



Collaborative Learning as a Pandemic and Post-Pandemic Best Practice in Teaching and Learning

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Abstract: When we were hit by the pandemic more than two years ago, we really did not know how life changing and all-encompassing the experience was. We never realized back then if online and distance learning was even possible and successful. But now, there seems to be some kind of normalcy happening, education in the new normal continues thanks to the presence of technology and the mutual efforts of administrators, teachers and students; and also, the practices of conducting online and hybrid modalities in our teaching and learning endeavors. This research seeks to answer the following problems: 1) What are the perceptions of students and teachers when it comes to the use of collaborative learning activities? 2) What are the benefits and challenges of collaborative learning activities during and beyond the pandemic? And 3) What are the practical things to consider when it comes to collaborative learning activities? Using the See-Judge-Act methodology and framework, this study will support how amidst the advantages and disadvantages, collaborative learning activities can still be one of the best practices during and even beyond the pandemic.

Keywords: Collaborative Learning; Teaching and Learning; Pandemic and Post-Pandemic Education

INTRODUCTION

It has already been more than two years ago since the Covid-19 pandemic started and there has been a lot of disruptions to everyday living like lockdowns happening everywhere, closure of businesses, people asked to follow work from home (WFH) setups, yet one specific disruption is in the area of face-to-face formal education. The schools, teachers and students have been forced to stop doing what they are so used to and accept Open and Distance Learning (ODL) whether they like it or not; and whether they are ready or not. ODL can be seen as an advantage that in spite of the ongoing pandemic learning and formal education continues; and yet not without its share of disadvantages. One particular disadvantage is the lack of interaction and collaboration between students and their classmates. This disadvantage may have a direct bearing on the quality of education specifically under the quality of learning and teaching; and critical pedagogy.

What is the present situation of education today? 1) In De La Salle-College of Saint Benilde, we have had no face-to-face classes since March 9, 2020 though in the incoming term there will be hybrid setup (a mixture of face-to-face and online) for certain courses especially, laboratory classes. 2) During the first few months of the pandemic when ODL was in force there were sectors referring to educators and student groups, lobbying for academic freeze and even mass promotion. Yet, what would have happened if the administration of educational institutions gave in to these? If the lobbying for academic freeze successfully pushed through, we would be having a two-year hiatus and maybe even more since we are in the third year of the pandemic. This could have a detrimental effect on the students and their formal education. Have “academic breaks” they must, like what happened last January this year, but they should not be made to stop at all. In fact, these online classes in many ways kept them sane during the pandemic. 3) In De La Salle-College of Saint Benilde the typical class size is about 40 students. But in some other colleges and

universities, class sizes may reach to almost a hundred per section, which was true both before and during the ongoing pandemic. 4) Limited and /or pilot face-to-face classes have already started in some areas in the country yet definitely this setup is still devoid of the usual interaction and collaboration between students and their classmates. 5) There is a wide observation that there is a “lack of social interaction among students” and the possible reason for this is the isolation brought by the pandemic and that there are a lot of students who are pensive and even afraid of group activities and would rather work alone rather than with other people that they are not so familiar with.

Given the COVID-19 situation, as more and more institutions of education provide online courses, it is important to know how to support students communicating and collaborating online. (Lu, 2021). In many ways this has been the reality for the past two years and there is now a move towards hybrid setups with limited face-to-face classes this coming term.

METHODOLOGY

This paper will take into account the following important processes of “examination”, “consideration”, “offering practical conclusions and recommendations” as an adoption of Joseph Cardijn’s method of the so-called “see-discern-act” also known as the pastoral circle process. These are identical to the three-stage planning process known as analysis of the situation, goal setting, and programming or in plain language, “social analysis”. (Seño, 2020) This study would take into account the practical experiences of the author when it comes to the use of collaborative learning strategies and techniques, the evaluation of the students and the teachers of these collaborative learning styles and strategies, which will lead to a clearer understanding of how collaboration can continue in this new normal of learning through online collaborative learning activities that will both enhance the teaching and learning experience of both the teacher and the learner that is characteristic of authentic assessment. (Seño, 2020). This study also highlights the role of critical pedagogy and the significance of reflexivity in creating opportunities for transformative possibilities in education. (Ryan and Walsh, 2018) This characteristic of reflexivity is an essential ingredient in critical pedagogy wherein it is the key component needed to combat the intractable epistemological inequalities that are most of the times embedded within educational structures and

processes and which also contends with the perspectives which define knowledge as a unitary truth are essentially inadequate to address current global problems. (Ryan and Walsh, 2018) This study is indeed very timely because of the ongoing pandemic to address the many disruptions that formal education faces at the present and even beyond.

RESULTS

According to a previous survey conducted with some teachers and students from the Theology and Philosophy classes in De La Salle-College of Saint Benilde (Seño, 2020), there are both advantages and disadvantages to collaborative learning activities but the advantages definitely outweigh the disadvantages. Many have said that collaborative learning strategies have helped them understand how other perspectives related to their individual contributions, claiming that peer assessment gave them an opportunity to learn how other members perceived their contributions. This is called peer evaluation or assessment which I have also utilized in my courses. The members of the group said that it encouraged them to collaborate more actively and helped them focus on areas requiring further improvement. These collaborative learning activities increased their awareness that their participation and contributions were being observed by others and assessed by other team members, increasing their sense of accountability (Ubell, 2010), especially today with how people, young and old have been more self-conscious with how they are perceived by others, which is seen even in social media with the use likes and dislikes of one’s posts and thoughts. Young people, specially of the present generation are very apprehensive of how they would be held in esteem by their peers and friends on social media and beyond. (Seño, 2018, 2020).

Learning in General

How are we to characterize learning? It can be viewed as the gradual construction and accumulation of increasingly refined and complex cognitive and linguistic artefacts. (Strijbos et al., 2004) It has always been seen as both developmental and constructive and is not something that is achieved overnight but a gradual process. When it comes to tertiary level education there is a wide observation that it suffers much because of its stress on the individual acquisition of knowledge and skills or competencies (Strijbos et al., 2004), that is, it is centered on the individual learner as the be-all-and-

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end-all in the process of teaching and learning. Indeed, the individual learner is at the heart of the teaching endeavor or learner-centered, but this may come at a heavy cost, it may even seem to be a pyrrhic victory in many ways if we educate the individual person who may grow up to be individualistic and independent and not interdependent and aloof from others, which is contrary to the ideals of being a team-player which we would like them to be today and, in the very near future (Seño, 2020).

There is a consensus among teachers, curriculum experts and school administrators that there is a need to continually challenge the learners because when they feel progressively challenged - without experiencing the anxiety of overreaching their skill - very powerful natural learning processes get triggered and students become self-motivated (Tokoro & Steels, 2007) to be the best that they could be. This will lead them to strive to be better and to make things better. It is as if they will always vie for better ways of doing things. Of course, to make sure that they find a balance and see everything is important not just their academics but even things that will help them in their over-all wellbeing. Thus, leading to an experience which is optimal and strikes the tricky balance between having less and having too much or doing less or being burnt out. This so-called optimal experience is characterized by the perception of high environmental challenges, adequate personal skills, high levels of concentration, enjoyment and engagement, loss of self-consciousness, control of the situation, focused attention, positive feedback, clear ideas about the aims of the activity, and intrinsic motivation (Tokoro & Steels, 2007), and this definitely leads to that what we call authentic assessment which is what should be the means to achieving the goals of education.

Authentic Assessment

What are the characteristics of authentic assessment? Authentic Assessment is characterized by being realistic; it requires judgment and innovation; it assesses the student's ability and skills to effectively and efficiently use a range of many skills to accomplish a problem or task; and replicates or simulates actual "tests" in the workplace, personal life, and civic life (Janesick, 2006). It allows students to participate actively in their own learning, and provide opportunities for teachers to align their curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices. (Paris & Ayres, 1994). Part of

this authentic assessment is when students work together to use assessments as tools for enhancing learning, wherein they are more informed and motivated to achieve high standards of success. There is a wide observation that there is this lack of social interaction among themselves and their peers and the possible reason for this is that there are a lot of students who are pensive and even afraid of group activities. The ongoing pandemic also caused so much isolation because of the lockdowns and the work-from-home setups. Yet, even before the pandemic there are those who would rather work alone rather than with other people. Yet, students need to be active participants in the assessment of their own learning rather than just being passive respondents likened to that of just being spoon-fed by a master teacher everything that they need to know. Authentic assessment is consistent with classroom practices, collects diverse evidence of students' learning from multiple activities, promotes learning and teaching among the participants; and reflects local values, standards, and control (Paris & Ayres, 1994). Deeper and dialogic learning, and critical thinking are essential capabilities in the twenty-first century environments we now operate. Apart from being important in themselves, they are also crucial in enabling the acquisition of many other twenty-first century skills or capabilities such as problem solving, collaborative learning, innovation, information and media literacy, and so on. (Manalo, 2020)

There is a wide observation that discipline-specific models of teaching and learning can underprepare students for the kinds of interdisciplinary collaboration that employers now expect. Although aware of these expectations and the need for change, many small colleges and universities have struggled to translate interdisciplinarity into programs and curricula that better serve today's students. Collaborative learning addresses the many ways faculty can leverage their institutions' situation and openness to pedagogical experimentation to overcome the challenges of limited institutional resources and enrollment concerns and better prepare students for life and work in the twenty-first century. (Angello & Campion, 2020)

Collaborative Learning

What is Collaborative Learning? It is broadly defined as a variety of educational approaches and strategies involving joint intellectual efforts by students with each other, or with their teachers. It is a teaching and learning

strategy that mutually searches for understanding, meanings, or solutions to problems. It improves the teaching and learning process because it is a flexible and adaptive approach appropriate to any context or academic discipline. (Goodsell et al., 1992) Collaborative Learning helps university students improve their academic achievement, learning persistence and attitudes. Social media tend to have positive effects on collaborative learning by encouraging positive interactions online. Although previous research studies were conducted to explore the use of social media in education, there is a gap of studying the use of social media tools for collaborative learning. (Lu, 2021) Collaborative Learning facilitate how students can work in groups of two or more, mutually searching for understanding, solutions, meanings, or answers to problems. This changes the notion of the students being passive recipients of information, spoon-fed by an expert master teacher to that of active agents in the construction of knowledge. (Tynjala et al., 2006)

Collaborative Learning Activities

Collaborative learning captures the common preference patterns underlying the heterogeneous population with data from all individuals while also identifying a unique membership vector for each individual. The practice collaborative learning helps deal with the problems of insufficient observations in individual preference learning. (Zhu, 2020)

Here are six broad categories of Collaborative Learning Techniques that can be utilized in both fully online or hybrid setups: 1) Discussion, wherein student interaction and exchange is achieved primarily through spoken words; 2) Reciprocal Peer Teaching, wherein students purposefully help each other master subject matter content and develop discipline-based skill; 3) Problem Solving, wherein students focus on practicing problem-solving strategies; 4) Graphic Information Organizers, wherein groups use visual tools to organize and display information; 5) Writing, wherein students write to learn important course content and skills; and 6) Games, wherein students work together in teams to participate in a competitive activity that is guided by a preexisting set of rules. (Barkley et al., 2014)

DISCUSSION

There is a widespread consensus that there is a present threat to quality education brought

about by the many disruptions to formal education brought by the pandemic, wherein all the more is critical pedagogy in danger of reproducing rather than contesting the worst effects of neoliberal schooling (Fitzpatrick & Powell, 2019). This neoliberalism is characterized as a so-called “powerful and complex, economic, political and cultural system that transfers market values into all aspects of life”, promoting the idea of competition and privatization. This present study filled the gap of the existing study through an overview of social media tools’ role in collaborative learning, which would be beneficial for online course design and pedagogical policies development. (Lu, 2021) There are long and diverse strands of thinking about how schools and schooling, teaching, curriculum, and learning could be conceptualized and developed so as to foster what is often loosely called social justice, that is, to give what is due to the students and to all the other stakeholders. Thus, the original term that encompasses this area is called ‘radical pedagogy’ which takes stances opposed to the mainstream educational systems in many aspects of its theory and practice, it is not surprising that this tradition has a comparatively slight professional and academic literature. Use of radical pedagogy has been quite slow and gradual, because only a handful of specialists have had the favorable conditions necessary to explore it and put down the results of their efforts in print (Crookes, 2022).

Collaboration is not only an observable phenomenon which can be a means of scientific description and explanation, but it is also an ethic, and one with powerful normative force in contemporary, secular society (Blunden, 2014). Collaborative learning could be achieved through personal investment, sharing perspectives and insights, and engaging in critical dialogue. Further research findings might be used in designing educational guidance, instructional strategies, learning activities, and evaluations, which promote team collaboration within the course (Lu, 2021), which ultimately be for the benefit of each and every learner.

For a collaborative activity to be successful, groups have to operate at optimal levels, participants need inquiry cycles, supportive relational conditions, the tools to activate their learning, and methods for reflecting on their practice. These conditions help ensure equity in teacher voice and teacher action. (Fisher & Frey, 2021) Collaborative learning activities will help preteens and teens learn about themselves. Cooperative learning activities require individual

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responsibility and group effort to succeed, and allow children to take on the roles of leaders, followers, and compromisers. Activities designed to develop self-esteem strengthen awareness of personal attributes and the power of choice. Reflection activities give participants opportunities to communicate their values to others (Demers, 2008).

CONCLUSION

Online Distance Learning (ODL) is a very welcome respite in this ongoing pandemic wherein learning and formal education continues; and yet not without its share of concerns, challenges and problems. One major concern is the lack of interaction and collaboration between students and their classmates, which has a direct bearing on the quality of education specifically under the quality of learning and teaching; and that of critical pedagogy.

Clearly, based on experience; and according to the perceptions of both teachers and students from select classes, collaborative learning activities comes with both advantages and disadvantages especially in the present setup of Online Distance Learning. There are both advantages and disadvantages to collaborative learning strategies but the advantages definitely outweigh the disadvantages. These are very beneficial to both the students and teachers alike in teaching and learning process whether it be fully online or hybrid modalities; and or even synchronous and asynchronous setups. With proper guidance by the professor and clear-cut instructions; proper delimitation of tasks and responsibilities expected of each member of the group; collaborative learning activities can be one of the best practices during and beyond the pandemic.

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