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## STUDENT COLLABORATION STARTS WITH TEACHER COLLABORATION

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## Introduction

Was it the silly hats? Was it the shared lunch? Or was it the amazing ideas I learned when in a class at Indiana University (IU) that made me spend my Saturdays during the fall semester of 2017 on the IU campus. In the process, I missed so many things I wanted to do, like going with my Fulbright teacher friends on a field trip to Louisville, Kentucky. If you were not there, you would not know. But life and success as a teacher are all about choices, and I made mine.

Collaborative methods in the classroom have been my passion for as long as I can remember. However, until my experiences as a Fulbright teacher in Bloomington, I did not fully understand the power of collaboration. With high hopes, I returned home to teach English and special education at Ylöjärvi High School near Tampere, Finland, and this is what happened:

*I've arranged the chairs of the classroom into a circle. The students come in and stare at the arrangement. They don't know where to sit before I tell them to take any seat. They look at me, don't say a thing, and sit down. I sit down, say "Good morning," and wait for a response. There is none! No "Hi," no "Hello," no nothing. The usually talkative students shut up in this setting.*

My plan was to pilot some of the collaborative methods I had learned in Bloomington. The tactic described earlier was meant to be the "fishbowl" technique I had learned the previous fall when I skipped the field trip. OK, no bowl there, just dead fish. If you have ever met any Finns, you know that we are quiet. We do not like to talk and definitely not in a foreign language until we master it superbly. The curriculum in Finnish high schools has previously had a strong focus on individual student learning and their passing the matriculation examination. With such an exam focus, learning and teaching have been lonely jobs. Students sit in neatly arranged rows and answer when the teacher asks a question. Today, there is a change toward more collaborative methods, but the change is slow.

In fall 2016, high schools in Finland started to work with a new core curriculum, and we were taking a huge step into a new direction. The new core curriculum emphasized cooperation, student-centered methods, problem-based approaches, and the use of technology. In spite of these initiatives, Finnish students too often continued to languish in an educational system where they were told what to learn, how to learn, and when to learn. Unfortunately, their Finnish teachers were not using these new methods of learner empowerment. What I want to do in my classes is teach the students to take responsibility for their own

learning and become more aware of themselves as learners. I strongly believe that when students “own” their own learning, it becomes more meaningful and interesting.

I asked myself, how can I accomplish my goals of making students active learners and become a better teacher in the process? That is the question we teachers ask ourselves constantly. After our teacher training stints at a Finnish university, the development of our own careers is usually left to ourselves. However, Finnish schools do not usually have enough resources for continuous professional development. And as we all know, the way the teacher works in the classroom affects the students and the way they feel about themselves. It also affects how comfortable the classroom feels in general. For the teachers to be able to create a collaborative learning atmosphere in the classroom, they must have experienced a collaborative learning environment themselves. We are the ones who can change our work and the school. We are the experts of our own teaching practices. We know our students, the school, and education in our context. What I realized after the fishbowl incident is that we teachers need to start collaborating and experimenting with active learning pedagogy.

Where to start? First, we need to decide if we are talking about cooperation or collaboration. In my opinion, there is a big difference. **Cooperation** can be defined as working together to accomplish a goal or set of goals or achieve a certain set of skills or competencies, such as helping everyone on a team learn to solve simple division problems. A cooperative task can often be divided among the participants so that each person is responsible only for their own part of the task. We teachers have numerous staff meetings where we decide who does what and design guidance for team functioning.

**Collaboration** entails working and thinking together to accomplish a shared goal such as editing a book like this one or crafting a technology tool tutorial or guide. In addition, it is vital that collaborative team members freely share knowledge among team members. Successful collaboration requires participants to share knowledge in interaction. Collaboration requires dialogue throughout the process to have a shared vision and a goal.

As you can see from the title of this chapter, I am all in for collaboration. In language learning, “working and thinking together” is essential for the students to learn the language. Sure, they can repeat sentences after the teacher and learn phrases by heart, but to truly know the language, they have to be able to use it as a tool to reach a goal. And what is the goal? Communication with others, of course!

Second, teachers need to experience collaboration, working and thinking together, themselves, to be able to use it. What I have done in many schools since IU Bloomington and the horrible fishbowl incident after I returned back to Finland is to start a teacher teaming process. What this means is that teachers form small teams for collaboration. The idea is to **think and learn** together. These team meetings are not normal staff meetings where there is an agenda and teachers decide various everyday issues. Instead, these are meetings for learning. Put

away your laptops, your phones, and sit in a circle and talk. It is surprising how fast ideas, problems, and innovations arise in these “no-agenda” team meetings. There is always someone with a question or an idea to start the dialogue.

Where to find time for this? My recommendation is that you look at your normal staff meetings. Are they all really relevant? Could you make them shorter somehow? Don't attempt to change the whole system at first. Take baby steps.

How are my students doing? Great, I think. I still use the “normal” communicative textbook exercises and we don't sit in a circle all the time, but I have learned from the teacher dialogues that I need to give my students time. Time to talk. Time to raise questions. We simply need to allocate time to stop and hear each other.

I have also thoroughly enjoyed the dialogues about teaching and learning that I have had with my colleagues in my school, as well as the dialogues in other schools where I sometimes participate as an educational coach. There is so much we teachers can learn from each other!

### Advice and Suggestions

1. When you meet with your colleagues for the first time, don't talk about school. Get to know each other. Talk about your family, hobbies, weekend plans, pets, and so forth. The better you know each other, the more trust, respect, and shared understanding you build.
2. The second time you meet, talk about rules. The four basic principles of dialogue are expressing yourself and your feelings genuinely, listening to others without judgment, respecting and honoring one another's point of view and, finally, suspending judgment. How do you make sure this happens?
3. The third time, agree on a goal. Remember, you are there to think together and learn, not make decisions. After these initial steps, you are ready to dive in!

### Reflection Questions

1. What does collaboration mean to you? How have you seen it effectively enacted in your classrooms or in those you have observed or participated in?
2. What kinds of roles should there be in a collaborative group? What roles do you volunteer for and why?
3. How could we as teachers implement collaboration in a classroom in engaging and inspiring ways?
4. What do you think are the most important aspects of collaboration? And what are common barriers to success?
5. What do you see as key differences between cooperative learning and collaborative learning? What are the similarities? How do the differences play out for younger and older age groups?

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## LEARNING IN LOCKDOWNS

Creating Safe, Structured, and Student-Centered Classes During the Pandemic

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