Collaborative learning:
teachers' sharing experiences

An analysis of discussions in a Community of Practice

Authors: Alexandra Hanna Licht and Roger Blamire (European Schoolnet)

Project

CO-LAB (http://colab.eun.org/) is a forward-looking project funded by the European Commission's Erasmus+ Programme, focused on making collaborative teaching and learning a reality in the classroom. Being able to collaborate effectively is a valuable 21st century skill, yet teaching about or through collaboration remains rare in schools because of a lack of understanding of what real collaboration in an educational setting means, and because existing policy conditions do not always enable it to flourish. Practitioners and policy makers need a dedicated space and time to experiment and better understand what collaborative teaching and learning means in terms of policy and practice. CO-LAB provides these stakeholders with that opportunity.

For more information, please, contact info@eun.org

Partners

European Schoolnet Network of 34 European Ministries of Education | Belgium (coordinator)

NCCA National Council for Curriculum and Assessment | Ireland

IBE Educational Research Institute | Poland

DGE Directorate-General for Education (Direção-Geral da Educação) | Portugal

HITSA Information Technology Foundation for Education | Estonia

Go! HET GEMEENSCHAPSONDERWIJS - GO! Onderwijs van de Vlaamse Gemeenschap| Belgium

BMB Bundesministerium für Bildung | Austria

Contents

Introduction

As part of CO-LAB, a project focused on making collaborative teaching and learning a reality in the classroom, a MOOC (Massive Open Online Course) was run in autumn 2016, focusing on various aspects of Collaborative Learning. Participants from Austria, Estonia, Ireland, Spain, Portugal and Poland were encouraged to share their opinion and experience in addition to discussing the various topics and questions presented in the end of each section. They posted the information on online discussion spaces called 'padlets' (www.padlet.com). This analysis examines five padlets produced by participants.

Questions addressed in the selected padlets were:

- What is collaborative learning?
- Embedding collaborative learning into lesson design
- Assessment for improving collaborative learning
- Answers to teachers' questions on assessing collaborative learning
- The benefits and challenges of teacher collaboration

A framework for analysis and reporting was developed in order to distil teachers' experiences and views on the following questions:

- What could support, favour or make room for the use/implementation of CL at school?
- Which are the obstacles and/or challenges and/or enablers for a successful implementation of collaborative learning?
- What is your experience in the classroom relating to the implementation, planning and management of collaborative learning?

The content of each entry was categorised, for example does this comment address an enabler or obstacle for collaborative learning in all stages (planning, implementing and aftermath)? Each entry was also reviewed for its additional value, e.g. is it an entry with direct experience, what do we learn from this entry? Posts to the padlets were also grouped by type of input (enabler, suggestion, obstacle, challenge), actor (who needs to implement a suggested change?), and emerging themes. Following this categorisation, a secondary review of posts identified as interesting (because based on personal experience) was conducted. The results are based on these. They are presented in the following pages, beginning with the positive outcomes related to competence development followed comments related to the factors to be taken into account for success in implementing collaborative learning in the classroom.

It is to be noted that participants in the MOOCs commented and shared their experience voluntarily and that information may not represent all countries as some participants were more active than others. Four themes emerged in the analysis of these posts; for each, there is a brief analysis and one or two comments made by teachers on the topic (in some cases, the statements have been slightly edited for clarity and brevity. All the original posts can be seen in the padlets by following the links above.

1. Outcomes of collaborative learning

Many teachers commented on the skills and competences their students developed through collaborative learning. In all padlets teachers reported positive outcomes and the skills and competences students developed as a result of collaborative learning. In addition, they noted that students were more engaged when learning collaboratively and actively learning and working in small groups.

Skills and competences developed in collaborative learning

Teachers observed that various skills were enhanced, notably social, problem solving, communication, negotiation, responsibility and independence.

"*Collaborative learning is more effective because it develops such skills as responsibility, leadership, self-assessment, presentation skills, communication skills, and so much more (...) I've already witnessed some students to improve their learning and change their behaviour at school only because they are working in groups. They feel that they are useful and they can help their group to achieve its goal.*" Fatima, Portugal

Some comments concerned collaborative learning in project based activities:

"*Creating a project requires students to think or find a problem, then to be able to figure out how to break the problem down into smaller steps and achieve it using different methodologies. In this way, students learn to select, create and manage multiple forms of information including text, images, animation and audio records. Thus, they become more insightful and critical in analysing what they observe around them. On the other hand, young people adopt forms of critical reasoning and systemic thinking.*" Honorata, Portugal

Assessment

Students gain added value from collaborative assessment:

"*I find that it helps the children to identify their own strengths and areas for improvement, far more than simple teacher feedback.*" Helen, Belgium

Development of skills outside school through collaboration

Some comments referred positively to working collaboratively with organisations outside school (universities, community centres and schools in other countries):

"*We also coach some students to get better grades or to solve some problems in their lives outside school (that sometimes influence their performance in school). We also work with partners in universities and institutes.*" Malfada, Portugal

eTwinning was widely mentioned as enhancing communication skills through collaborative projects between schools and across topics and countries:

"*I am also of the opinion that technology can support new pedagogies, enhancing international communication, which I have experienced conducting an eTwinning project based on Skype conferences.*" Paulina, country not mentioned

Technological skills

Various teachers shared their successful experiences in using ICT tools such as Google Drive, Padlets and Dropbox:

"*My school has been using Dropbox and Google Drive for some time to share documents and materials among teachers; For example, this school year I created a padlet for each of my classes with the purpose of sharing and exchanging ideas, information and materials with my students.*" Nazare, Portugal

"*My experience tells me that these work tools transform the students into more active participants and into more motivated and better students.*" Ana, Portugal

The inclusive classroom

Some comments report positive outcomes for classes with diverse student population in terms of competences and achievements:

"*Collaborative learning strategies benefit mixed ability classes as well as special needs students. However, large classes of 30 students are a challenge.*" Helena, Portugal

2. Structural support: engagement and resources

Teachers frequently highlighted the need for support from school management and stakeholders in the community, as well as adequate technological support

A supportive culture encouraged by school leadership

Many comments emphasised the importance of school management support for collaborative learning in classes and between teachers to be a success.

"*We need a common understanding in learning. It applies not only in collaborative learning but also other methods and strategies in education. The shared language should be on every level, also in a school - I mean the staff needs to be on the same position. It does not help if just some teachers would include collaborative learning but other teacher nor leaders of the school do not support them. Only after the above aim is achieved we can start to work with students and learn them to collaborate by showing examples and doing it with them.*" Piia, Estonia

Shared values and goals at all levels

Support should be provided by the school, in terms of time, space for teachers and awareness of school leadership to the benefits of collaborative learning:

"*Time for collaboration is an issue here in Ireland as the school day is busy. Leadership in schools has to recognise the value of teacher collaboration and give time for it. However, there is a need to build and develop the skills for collaboration. This needs to be addressed and supported.*" Majella, Ireland

Support from stakeholders

Teachers mentioned the importance of broader and more structured support from political players such as the ministry of education and other policy makers:

"The development of a new professional practice and in new processes of curriculum development […] requires the involvement of all actors: governance structure, education researchers, school principals, teachers, students and families." Paola, Portugal

Community engagement and parental support

Various comments addressed the importance and difficulties in approaching and receiving support from parents unfamiliar with collaborative learning methods:

"We must not forget parents, accustomed to more conventional methods and therefor may have some distrust for." Christine, Portugal

Access to technology

Numerous comments discussed the reality in classrooms where there are limiting conditions to the use technology. Comments recognise that technology is not the goal of collaborative learning but is the means that can assist teachers and students to successfully collaborate with each other:

"I do not have access to the informatics classroom every time I want. I can't be there for three followed lessons and my students don't have laptops or tablets. It's not because of this that I do not do collaborative work but it's much, much more difficult." Carla, Portugal

3. Managing collaborative learning

Teachers provided a wealth of practical suggestions for implementing collaborative learning: creating suitable learning spaces, cooperation between teachers, making time for collaborative learning and effective communication.

Reorganisation of space

Implementing collaborative learning entails restructuring the physical space in the classroom (tables and chairs, etc.):

"Cooperative learning includes interdependence between students. They share responsibility, make decisions, help each other to reach a common aim, investigate, discuss together, evaluate. In this way, they feel themselves a team that has a common goal. I think that it is not easy to work in this way because we have to change completely our way to organize the space in our classroom." Cinzia, Portugal

Management of collaboration between teachers

Working collaboratively with other teachers should be timetabled and can be rewarding:

"Working collaboratively works best when time is actually built into the working week where genuine collaboration can take place. This provides opportunities to plan, asses and evaluate together. It challenges old thinking and really encourages teachers to provide the best learning experiences for children at all times." Richard, Belgium

However, such collaborative working is currently the exception:

"In my school, collaboration between teachers is not very frequent. It is within the disciplinary group, or with similar groups. I sometimes collaborate with colleagues in geography. Although real collaboration does not exist." Rosa, Portugal

Time management in the classroom

Lack of time is a recurring topic through the various padlets and is mentioned by teachers from all countries:

"*I try to use them as much as possible in my classes but this requires time and we don't have: we have many things to do in a short time.*" Elisabete, Portugal

Clarity and communication

In planning, implementing or assessing collaborative learning, teachers underlined the importance of clearly defined goals to facilitate open communication with students as well as parents, and matching expectations:

"*I agree with the need for a shared language about "what is the collaborative work"; this concept must be very well explicit not only between teachers who want to develop interdisciplinary work, but also for students: they need to know exactly what is expected from them and that they are responsible for their own learning and development. We must not forget parents, accustomed to more conventional methods and therefor may have some distrust for changes.*" Cristina, country not mentioned

4. Readiness and resistance – of teachers

An important condition for a successful implementation of collaborative learning and collaborative work between teachers is readiness at various levels, from readiness of the educational system to adopt new paradigms and methods of learning to readiness of school leadership and teachers to implement collaborative learning. Teachers often mentioned encountering resistance to change from their colleagues, head masters and schools:

"*Despite all the changes in schools, education remains essentially an activity developed in isolation by teachers. The realization of projects, collaborative work in education, is a question that almost always presents controversial and difficult to implement, despite recent advances.*" Elizabete, Portugal

Readiness of teachers

A recurring theme is an unwillingness to change working methods which are already successful:

"*Educators who have had success (in exams) working in isolation may view this process as an invasion of their pedagogy and a waste of time". Even if willing to implement collaborative learning, teachers face difficulties related to lack of knowledge or/and conditions in the school.*" Ana, Portugal

"*I agree that students can learn collaboratively and develop the so-called 21st century skills; It is an area where I do not feel at ease, since I have difficulty focusing and preparing lessons based on this strategy and always put doubt on the proper functioning of the digital tools at our school; the fact that the classes are large hampers my work as a group guide.*" Sandra, Portugal

Shift in teachers' and students' role

Throughout the padlets teachers reflected on their changing role to guide and facilitator:

"*Teachers are there to support, to guide and help, without giving the right solutions. To me, it's also important to evaluate the working process and not only the final product. It's learning by interaction.*" At the same time, the student becomes more active in their learning. Emma, Belgium

Training and continuous professional development for teachers

Regardless of country of origin or whether the commentator was sharing a direct experience or an opinion, participants expressed a need for further training in the planning and preparation stages of collaborative lessons.

"*We must give teachers the chance to do some training and give head teacher schools the opportunity to see/feel the need have a more technological school.*" Odete, Portugal

Lack of technical knowledge of digital tools

The teachers often confessed a lack of knowledge and proficiency in using ICT tools and lack of confidence to implement technology supported activities in the learning process. Comments expressed the need for practical examples together with general guidance on how to use ICT tools. Some teachers doubted whether their institution can provide them with the training and technological equipment they need:

"[Digital competence] *is an area where I do not feel at ease, since I have difficulty focusing and preparing lessons based on this strategy and always put doubt on the proper functioning of the digital tools at our school*" Ana, Portugal

5. Readiness and resistance – of students

Although there was much debate between participants about the resistance of peers and management to adopting collaborative learning, some contributors pointed out that not all students were enthusiastic about collaborative learning.

Age and personality characteristics

Comments suggested that younger students were less engaged in collaborative learning and teachers encountered problems in managing the lesson and engaging students who were not natural leaders. Moreover, when engaging in collaborative assessment, some teachers said that younger students had difficulties to impartially assess their friends and expected the teachers to take the lead in this task:

"*The effects depend on the age of the students, past experiences and personality traits. The effects are smaller when the children are younger, have previously failed relationships in the peer group, they are introverts or prefer individual achievements.*" Dorota, Poland

Comfortable with traditional approaches

Some comments mentioned students' resistance to change:

"*I have been working with these new trends in the last three years and sometimes it is still difficult to get students engaged (maybe it's my fault). Students have problems with working collaboratively. They are used to traditional work groups in which tasks are divided and then "glued" at the end...it seems to be "their" tradition and so difficult to break with it.*" Carla, Portugal

Resistance to adopting new roles

Other comments reflect a situation where students refuse to assume new roles:

"*In some classes I experience that the students don´t want to come out of their passive role. Some students may have collaborative skills as part of their personality, but not the majority of them.*" Celia, Portugal

Distrust of formative peer assessment

A further reason for resistance relates to students' distrust of their peers or fears that their final score might not reflect their efforts and work during the year:

"*It seems difficult for us to effectively join self and peer assessment. Both focus on the process, whereas most students are mostly concerned about their final marks.*" Anabela, Portugal

Need for pupil training in ICT

Some teachers shared the feeling that, like teachers, pupils, especially from disadvantaged backgrounds, also need to develop their ICT skills that many assume are already acquired by pupils of young generations:

"*The problem is that some pupils are not ready to use the technology the proper way.*" Carlos, Portugal

Conclusion

The experiences, suggestions and opinions freely expressed by the CO-LAB teachers in the padlets provide a valuable insight into both the benefits and challenges of introducing collaborative learning in European classrooms.

Teachers highlighted how collaborative learning can develop a range of digital age competences and skills: notably problem solving, communication, negotiation, responsibility, independence and social skills. They also found that the collaborative classroom could be more inclusive (if carefully planned and managed).

They identified a number of conditions, sometimes outside the control of the individual teacher, that needed to be in place for collaborative learning to prosper, including access to ICT, whole school, management and community support.

Managing collaborative learning can be a challenge for teachers and posts on the padlets reflected this, with teachers mentioning the need to reorganise the physical classroom layout, finding time in busy schedules, and the need to communicate clearly with other teachers, students and parents.

Contributors to the padlets noted resistance to collaborative learning from both teachers and students, for example difficulties with using new technology, adopting new roles and changing successful teaching and learning methods. Both teachers and students in some schools were not ready for collaborative learning because of unfamiliarity with formative peer assessment methods and a lack of ICT training. Others found that collaborative learning was more problematic for younger children (especially as regards assessing each other's work) and that some young people prefer to work on their own.

As in the workplace, collaboration, while essential in the 21st century, should not be seen as a 'one size fits all' solution and should be implemented sensitively.