

Collaboration: An Important Skill for the 21st Century

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The phrase "21st century learning" conjures up in a word 'change'. With technological advances coming so quickly that we can't keep up, education systems around the world are scrambling to identify what skills will be necessary in the future (Koenig, 2011). Included among skills such as critical thinking, problem solving, self regulation, and communication, is the ability to collaborate (Binkley, Erstad, Herman, Raizen, Ripley, & Rumble, 2010) .

The National Research Council (2011) in the US outlines collaboration as the ability of an individual to work with diverse groups of people to develop, implement, and communicate new ideas. People who are skilled at human interaction and adaptive problem solving will become increasingly valuable as jobs with other skill sets are replaced by technology and shipped offshore (Koenig, 2010). Further support for learning how to collaborate in the 21st century can be found in Robinson's book 'The Element' as he discusses how validating, inspiring, and transforming it is to find a group of people who share your passion (Robinson, 2009). Therefore operating on the premise that collaborating with others is a skill that we need to be focussing on as we reform education for the 21st century, the question might arise, " Do developmental theories of how children learn support the concept of collaboration?".

I believe the answer to this question is yes. Interpersonal communication skills which are key to successful collaboration, are also key to developmental theories. Vygotsky's theory supports collaboration through his premise that the role of culture is pivotal to human development. "The formation of individual consciousness takes place through relations with others: it is a socially meaningful activity that shapes the individual's makeup" (Gindis, 1999, p. 336). Further, Vygotsky contended that thinking is a social process and that the acquisition of knowledge originates from one's social interactions. Another developmental psychologist, Jerome Bruner, discussed the necessity of culture providing us with procedures with which to share knowledge and therefore construct our reality in a "deeply shareable way"(Bruner, 2008). Each of these theories places social interaction solidly at the

core of human development offering support for a renewed emphasis on the skills of communication and collaboration for all 21st century learners. Many of these learners come under the umbrella of special education and have specific struggles with the communication and interpersonal skills necessary for collaboration. It has been my experience that behaviour specialists, youth care workers, and resource teachers have offered direct social skills instruction to individuals or small groups in such cases. It has also been my experience that these students are then put in the regular classroom or on the playground where it is assumed that the skills will be practiced and transferred. Often there is no evidence that the skills have transferred. I believe that we have more work to do in providing our students opportunities to practice skills with their peers in scaffolded situations.

One remedy offered by Udvari-Solnar and Kluth is to create a collaborative classroom community through providing activities designed for all students which emphasise partner and group work. According to Udvari-Solnar and Kluth inclusion, which has always been difficult under the current educational model, is attainable in a classroom that allows for students to explore and construct their own meaning in a community of learners. Another option which opens up the doors to collaborative efforts is teaching to the 'big idea' through open ended problem solving which allows students to participate in a group at their individual level of understanding (Small, 2009).

Regardless of the teaching strategies chosen, including special education learners in your plans for collaborative learning offers opportunities for all members of the classroom to learn flexibility, compromise, and how to work effectively and respectfully with diverse members - skills that are highly valued in the global market of the 21st century where technology is widening the ability of people from diverse backgrounds to work together (Koenig, 2011). Some such as Robinson (2009) go further to say that in order to meet the demands for fresh innovations that population growth and urbanization demand, we must encourage imagination and connect people with their true talents in like minded communities.

References

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