and social climate by respecting and trusting students' input into the course. When students feel respected and trusted by the instructor, they, in turn, will more readily respect and trust each other. In contrast, when students do not feel an instructor's respect and trust, "their energy is spent dealing with this feeling more than with learning" (Knowles 15). Young adult and adult learners have the potential to be self-directed, particularly when their life experiences are utilized as vital resources (Gitterman, "Interactive Andragogy").

The instructor consistently conveys her/his unshakable faith that students will be more able to learn, to think critically and to venture into new substantive areas when they have been involved in an active, cooperative educational process. The teacher focuses and directs class discussions, providing new ideas and perspectives. In the class discussions, the teacher also helps students to search for connections between course readings, assignments, lectures and their personal experiences. In

this process, the instructor models attentive listening, investment in students' learning and collaborative learning (Gitterman, "Reflections").

Students are encouraged to help each other to present and develop their ideas while they are in the process of being formed and shaped. As they build on each other's contributions, they are invited to create new generalizations, underlying principles and meanings. Students are helped to incorporate others' viewpoints. In this way, they can help each other to improve their critical thinking and deepen their analyses. The class discussion is the major teaching method used to help students interact with the subject. Occasional lectures can also facilitate collaborative learning.

Discussion and Lecture Methods

Helping students to personalize learning requires their active engagement with the subject. Structured class discussion provides students an opportunity to exchange ideas with each other as well as with the teacher. When students are involved in an active, cooperative educational process, they are able "to help each other to 'catch the point,' to experience an 'aha,' to capture a pattern of relationships" (Gitterman, "Working with Differences" 68). In collaborative discussions, students have to develop the ability to move outside of themselves, to listen, and to evaluate and perhaps incorporate others' perspectives and learning styles.

To engage students in discussion, the teacher must skillfully carry out the following five tasks (Perlman "Teaching Casework"; Wetly):[2]

1. *Ask appropriate questions.* The questions we ask require different types of answers: facts and clarification; inferences and explanations; elaborations and syntheses; evaluative judgments and opinions.

In the first few classes, questions that invite opinions that have no right or wrong answers are more likely to encourage open discussion. The emphasis should be on students building on each other's contributions rather than the instructor responding to each student's comments.

Teachers should plan in advance some questions designed to provoke thinking about the assigned readings. For example, in assigning readings, teachers might suggest that students read with specified issues, controversies, and questions in mind. With a preparatory focus, students examine the readings in a more thoughtful and focused way. Preparation enhances their readiness to engage in a structured discussion and provides a framework for it.

2. *Respond supportively to students' communications.* When we ask questions, we must make sure to wait for answers.

Student responses need to be valued and supported, especially when inaccuracies, illogical reasoning, or stereotypical thinking must be corrected. A climate of acceptance and support must be established for students to feel safe in risking themselves and their ideas with one another and with the instructor. Starting where students are in their knowledge and understanding, respecting their desire to learn and participate in collaborative efforts with their peers, demonstrating interest in each student's ideas, and expressing appropriate humor and enthusiasm for the subject represent important guiding principles.

At the same time, misinformation, illogical thinking, and inappropriate use of concepts and principles must be corrected. The teacher might raise a question about what the student has said, ask for evidence, suggest additional readings, provide the corrected information, or suggest an alternative explanation.

3. *Answer student questions.* How the teacher responds to students' questions has a profound impact on class climate and quality of discussions.

If the teacher does not understand a question, the student should be asked to rephrase it. If the student remains unclear, other students might be asked for assistance. At times, the instructor may not have an answer to a student's question. Teachers often feel pressure to be all knowing and to hide their uncertainty. To respond, "I'm not sure, I need some more time to think about it. What do others think about it?" models un-defensive behavior for students to emulate.

Occasionally, a student asks a question to challenge the teacher's authority, (e.g., "How come you don't provide us with weekly reading assignments?") At this moment, all eyes are on the teacher. A student's challenge provides an opportunity to model un-defensive exploration. For example, the teacher might respond, "Have you found I haven't provided enough structure to your reading?" (More on challenging the teacher's authority later in this essay.)

4. *Maintain a flexible focus.* This represents a difficult task. When focus in class discussion is unclear, movement toward subject mastery is impeded. Too much control, however, results in mechanical responses that interfere with free interplay of pertinent ideas or the exploration of new ones.

Because self-expression is not the reason for the discussion, the teacher must take responsibility for keeping it on track, while allowing the exploration of related ideas when indicated. Ideas must be woven together to keep their bearing on the focal point. Occasionally, when students' interests or concerns veer away from the focal point or push ahead of the teacher's planned sequence, the original point can be temporarily laid aside with the explicit recognition that it will be returned to later in the discussion.

64   *Collaborative Learning and Teaching*

Periodically during a class session, the teacher pulls together the threads of the discussion and at the end of the session relates them to what has been achieved and what still remains to be done. In some instances, especially in those involving literary and theoretical ambiguity, no resolution should be reached. Students need to learn to tolerate and sustain ambiguity. As time goes on, the teacher has students pull the discussion together, a useful learning task. For example, the instructor might stop the discussion and ask: "Where are we right now, what one or two ideas are you pulling out from our discussion (or the differences being expressed)?"

Students should leave class sessions having wrestled with significant issues and with a sense of having mastered important content. This cannot happen without the teacher's guidance of the discussion, however involved the students might seem to be. Productive class discussion has movement; it is not free-flowing self-expression or a bull session. The teacher keeps the class discussions related to the learning goals that give it direction.

5. *Structure class discussion.* To be effective, discussion must be focused, and bound by educational objectives and the time available for achieving them.

A class can be divided into small committees or subgroups (four to six students) to work on a common learning issue or task. If a formal presentation is required, the committee structure is most useful. Students will need to meet outside of class, pooling their knowledge and mastering content. They will also have to develop a method for presentation that engages peers in the learning process. Through this process, students learn new content, and become curious about pedagogical techniques. To assure quality presentations, the teacher can meet with each committee to provide needed resources and suggestions.

For briefer, informal work the subgroup is useful. After the teacher provides clear focus and instruction, subgroups are given a set period in which to complete the assignment. Each group selects a recorder to pull together the discussion and present the material. At the end of the allotted time, the teacher invites each group's report and pulls together core concepts and identifies trends in thought.

In collaborative learning, discussions carry most of the teaching: informal and relatively brief lectures help to clarify what is to be learned. They can be planned or spontaneous. The lecture serves three important purposes (Perlman, "Teaching Casework"):

1. A lecture *provides information.* A lecture condenses information and provides a tool for the discussion to come. A lecture also provides new information that is not readily available in the literature. Often this kind of brief lecture provides an introduction to a new topic.

2. A lecture *organizes and integrates knowledge.* A lecture supplements students' own efforts to organize knowledge through reflection and class discussion. A lecture can bring out the parallels in two or more systems of thought; or compare and contrast different novels; or connect past and present issues in literary thought. Placing the many bits and pieces of what the student has been reading, discussing, and experiencing into a systematic framework aids the students' efforts to integrate diverse materials. A brief lecture at the end of a unit of study, going beyond mere summarization, can weave together the various strands of discussions.

3. A lecture *interprets and illuminates knowledge.* Often there is a need to clarify contradictory and conflicting ideas. Students value an occasional spontaneous lecture that reveals where the teacher is in her/his present thinking on complex and ambiguous ideas. They identify with the teacher's independence of thought in questioning accepted notions in literary interpretations or taking exception to the writings of "authorities."

The usefulness of a lecture is revealed by how it affects the quality of student thinking and communication in class discussion, and their analysis and synthesis in written assignments. Together, discussion and lecture form the principal methods of the teaching/learning experience. The usefulness of a lecture is revealed by how it affects the quality of student thinking and communication in class discussion, and their analysis and synthesis in written assignments. Together, discussion and lecture form the principal methods of the teaching:learning experience.

The "Hidden" Class Group

In every class, a "hidden" group exists with distinctive cultures, interpersonal communication and relationship structures and processes (Shulman). The hidden class group begins to develop as soon as students walk into the classroom in the first class. Usually, an instructor, even in large lecture courses, can feel the class/group collective emotional state. Students verbally and nonverbally (facial expressions, seating postures) convey moods of exhaustion, apathy, anger, or of hopefulness, excitement, and energy. The instructor intuitively "feels" the collective mood. When the students slouch deep in their seats, faces staring blankly ahead, the instructor gets that sinking feeling—"This is going to be a tough one!" In contrast, when the students seem alert and energetic, the instructor "feeds" off that energy. External forces as well as internal classroom forces affect the collective mood of

students. Since the class culture supports or impedes the breadth and depth of collaborative learning, teachers need to familiarize themselves with class/group cultures, structures and processes, and develop strategies to influence them.

The interplay of two factors, the teacher's authority and students' interpersonal relationships, provides the driving force of the class/group experience (Schwartz 9). As a class begins, students must work out their relationship to the teacher and to each other. Initially, students tend to be preoccupied with the teacher's authority (its consistency, fairness, boundaries). Based on their life experiences, each student enters the class with a basic orientation to authority figures. Some students tend to rebel against authority figures. Other students tend to be submissive to authority figures. Still other students are relatively neutral and respond flexibly and differently in different situations (Bennis and Sheppard). Regardless of their personal orientations, all students are alertly watching and listening, assessing the teacher's competence, trustworthiness and authoritative stance. Consequently, in this beginning phase of the hidden group in the classroom, students tend to be cautious and search for cues. The more dependent students search for prescriptions, curriculum structure and teacher's approval. The more rebellious students search for teacher inconsistency and weakness. Although the students' orientations to authority are different, they have in common basic concerns about being disapproved of and rejected by the teacher.

Students with a rebellious orientation will test the teacher and attempt to make her/his weaknesses and limitations explicit. In certain class/groups, this testing can intensify and create anxiety for all. How the teacher deals with the testing processes determines, to a large degree, the extent to which collaborative learning and course mastery is achieved. If the teacher assumes an authoritarian posture, engages in unnecessary power struggles, or abdicates an educational leadership role, members will remain preoccupied with questioning the teacher's credibility rather than turn their energies to helping each other learn the curriculum. If, on rare occasions, the teacher and students fail to get past this testing phase, collaborative processes can go astray.

When the teacher does not personalize the testing and deals with it in a straightforward manner, the testing usually subsides. The fact that the teacher is not thrown by the testing allows the more submissive and neutral students to coalesce and begin engaging each other. This marks a significant shift in the class/group. Essentially, before students can turn their energies toward each other and develop interpersonal trust, they have to become less preoccupied with the teacher and testing his/her authority. In this phase of class/group development, the teacher helps classmates to

support each other in the educational journey, and, simultaneously to make demands on each other (in a supportive manner) for rigorous thinking and creative risk taking.

As students experience support from group/class members and the instructor, they are more likely to share their ideas and experiences, and increasingly take risks in the educational journey. While they initially may offer surface interpretations and analyses, they are actually testing each other's potential for being judgmental. In the process of learning from each other, students often encounter yet another class/group developmental issue; namely, how close do they want to become to each other. Based on her/his life experiences, each student enters the class/group with a basic orientation to intimacy with peers (Bennis and Sheppard). Some students will resist becoming close to peers. Other students will desire a great deal of interpersonal intimacy. Still other students are relatively neutral and respond flexibly and differently in different situations. Regardless of their personal orientations, all students are assessing the trustworthiness of their classmates and determining whether they feel safe from negative judgments and rejection. Thus, students' different orientations to intimacy create another major challenge to the class/group. Similar to the authority-challenge phase, the intimacy phase of class/group life creates tensions and obstacles for collaborative learning.

These interpersonal tensions and obstacles become evident in such class/group behaviors as mutual withdrawal, formations of factions and alliances, clowning, scapegoating and monopolism. At times, the students with the more neutral orientation to intimacy serve as mediators and help members negotiate a common comfort zone. Other times, however, these obstacles may become fixed and interfere with peer learning. The teacher has to deal with these threats to collaborative learning rather than to simply ignore them. To mitigate these interfering patterns, the teacher uses various interventions.

Since class/group members may be unaware of their interpersonal patterns, the teacher identifies collaborative learning obstacles. For example, the teacher can simply describe the patterned interaction: "I've noticed every time I invite you to deepen your literary analyses, someone picks on John and our focus changes from the learning task." The identification of the behavioral transaction is often a first step to raising consciousness. If the pattern repeats itself, the teacher reflects on the prior effort: "O.K., here we go again, it's happening right now. Bill, you just started in on John just when I asked about your progress on your group projects."

Often, class/group members may resist a teacher's identification of transactional patterns. To give up entrenched patterns is far from easy. Avoiding conflict, inti-

68   *Collaborative Learning and Teaching*

macy and threatening academic tasks or escaping into an "illusion of learning" may be initially an easier and understandable option. However, for collaborative learning to serve the course's purpose, the teacher has to hold class/group members to their mutual understanding about the course and its lines of inquiry, as well as teaching and learning responsibilities. The teacher makes the demand that they attend to the interpersonal obstacles: "Everybody is fuming but nobody is talking. What's going on? This silence will not solve our classroom problems. What's happening?" If the silence continues, the teacher makes a further demand: "I want each one of you to put your silence into words; what are you thinking at this moment?" The teacher invites and sustains working on the obstacle to collaborative learning. Generally, when anger is suppressed or denied, communication is thwarted and collaborative learning wanes.

By inviting negative feelings and thoughts, the teacher conveys interest and respect for each class/group member and faith in their ability to communicate and work on interpersonal issues. And by overcoming them, collaborative learning is enhanced. Such professional directness and persistence convey the teacher's strength and genuine caring, which, in turn, might release students' energies to deal with course demands and with each other. Challenging dysfunctional collaborative communication and relationship patterns may induce a learning crisis, which may permit communication and relational patterns to improve.

If students are to feel sufficiently comfortable to participate in discussion of interfering tensions and obstacles to their learning, they need a secure atmosphere in which differences can be examined without fear of recrimination. Thus, the teacher must establish ground-rules, which protect and facilitate open and direct collaborative learning. Explicit rules barring use of verbal abuse, ridicule or even threat have to be established. Such rules provide normative supports for the weaker class/group member. The teacher insistently encourages and, even, demands that students abide by the agreed upon rules. Feeling safe is a prerequisite to collaborative learning.

Relationship and communication obstacles are phenomena inherent in a group's life. Members usually have some ambivalence about intimacy, about being close to each other and with the teacher. As students work out such issues, they become closer, supportive, and helpful to each other. Usually with the teacher's encouragement and direct involvement, the interpersonal tensions diminish and energies are released for the learning tasks. When these obstacles are ignored or dealt with unskillfully, they become entrenched and threaten collaborative learning. The teacher, thus, has to have confidence in the students and in his/her abilities to deal with class learning obstacles.

The instructor models for students how to demonstrate interest, convey to others the worthiness of their ideas, and offer suggestions. As members experience their ideas valued and not judged, they are likely to risk deeper interpretations and analyses. Learning from each other as well as the instructor brings a special excitement into the classroom. The classroom becomes alive with a debate of ideas and building of connections. Supportive peer learning encourages students to struggle, to exchange ideas, and to build on each other's contributions. Since class/group members have had common cohort experiences, they are often receptive to each other's views, suggestions and challenges.

Conclusion

Some readers may be wondering, "What does attention to class/group culture, structure and process have to do with students learning course content?" As Dewey suggested, no dichotomy exists between content and process. For the teacher, it is a false choice to choose between covering the material over dealing with class obstacles that interfere with students learning the material. One deals with a class obstacle to learning so that students can learn the course content. For example, when this teacher returns graded student papers, the students' facial expressions and silences speak loudly. While I may be ready to move on to the next learning task, they are not! They need some time to process my feedback, to express their disappointment about grades, and to identify unclear or unfair expectations. To ignore their deafening silence would only push their feelings underground, and their energy for learning would be displaced by festering resentment. Allotting some time for a discussion about the paper frees the students to continue the learning journey. Process and content are, after all, interdependent. We always need to keep in mind the distinction between "covering" the material and "learning" the material.

NOTES

[1] This paper has been prepared in honor of Ken Bruffee—a visionary scholar, a dedicated educator, a compassionate man.

[2] Discussion drawn from Germain and Gitterman.

WORKS CITED

Bennis, Warren G., and Herbert A. Shepard. "A Theory of Group Development." *Human Relations* 9.4 (1956): 415-437.

Dewey, John. *The Child and the Curriculum and the School and the Society.* Chicago: Phoenix, 1966.

—. *Experience and Education.* New York: Macmillan, 1947.

—. *The Theory of Inquiry.* New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1938.

Germain, Carel B., and Alex Gitterman. *Instructor's Manual for the Life Model of Social Work Practice: Advances In Theory And Practice,* 2nd ed. New York: Columbia UP, 1996.

Gitterman, Alex. "Interactive Andragogy: Principles, Methods, and Skills." *Journal of Teaching in Social Work* 24.3/4 (2004): 95-112.

—. "Reflections about Teaching and Learning." *Reflections* 2 (Spring 1995): 9-18.

—. "Teaching Students to Connect Theory and Practice." *Social Work with Groups* 11.1/2 (1988): 33-42.

—. "Working with Differences: White Teacher and African-American Students." *Journal of Teaching Social Work* 5.2 (1992): 65-80.

Granrose, John. "How Do You Teach?" *The Teaching Professor* 1 (April 1987): 1-2.

Knowles, Malcolm S. "Introduction: The Art and Science of Helping Adults Learn." *Andragogy in Action: Applying Modern Principles of Adult Learning.* Ed. Malcolm S. Knowles and Associates. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1985. 1-22.

Mezirow, Jack. "Learning to Think Like an Adult." *Learning as Transformation: Critical Perspectives on a Theory in Process.* Ed. Jack Mezirow and Associates. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000. 3-33.

Perlman, Helen. H. "The Lecture as a Method in Teaching Casework." *Social Service Review* 25 (Mar. 1951): 19-32.

—. "Teaching Casework by the Discussion Method." *Social Service Review* 24 (Sept. 1950): 334–346.

Schwartz, William. "On the Uses of Groups in Social Work Practice." *The Practice of Group Work.* Ed. William Schwartz and Serapio R. Zalba. New York: Columbia UP, 1971. 3-24.

Shulman, Lawrence. "The Hidden Group in the Classroom." *Learning and Development* 2.3 (1970): 1-6.

Welty, William. "Discussion Teaching Method." *Change* (July/Aug. 1989): 41–49.