Reviewing & Reflecting Upon Practices of Collaboration in Higher Education

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Abstract
In the current innovation-driven knowledge age, education is under a critical transformation. The instructor-student collaborative partnership has the potential to transform education from traditional instructor-directed, transmissive teaching to a very active, participatory student-centered learning. Collaborative learning is a widely used instructional method, but the learning potential of this instructional method is often underused in practice. Therefore, the importance of various factors underlying effective collaborative learning should be determined. The present study applies a critical literature review approach and reflection upon practices which promote collaboration in a learning environment. The key conclusions indicate that there are various ways to promote collaboration among students-students & student-instructor. Proposed practices in this study serve as recommendations to policy makers and educators in Higher Education.

Keywords: education, collaboration, practices, students.


Introduction
Education is under a crucial transformation & change in the current innovation-driven knowledge age. The collaborative partnership between students & instructors can contribute to the transformation of education from traditional instructor-directed, transmissive teaching to active, participatory student-centred learning. Research findings indicate that “the instructor and students not only actively participate in learning, instruction, and social environment building processes, but also maintain mutual interactions, communications, and actions to construct knowledge, to design and facilitate discussions, and to build a social learning environment” (Ouyang et. al., 2020, p. 1). Collaboration between instructors & students

Nowadays, the concept of ‘collaboration’ in higher education is of critical importance. According to HEFCE publication report (2011) ‘Collaborate to Compete’ collaboration takes place on any administrative, academic (teaching, learning, research), institutional (collaboration among different institutions) level, and, contributes to economies of scale, greater capacity, innovation, flexibility, enhanced work outcomes via sharing
experience, knowledge. Through collaboration, institutions can achieve rapid development (such as the development of learning resources), adoption of new technologies and sharing the risk of developing new forms of provision. Learning environments and contexts are becoming increasingly participative (HEFCE report, 2011).

The present study will explore practices that contribute to an increase collaboration with students in Higher Education reflecting upon the approaches the author applies.

Collaboration & Mindset

A collaboration involves working together across some form of differences (national, cultural, institutional, subject or other) (Walsh & Kahn, 2010). We should make ourselves open-minded, we should try to see things from different perspectives, we should try to understand different attitudes and ways of thinking, developing more our emotional intelligence & making ourselves more cross cultural aware so to bridge differences and understand others (Putnam, 2000). Mutual understanding is essential for cohesive collaborations driving to creativity and innovation. I believe that working upon differences more ideas can be born and this diversity can drive to something new and innovative. I believe when there is understanding bonds are likely to be stronger & understood as language, conventions and approaches are shared. This acceptance & understanding will help to facilitate an easy going transformation from individually accepted & applied working practices to new ones that are collaboratively accepted so things to happen in a cohesive way for all without causing ‘disruption’ from the established social order (Walsh & Kahn, 2010). I also believe that in order to work collaboratively we should try to perceive ‘roles’ and ‘power’ of people in the group in a different way. All group members should collaborate ‘authentically’ reaching judgments that express themselves than not just agreeing with a ‘yes’ or ‘no’ towards positions that may not represent them and letting a dominant leading figure to impose decisions. Collaborative work requires moving from the ‘individual leadership’ style to a more ‘participative, shared & distributed leadership’ so more space of autonomy to be provided to people/group members. The above will be a factor of success working collaboratively and will facilitate people engagement towards a common goal but also practice having a common mindset focus.

Acquisition of different mindset in order to work collaboratively facilitates bonds with people from other ‘tribes’ to be made through a different kind of social capital: ‘bridging’. This stimulates innovation & creativity (Putnam, 2000).

Collaboration & Reflection upon Practice

The example I will present & critically review here regards my collaboration with my students in order to help them achieve a collaborative learning for themselves. The case study that will explore the above regard my PG module ‘Managing people & organizations’ where collaboration is a key theme for this module. I find challenging to plan activities to match interests & needs, to communicate effectively with them, to help my students understand that sharing out the work and ‘learning from others’ are two of the main reasons engaging in collaborative activity (HEFCE report, 2011). Teaching involves a social process rather than just download information.
Collaborating with my students aiming to develop a climate of collaborative learning among students and students & instructor is based on:

**Factors to be Considered**

*Plan activities that meet their needs & interests in the module; Communicating clearly, openly, effectively & with honesty; Developing trust; Promoting dialogue/discussions & student partnership; Clarifying tasks & common goals; Appreciating a diversity of ideas & encouraging share of experience & empowerment; Sharing the same values & vision supporting each other; Making students feel that they have value & are respected.*

Gravells (2014) states: ‘You are not teaching your subject to a group of learners who are all the same, but to a group of individuals with different experiences, abilities and needs, which should be recognised and respected’. Due to this, before the start of my module/s, I contact the SoB administrators to get the list of the registered students and brief information about their profile (education, country of origin, disabilities etc), so, knowing the synthesis of my class, to plan accordingly my communication approach, activities, collaborative practices which are always inclusive, joint working on clearly defined tasks in a reflective way (James, Dunning, Commolly, Elliot, 2007) aiming a) my students to share their own experiences & to reflect upon them b) all learners’ different learning styles and achievements to be equally valued & respected, and to be enabled to fulfil their potential. Due to this, planning my teaching & learning activities, I make adjustments taking into account individual requirements and needs as these are expressed by my students during our class discussions, during individual & group meetings, during tutorials, via email requests and online contacts (skype, MS teams etc); all the above are important for building collaboration since the nature of collaborative is inquiry based, relationship dependent (Walsh and Kahn, 2010). Adding to the above, I also consult the equality & disability coordinator of my School for cases of disabled students in my class helping me to think further & apply alternative ways of communication (e.g more face to face contacts), alternative ways of facilitating learning experience/ performance outcomes leading to student satisfaction, alternative access to materials (e.g to provide handouts, or, orally to explain the context of them arranging ad hoc sessions), support, adjustments regarding assessment. Also, attending workshops, discipline meetings, school boards and reading in order to be well informed about the University of Dundee's 'Accessibility statements and support' guidelines and requirements which help to understand University's requirements and my role in ensuring all our digital material are accessible to all our current and future students as well as consulting the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Coordinator of my School when more clarifications are required.

Having already developed the general Module Outline, I incorporate the above student specific information when developing my final Module Handbook where I make adjustments regarding the materials (to be broadly international), activities (e.g group case studies from different countries & companies, in- class examples & videos from all continents etc), defining clearly, and in every detail tasks, rules & processes, type & context of assessment, deadlines, context of each lecture/workshop/tutorial session, providing guidelines for each activity and each assessment. However, although these are clearly defined, when the module starts, I follow a soft-hard approach keeping balances between my subject & academic expertise of what needs to remain unchanged in the subject area supporting students’ learning in this subject while meeting learning outcomes but also of what may need to change to adjust better to students’ needs and
interests. The design and development of the module & module materials takes place by me on the basis of my expertise in the area (expert in HRM), doing further academic research in the field (to choose & select the right, relevant & appropriate materials), administering broad comparative research of how such module is developed & delivered in other Universities, considering past years students’ feedback, considering feedback from colleagues sharing their knowledge & experience, considering peer reviewers’ feedback of my module teaching, as well as, educational, program & subject issues being raised in discipline meetings complying with the School targets (e.g incorporating my own research in the subject, regulations and processes (e.g standards being set by the Quality Assurance & Academic Standards Committee etc). Developing professional dialogues with colleagues contributes to joint-decision making (Sachs, 2003) and professional learning comprises both the process and product of collaborative working (Welsh and Kohn, 2010). Although everything is clearly planned, I try to be flexible, open to students’ queries & proposals developing a social interaction with them (Welsh and Kohl, 2010) for what serves their learning interest & needs at the best and negotiate through a democratic dialogue and clearly presented evidence what adjustments can take place. Sachs (2003 as cited in Welsh & Kohl, 2010) discusses about collaboration as ‘a process of joint-decision making that requires time, careful negotiation trust and effective communication where all parties are learners’ (p.32). I challenge students inviting them (during in-class discussions, tutorials, meetings, email contact) to be active participants, to raise suggestions & ideas about what facilitates more their learning experience and needs negotiating with them for various issues (e.g size of group work, deadlines for assessment, number & duration of workshops, context of learning activities etc), so, further adjustments to take place if needed. At the same time, through a clear, continuous, open & honest communication I inform them in every detail about my approach and practice, my intentions (to support them succeed) providing also full guidelines (via announcements, in class discussion, group & individual meetings), of ‘what’ needs to take place, ‘why’ needs to take place, ‘how’ and ‘when’ needs to take place so everything to be perceived correctly. In the meantime, I provide continuous follow up support e.g uploading extra clarifications in a clear way, plain language, sharing materials and communicating clearly the purpose of this, communicating personal values (e.g value of transparency, meritocracy, collaboration, fairness and equal access to opportunities so to develop trust etc).

Within the 'supercomplexity' of HE (Barnett, 2000 as cited in Lea and Callaghan, 2008), lecturers may harbour a number of contradictory beliefs and draw on each of them in their working lives, either to meet pragmatic demands or to justify their teaching practice, philosophy and approach. Reflecting upon my practice and communicating messages such as ‘help me to help you’, ‘we work all together for your success’ and realizing these in practice exploring ways to meet each student expectations & interests, providing sufficient time for empathic listening & sharing, encouraging & supporting them emotionally (e.g that they will succeed), motivating them that diverse opinions are very welcomed challenging them to justify different perspectives, and that all efforts are acknowledged so that to minimize feelings of uncertainty. I find this clear, honest communication which is supported by actions helps students to feel that are valued & respected, that their own learning needs are prioritized, that expectations and promises are met. I find very helpful for a constructive collaboration with my students when I communicate with them that ‘we all belong in the same team’, that ‘I am not an instructor but a team member with them’ clarifying my role to collaborate with them to facilitate their knowledge journey. This approach acts as a role model inspiring them for collaborative learning when working with other classmates.
The above contribute to the development of a feeling of trust, contribute to students’ understanding & consensus of what takes place in the module. This builds trust between students & instructor which is important for collaboration (Walsh and Kahn, 2010). I believe, in this way a positive climate is developed that cultivates students’ collaborative relationship/partnership with the instructor which is extended to other classmates. Also, I believe that encouraging active learning but also autonomous and collaborative learning (via interdependent tasks) I encourage students’ empowerment and group interaction; group interaction and learning provide the building blocks to allow the student to develop as a participant member of a wider learning community (Webster, and Sudweeks (2006) . Borrowing from my experience, this challenges students not only to share but to assist other members/partners’ learning taking often the role of tutor of others, co-teachers etc which enhances collaborative learning.

My collaborative practice approach focuses on task execution via the collaboration with students for developing the appropriate learning climate aiming to satisfy students’ needs.

As I mentioned above, honest communication is followed by actions. Such an example of actions regard the way I develop the module teaching & learning activities: Considering that the audience of my PG HRM lectures consists of international students, I selected and incorporated international materials (variability of journal articles & bibliographical resources, handouts, videos, research materials, business examples & exercises being discussed in the class, case studies) with authors from all over the world and context which regard research findings, examples and cases from different countries. In this way, I try to create frameworks of understanding that emphasize the wider socio cultural context which plays a central role in the formation of cognition, meaning, relevance and knowledge creation (Walsh and Kahn, 2010). For example, real management & organizational exercises/examples and case studies in various European, Asian, African, Australian & American companies; Inviting in my lectures guest speakers (local & international ones) from the academic & business world (such as CEOs, HRM Directors, Consultants) to share their own academic knowledge & work experience but also to challenge students to share their own experience & knowledge; following an interactive teaching approach helps students’ understanding (Biggs, 1999) as cited in Lea and Callaghan (2008). Presenting various short videos relevant to the specific subject being examined in each lecture session challenging students to reflect on these, interact with others and the instructor (student-student & students-instructor interaction), share opinions & personal experience, question issues of interest; organizing two workshops & inviting PhD students of mine to share their own international research experience helping students development of research skills; organizing student-led seminars where different groups had to present different case studies. For these student-led seminars, I facilitated the development of small & of equal size groups because trust & sharing collaboratively of ideas is harder to achieve in larger groups (Levine & Moreland,2004), providing detailed instructions and guidelines for the specific group task via tutorials, announcements in the University platform, via emails, via meetings with individuals or/and groups during office hours and beyond these, clarifying and providing specific guidelines for the roles of the group members but also giving them the autonomy to decide which group wished to join, how to distribute roles, how to plan, organize and execute the task. From the beginning, I placed myself at their disposal to assist and resolve for them any problem that might appear acting as a ‘bridging’ capital, (Putnam, 2000) (e.g. when a student did not find a group to join, or, wished to change group or role I intervened contacting in class and via email messages the group leader and all group members trying to
explain clearly the problem, inviting them to collaborate this to be resolved, to be altruistic towards others’ needs but also manage any resistance of an individual group member on the basis of presenting evidence (convincing) that the specific PG HRM module task regarded application of the module team work theory & collaboration in practice and this and assist to resolving the matter on time addressing all students’ needs and interests and helping them to have a good collaborative learning experience & satisfaction avoiding time delays and frustration).

Each group presented, analysed & critically reviewed a case study reflecting on their own experience, and the end of each presentation, each group had to answer queries of their classmates and interact with them. Additionally, in the student led seminars, workshops and lectures when applying theory into practice through the examination of examples & case studies, I encouraged students’ role plays where students could debate ideas & present perspectives stemming from the allocated roles. The variety of applied teaching (reflective, inclusive, reciprocal, connecting theory & practice), & variety of learning approaches & opportunities for a PG module in management (such as via lectures, in class discussions & interactions, group case studies, reflective discussion of examples/exercises, workshops, student-led seminars, reflection on materials & experiences, tutorials, role plays, invitation of guest speakers & interaction with students, challenging them to apply learning of ‘Managing people’ theories in practice through collaborations, interactions with guests, as well as, via team work , learning via videos, via Blackboard resources provided evidence of combining formal & informal learning, active & collaborative learning diverse learning opportunities for students helping all students to be active participants & learners.

Positive Interdependence

For all the above mentioned activities, I develop a partnership on the basis of creating positive interdependence between students & instructor, students & students which is a critical factor contributing to the effectiveness of collaboration. The positive effect of interdependence on student achievement researched (Slavin, 1990 ; Webb and Palinscar, 1996; Johnson et al., 2007 as cited in Scager et. al, 2016) concluding that interdependence does not consist of a single factor but is constructed through the interaction between motivated students and design factors (the nature of the task and student autonomy). From my experience, selecting & designing appropriate activities and applying of variety of teaching & learning approaches meeting students’ needs, making them to feel comfortable and trust that there is a supportive environment, cultivate a positive interdependence which contributes to collaboration. The above variety of teaching & learning approaches is considered the appropriate approach in a PG management module being confirmed by colleagues (via discipline meetings, discussions), by peer reviewers’ feedback & students’ feedback throughout the semester, by the final module students’ assessment, as well as, by research in the field as I participate in the British Academy of Management yearly based conferences, as well as, in the European Academy of Management yearly based conferences and notice the new approaches in management education & management teaching keeping myself abreast with the new developments ; Also, administering & publishing research in the field of management education in the International Journal of Higher Education Management, being editorial board member and scientific member of the advisory panel of the Centre of Business & Economic Research where I review current research in the field of human resource management and management education I become informed of the new trends and incorporate recent research being published as part of my teaching.
materials so my module materials to be continuously updated. My sessions have always been student-centred promoting collaborative & inclusive learning which is reviewed regularly via observations, checking attendance lists, participation in class discussions and other.

**Promoting Understanding, Rationality Enthusiasm**

*Promoting understanding, rationality, enthusiasm, consensus, autonomous vs. collaborative learning.*

For example when I plan & organize assessment: with respect to cultural, educational, and other personal differences (language, disabilities etc), I developed three different types of coursework as part of the module assessment so all students to have more & equal opportunities of success. I explained in every detail (in class, in the module handbook, via email) the rationality & benefits of these 3 different coursework so that students to perceive, understand and perform successfully specifically, I explain in every detail what the importance of every assessment, what skills every assessment type serves and specifically the importance of development of critical thinking, research skills, reflection, ability to work autonomously as individuals and collaboratively in teams in order to be equipped for the real world and increase their employability opportunities. One coursework was a group work developing freely a research argument of their own interest (free choice topic); part of the assessment was also evaluation of reflective, critical & collaboration skills and of the collaboration process students followed to perform the task (Jeroen, 2018); the second assessment regarded an individual work critically reflecting on literature for a specific given topic/subject providing the opportunity to work autonomously, and the 3rd the critical analysis of a group business case study providing the opportunity to develop critical, analytical, collaborative & presentation skills all of which were in line with the learning outcomes as is required by the QA Committee. Students, working autonomously and collaborative develop skills which are important for their employability. I provided clear guidelines that individual assessment coursework was uploaded in Turnitin, the group one in safe assignments explaining that for students with technical difficulties or disabilities could be sent via email and I would assist. Helping students to understand tasks and processes contribute to make them feel comfortable, to be enthusiastic and collaborate.

Combination of the specific assessment types supported the provision of diverse learning challenges & acquisition of knowledge from various sources & from different perspectives (connecting practice & theory), promoting collaborative & autonomous learning, as well as, equal opportunities of success in the module because students have more chances to perform and be assessed. I feel that students who are autonomous in the planning and regulation of their work, adds to their motivation to follow their own rules and planning. This direct relationship between perceived autonomy and self-regulatory behavior is aligned with self-determination theory (Deci and Ryan, 2000 as cited in Scager et.al, 2016).) According to Deci and Ryan (2000), when teachers are supportive of student autonomy, students are motivated to internalize the regulation of their learning activities, whereas when teachers are controlling, self-regulated motivation is undermined. The self-regulatory social processes of these students, which was encouraged by the autonomy they were provided, were the most important factors increasing the effectiveness of their collaboration with myself and other classmates (Scager et. al, 2016).
This three (3) coursework assessment minimized risk of biases due to more assessment opportunities, it was fully supported & appreciated by students from their 2 levels of feedback- during the module and final student module feedback, almost all students in this big size module succeed, this type of multiple coursework assessment is the common practice in my discipline, it is approved by the QA Committee in order standards & learning outcomes to be met, all past students of the module rated the module teaching, learning & assessment at very high rates (K6); the combination of individual & group assessment was suitable assessment for the module satisfying diverse students’ needs. Defining clear goals, explaining tasks, explaining the reasoning for every assessment & activity, the standards that have to be met and how these contribute to their development contribute to students’ understanding. Allocating specific time intervals during class discussions, uploading guidelines in the Announcements section in the University platform, providing additional clarifications & guidelines in the Module handbook and via email contacts provide to students what they need to get a good understanding of what they have to do and how they can do it; facilitating distribution of group members’ roles while designing complex tasks contribute to learners’ interdependence; assisting collaborative learning and making teaching more inclusive engaging students as partners in the learning process increase students’ satisfaction (Fleming, 2001). All these create a climate for students’ consensus in terms of what takes place both of which have added value of an effective collaboration between instructor-students, students-students. Detailed feedback for each piece of assessment which is clear & well justified, is provided on time, either via face to face / individual or/and group meetings, or, via online in clear language comments in Turnitin, in safe assignments, via email; the feedback is always constructive (commenting in a careful & language sensitive way every part of the work body acknowledging the value of students’ efforts), developmental (provides guidance for improvements), sensitive to learners’ needs or/and difficulties or/and disabilities to assist students’ learning. As such is communicated to students in a clear and honest way so its context & purpose to be understood & accepted contributing to knowledge development & knowledge transfer both generally (e.g. importance of feedback for improvement) and in their subject area (e.g. elaborating critically new theories, ideas & perspectives in the field off HRM). The above comprise both the process & product of collaborative working (Walsh & Kahn, 2010).

Closing, other issue which contribute to collaboration include: a) Develop small heterogeneous group activities in class. This helps students to feel more comfortable sharing their knowledge & experience than in large groups, but also helps myself to mentor, supervise more closely each group (in class and in different tutorials) knowing them better; although the presented here PG module is a big size module and large groups presentations of case studies would fit more to my timetabled hours schedule, however, I felt that I had to allocate additional hours of mine to students arranging two additional open sessions for all groups to have equal time intervals and equal opportunities of participation and success to present their cases. This initiative of mine to do such arrangement benefited students achieving a successful collaboration, b) Design & develop patterns of working that acknowledge the contributions of others are essential – as a matter of ingrained habit: Borrowing from my practice for this module, assigning a student to create the whole list of names of all members of all groups of a big size module (200 + students), is a contribution which was acknowledged via in class and Blackboard announcements of acknowledgement.
Conclusion

The present study proposes practices for effective collaboration with students which is facilitated by various ways such as: a) Meeting students’ needs and interests when planning & designing activities, developing trust, dialogue, partnership with students & effective open & honest communication which leads to actions so expectations and promises to be kept. The above help a positive climate to be developed and the instructor to act as a role model of collaboration for them (Levine & Moreland, 2004); b) Developing a 'bonding' capital, that constitutes strong relationships with my students saying and showing in practice that all of us in the module/class constitute a team (Putnam, 2000); c) Evoking, rather than enforcing, positive interdependence (Scager et. al., 2016); d) Acting as facilitator in the student-driven activities (e.g. when students participate in small groups) (Kirschner, 2001 as cited in Scager et. al. (2016)); e) Acknowledging the various contributions that those involved make to a task. Acknowledgement confirms that people are valued and respected. This contributes to an effective collaboration.

References


