

## Collaborative Learning Reflection

MDDE 665 – Athabasca University

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Assignment 1

### **Introduction**

Brookfield and Preskill (2005) extoll the virtues of discussion and how it develops habits of collaborative learning as follows: "Collaboration is addictive. The more successful people are at collaborating with others, the more they seek the chance to do it. Unfortunately, opportunities for collaboration are all too infrequent...It provides an important outlet for the kind of communal sharing that many people crave" (p. 33).

My logical mind recognizes the benefits of 'sharing' but I am not one of those who crave it. Since the start of my graduate studies at Athabasca, I have found collaborative learning challenging. One might wonder then why I would sign up for a course called "Collaboration and Mentoring in Educational Environments" where clearly the focus is on collaboration in learning. I will try to briefly address that question and why I don't feel 'successful' with collaborative learning as I reflect on my recent group experience developing and presenting on key considerations when collaborating with community partners. In this assignment I will also present a summary of strengths and weaknesses of our group's collaborative process, as well as personal lessons learned from this collaborative group experience.

### **Description of a Collaborative Process**

Our team was comprised of three members representing three time zones (Toronto, Papan, Malaysia, and Vancouver). Logistically, the window of time for synchronous collaboration was limited, yet with the tools we selected, i.e., Skype, Google Docs, Google chat, and email, our group was able to effectively connect and work 'offline,' picking up where each left off on the work. Our group took awhile to coalesce; we first established an outline of how to respond to the assignment and then we set up a meeting schedule in Google Docs. Even with this organization, I missed an initial meeting and another member missed two meetings as our work progressed. As

the deadline for the class congress approached, we scrambled to complete the presentation content without a 'practice' session. On the day of the presentation, a group member confided that they didn't think the slides made any sense and another emailed to say they weren't sure if they could attend the live session and that their part wasn't as important. This was the backdrop for our collaborative group experience.

Partnership involves two or more parties who work together and is characterized by 'collegial' or open and honest communications where contributions and perspectives of others in the group are valued (D'Amour, Ferrada-Videla, Rodriguez, and Beaulieu, 2005). There was candor and open dialogue between our team members about how to approach the assignment. When I initially had concerns about relying on Coleman's (2009) rules of collaboration as a lens to shape our case studies and presentation, the other team members were accepting of my arguments and we were able to jointly agree on how best to apply them to our findings. In other words, we didn't always agree on the best possible solution but once a decision was made, we all supported it (Thomson and Perry, 2006).

In terms of interdependency, what Thomson and Perry (2006) refer to as 'mutuality,' we were indeed like 'actors who depend on one another' (D'Amour et al., 2005), and this was very apparent in our live class congress where I was scheduled to lead the closing discussion but given technology difficulties another team member stepped in to facilitate. After our live session, I sent an email to both team members thanking them for helping and for the opportunity to work with them. One team member responded by stating: 'That's what collaboration is all about.'

Gardenswartz, Cherbosque, and Rowe (2009) remind us how easy it is for groups to have judgmental reactions to one another's behavior when collaborating. They recommend that groups

collaborating establish a 'set of norms' in which all agree how to work together and to hold each other accountable in order for a sense of shared ownership to develop. Personally, I did have doubts at one time that we were all committed equally to the assignment but persevered to tune that thought out and instead focus on working together with 'goodwill' of intent. This aspect speaks to the inherent tension of balancing one's own interests with that of the collective when collaborating in groups, and this is why collaboration is at its nature 'multi-dimensional, ambiguous, dynamic and complex' (Thomson & Perry, 2006). In effect, something that is out of our personal scope of control.

My final observation about our group collaboration process is that despite those individual misgivings prior to class congress, not having time to meet again for a practice session, we pulled together to deliver the presentation and facilitate a discussion effectively. Gardenswartz et al. (2009) describe this as 'social architecting,' that is, enrolling and engaging others in the collaborative effort, and indeed it felt that way, each one of us took turns to mobilize ourselves given technology challenges and adjustments in schedule.

### **Conclusion: Personal Lessons Learned**

I still feel the same way as I did about collaboration and discussion before this assignment - that it's plain hard work. These processes require mindful attentive listening and communication, and 'hospitality,' what Coleman (2009) refers to as being a 'conscious communicator.' With 4 minutes to close, a technology glitch at the end, I didn't feel 'successful' on the evening of the class congress. The question and answer portion where I was to solicit input from the class felt hurried; I realized I was leading to close rather than to allow questions to open and lead to new ideas. My biggest lesson learned therefore from this experience, was to let go of expectations

about what 'successful' discussion or collaboration looks like...insights are unpredictable after all. Furthermore, whether it is one's role or not to formally 'facilitate' discussion, when we work collaboratively as groups, we all play a role to poke and feed those in the learning journey to test their assumptions and to drive others to ask new questions. This opens up doors, new ideas, solutions and increases our awareness and tolerance for ambiguity or complexity; it also helps us develop the habit of collaborative learning (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005). And this explains the reason why I am taking this course.

## References

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