

Easier said than done: Collaborative Learning

Chris Watkins takes a closer look at collaboration between pupils: why do they enjoy it and how does it work?



Working with friends. Working as a team. Working in groups. When we ask pupils and teachers how classroom pedagogy might be improved, this is what primary schoolchildren say. In secondary schools, meanwhile, a preference for learning with friends was voiced by 53 per cent of respondents in a 2008 MORI survey – an increase from 35 per cent in 2007 and 28 per cent in 1998. When we ask teachers about their own best experiences of learning, they regularly report times when they worked and learned with others – but by no means all of their examples come from a classroom context.

However, when we look into classrooms we find that they are often not characterised by co-operation or collaboration: for many years research on primary school classrooms has shown that pupils may be placed in groups around a table, but that does not mean they are operating in groups. And in secondary schools the 2008 survey shows that ‘working in small groups to solve a problem’ has declined in the last decade.

How might we explain this disjunction between what people think is best and what we see in classrooms? Some of the issues which have been highlighted in the past include:

- Teachers have seldom experienced classrooms being run in a collaborative fashion
- The culture of schools does not foster collaborative work by teachers themselves
- The dominant values in today’s schooling, especially under the influence of hyper-accountability, emphasise individualism

So is there any point trying to develop more collaborative learning in classrooms? I believe

so. It will generate important social learning and life skills for young people, a more balanced role for the teacher and better behaviour. There are benefits even if we accept the narrow educational priorities of the present time, as the research evidence suggests that collaborative learning is associated with higher performance, right from the earliest years in schooling:

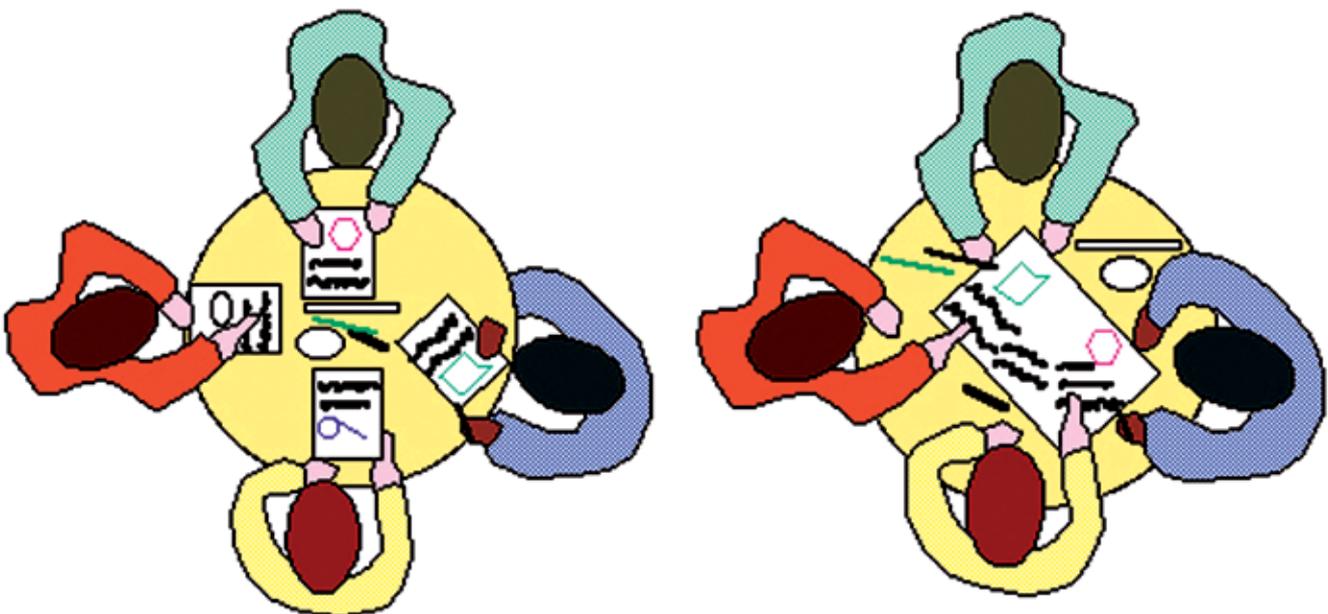
“Over a school year, children in experimental classes improved more than children in control classes with regard to academic attainment, motivation to work with others, group and on-task focus and showed high levels of communicative interaction with partners. It is concluded that young children are capable of engaging in effective group work that promotes academic achievement.” (Kutnick 2008, on five- to seven-year-olds)

So if we are to develop more collaborative learning in classrooms, the following issues may need to be addressed:

- what collaboration means and why it is important in learning
- designing tasks for collaboration
- prompting collaborative interaction and skills
- developing classroom structures for participation

One distinction that seems to prove useful is between co-operation and collaboration. When people are co-operating, they are adjusting their actions so that each person achieves their individual goals, whereas collaboration is about actions being adjusted in order to achieve a shared goal. In a classroom you would see and hear different things for these two processes. You would see co-operating learners perhaps around a table working on their own tasks (see figure 1), but hear them saying such things as “Pass the ruler please” to co-ordinate their use of scarce resources. Collaborating learners would be seen to contribute to a shared task, and would be overheard saying things more like “Let’s try it like this”.

Figure 1: Co-operating and collaborating learners



Collaboration is about creating something greater between us than would have been achieved separately. In a classroom, students might be working in groups of two or more, mutually searching for understanding, solutions, or meanings, or creating a product. Their activities often require the exploration or application of the key ideas in the curriculum area being addressed.

Communication is central and is also the key to learning. As Annie (10 years) puts it, in an interview with Caroline Lodge: “You learn more [when working with others] because if you explain to people what to do, you say things that you wouldn’t say to yourself, really. So you learn things that you wouldn’t know if you were just doing it by yourself.”

Promoting dialogue

Collaborative learning aims to promote dialogue. Dialogue enhances understanding when learners explain to each other. As learners become more adept in talking themselves through problems and contexts, their ‘outer speech’ develops, and so does their ‘inner speech’, giving greater power of self-direction.

Designing tasks for collaboration is a crucial element: the design of the task can be more powerful in creating the need for collaboration than any other of the tactics we may resort to (such as encouragement, or even more telling). There are three key considerations.

First, the task must not be ‘decomposable’; in other words, it must not be able to be completed by one member of the group, leaving the others to indulge in what has come to be known as ‘social loafing’! So it would be counterproductive to give a group of learners a set of maths exercises, for example, since one person could complete them for the rest. Second, the task must require the contribution of all members of the group, through their different voices, angles, roles, and so on. This builds an interdependence which is reciprocal: each student is dependent on the contributions of all others.

Finally, the task cannot be a 'right answer' task: instead it must require higher-order thinking and the negotiation of meaning. So if our group of learners were asked: "Look at these maths exercises, see whether there are different ways of completing them, and decide whether one way is better than the rest", the task would necessarily involve them in variety, strategy and decision making. Their interaction would need to bring their perspectives together and reconcile them together.

Next we come to *prompting collaborative interaction and skills*. Most learners' previous classroom history and much of their surrounding culture may not have prepared them well for collaboration, and the interaction may be disconnected or even competitive. So how can we encourage the appropriate sort of interaction? Recent studies show the importance of briefing and prompting learners for the interaction which is to come. This can be supported by offering them prompts to try out on key aspects:

- thought-provoking aspect of interaction. For example: "Why is..... important?" and "What would happen if...?"; "What do you think of my idea?" and "So you reckon that..."
- social aspects of interaction, for example how best to be a help-seeker or a help-giver: "I'm confused about..."; "I don't see why..."; "It would help me if you could explain..."; "Did you get that bit?"; "How does it make sense to you now?"
- emotional aspects, especially the clear communication of emotional states, for example: "I feel..... when you..... because....."

The development of skills for collaboration is more likely to come about through learners reviewing live experiences than from anyone telling or 'modelling'. If there has been a short briefing before the experience, a debriefing will naturally follow but, again, will need some prompting. When the pupils review, if they are asked to consider "What was it that helped?" and "How could we make it better?", most times they will come up with similar things that the teacher might have noticed and be concerned about, and sometimes their proposals for improvement will be more credible.

Structures for participation

Then there is *developing classroom structures for participation*. Most classrooms do not structure the way in which learners participate with each other. When we ask pupils to portray their classroom in a drawing, they often depict isolated learners. A layout of rows or a seating plan based on gender or attainment indicates that learners are not arranged to view each other as resources for their learning. For improving on this, the basic building block is pair work, through which the skills of exchange dialogue, helping, and contributing to a new shared product can develop.

Small groups in a classroom context are often most successful beginning as threes or fours. Even here, starting the process in pairs can be of value, and then coming to the small groups of four when further dialogue and learning take place. As a further step the small groups can come together to create a whole-class product. This structure has sometimes been called a 'snowball', because the product

increases in size as the process rolls on. If the initial task has been the same for all participants, the later stages run the risk of feeling repetitious.

A whole-class structuring practice which gets over such difficulties has its history in the context of improving race relations in 1970s USA following the desegregation of high schools. Rather than try to solve the difficulties that arose between black and white students by bemoaning their lack of skills or by creating 'add-on' strategies or programmes, the social psychologist Eliot Aronson took the view that core classroom activities needed to be addressed: "It would be valuable if the basic process could be changed so that youngsters could learn to like and trust



each other – not as an extracurricular activity but in the course of learning their reading, writing, and arithmetic.” (www.jigsaw.org)

The approach that was devised can apply to any classroom activity that can be divided into component parts – a story, a reading, a production, a new area of knowledge. The metaphor of a jigsaw is used to describe the whole class making up a picture from its parts. The classroom practice is to divide an area of enquiry into different sections, each one of which is allocated to a sub-group of the class. In phase 1, these sub-groups become temporary experts in their section, and then in phase 2 the groups are recomposed with one expert from each section in the (now) ‘jigsaw’ group.

At this point the big picture is created – by students who have now grasped that picture through their own efforts and understandings. So diversity is embraced and the procedure makes use of that key strategy in promoting active learners – asking them to learn something in order to help others learn it. I have witnessed primary and secondary examples where teachers have been amazed at the high levels of engagement and the high level of processing that occur in a jigsaw classroom. And the connection with levels of achievement was best made for me by Gemma, the science teacher for a group of Year 8 disruptive boys, who exclaimed: “And they all learned much more than they were supposed to!”

How to manage

So how can we best manage the development of more collaborative learning in classrooms? The answer for me is to apply the above ideas to our work with teachers:

- start by having pairs of teachers plan together, something to which they can each contribute
- support them in high-level thinking, not compliance
- help them review, to identify what’s effective (both in their classroom practice and in their relations during this development)

During such development, there are some predictable tensions and some classic ‘ah, but...’ factors which are useful to anticipate.

One is the issue of within-class and across-class grouping by so-called ‘ability’. This has become a more prevalent practice in our schools following the pressure applied by central policy voices. But the evidence is not in its favour, so it should not act as a barrier. A major review for the DfES in 2005 stated: “Especially with regard to attainment, studies have not shown evidence that streamed or set classes produce, on average, higher performance than mixed-ability classes... There are no significant differences between setting and mixed ability teaching in overall attainment outcomes. Studies suggest little evidence that ability grouping across KS3 contributes to raising standards for all pupils.”

An interesting phenomenon sometimes occurs when operating classrooms in groups – the idea arises that some sort of extrinsic motivation will be needed, such as a prize

Classroom pointers when developing more collaborative learning

1. The task which is aiming to promote collaboration. Check:
 - could this task be completed by one?
 - does this task require something different from all?
 - is this task requiring higher-order thinking?
2. The interaction between learners which is meant to be collaborative. Ask:
 - were learners supported, e.g. through prompts for how to be co-operative?
 - were learners invited to review their collaboration – and when did it go best?
3. The structures for people to participate with each other. Is there:
 - a foundation of paired talk (‘talk partners’, ‘chatterboxes’, ‘study buddies’...)?
 - a progression to reciprocal teaching and collaborative groups?
 - a culmination in the whole class being a learning community?

or a competition between teams. This may indicate that the focus has turned toward performance rather than learning, which is intrinsically motivating and is needed for highest performance. A recent experience was instructive on this issue: a creative teacher, Jenny, reported: “We planned a project where groups had to design a healthy fruit cocktail, and the best group would win. When it came to it, we just dropped the competition aspect and it was brilliant.”

Other reservations teachers may have, and which may need to be addressed, include the following:

- “I couldn’t delegate to *them!*” So what model of leadership are we ourselves displaying when we say that? And what do you think they think of being treated like that?
- “They don’t have the skills of collaboration.” Well, it’s our job to try to do something about that.
- “Isn’t it likely to get noisy?” The idea that a good classroom is a quiet classroom goes back to the monastery. Let’s try to judge the quality of the buzz that develops during collaboration.
- “The caretaker wouldn’t like me moving the tables.” OK – it’s good to be clear about our real priorities in school!
- “Won’t the ‘high flyers’ be held back?” Actually the evidence is that they are not, but anyway we need to find ways of embracing diversity rather than maintaining difference.

Chris Watkins is a reader at the Institute of Education, University of London, and an independent project leader with schools. See www.ioe.ac.uk/people/chriswatkins Chris Watkins is a keynote speaker at the Teaching With Imagination Conference in May see pages 76 for more details.