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[Reviews of two articles, ‘Collaborative learning with young children’ by Fiona Hockaday; and ‘Collaborative learning and the conversation of mankind’ by Kenneth A. Bruffee]

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REVIEWS

"Collaborative Learning with Young Children" by Fiona Hockaday
Educational Studies Vol 10 No. 3, 1984
"Collaborative Learning and the 'Conversation of Mankind' "
by Kenneth A. Bruffee.
College English Vol 46, No. 7, Nov. 1984

The notion and practice of group work and peer-group learning is one that has become increasingly popular. It seems that a method of promoting faster and more effective, lasting learning has at least been 'discovered' through group work, where peer teaches peer.

The two articles chosen for review both deal with this topic, termed here as "Collaborative Learning", but from very different perspectives.

"Collaborative Learning with Young Children" by Fiona Hockaday is a report on a practical experiment on group work with young children, while Kenneth A. Bruffee's "Collaborative Learning and the 'Conversation of Mankind' is an article with a strong bent towards the academic and the philosophical.

Fiona Hockaday writes of her experiment with group work in young children. Traditionally, group work with young children has been avoided because young children have been perceived to be too egocentric to cope with communicating successfully with their peers.

This study assumes that young children ARE capable of group work and proceeds to investigate whether the composition of the group influences the quality of the work produced. Here the question posed was, "Does friendship influence group performance?"

Two groups of four each, seven year old girls from a 'top infant' class in an average town school were selected. They were matched in as many respects other than their degree of friendship as possible - (thus age, sex, cognitive ability, size of group, as already noted).

The teacher was already familiar with the group and so her possible influence as a factor causing variability was removed.

Attention also had to be paid to tasks - tasks had to be problem-solving, encourage discussion and involve a need for more than just cognitive skill. They also had to be the right level of difficulty. Two contrasting tasks were chosen so as to ensure that differences in group reaction was not simply task-related. One of the tasks was a scientific one, demanding a defined, structured reasoned answer; the other was a language task which was creative and open ended.

The criteria for analysis included looking at what language strategies were employed, the level of interaction (measured by things such as 'tension', 'releaser', 'imitation', 'initiation', 'challenging' etc.,) the quality of the solution and the degree of group satisfaction. (All these seem very diffuse things to 'measure' empirically).

The results

It was found that the non-friendship group spent more time on the tasks and talked more. However, this was largely due to organisational problems and problems of establishing individual roles and the conflict caused thereby. The 'friendly' group, on the other hand, finished more quickly and were well organised but seemed to agree too quickly - group pressure and 'friend' approval would appear to have been unanticipated variables.

The conclusion

The author concluded that while the children did learn, the value of this exercise was limited. This again comes back to the reason that younger pupils lack the verbal strategies, reasoning and evaluating skills that certain social skills (they 'talk at' each other, rather than 'to' each other) which are essential for successful, extending group work.

In general, this is quite an interesting article more for the issues it does not raise, than the ones it does. Descriptive rather than analytic, it leaves one wondering what exactly the tasks were, how, when it came to the crunch one measured degree of 'challenge' or 'tension' when comparing eight children and whether these rather vague conclusions damn the use of groupwork with the young forever!

In rather startling contrast, let us turn to Kenneth A. Bruffee's "Collaborative Learning and the 'Conversation of Mankind: ". On his own admission, Bruffee, dealing with collaborative learning in students learning English at a university level, says his article -

"...offers no recipes. It is written instead on the assumption that understanding both the history and complex ideas that underlie collaborative learning can improve its practice and demonstrate its educational value" (p.636)

Central to the evolution of collaborative learning are, he states, ideas of democratisation and the phasing out of authoritarian teaching - where the teacher is perceived as a keeper of knowledge. Central too, is an acknowledgement of the role of peer interaction in lasting learning and thus learning must also be perceived as being of a social nature.

Bruffee then goes on to consider "Conversation and the Nature of thought and knowledge" (p.638) Citing the work of Michael Oakeshott and the Vygotskyan theory of knowledge as a social pheomenon, Bruffee states that thought is internalised conversation and that thought and conversation tend to work in the say way. (p.639) We learn the one from the other and "If my talk is narrow, superficial, biased and confined to clichés, my thinking is likely to be so too." (p.639)

The argument continued... "Still, it remains the case that according to this concept of mental activity many of the social forms and conventions of conversation, most of the grammatical, syntactical and rhetorical structures of conversation are the sources of the forms and conventions, structures, impetus, range and flexibility, and the issues of reflective throught." (p.639) Writing also, is related to conversation. It is, as it were, twice removed. Thus the students' writing will be determined by the way they talk to each other which determines the way they think. which determines the way they write. Normal discourse becomes recognised, desirable writing which reflects acceptable thought.

All this is very interesting. Are the implications that we can not think outside the limits of the structures and rules provided by conversation? Can we therefore not think beyond the limits of what our neighbour is capable of or what one particular language offers you (e.g. the weary example of English only having one concept of snow, while Eskimo offers Seven) Sapir-Whorf.
Further, does this imply that we only think because have language? Is this the old issue of the Piaget-Bruner debate of thought and language developing as a result of biologically motivated cognitive development or thought only being able to develop because one has language to think in? Is thought indeed not - "an essential attribute of the human mind but instead an artifact created by social interaction." (p.640)
"We can think because we can talk, and we think in ways we have learned to talk" (Do we thus only Learn to think) "Thus to create better thought, one must create better conversation" (an intriguing thought but a rather strange assertion for a world becoming increasingly oriented to computer learning, where the brightest thinkers are often the most alienated and lonely.) Bruffee ends this section with "Our feelings and intuitions are as much the product of social relations as our knowledge." (p.641)

In a further section Bruffee talks of the 'mistrust' of collaborative learning; we have learnt to believe in individual talent and endeavour. Furthermore, if one uses collaborative learning to teach what can peers teach each other? Will then "Blind lead the blind"? (p.646)
"It is of course exactly the blind leading the blind if we insist on the Cartesian model of knowledge; that to know is to "see", and that knowledge is information impressed upon the individual mind by some outside source. But if we accept the premise that knowledge is an artifact created by a community, and that learning is a social and not an individual process, then to learn is to work collaboratively to establish and maintain knowledge among a community of knowledge peers through the process Richard Rorty calls 'socially justifying belief' "
"...knowledge is the product of human beings in a state of continual negotiation or conversation. Education is not a process of assimilating 'the truth'...

but a process of learning to 'take in hand what is going on' by joining the 'conversation of mankind' " (p.647) Thus collaborative learning as such is not new, it is simply new to education systems!

However, for discourse to be knowledge generating, it can not be 'ordinary' conversation. It must be "abnormal discourse." (p.647) This cannot be taught but arises out of the ensuing conflict when members join a group and are ignorant of the norms governing the particular group. Thus the whole concept of the teacher as both authority and the transmitter of knowledge is challenged. The teacher can only 'teach' normal discourse. Abnormal discourse, the source of social knowledge is generated socially through 'conversation' and participation. The teacher's duty is to -

"...perform as conservators and agents of change, as custodians of prevailing community values and as agents of social transition and reacculturation" (p.650)

The teacher must provide "and maintain a demanding academic environment that makes collaboration - social engagement in intellectual pursuits - a genuine part of students' educational development" (p.652)

In general, this is a very provocative and interesting article. The ideas presented are often complex and sometimes I feel these are only really stated, not backed up or justified and thus one can come away feeling a little wooly about certain aspects. For example, if knowledge is socially constructed how is one ever sure that any content is covered in a conventionally acceptable way? Does one have to be of phenomenological persuasion to believe in the value of collaboration?

What then happens to practices of 'objective evaluation' and how does one 'find' the 'recipe' to valuable collaborative learning so that the process does not degenerate into group work showing evidence of "conformity, anti-intellectualism intimidation and levelling-down of quality"? (p.652) Overall, however, a "meaty" article and one well worth reading and reflective contemplation.

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