

Over the years higher education learning has evolved from class lecturing to collaborative learning – where students learn from each other with the lecturer as facilitator. **Cherice Smith** looked into the value of collaborative learning.

From Sage on the Stage to Guide on the Side.’ Twenty years ago, this now well-known learning quote was the title of an article about several active learning techniques by Prof Alison King, at the time an associate professor of education at the College of Education at California State University in the USA.

In this article, published in the journal *College Teaching** in 1993, King reflected on why students should actively participate in thinking and discussions while making meaning for themselves. The way King described it was that, instead of being the ‘sage on the stage’, the lecturer should function as the ‘guide on the side’, facilitating learning in less directive ways.

Christo Nel, visiting senior lecturer extraordinaire at USB and programme director of the executive and international MBA at Nyenrode Business University in The Netherlands, says part of the change in learning over the years has been because of the way we look at the world. “We have moved away, slowly, from the ‘I am the great source of knowledge’ mindset. Students must not put lecturers on pedestals. Of course, lecturers know more – most of the time. But lecturers should be there to facilitate learning.”

According to Nel, research has indicated that collaborative learning is the most effective way for students to assimilate and retain learning. The worst way is through giving lectures. “Students’ retention level through straight lecturing is 5% and the retention level with a range of peer-based learning methods is in excess of 70%, which is a huge difference.”

Various collaborative learning methods are used to ensure that students comprehend and retain what they have learnt.

“The very best retention happens when students are required to study something and then prepare a short piece on it. They stand in class under supervision of a specialist and say what they have learnt – their personal retention of a subject or topic,” Nel explains.

“A second method is when participants are given a piece or a topic which is divided into different segments. Each team teaches its segment to the others – subdividing the work. Students become really good at retaining the information.

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“A third method is where students are divided into teams and given the exact same topic to address in a written paper. They then have to read, assess and allocate a mark to their own as well as another’s paper. As lecturer, I also allocate a mark to all the papers. This gives students an opportunity to assess their peers. In the process they often realise that they were far too generous or harsh with their marks. This teaches them that they have to be more constructive and assertive as they would need to be in the workplace.”

Nel says it is important that students separate individualism, which is a scarcity approach, from independence, which is an abundance approach.



Christo Nel,
visiting senior lecturer
extraordinaire at USB.



Prof Frikkie Herbst,
head of the MBA
programme at USB.



Brigitte Roediger,
MBA student.



Phumeza Nobhongoza,
Postgraduate Diploma
in Leadership student.



Hanrie Hill,
MPhil in Management
Coaching student.

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“A lot of developmental psychology and research have shown that we have to move away from an egotistic and narcissistic state of mind to an approach of abundance. It is one of the biggest challenges in businesses and organisations. Super teams do not operate individually. You have to understand that you are part of a team. It is an important learning process.”

Students from diverse backgrounds are also important for collaborative learning. “Good research shows that teams that are more diverse are more successful. And this diversity includes race, gender, specialisation and experience. It is vital to have a robust environment where you can agree, disagree, test one another’s views and not be opinionated,” says Nel.

Prof Frikkie Herbst, head of the MBA programme at USB, says students get value from collaborative learning through both the smaller group discussions and during facilitation in the lecture hall where everybody is present. “This methodology certainly adds value to the

development of individual students’ thinking and their ability to address complex problems.”

USB MBA student De Wet Albertyn says the group interactions have been stimulating. “The lecturers do a good job in managing the process. Collaborative learning has helped me to be more relaxed when discussing issues in a group. At first I did not share my opinions, but as the year progressed I have become more relaxed with my classmates, and have started to share on a continuous basis. I have also learnt how to work towards a common goal. Sometimes the end goal may not be clear, which can waste time, but I have learnt how to structure the situation in such a way that a collaborative decision can be reached timeously.”

USB MBA student Brigitte Roediger says collaborative learning has helped her with her personal leadership development journey on the MBA. “Leadership as a module is quite a reflective subject. Often you have to journal about topics discussed in class. Four of us decided to meet after class every Friday to discuss what we’ve learnt and how we have interpreted what was being said. We have bravely opened up to each other for comments. In a subject like this, where there is no right or wrong, it has been the ultimate forum for shared learning. There is no way we could have done it alone.”

USB Postgraduate Diploma in Leadership student Phumeza Nobhongoza says she had her reservations about this method of learning. “It took me out of my comfort zone. I believed that I was intelligent enough to produce results on my own. Through collaborative learning I have realised that intelligence is good, but it’s not enough. I have also realised how I have missed out on getting better through others,” she says.

“I believe in the power of collaboration and drawing on the experiences and knowledge of others,” says Annie Snyman, a student on USB’s MPhil in Development Finance programme. “My fellow students all have good qualifications and work experience from across various parts of

Africa and the lessons and insights they have shared, have contributed to the development of my own knowledge about the continent and development challenges. Experiencing multidisciplinary, multicultural collaboration once again has confirmed that different views, skill sets and cultural backgrounds support finding solutions to complex problems. When addressing complex development problems, I will definitely draw on the collaborative learning experience in future.”

Hanrie Hill, USB MPhil in Management Coaching student, says through sharing information with her peers she has strengthened her learning experience. “We coach each other, have group discussions and learn from peer presentations. Peer coaching has helped me to look at different coaching models and gain more insights.”

Nel concludes: “It is important for students to share their lessons and assignments and to critique one another. Two of the current MBA classes have been doing collaborative work in the form of Skype sessions, while another group distributes articles. You then have a class of 40 people that have become abundant. It is about finding that level of collaboration.” ^a

Collaborative learning at USB

Collaborative learning is a key feature of USB’s programmes. Each student brings unique knowledge and management experience to the table. Students come from all over South Africa, Africa and the world, and they come with different undergraduate qualifications and from different age groups. This diversity enables them to obtain different perspectives and real-world know-how by tapping into the collective wisdom of the group.

* King, A. 1993. From Sage on the Stage to Guide on the Side. *College Teaching*, 41(1), 30-35.