How to Prepare Professional Communicators for the Workplace

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OUTLINE

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Definition of Collaborative Learning (CL)

- Citing Johnson and Johnson (1996), Wang and Burton (2010, p. 2) define CL as "the instructional use of small groups so that students work together to maximize their own and each other's learning".

- Gokhale (1995) defines CL as "an instructional method in which students at various performance levels work in small groups towards a common goal [and] the students are responsible for one another's learning as well as their own" (para.1).

- Brown (n.d., p. 2), who uses CL interchangeably with cooperative learning or small group learning, defines it as a "technique designed to make learning a lively and successful process".

- All are about the active involvement of students in small groups to construct their own learning.

How I define & Use CL (Cont.)

► It is a pedagogical practice in which students work together in small groups of two or more to complete a common task within the class session or outside the classroom for a certain period of time ranging between two weeks and a month depending on the complexity and the scope of the task.

Theoretical Framework

- CL is based on socio-constructivism (Oxford,1997, p. 447)
- Brooks & Brooks (1993, p. vii) refer to it as a "theory about knowledge and learning".
- It is "rooted in the cognitive developmental theory of Piaget and in the sociocultural theory of Vygotsky" (Kaufman, 2004, p.303). Four major learning principles characterize this theory:
  1. The notion of knowledge
  2. Learner–centredness
  3. Collaboration and social context
  4. The role of language

CONTEXT: LEBANON

- Multi-sectarian & multilingual country

- Status of English: A very important foreign language, due to its utilitarian advantages

- Taught in almost every school either as a 1st or 2nd foreign language as early as pre-school

- Given the same weight as native language in weekly school schedule

- Used also as the medium of instruction

- the government and people of Lebanon seem to have a positive attitude toward learning English (Saba'Ayon, 2010)

Description of the Business Communication Skills Course

- Required advanced (3-cr.) English course in Languages & Humanities Department.

- Aim: to prepare students to be professional communicators and team players in their workplace environments.

- prerequisites for the students' internship training as well as for their senior projects.

- Students: advanced English learners, seniors, and some junior or sophomore in the School of Business Administration.

Description of the Business Communication Skills Course (Cont.)

- Learning outcomes: writing and using different forms of job-related correspondence such as memos, e-mails, letters, instant messaging, curriculum vitae (CV), reports, and proposals as well as giving professional presentations.

- Demonstrating professional behavior in the workplace

Rationale for Using CL

- "There is an upswing in demand by staff, students, and employers for students to graduate with good interpersonal skills, knowledge of group dynamics, the flexibility to work in teams, the ability to lead, to problem-solve and to communicate effectively"(Ingleton, Doube, Rogers, & Noble, 2000, p. 2).

- CL enables students "to deal with increasingly complex workplace problems and processes that require individuals to pool their resources and integrate specialization" (Beckman, 1990, p. 128)

- Collaborative Learning Activities helped tertiary students develop strong interpersonal skills (Bartle, Dook, & Mocerino 2011).

Rationale for Using CL (Cont.)

▶ CL (1) helps students to foster critical thinking as well as problem-solving skills and (2) increases their learning interest (Gokhale, 1995).

▶ "Where 'team player' is often linked with business success, CL is a very useful tool" (Brown, n.d., p.2)

▶ "deeper level learning, critical thinking, shared understanding ... long term retention of the learned material ... opportunities for developing social and communication skills, developing positive attitudes to co-members and learning material, ... building social relationships and group cohesion, ... effectiveness of social construction of knowledge and ... the development of competencies" (Kreijns, Kirschner, and Jochems, 2003, p. 337).

Teacher's Role

- ▶ Recent research highlights the importance of teacher's role in helping students experience successful collaborative learning (Choi & Ro, 2012).

- ▶ Most faculty may not be aware of students' needs for preparation, or pre-group instruction (Snyder & McNeil, n.d).

- ▶ According to Gillies & Boyle (2011, p. 64) "placing students in groups and expecting them to work together will not promote cooperative learning". Instead, CL requires "careful planning, monitoring, and evaluating" (Gillies & Boyle, 2011, p. 64).

Teacher's Role (Cont.)

▶ To facilitate "students' acquisition of learning and generic skills":

1. "the guide on the side" not "the sage on the stage" (Cifuentes, 1996).

2. the duties of the teacher as a facilitator "include monitoring and intervening … [which] are done through such activities as:

▶ a. Observing students to see that they work as a team

▶ b. Monitoring each team's progress

▶ c. Explaining concepts and tasks as the need arises

▶ d. Mediating and teaching social skills in cases of conflicts among group members

▶ e. Commending good group efforts and interaction"(Brown, n.d., p.5

Process of Implementing CL

▶ 10-Step process

▶ *Step 1*: Use ice-breaker such as the interview technique or three adjectives that describe one's personality among others.

▶ *Step 2:* Learning about Team work: its definition, advantages, challenges, and ways to ensure its success. (Activity)

▶ They learn:

1. teams are more creative, more efficient and more synergic,

2. But if not handled properly, teams can "waste time, accomplish little work, and create a toxic environment"

3. teams should satisfy some goals (1) to know each other very well such as "their strengths and weaknesses, work style, experiences, attitudes and so on" to collaborate effectively in teams and (2) "agree on how they will operate and make decisions" (Ober & Newman, 2013, p. 36).

Process of Implementing CL (Cont.)

▶ *Step 3*: Help Students Develop Negotiation and Social Skills

▶ learning how to express one's opinion without hurting or frustrating others.

▶ learning how to be open-minded and accepting others, no matter how different they are

▶ To this end, the first two skills students should learn are to **be *good listeners*** and to **give constructive feedback**

Process of Implementing CL (Cont.)

▶ **Be good listeners** by avoiding (1) jumping to conclusions, (2) discarding any idea based on any personal judgment, and (3) being biased to one's ideas.

▶ Instead, (1) be open to any idea suggested by any member as long as it is likely to improve their work,

▶ (2) discuss ideas objectively, and

▶ (3) make decisions that reflect the thinking of almost all the group members.

Give Constructive Feedback

▶ Activity: How would you respond to the following situations?

1. Your partner, Fred, has missed your group meeting, and it's his first time.

2. Angela has not submitted her part on the agreed due date claiming that she is working on 3 other projects.

3. Bonita has not only completed her task on the due date but also created an innovative design for your project.

4. Mike sent you his draft; you think that the idea is good but not well supported.

Give Constructive Feedback (Cont.)

- Balance feedback between positive and negative comments.

- To ensure appropriate tone, begin with positive & then negative comments in a professional, positive tone.

- Feedback: descriptive, free from labels and exaggeration, reflective of one's opinion (not others), and expressed in "I" statements.

Process of Implementing CL (Cont.)

- *Step 4*: Monitor and Facilitate students' Collaboration in class Activities (Activity)

- Provide students with enough practice on CL in class, ask them to collaborate in groups of 4 or 5 to accomplish a task such as responding to a routine e-mail request, writing a sales letter promoting a product or a service, refusing a claim, or proposing a new idea to solve a problem in one's corporation.

- While the students are working within their groups, the teacher passes among the groups to monitor their progress and **facilitate** their learning, if needed, through questioning students' logic, hinting at illogical student reasoning, and providing resources for students to help them accomplish their tasks.

Process of Implementing CL (Cont.)

▶ *Step 5*: Involve Students in Real-life, Job-Related Tasks (Activity)

▶ Accomplishing a project that requires to work outside the classroom such as a research proposal, research report, feasibility study, and/or progress report.

▶ Each of these tasks requires students' collaboration in groups of minimum 3 members.

▶ As to *group selection*, can done heterogeneously or homogenously, through self- selection or random assignment. This depends on the teacher's objectives.

▶ After being grouped, the group members' first task is to get to know each other: their email address, mobile number, facebook account, likes, dislikes and their other interests as well as establishing *their group rules. (Activity)*

Process of Implementing CL (Cont.)

▶ *Step 6*: Help Students Develop a Work Plan

▶ To ensure effective CL, there must be "group goals" and "individual accountability" (Slavin, 1989).

▶ Table 1: Work Plan

Due date	Task	Responsible Member	Medium of Communication

Process of Implementing CL (Cont.)

▶ *Step 7*: Encourage the Use of Different Media for Communication

▶ Such as the e-mail, whatsapp, BBM, facebook, wikis, Skype instead of depending on face to face meetings.

▶ In this way, students understand the value of these technological facilities to facilitate their communication with other members to complete their common project,

▶ thus becoming prepared to collaborate with people on different parts of the world in their prospective workplaces.

Process of Implementing CL (Cont.)

▶ *Step 8:* Assign group Conferences with Each Group/Team

▶ a 15- minute conference for each group to discuss their progress and provide feedback on their work.

▶ During such conferences, check for each member's accountability which Slavin (1988) consider, together with positive interdependence among the group members, essential for successful group work.

▶ Provide help and guidance to groups

Process of Implementing CL (Cont.)

▶ *Step 9*: Facilitate Students' Research and Writing Assignment

▶ Through class activities: instructions on how to construct questionnaires, conduct interviews, & analyze their collected data.

▶ Share samples similar to their assignments.

▶ During office hours, provide individual help to each group such as checking the questionnaire and interview questions

Process of Implementing CL (Cont.)

- *Step 10*: Prepare Students to Give Professional Team Presentations

- Students share their projects in a professional oral presentation

- Instruct the students on how to give a **professional team** presentation, to prepare a professionally looking power point presentation, to develop good presentation skills.

- Emphasizes on the team unity and cohesion.

Possible Challenges

- Some of the challenges: (1) time, (2) student attitudes and (3) student capacities.

- CL requires more time than traditional teaching in terms of developing collaborative activities, teaching group dynamics, having students work in groups to accomplish a task.

- Students' attitudes towards CL: fear of some competitive students that they will do the whole work and the others will just simply "hitchhike" (Brown & Lara, 2007, n.p.). At the other end, some students with no interest in the group's work be social loafers.

- Students' capacities: introverted students could feel "apprehensive" because it requires them to communicate

Ways to Overcome the Challenges

▶ Time could be overcome with careful planning, organizing and training. The more trained and organized the teacher, the easier the implementation of CL becomes.

▶ Students' dependency on others (hitchhiking and social loafing) could be overcome : (1) when students know they cannot get equal grades unless they do the work equitably, & (2) through prepared work plan, teacher's monitoring, and peer evaluation, their accountability can be determined.

▶ Through socializing in small groups, introverted students are more likely to be more sociable.

Conclusion

► These 10 steps, which have helped me to foster a collaborative, friendly learning environment in my class and prepare my students to a collaborative working environment, are likely to yield the same results if you follow them in your class.

► Although I have been implementing this instructional practice for over six years (equivalent to 18 semesters), I always look for ways to improve my strategy.

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THANK YOU FOR LISTENING
Any Questions?