Active Learning (2)
Cooperative/Collaborative Learning

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Despite the fact that I taught for several decades in a sociology department and believed that I had attained a degree of professionalism in this field, it was Gilly Salmon, a leading British pedagogist who teaches at the Open University (UK) that recently drew my attention to the importance of the work Emile Durkheim, a leading French sociologist, in respect to my quest to enhance quality learning in my classes. Writing more than a century ago, and with reference to his seminal work on *collective representation*, "*Durkheim showed that a sense of security and progress depends on broad agreement both on the ends to be pursued and on the accepted means of attaining them*." (Salmon, 2000: 28) Thus, it was Durkheim's work, a sociological account of the consequences of socialization and its implications for human behavior that motivated me to explore the benefits to be derived from perceiving my class as a **"learning community"** with its own distinct learning culture, formal and informal rules and norms and behavior.

From there it was only a short step to the recognition of the significance of "cooperative/collaborative learning" as a dynamic and innovative way of enhancing quality active learning among my students. The key to attaining active learning, therefore, was the process of enabling and/or empowering my class of individual students to transform into a "learning community" composed of "cooperative/collaborative learners".   In this respect the individual students, were now being compelled to interact in three different ways through the pedagogic socialization process: interaction with course ware, interaction with me and of greatest significance interaction with their peers. This process quickly generated its own momentum and again of critical importance an acquired sense of "ownership" with regard to knowledge construction and thus also a sense of "power" that implicitly re-negotiated the conventional and hierarchical parameters and boundaries of the teacher-student relationship. Students derived their empowerment from the very process of establishing their own "learning community" which was facilitated by the instructor, but not awarded.

The learning benefits to be derived from such a process are captured by Rowntree who notes that:
> *Participants are liable to learn as much from one another as from course material or from the interjections of a tutor. What they learn, of course, is not so much product (e.g. information) as process – in particular the creative cognitive process of offering up ideas, having them criticized or expanded on, and getting the chance to reshape them (or abandon them) in the light of peer discussion. The learning becomes not merely active…but also **interactive**. The learners have someone available from whom they can get an individual response to their queries or a new idea and from whom they can get a challenging alternative perspective. In return, they can contribute likewise to other colleagues' learning (and themselves learn in the process of doing so).* (Rowntree, 1995:207)

A central issue in this process of active and/or interactive learning is that the locus of power in the learning relationship is no longer with the instructor, professor or academic expert. In "cooperative/collaborative learning", that takes place within a "learning community of peers", the conventional hierarchy is replaced by a "flattening "of the communication structure between professor

and students.   In this respect the learning process can achieve **knowledge construction** as compared to **information dissemination** which is the hallmark of most conventional lecturing methods. This is clearly encapsulated by Jonassen who notes that:

> *…groups can work together to solve problems, argue about interpretations, negotiate meaning, or engage in other educational activities including coaching, modeling, and scaffolding of performance…knowledge construction occurs when participants explore issues, take positions, discuss their positions in an argumentative format and reflect on and re-evaluate their positions.* (Jonassen et al., 1995: 16)

"Cooperative/collaborative learning", therefore also enhances critical thinking as it enables learners to challenge and be challenged within a non-hierarchical social environment in which they share a "sense of security". This enables the "learning community" to even challenge the interventions of the instructor or professor, especially if they deem them to be unhelpful[1]. In this respect the learners are also making use of a **constructivist approach to learning** which involves learners exploring the way in which they articulate thoughts and especially the manner by which they construct knowledge. The key here is that learners attribute meanings or interpretations to "information" provided by course ware or lectures by reference to conceptual structures that have derived from a process of social and intellectual negotiation and re-negotiation within the "learning community" and thus significantly different from "conceptual baggage" they carried upon arrival. The process of active learning has been initiated.

There is a plethora of benefits to be derived from adopting "cooperative/collaborative learning" and facilitating "learning communities" as a central element of our teaching style. Of particular importance is the fact that it also enhances the "employability" of our students as it mirrors almost exactly the requirements of contemporary businesses and organizations. Here again Gilly Salmon has captured these requirements when she notes that:

> *Skills needed for work and learning will embrace self-direction together with a willingness to support others, the ability to work in multi-skilled teams (which are likely to operate without regular meetings), to co-operate rather than compete, to handle information (rather than know everything) and to become critical thinkers.* (Salmon 2000: 91)

Salmon then concludes by quoting the Senior Learning and Development Adviser for Shell who suggests that:

> *…a change of learning mindset is needed. He wants future recruits to be able to know how they learn, know what they need to learn and be open and receptive to learning from others without negative responses to criticism.* (Salmon, 2000: 91)

"Cooperative/collaborative learning" enables such a change of learning mindset to take place. The question that does remain however is: **Are professors willing to meet the challenge?**

Sources
Jonassen, D et al (1995) *Constructivism and computer-mediated communication in distance education*, **American Journal of Distance Education**, 9 (2), pp 7-25.
Rowntree, D (1995) *Teaching and Learning online: a correspondence education for the 21st century?,* **British Journal of Educational Technology**, 26 (3), pp 205-215.
Salmon, G (2000) **E-Moderating: The Key to Teaching and Learning Online**, Kogan Page, London.

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[1] Some professors find this aspect of cooperative/collaborative learning problematic and feel concerned about their role in the learning process. This will be discussed in a forthcoming issue of Chalk Talk.