

Fostering Community and Collaboration: A Reflection on Collaborative Pedagogy in Hybrid Postgraduate Courses

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Abstract

The interconnectedness of online and in-person students is a vital component of many universities' educational strategies and is comprised of ever evolving technology and application which can prove difficult to balance (Weidlich & Bastiaens, 2018). The purpose of this reflective essay is to challenge graduate teaching assistants and instructors to incorporate more collaborative teaching practices in their hybrid classrooms. Specifically, this reflection will express the positive experiences of one graduate teaching assistant, with a background in primary education, on a hybrid/fusion postgraduate course. It is the goal of this reflection to inform readers about collaborative pedagogy practices and how to use them in higher education. This piece will inform readers on specific methods that were utilized to foster community and collaboration in a hybrid postgraduate course. By expressing the benefits and experiences of collaborative pedagogy for instructors and students, this article hopes to inspire fellow educators to use a collaborative approach to instruct postgraduate students especially in hybrid or fusion classrooms.

Introduction

This reflective essay focuses on the experiences of one primary school teacher, who transitioned roles to Graduate Teaching Assistant (GTA), and their incorporation of collaborative pedagogy within a hybrid learning environment. During the global Covid-19 pandemic it became evident to educators that to better support their students, a collaborative and more engaging personal approach to education was needed (Oraif & Elyas, 2021). It is notable that collaborative pedagogy began long before the incorporation of digital technology in classrooms and would continue without it. However, technology continues to shape the world of education across all disciplines and levels of study and has become a key component of education across all levels of academia. While the historical relevance of collaborative pedagogy will be explained in this article, the focus will remain instead on the use within a hybrid graduate level master's classroom.

To begin, context and positionality are presented, to enlighten the reader on the perspective offered, followed by a review of theory and historical context of current practices within universities. Finally, reflection and commentary for fellow educators will be given along with key aspects and methods utilized in the specific setting. By reflecting on previous research and examining the differences between traditional and modern collaborative pedagogy, this paper hopes to enlighten readers about the challenges and nuances of collaborative pedagogy, through a single perspective, in higher education. Future implications and final thoughts will conclude the reflection and will encourage educators to elicit collaborative pedagogy practices within their postgraduate

and higher education classrooms.

Positionality and Context

To give context to my reflection as a GTA and interest in collaborative pedagogy within higher education, it is important to note my background as a primary school teacher. As a teacher, I was deeply motivated to provide a classroom culture and community that recognized my students' strengths and supported their social learning. As the majority of my students were English Language Learners it was important to scaffold their learning in both academic and social language. I first became aware of, and began implementing, collaborative pedagogy when following the prescribed curriculum and classic teaching styles appeared unsupportive of my students needs both academically and socially. As elementary school comprised my students' formative years of education, I wanted to allow for highly socializing and creative environments with learner-centered and driven methods to govern their education. I state this context as it presents my personal preference toward the use of collaborative learning methods and gives insight to the reasoning behind my curiosities for its implementation in higher education.

Upon the acceptance of the postgraduate teaching position, I knew that I wanted to specifically focus on the challenges and benefits of collaborative pedagogy within a highly technological postgraduate hybrid classroom. I was excited for this challenge and wanted to experience the nuances of developing such a classroom firsthand. It was a goal for me to incorporate and advocate for these practices, as I believe

they enhance student learning, regardless of age. There were also similarities between my previous primary students and my 'soon to be' postgraduate students, many of them had been English language learners or considered English as their second language. I wanted to inform my practice on the ways the students participated with technology and how these interactions supported or hindered my perception of their learning or abilities to work collaboratively and engage linguistically. What ways could collaborative learning be advanced for the next course, what seemed to go "right" or "wrong"? How did the adult learners react to this type of instruction?

These questions guided me while I observed and supported students in a hybrid setting. However, it was also necessary for me to first understand the historical and contextual framework of collaborative pedagogy within education to inform my applications more specifically within higher education. In the next section, background and context for the utilization of collaborative pedagogy in education is explored through previous research and is presented to support the later reflection. It is the hope that by understanding the meaning and uses of collaborative pedagogy, that the reader will find value in this piece's reflection component and build general knowledge on the subject.

Collaborative Pedagogy and Hybrid Higher Education

What is Collaborative Pedagogy?

Collaborative pedagogy is a learner-centered approach to teaching students and is elicited in a learner-driven

environment. These learning approaches are members of the constructivist learning theories first developed by Jean Piaget (1971). Piaget proposed that learning was an active process in which learners needed to be engaged in constructing their own knowledge. This new knowledge, he argued, was guided by previous experiences and earlier learned content (Piaget, 1971). Similarly, student-centered education and collaborative pedagogy focuses on the learner's direct participation in the learning task and focuses primarily on the learner's autonomy and independence (Herranen, Vesterinen & Aksela, 2018). This can be accomplished through revisioning the roles and responsibilities between students and educators to incorporate a more balanced power relationship when considering student learning and its outcomes.

Cooperative learning and peer-assisted learning are two types of active learning strategies found in a classroom with collaborative pedagogy. Peer-assisted learning is defined by Topping and Ehly (2012) as the active learning provided through peers or matched companions that guide instruction and support on a given topic. For example, this could be when teachers assign differentiated leveled tasks or assignments to certain groups in which students work collaboratively in homogenous (same level) or heterogeneous (different level) teams. According to Smith and MacGregar (1992) cooperative learning represents the most intensely structured components (in which lesson components are constructed by the teacher prior to administration) of collaborative pedagogy. Foot and Howe (1998) express that cooperative learning has three parts: 1) Students working in teams towards an obtainable goal; 2) Equal division of labor among members and differentiation of sub-goals thereby

highlighting the strengths of individual members and maintaining accountability for each role; 3) The end goal and completion consist of a combined score consisting of each member's contribution.

Benefits and Challenges of Collaborative Pedagogy

Collaborative learning boasts many benefits to students as shown through an array of empirical studies (Oraif & Elyas, 2021). Not only do students gain from the social interactions and added perspectives of their peers but they develop a higher level of understanding and thinking as well (Webb, 1982.; Laal & Ghodsi, 2012). It is assumed that quality interactions (as depicted in peer-assisted learning) among peers promote a restructuring of the cognitive understanding of the material and therefore enhances or deepens the learning of the students (Webb, 2009). Importantly for the purposes of this paper, a study comparing university students' achievements after working collaboratively or independently showed that the students who worked in groups showed a higher understanding of the material and concepts (Linton et al., 2014).

It is critical, however, to distinguish that simply forming groups or assigning partners does not automatically add benefit for students' learning. Groups must be formed with intent and have structures in place to elicit equal participation and division of work. However, over-structuring groups could lower motivation and disrupt intrinsic interaction between students (Dillenbourg, 2002). For this reason, some students are opposed to working collaboratively or with their peers in general. As found in

Raidal and Volet's (2009) study of university students' opinions of collaborative learning, most students preferred individual forms of learning. On the other hand, when students recognize each individual or group member to be contributing and adding to the collective, collaborative learning is highly effective (Johnson & Johnson, 2009). Johnson and Johnson (2009) explain that this accountability within groups minimizes the feeling of "freeloading" which can negatively impact students' preference for collaborative learning as mentioned above.

Apprehensions to using collaborative pedagogy in higher education also arises from the historical nature of academia and traditional structures of education (Smith & MacGregar, 1992). The hierarchy of power between instructors and students dissipates in a collaborative atmosphere. When learning is no longer solely dependent on the instructor, but is based within a community i.e., classrooms, it holds the same challenges that face any group including shared responsibility and accountability (Smith & MacGregar, 1992). This reason alone may interfere with instructors considering a collaborative approach to teaching in higher education as these issues are more complex than working in a traditionally teacher-led style classroom. Further, issues such as dominant group participants who control the group or conversation, teammates who refuse to engage with the material or obstruct others learning, and overall lack of preparation can seriously impact the success of a cooperative learning activity, putting pressure on teachers with regard to classroom management (Hsiung, Luo & Chung, 2014). However, when students are engaged and risk factors are mitigated, the benefits of higher academic achievement, specifically regarding multilanguage learners/speakers, are

great (George, 2017).

Hybrid Teaching in Higher Education

It is important to include further background on the utilization of technology and the adaptation of modern classrooms within universities as this was the setting for this article. As with many universities, the university discussed within the reflection sections offers on-campus, online and hybrid courses with the flexibility of choice of study and location preference for their postgraduate programs. Students can study in hybrid, also referred to as a fusion teaching setting, which allows students to participate from anywhere in the world. Importantly, this aspect of bringing together diverse learners who have little to no previous interaction will become more relevant later in the reflection. While this option has advanced perspectives and collaborative pedagogy within postgraduate courses, it also presents new challenges for dialogue and communication.

Moore (1993) developed the theory of transactional distance and remains a key influential theory governing distance education. Moore posits that as the level of interaction (dialogue and communication) decreases between students and teacher, the learners' abilities to understand content also decreases. Zang (2003) expanded upon Moore's theory, which includes online learning, and expressed that the transactional barriers to learning also include the learning environment and the interaction within. To combat the issues within transactional distance theory, some schools and universities have adopted technology within the curriculum and thread collaborative pedagogy throughout.

Some postgraduate courses are taught through a flipped classroom model in which students participate in self-directed and scheduled activities. Bishop and Vergler (2013) define a flipped classroom as an educational strategy that consists of interactive collaborative group work in the classroom and computer-based instruction outside of the classroom. This strategy can be expanded by providing interactive collaborative pedagogy within both in-person and online structures. Universities may use technology to support this modernized version of the flipped classroom by utilizing adaptive cameras, table groups with built in microphones and computers that connect students who remain remote or online to those who are actively within the classroom setting, as was the case for my postgraduate hybrid classroom.

A Primary School Teacher's Reflection

Course and Classroom Dynamics

Clarifying that the course, in which this reflection is based, took place in a hybrid class is critical for the next portion of the discussion. This specific course was within the first set of taught classes in a new program in which students experienced a fusion/hybrid learning environment. Students who attended in-person, were predominantly international students with English being their second language. All students were taking the course to fulfil their master's degree requirements in which this course was an elective or optional course. Students participated in independent learning online for two weeks, then two intensive days of primarily in-person learning (~8 hours each day), followed by a two-week post-intensive portfolio project created independently. Because

the students would only have two days to be together it was deemed important for the course organizer and teaching assistant to incorporate as many collaborative activities as possible.

After several discussions on how to best support students, both in person and online, I was offered the task of creating inclusive and collaborative activities for the intensive days. Reviewing the core content as well as the course objectives set a foundation for the intensive day schedule and finding time to incorporate such activities was difficult. However, the course organizer saw the potential benefits for our students and was supportive and generous in sharing the lecture time with me.

It was noted early on that students were not participating in the optional, but encouraged, discussion boards or activities during the pre-intensive weeks. Because of the low engagement leading up to the intensive days, in which some of the content was not fulfilled online, both the course organizer and I restructured the activities to take place during the intensive days. For many of the icebreaker and collaborative activities elicited during the intensive days, previously shared documents with interactive discussions were used and adapted from the pre-intensive content.

Hybrid Collaboration in Action

Upon entering the classroom for the intensive hybrid learning day, it was critical to set up the student desks and begin the online meeting for students to participate remotely. The classroom had 5 table groups each with learning stations consisting of 2 monitors that projected the online students

and the learning materials, i.e., the lecture slides, along with microphones and docking stations. In-person students chose a seat at one of the 5 tables, and some logged into the online meeting as well. All students were working synchronously and experiencing the same lecture and materials provided by the course organizer throughout the intensive days.

Launching the first intensive day proved challenging regarding student engagement and overcoming a sense of diffidence amongst students. While this was expected and discussed prior between me and the course organizer it was still surprising and frankly, concerning. Students entered in silence and were immediately on their phones or devices, no chit-chat or familiarity could be noted. As a previous primary school teacher, this was jarring, and the polarity was tangible.

To combat this, a series of icebreaker or get-to-know-you activities were led. "Guess Who "or "Amazing abilities" was the first activity I used to elicit student engagement and foster a sense of vulnerability and community. Students wrote down a secret talent or ability and crumpled up the paper, tossed it into the middle of the room and then I collected them and put them into a hat. I then drew three random papers and read them aloud, students and teachers had to guess who had written the talent and the correct student was revealed. This activity was used throughout the two intensive days at the start, in the middle and at the end of the day. It was clear that students were apprehensive of the many aspects of this activity when it was introduced the first time. For example, I had to direct and reassure students multiple times, that throwing their papers on the ground was necessary and expected. However, it was observed by the end of day that students were generally

having more fun with the activity. Students were laughing and sharing more openly and throwing their papers with more vigor and excitement.

A collaborative learning activity used on the first intensive day had students working in their table groups first independently, then sharing within their table groups, and finally sharing with the whole group. This enabled students to engage with one another and elicited early discussion amongst peers. It also facilitated growth in confidence for students by building their knowledge, scaffolding their processing of new content and affirming through discussion. The repetition of an activity first by internally processing (thinking to yourself), followed by group discussion (low stakes verbal processing) and whole class discussion (articulation high stakes processing) has been shown not only to support students with multiple languages but all students (Bygate, 2001). I had previously used this technique and witnessed its positive outcomes within my primary students and was pleased that it appeared to have the same effect for the postgraduate students.

Groups were asked to collaborate on a shared document (Google Slides) to provide insight into their views of resiliency. Using photovoice, which is expressed as processes by which people can recognize, represent, and amplify their community through a specific photographic technique (Wang, Cash & Powers, 2000.) students were able to reflect on their personal interpretation of the word 'resilience'. The activity consisted of students searching for a photo online, in their personal devices or through social media and posting it on their group's shared slide. Each student participated and groups completed a collage of photos eliciting a discussion

amongst table groups, online students, and the whole class. Online students were provided links to work synchronously with their assigned table group and could share their stories using the interactive large format display. Students immediately began searching for their photos and were keen to contribute to their shared slide. I think having this initial group activity consist mainly of an independent task eased students into the first intensive day.

On the second day of the intensive class, students were given a task that flipped the traditional teacher-student power dynamics. During this activity, the students were asked to perform as “professor for the day” and research and teach their peers about a resource they found relating to the course, which for this course related to the ideas of resiliency and education. Students were directed to first take time as a group to discuss what topics and type of presentation they would like to expand upon. Depending on the outcomes of the discussion students either worked as a research team, taking on specific roles, or as one entity, working together in real time on the same aspect of research. Groups then presented (taught) their findings to the whole class and justified their findings with prior research.

This flipped-dynamics activity provided students with higher cognitive learning and deepened their knowledge of the content. It also allowed online students to participate equally amongst their in-person peers which limited the transactional distance consequences as described earlier by Moore (1993). This activity also closely corresponded to Foot and Howe’s (1998) explanation of peer-assisted learning and brought a level of intensity not witnessed early in the intensive days. It appeared to me, that the accountability of individual

students and the equal efforts of the group members enhanced the students' engagement of the activity. This also lessened the earlier apprehensions of participants and uplifted the classroom community as expressed by several students at the conclusion of the course.

Watching the blended table group of online and in-person students work collaboratively was inspiring as an instructor. When creating table groups, I asked students to volunteer to be part of the fusion table that incorporated both in person and online students. Three students expressed interest and were selected for the fusion group. They included online students and provided an ample voice to their comments and thoughts to the whole group and to the instructors. A leading reservation I had regarding hybrid and fusion classrooms is that the online students and in-person students would not cooperate with one another and instead would isolate themselves in their respective domains. When this did not occur, I was relieved; this created a greater sense of community among all students. Further, students utilized online resources such as Google slides, MIRO, and Jam board and worked synchronously alongside one another online and in person which allowed for more social and educational connections and collaboration amongst peers. Using a mix of pen and paper (which online students could see via the table group cameras), and online platforms (such as Jam board or Google slides) enabled all students to participate. While this was intimidating at first as an instructor, it proved to be a wonderful way to enhance the student voice.

The collaborative activities appeared to be emotionally taxing and awkward for the students at first, but over the 2 days I witnessed students sharing with each other and cooperating

as groups to finish tasks and assignments with more ease. In my experience, the shortened intensive timeline for this course had proved the most challenging aspect in relation to overcoming social barriers and facilitating a sense of community. McKinney and colleagues (2006) suggest that a sense of community rises with time, and it is my opinion that if allotted more in-person/hybrid scheduled time, collaborative efforts and a sense of community would have risen for this course.

At the conclusion of the intensive days, students were asked to reflect on the activities and learning that took place. Both students and instructors debriefed and shared their thoughts using the four corners technique. The four corners technique is, simply put, a rating system from 1-4 in which 1 is low/negative and 4 is high/positive, with each corner of the room being a selected rating. Online students participated by moving an avatar on Google slides to the corresponding number square while in-person students walked from corner to corner. This was followed by open sharing and a discussion on the rationale for their choice. Students were asked to rate their feelings of community and the activities in which they participated. Students expressed that group work activities made them feel stressed at first but after the initial tension faded, they felt that the learning outcomes of the assignments were worth the time and initial discomfort. Some students also shared that they would like more opportunities to work in groups i.e., for their final projects while others shared that they wanted to work independently as this was the bulk of their final grade. This juxtaposition is inevitable in large groups and finding the balance is key. I think, during the next iteration of this course, allowing students to choose their preferences prior to the intensive

days may benefit all parties. Remarkably, students also expressed that their comfort levels in working collaboratively grew due to the activities and the given time allotment for group work.

Challenge Accepted

When I, a primary school teacher with no experience in higher education, accepted the challenging new position of postgraduate teaching assistant, it allowed me as an educator to evolve my preconceived notions of what higher education looked like. I was able to grow and advance my mindset and support my course organizer in facilitating a shared vision of collaborative education within a hybrid setting. Moreover, enabling students to use their voice and work in groups to elicit new discoveries of content and strengths within themselves was compelling. The kindness, flexibility, and grace which my students offered one another and to the instructors was palpable. While I knew previous research had shown that collaborative pedagogy enhances student achievement and heightens the sense of community, it was truly inspiring to witness it in action amongst adult learners (Oraif & Elyas, 2021). Many educators may find the task of creating and maintaining a pedagogy that includes group work and peer collaboration difficult within a postgraduate course, let alone a hybrid setting, but I would encourage them to take a risk and try it for themselves. The results have shown it leads to higher level thinking and deeper learning for students and may alter educators' perspectives of education as well (Foot & Howe, 1998).

I was skeptical at first, as were the students, to incorporate

some of the collaborative pedagogical approaches shared within this paper. I was fearful that my students would feel infantilized with some of the game-like or informal structures elicited. However, upon completing the two-day intensives, students specifically thanked us for the unorthodox approaches we chose and expressed that they had enjoyed the course's structure more than a traditional style of learning. Students said that they felt comfortable and relaxed by the end of day 2 and that they were less 'scared' of the instructors and more open to asking for help. Students shared that they had previously been afraid and intimidated to speak in class or share potentially incorrect answers but that this course had shown them a different side of academia. This feedback motivates me to expand my collaborative approaches within higher education, to take risks in my teaching pedagogies, and to challenge myself to overcome my fears of failure. Maintaining a creative, collaborative, and community-oriented classroom is my continued goal for my own teaching regardless of the student's age or subject area and I hope that readers and fellow educators within all fields and age ranges take this feedback and challenge themselves to build a more collaborative approach to teaching, specifically in higher education.

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