Engaging the whole person through the practice of collaborative learning

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This article is based on an analysis of a qualitative research case study involving three British adult educational schemes which were experimenting with collaborative learning. A total of 19 facilitators and 43 participants were interviewed. In addition, I engaged in participant observation of nine modules from among the three schemes. The focus of this practice-based research was listening to and observing adults engaged in collaborative learning in order to elucidate what they perceived to be some integral values inherent in this learning approach. ‘Engaging the whole person’ emerged as one of the hallmarks of collaborative learning. Four expressions of whole person learning were unfolded, namely, touching the affective; working with experiences; strengthening the cognitive; and enhancing the social.

My personal journey into collaborative learning

Dr Sanders, the lecturer, entered the classroom where 15 adults were gathered for the MA in Adult Education. My eyes followed her to the front of the classroom, expecting her to occupy the seat that was set apart. Without a word, she took the chair from behind the teacher’s desk, and placed it in front of the desk. She motioned with her index finger the shape of a circle. With a measure of apprehension, the fifteen of us took our chairs which had been neatly arranged in rows, and formed a circle. Sitting as part of the circle of learners, Dr Sanders broke the silence and suggested, ‘Let’s hear from you. We’re here as a community of adult learners to experience shared inquiry. How shall we shape this course? I don’t have all the answers, but let’s talk through the issues together. Let’s learn from each other; let’s enter into collaborative learning’.

This above adult learning experience challenged the educational values and roles of teachers and students that had previously formed my own academic identity. In my two decades of involvement with adult learning in institutions of higher education in Singapore, I had contentedly reproduced the traditionally stratified roles where the teacher disseminates what she knows to students intent on accumulating information.

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Participating in Dr Sanders' learning community was a bewildering experience for me. I was quite literally unseated; the shape of the classroom was transformed before my eyes. The desk as a barrier between teacher and student disappeared along with my confidence in the situation. In the silent interplay of forming a circle, the body became as important as the mind and the physical movement helped to create a communal relational atmosphere. 'Set apart' and 'reserved' did not feature in this educational setting. Instead, an atmosphere of comradeship developed as the solitary and competitive 'I' changed into 'we' as a community of co-learners. Dialogue and engagement with shared inquiry helped me dispel the notion that the teacher always possessed the 'one right answer'.

As a Singaporean adult educator schooled in the educational culture where competition and individualism thrive, I wondered how collaborative learning might engender a more meaningful partnership in shared inquiry and be a more wholistic approach to life and learning. I decided that I would explore Dr Sanders' practices for their deeper potential. This was to be the genesis of my collaborative learning research project.

**Appreciating the concept of 'collaborative learning'**

The term 'collaborative learning' (Bruffee 1984, 1987, 1993, Romer 1985, Wiener 1986, Whipple 1987, Sheridan 1989, Goodsell et al. 1992, Bosworth and Hamilton 1994, Gamson 1994, Matthews 1996 *inter alia*) is used in this article as an umbrella term for a variety of educational approaches involving joint intellectual effort by participants, or participants and facilitators together. In most collaborative learning situations participants are working in groups of two or more, mutually searching for understanding, solutions, or meanings, or creating something 'new'. There is wide variability in collaborative learning activities, but most centre on the participants' exploration or application of the topic at hand, not simply on the facilitator's presentation or explanation of it. Everyone in the learning community is participating, working as partners or in small groups. Questions, problems or the challenge of creating something 'new' drives the collaborative learning activity. Learning unfolds in the most public of ways. A composite working definition/description of collaborative learning might read:

Collaborative learning mobilises the social synergy that resides within a group of co-learners engaged in a dynamic process of shared inquiry. Through dialogue, learning as shared inquiry evolves by critically exploring the perspectives of others. New dimensions of interpretations are fuelled, issues clarified and interdependence valued. There is an ongoing negotiation of roles among the community of learners.

A myriad of processes characterises the dynamic nature of collaborative learning. These integral processes include social synergy, shared learning, dialogue process, critical exploration and negotiations which result in reconfiguring the traditionally stratified roles of teachers and learners. Active engagement and ongoing reciprocity create a community of co-inquirers.
Setting the research context

This article is drawn from a research project in which I collaborated with three British adult education schemes which were experimenting with collaborative learning approaches in their adult education programmes. The first scheme was a Master of Arts in Adult Education, the second a pre-theological training programme, and the third a training and development programme. My research was framed in the qualitative paradigm. It is ethical inquiry with people, rather than research on people and a personal process pursued in relation to others. In total I interviewed 19 facilitators and 43 participants. I also engaged in participant observation of nine modules from among the three schemes.

Dimensions of whole person learning

This research shows that facilitators and participants of the three schemes uphold the humanistic vision of personhood where whole person learning is emphasized. In unequivocal terms, a facilitator remarked:

The word 'collaborative' means engaging the whole person and honouring and respecting the whole person. It is not just head knowledge which can just go way over us. Rather, it is whole person learning.

The prevailing perspective among participants and facilitators was that learning should be holistic and not privilege any particular dimension. A participant remarked: 'Collaborative learning is a very holistic approach. We are dealing with whole people and all of their senses'. In the same vein, a facilitator commented: '(Collaborative learning) takes into account your feelings, your body, your imagination...'

The three schemes' commitment to whole person learning suggests their belief that wholeness is an integral dimension of the learning process. Concern for the development of the whole person is a characteristic feature in Jewish education. To the Jews, the idea of knowledge embraces the whole human personality. The Hebrew verb yada 'to know', means to encounter, experience and share in an intimate way.

The term 'holistic' has entered the educational arena to promote a view that an attention to wholeness is more important than attention to the separate and contributory parts. Deriving from the Greek holos—whole—the concept refers to an understanding of reality in terms of integrated wholes whose properties cannot be reduced to those of smaller units. Whole person learning seeks to restore an appropriate balance to the different dimensions of life. It enfold's personal integration (Miller 1976) and an informed heart (Bettelheim 1971); it involves the training of 'eye, hand and heart' (Reid 1986) and encompasses an all-round development (Van Der Zee 1991) where 'rationality and feeling, memory and perception are not opposed' (Moyle 1997).

Collaborative learning affirms a holistic view of persons in which thought, feeling and action are 'conceptually, not contingently, connected as aspects of the person's conduct' (Astley 1994: 234). For Bergevin (1967), the term 'maturity' refers to the 'growth and development of the individual towards wholeness in order to achieve
constructive action in the movement from mere survival to the discovery of himself both as a person and as a responsible member of society (p. 7).

Collaborative learning emanates primarily from humanistic philosophy with its emphasis on whole person learning. In humanistic philosophy all aspects of an individual are allowed to grow through the educative process. Emotions, attitudes and physical aspects are as important as intellectual development—the whole personality is deemed an integrated whole.

In fleshing out whole person learning, the research identifies four values in collaborative learning: (1) touching the affective; (2) working with experiences; (3) strengthening the cognitive; and (4) enhancing the social.

**Touching the affective**

Three facilitators (one from each scheme) emphasized that the affective is an integral dimension in collaborative learning. In unequivocal terms, they remarked:

I believe that emotions have to be involved if real learning is going to take place. I feel quite strongly about that. This is often a missing dimension in the didactic approach.

Collaborative learning isn’t just at the intellectual level but the affective level is also engaged. Inevitably there will be some emotional response even in hearing a lecture, but the dynamic engagement in any depth is not as great as when you are actually having to relate to other people, and in the process share something of yourself.

Adult education theory is beginning to really focus on how adults learn only if it ‘scratches where they itch’, if it reaches a real deep need deep down. This recognition is present with collaborative learning models. It touches the affective dimension.

It is significant that participants were the ones more reticent in speaking about the affective dimension. Only one participant commented on the affective dimension in collaborative learning:

Collaborative learning has the potential of inculcating sensitivity among group participants. It can pick up when people are dissenting or bursting with enthusiasm. It can harness the group like the conductor of an orchestra. It involves feelings.

Participants’ reticence in speaking about emotions and feelings intimates that ‘emotions and feelings are the ones most neglected in our society; there is almost a taboo about the affective intruding into our educational institutions, particularly at higher levels’ (Boud et al. 1993: 14). It reinforces that there is a tension between learning perceived as an essentially cognitive process and learning understood more broadly as the development and integration of the whole person. Cognitive processes are often equated with ‘rational’ and ‘intellectual’ dimensions while emotional processes seem less related to the learning process. In The Education of Feeling and Emotion, Dunlop (1984) remarks that ‘emotion and feeling are extremely hard to talk about
systematically ... it is thus not surprising that the education of feeling and emotion should be a rather neglected topic’ (p. 2).

In parallel with the proposition that emotions embody cognitive content, McMullen (1996) states that emotions are ‘qualities of mental processes’ and are the ‘experiential factors that instigate or motivate thinking’. The term ‘cognition’ is coined by Fineman (1997) to suggest that what is learned and not learned cannot be appreciated outside a socially contextualized, socially constructed discourse of emotion. Fonow and Cook (1991) note that a feature of feminist epistemology is to attend to the place of the affective as well as the rational in the production of knowledge. Our emotional, sensual and physical being informs our knowledge of both self and others; empathy, anger, desire and interestedness are moments of connectedness to self and the world that provide important evidence about the world.

The appeal for the affective dimension to be valued as an integral component in learning is consonant with Lindeman’s (1926: 105–106) emphasis that ‘emotions and intelligence are continuous and varying aspects of a single process and that the finest emotions are those which shine through intelligence, and the finest intelligence that which is reflected in the light of its appropriate feeling’. He goes on to elaborate: ‘We cannot feel and then understand; feelings may predominate over intelligence but they cannot annihilate it; likewise, to understand anything always partakes somewhat of getting the feel of its properties and qualities. Feeling adds warmth to understanding and understanding gives meaning to feeling’ (p. 106). Likewise, MacMurray (1957) argues that the significance of feelings for human action is crucial. Reflecting on ‘emotional rationality’ MacMurray (1957) points out that it is a ‘serious mistake to think that rationality has only to do with our intellectual capacities. On the contrary, our feelings and emotions have a reference to the real world, just as our thoughts do’ (p. xxi).

Although our emotions are epistemologically indispensable, they are not epistemologically indisputable. Like all other faculties, they may be misleading, and their data, like all data, are subject to reinterpretation and revision. A participant’s comment about personalities in collaborative learning who ‘might use their emotions to control and manipulate the group’ describes a deceptive use of emotions. This is a reminder that discordant emotions, if not attended to seriously and respectfully, could hinder the learning process.

**Working with experiences**

The research identifies that the most prominent resource which participants infuse into collaborative learning is their experiences. This is a recurring theme that emerged from the interviews. The learning cycle subscribed to by each of the three schemes vivifies the life experience of the community of learners.

A facilitator remarked: ‘This department has been building up the idea of experiential learning...building on the participants’ experiences...taking them on from there rather than seeing them as empty vessels to be filled with a certain amount of predefined information’. In like manner, another facilitator noted: ‘There is an enormous wealth of experience and expertise in the group. We as co-facilitators are not the sole repositories of wisdom. It is important for the group to learn from each other and to recognize each other’s experiences’.
Another facilitator also registered his commitment to experiential learning. He remarked:

The strength of the collaborative learning model is that it works with the experience and situations of the participants. The participants have something to bring to the learning which needs to be given attention, respected and honoured. That can only be done when the learning process is structured such that the participant recognises that honouring and recognition is going on and is encouraged to reflect on his or her experience in order to see what is there. Collaborative learning seems to be quite akin to the whole notion of experiential learning.

The facilitator's use of the word 'situations' coheres with Lindeman's (1926) suggestion that the approach to adult education be via the role of situations and not any particular academic discipline. Lindeman (1926) points out that the academic system has grown in reverse order: subjects and teachers constitute the starting point while students are secondary. In conventional education the student is required to adjust herself to an established curriculum while in adult education the curriculum may be built around the student's needs and interests. Every adult finds herself in specific situations with respect to her work, family life and community life—situations which call for adjustments. Subject-matter is brought into the situation and put to work when needed. Texts and teachers play a secondary role in this type of education; they give way to the primacy of the learner. In the andragogical tradition, working with experiences is not just a pedagogical device but an affirmation of the ontological and ethical status of adulthood (Usher et al. 1997). Experience provides a different kind of knowledge, a knowledge of the 'real' world drawn from 'life', that is either an alternative or an enriching complement to formal knowledge.

Experiential learning receives wide acceptance within the spectrum of educational philosophies. The radical tradition of adult education regards experiential learning as an important epistemological counterpoint to codified academic knowledge. It views experiential learning as having some critical connection with 'really useful knowledge' (Johnson 1988). Progressive educators view knowledge as inseparable from life experiences (Dewey 1967). The focus of progressive education on what is useful to the learner changes the role of the teacher to one of a guide or a facilitator. Humanistic education regards the repossessing of experience as a personal discovery of knowledge which enables the person to become a whole person.

This research amplifies that contrary to reservations that experiential learning accepts as valid any interpretation of an experience, collaborative learning communities provide the arena where experiences might be critically reflected on in a non-threatening manner. A facilitator articulated this:

The collaborative learning community helps participants to keep in touch with insights and experiences outside one's own range of experience. It provides a useful way of critically reflecting on the validity or otherwise of one's own personal experience. One will cross-check with the other what the experience means for them.
The development of critical reflection on experiences, along with the collaborative interpretation and exchange of such experiences, is a significant form of adult learning. The life experience of the learner and a critical analysis of this are at the heart of Freire’s (1993) process of conscientisation. As the learner interrogates her own experience she is able to reinterpret her experience and understand the societal context within which she finds herself. This understanding leads to action, which again becomes experience to be reflected upon.

Brookfield (1986) and Usher et al. (1997) point out that adult learners need to problematize and interrogate experience as much as to access and validate it. ‘Unless an experience is examined and reflected on it has no educative value...experience needs to be arrested, examined, analysed, considered and negated to shift it to knowledge’ (Criticos 1993:162). Usher et al. (1997) acknowledge that any approach to drawing upon experiences will generate its own representation of experience and will itself be influenced by the way experience is conceived or represented. The need to critically reflect on experiences is consonant with Dewey’s (1967) belief that all genuine education comes about through experience. However, it does not mean that all experiences are genuinely or equally educative. Any experience is mis-educative that has the effect of arresting or distorting the growth of further experience.

Engaging participants ‘where they are at’

This research highlights that an important dimension enmeshed within ‘Working with Experiences’ is ‘Engaging participants where they are at’. On one of the schemes, where the participants are diverse in educational backgrounds and experience, collaborative learning engaged participants at their level of experience. A facilitator explained:

As an educational process, collaborative learning allows the learning to be accessible to people where they are at—whatever stage they are coming in, whatever level of experience they come with.

Several participants demonstrated awareness that collaborative learning seeks to engage the learner ‘where they are at’:

Collaborative learning allows me to think my own thoughts; to become conscious of my own thoughts—of what I know. It allows me to assess first what I do know and what I don’t know. It is able to start with my experience. It takes into account where I am at.

Collaborative learning begins where I am...it bothers about my experience...it allows the participants to take greater responsibility in saying, ‘This is where I am at...this is what I need...Can you help me?’

The phrase ‘to start where participants are at’ echoes Lindeman’s (1926) belief that the curriculum of adult education should be grounded in participants’ concerns and that such education would take as its starting point those situations in adult life when individuals are facing adjustments and changes in the spheres of work, family life, leisure and community life. Freire (1993) also emphasizes the need to start where
people are, using the knowledge and culture with which they are familiar. He calls this process codification, a representation of the existential situation.

The recurring phrase ‘where I am at’ discloses that ‘implacement’ (Casey 1993) is significant to collaborative learning processes. It is more than a mere backdrop for concrete actions or thoughts. The im of implacement stresses the action of getting in or into, and it carries connotations of immanence that are appropriate to the inhabitation of places (Casey 1993). Place itself is concrete and at one with action and thought. In pointing out that place is something rarely accorded much importance, Casey (1993) explains that the pervasiveness of place is perhaps well understood against the perplexing phenomenon of displacement—feeling ‘out of place’. Such was the expressed feelings of a participant: ‘I felt out of place because I was with people who have much more experience in doing adult education. I did not seem to fit’.

In engaging participants at their individual levels, collaborative learning recognizes that ‘the place we occupy—has everything to do with what and who we are...what we are right now is not a matter of indifference but affects the kind of person we are’ (Casey 1993: xiii). ‘The sense of one’s place, as the sense of what one can or cannot allow oneself, implies a tacit acceptance of one’s position, a sense of limits’ (Bourdieu 1991: 235). This notion is one of the key principles upheld by the Highlander Folk School with its axiom, ‘start their education where they are at’ (Adams 1975). Horton (1990: 131) proposes: ‘You have to start from where people are, because their growth is going to be from there, not from some abstraction or where you are or someone else is’.

A participant observed that one of the resultant effects of engaging participants ‘where they are at’ is a corresponding ‘readiness and desire to learn’:

One of the values in collaborative learning is something about creating a readiness and an openness to learning. If people have experienced something, struggled with something themselves—however briefly—collaboratively—they are then looking for certain ways forward. It is something about creating a desire to learn, a readiness to learn.

Armed with a readiness to learn, participants are more likely to nurture a sense of personal ownership of the collaborative learning process. Learning would not be externally motivated but a quest springing from within. A participant’s comments correspond with a recommendation from Kazura and Jones (1994: 136): ‘A readiness and desire to learn are important prerequisites to learning’.

**Strengthening the cognitive**

This research indicates that one of the values of collaborative learning is the strengthening of the cognitive dimension. The allegation that collaborative learning is ‘less rigorous’ stands in opposition to Romer (1985) and Sheridan (1989) who posit that ‘intellectual rigour’ attends this adult learning approach. It also fails to recognize that collaborative learning may call for an even greater mastery of the subject material. A facilitator expressed it thus: ‘Collaborative learning requires you to know your material even better...in a more holistic way’.
Another facilitator observed that some people perceive collaborative learning as a ‘less rigorous form of education, not suited for academic subjects’. A participant’s attitude is illustrative of people who associate collaborative learning with a lack of content. He remarked unabashedly that he had grown weary with the lack of content at some of the residencies and made a request to the principal: ‘Can we do something a bit more cerebral at the residencies?’ His criticism of the scheme’s lack of content stood in opposition to the perspective of other participants. Another participant championed the depth and breadth of content within the residencies:

I don’t think the collaborative learning on this programme lacks content! Some people expect that they are to be fed what they are going to have. The issues that come up...you are actually working through them and not just dropping them when the residential is over. If there are issues that are raised which you have not made your mind up on, it is wise to be thinking it through.

The words ‘working’ and ‘thinking’ versus being ‘fed what they are going to have’ reflect a difference in perception concerning what constitutes ‘content’.

In contrasting non-collaborative and collaborative learning approaches, several participants expressed that in their experience with the former, opportunities for intellectual stimulation were not so readily available. A participant commented: ‘In collaborative learning, you are able to use your mind more deeply than if you are just taking notes in a lecture’. Expanding on the stimulation of thinking ignited by the dynamism of collaborative learning, another participant remarked:

In collaborative learning, there is a sense in which you are stimulated all the time in your thinking. You are moving from one thing to another. Your mind is constantly being focused and refocused in a way which lectures don’t. I have been through many lectures in my time in university. At the end of the lecture I have the notes on my paper. The lecturer imparts what is in his mind into our minds without the process of thinking, learning and sharing. Collaborative learning takes us through the process of thinking, learning and sharing in a way which the lecture doesn’t.

Several facilitators emphasized that the quality of content is enhanced through collaborative learning. The prevailing point of view was that quantity of information does not guarantee quality of learning. Assimilating the material and making connections are more creative and holistic processes than regurgitating facts. A facilitator remarked: ‘If the students are only taking notes, they are not actually assimilating and working with the ideas. They are in the mode of recording what the lecturer is offering’. In developing the notion of ‘working with ideas’ the facilitator amplified: ‘Collaborative learning is playing with ideas—I don’t mean this in a trivial sense. People learn by engaging with the playfulness of learning. The lecture is but one small part. Working with ideas can only be done collaboratively’.

The ‘playfulness of learning’ (Brake 1992) signals a refreshing dimension of collaborative learning. Many well-intentioned teachers can be imprisoned by outcomes, rather than enjoying the freedom of ‘turning ideas on their sides and
laughing about them’ (Brake 1992: 6). A special value in the ‘playfulness of learning’ is its tendency to break down barriers to learning. Enjoying becomes a theme—‘when people laugh together, they cease to be young or old, master or pupil, worker or boss, jailer or prisoner. Instead, they become a single group of human beings enjoying the group’s existence’ (Brake 1992: 7). In a sense, play is the ability to suspend rules in order to explore new arrangements (Eisner 1991). It engages our energy, involvement and curiosity. ‘Playfulness is, in part, an openness to being a fool, which is a combination of not worrying about competence, not being self-important, not taking norms as sacred and finding ambiguity and double edges a source of wisdom and delight’ (Lugones 1992: 97).

A playful approach to learning helps learners connect with parts of the self which are often dormant, inaccessible or well-defended. Playing with ideas frequently results in better ideas as it embodies five dimensions as posited by Melamed (1994): the relational—the capacity for connectedness; the experiential—validating and learning from experience; the metaphorical—intuitive and right-brain thinking; the integrative—valuing a holistic and organic connectedness to people and things; and the empowering—facilitating transformation in ourselves and the worlds we inhabit.

The inadequacy of simply amassing information was also conveyed by another facilitator. In reflecting on her student days, she remarked candidly:

It is perfectly possible to listen to a lecture, acquire content, put it in your essays and never really engage with it or stay with it at all. It could be a passive fleeting routine. That is not an adequate understanding of learning.

For this facilitator, listening to a lecture is a passive endeavour that demands little intellectual engagement. According to Bligh (1971) and Rogers (1993) an undue reliance on the traditional lecture format distracts from, perhaps even interferes with, in-depth learning and self-discovery. Grant (1997) suggests that in the lecturer’s presentation of the content the processes of selection and judgement and the underlying values and assumptions which have informed their work and choice of ideas are almost entirely hidden. Unfortunately many students receive lectures like seamless truth and fail to critically engage with what is presented.

**Appreciating the content and process dimensions**

One of the values of collaborative learning is the attention given to both the content and process dimensions of learning. The research identifies the content-process debate as a recurring theme in collaborative learning communities. Several participants and facilitators recommended that it should not be an ‘either-or’ situation but viewed as a ‘both-and’ proposition. A facilitator voiced three times his commitment to capitalizing on process and not just content:

- I believe that people learn far more quickly and unconsciously through the process.
- Methods and processes are the key rather than the content. Obviously, if the two work together...that is best.
- People are shaped by being in collaborative learning processes far more than by being given a content of understanding about collaborativeness.
The comments from the facilitator in the preceding paragraphs echo Parker and Rubin's (1966: 1) statement: 'Process is in fact, the highest form of content and the most appropriate base for curriculum change...through process, we can employ knowledge, not merely as a composite of information but, as a system for learning'. In more recent days, similar sentiments are reiterated by Costa and Liebmann (1997: xv): 'We are on the verge of a paradigm shift—content will become the mechanism by which we teach process'. When process is valued and attended to by all members of the group the 'end result' will be due as much to the exploration of the process as to the exploration of issues. Process has no beginnings or endings but is the continuous operating in the middle.

The content-process debate is a theme that appears in the adult education literature. In his early work The Meaning of Adult Education (1926: 14) Lindeman advised adult educators to ignore questions of curriculum development and 'to devote their major concern to method and not content'. He felt that the preoccupation with curriculum development created 'technicians, not educated men and women' (1926: 15). However, two decades later, Lindeman reversed his position about the a-curricular nature of adult education when he made very specific curriculum suggestions for adult education classes. In New Needs for Adult Education (1944), he suggested four central curricular questions: the form of economic arrangement best suited to a democratic society; what is to be done about our deep-seated habits of racial discrimination; how are we to democratize our vast educational equipment; and how are we to play an appropriate role in world affairs? Lindeman believed that these topics would furnish adult education with its programme and mission.

Analytic philosophers of adult education such as Paterson (1979) and Lawson (1979) emphasize the importance of content in any educational endeavour. They both argue that an activity can be considered educational only if the curriculum comprises knowledge deemed intrinsically worthwhile. Lawson (1979) argues that a discipline provides a set of organizing principles around which a curriculum can be built, together with a set of standards against which learning tasks and objectives may be judged or tested for validity. By having these shared frameworks individuals are in a better position to judge the conclusions of others and to be critical.

The separation between content and process is criticized by radical adult educator Freire (1993) who regards a collaborative analysis of individual and collective experience as essential to problem-solving education and to the bringing of assumptions into critical consciousness. Contrary to Paterson (1979) and Lawson (1979), Freire (1993) holds that there is no such thing as a 'neutral' educational process. Education either functions as an instrument of conformity or it becomes the 'practice of freedom', the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world. For Freire (1993) learning is not to be equated with amassing a quantity of information. A Freirean class invites students to think critically about subject matter, doctrines, the learning process and society. In the liberatory classroom suggested by Freire's ideas, teachers pose problems derived from student life, social issues and academic subjects, in a mutually created dialogue. They reject processes which encourage students to be passive. Instead, they pose critical problems to students and encourage curiosity and activism about knowledge and the world.
The phrase ‘beyond the transfer of knowledge’ was articulated by a facilitator when reflecting on the thoroughness and assimilation of content that attends collaborative learning. He remarked:

In collaborative learning, the group works together and shares their understanding. They actually work with, take in and assimilate ideas. However, collaborative learning goes beyond the transfer of knowledge.

The words ‘works together...shares their understanding...work with, take in and assimilate’ imply that collaborative learning strengthens the ability to wrestle with issues. It does not discount content but goes beyond mere transmission of subject matter. Another facilitator also used the word assimilate in pointing out that ‘the learner will always assimilate what they are hearing into their own world...content is not just transferred but worked with’. This notion about assimilation echoes Mansbridge’s comment that knowledge is not ‘learning formulae’ nor ‘mere cleverness’ but a process of ‘inward digestion’, that is, passing into a person’s experience and so transforming their personality and bringing about wisdom (1929: 32).

The word ‘assimilate’ comes from the Latin assimilare, to make like: ad, to, and similis, like—‘to become like the body’—incorporated. In her doctoral thesis, Todd (1989: 15) writes: ‘Collaborative learning provides a context for the co-production rather than the consumption of knowledge’. I disagree with Todd’s (1989) understanding of the phrase ‘consumption of knowledge’ as there is no production without consumption. Consumption is an active, generative process (Usher et al. 1997). It is ‘eminently social, relational, and active rather than private, atomic, or passive’ (Appadurai 1986: 31). Eating implies the consumption (Latin, consumere, that is, to use up entirely, which involves destruction of matter, and consummare, or to sum up, to carry to completion) of the food but it is also simultaneously a process of production—or better, construction: (re)producing or constructing life on all levels from the physical to the social (Falk 1994: 93–95). The willingness to assimilate what has been seen or heard draws other lives into increasingly inclusive definitions of the self (Bateson 1994).

The phrase ‘beyond the transfer of knowledge’ resonates with Lindeman’s (1926:2) cautionary word about the ‘merely addictive process of school education whereby the teacher gets from his students what he has already imparted out of his academic repository’. Lindeman (1926) points out that adult education is the antithesis of this addictive process and instead represents a new technique for learning, a process by which the adult learners become aware of and evaluate their experience. Furthermore, Lindeman (1926) offers a contrast between knowledge and intelligence. For him, ‘intelligence is reasonable: seeks out the logic of events; is objective: seeks the factual reality which lies behind appearances; is critical: views isolated facts and phenomena in relation to milieux; presses facts to the level of relation to other relevant facts; is tentative: arrives at conclusions which are easily revised’ (p. 20). An intelligent person sees facts, not merely in relation to each other but in relation to himself. Intelligence becomes a way of appropriating facts—a way of integrating facts with the total aspects of personality. In much the same vein, Rogers (1961) suggests that significant learning is ‘more than an accumulation of facts. It is learning which makes a difference in the individual’s behaviour, in the course of action he chooses in the
future, in his attitudes and in his personality. It is a pervasive learning which is not just an accretion of knowledge, but which interpenetrates with every portion of his existence’ (p. 28). Indeed, the learning process is ‘much wider than merely the cognitive’ (Jarvis 1997: 54).

Enhancing the social

The research shows that collaborative learning enhances the web of social relationships among the community of learners. Of the three schemes the social dimension was most pronounced on the pre-theological training programme. The residentialis were filled with a spirit of camaraderie. Reflecting on his personal inclination in relating to others, a facilitator acknowledged: ‘I am attracted to collaborative learning because I enjoy the social dimension of communal learning…relating to people. In collaborative learning, we are creating something together’. Another facilitator observed that meaningful relationships tend to encourage learning:

Sometimes the most important learning goes on when people are talking to one another and sharing drinks with each other. It is in such conversations that they are bouncing ideas off one another as real people. They may actually be understanding the differences they have. They are actually learning and affecting one another.

The foregoing quotation suggests that a climate of informality might create a learning context where ‘head and heart’ are stimulated. The six verbs ‘talking…sharing…bouncing…understanding…learning…affecting’ convey dynamic ongoing reciprocity. By its very nature, collaborative learning is socially and intellectually involving. It invites participants to build closer relations with fellow-participants and facilitators.

Several facilitators used the word ‘community’ at least once in their interviews. A facilitator expressed it this way:

Collaborative learning is a social and relational process. It is what human beings do in communities. It is a relationship that exists between the content matter, the community of learners and the teacher.

The residentialis also provided the arena for a community of inquiry to emerge. There were opportunities to engage in a variety of manoeuvres such as listening to other perspectives, building on one another’s ideas, challenging one another to supply reasons for otherwise unsupported opinions, assisting each other in drawing inferences from what was said and identifying one another’s assumptions.

The research shows that amidst appreciating the social dimension present in collaborative learning, all three schemes also reflected their commitment to valuing the individual. Collaborative learning does not negate individuality in its quest to uphold the social dimension of learning. A facilitator remarked:

Collaborative learning values the uniqueness of each person. It is about individuality. People are valued in themselves. Very often the experiences and
educational needs that people bring are ignored or treated badly in some learning contexts.

An incident at one of the modules illustrates that the dilemmas of individuals ripple above the pulsating dynamics of collaborative learning. A participant’s (Sarah) facial expressions betrayed her frustration and lack of confidence. A wrinkle on her forehead...a frown...a puzzled look...were noticeable. In somewhat exasperated tones her questions and/or statements were frequently prefaced with self-deprecating words: ‘I must be dim here!’ and ‘I really can’t understand what this is all about!’

Several participants and the co-facilitators were sensitive to Sarah’s agitation. The first time Sarah ventured to articulate a thought the co-facilitator, eagerly paved the way: ‘Yes, Sarah...did you want to say something?’ At the end of Sarah’s comment the co-facilitator affirmed: ‘Sarah, that is a very fine statement’. Sarah’s feelings of inferiority and hesitancy were palpable. Yet, reassuring comments and gestures by facilitators and several participants seemed to infuse growing confidence. At an interview with the co-facilitator, he explained:

When Sarah actually spoke at a later session it was very helpful. She is very well rooted. When she spoke it was with considerable confidence. I have spoken to her personally during the lunch break. She has a lot to offer.

The question in collaborative learning communities as to whether attention should be focused more on the individual or the group parallels one of the frequently discussed tensions in adult education: Should the proper focus of adult education activities be to respond to the individual learner or to the issues and concerns of society? Or should it be both? Most who support the focus on the individual argue that adult education’s purpose is to facilitate individual change. The commitment to the individual and the individual change process underpins most definitions of adult education. The individual focus is clearly predominant in Knowles’s (1980) work and in many of the studies on self-directed learning (Tough 1979; Brockett and Hiemstra 1991; Candy 1991).

A contrasting position in the individual-versus-society debate coheres with Lindeman’s (1926:166) proposal concerning the ‘bilateral’ purpose of adult education—that of ‘changing individuals in continuous adjustment to the changing social functions’. This position maintains a focus on the individual but at the same time posits that changed individuals will have the collective effect of changing society. The ‘bilateral’ purposes of adult education echo Qualley and Chiseri-Strater’s (1994) comment that collaborative inquiry involves two recursive moves: a dialogical encounter with an ‘other’ (a person or idea) and a reflexive engagement with the self. Because collaboration is simultaneously dialogical and reflexive, it moves beyond either/or conceptions which pit the needs of individuals against the desires of the group. The individual and the community are not opposite sides of a dichotomy; they are inseparable components of an organism, neither of which makes sense without the other. It is the logic of supplement rather than contrast.

The idea of the social dimension being enhanced through collaborative learning coheres with Lave’s and Wenger’s (1991) notion of ‘situated learning: legitimate peripheral participation’. They posit that learning is a process that takes place
with a participation framework, not in an individual mind. Learning is distributed among co-participants and is not a one-person act.

**Final thoughts**

Collaborative learning as one of the viable adult learning approaches may initially require more attention and time on the part of both facilitators and participants. However, the multiplicity of dynamics has the potential of galvanizing the learning community to become one that engages the whole person. Learning is appreciated as touching the affective, working with experiences, strengthening the cognitive and enhancing the social. This brings to the learning community a pulsating rhythm of learning.

**References**


