



Facilitators and Inhibitors along the road to Collaborative Learning: Your Road ahead?

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Abstract

For Collaborative Learning to take place within any group of people, in our project, those involved with teaching and learning in schools, one vital need is co-operation. This may not be easily obtained and there are other requirements to consider on the road to collaborating.

These include strategies and practices that help in fostering the criteria research indicates are significant in supporting the growth of CL:

- participating in a professional way at a basic level of sharing
- the development of this to a deeper level of collaborating
- dealing with the various areas of equality
- moving to deep or holistic learning; CL becoming internalised

As with most corporate undertakings these cover both positive and negative behaviours, involving what can broadly be described as:

- 1 Management
- 2 Plant
- 3 Curricular Requirements
- 4 Cultural Factors
- 5 Attitudes
- 6 Knowledge

This chapter considers each of these in turn and points to materials that will help to develop and/or overcome issues that may arise.



As the term suggests Collaborative Learning involves both the individual and others in the process of learning. This could be in the context of everyday personal life or in a work place. Indeed it can happen anywhere, often without us even consciously realising it is taking place. Think of interactions in shops, on public transport, in the street, lending a hand in loading a car, giving directions, children playing ... the opportunities are endless.

Here, however, we are concentrating on specific aspects and for desired outcomes. That of developing the quality of teaching and learning to help individuals and countries as a whole to reach their full potential. The main emphasis is on schools, the people and actions that take place in them and the opportunities and constraints under which they work. This would include their venues, the educational and cultural mores and curriculum they are expected to follow, governmental policies, management and financial and time considerations.

So it involves teachers, their students, school and district management, education support and evaluation providers, policy makers, the community, including importantly parents, in promoting, understanding and supporting learning.

But, you may ask, why Collaborative Learning? Aren't there and haven't there been other methods of learning and teaching? Experience strongly suggests the opportunities for learning are greatly increased when sharing thoughts and experiences with others. Think of the old adage of 'two heads being better than one'; research seems to bear this out¹.

Though Collaborative Learning, as suggested above, does sometimes just 'happen' there are a number of strategies that can both help (facilitators +) and hinder (inhibitors -) how rocky the road of any individual or team will be for those starting out, or indeed, wanting to get even further ahead on the route.

As in all new or expanding ventures, an amount of preparation beforehand and the presence or absence of knowledge, skills, attitudes and expectations, along with self-knowledge adds or detracts from the experience. Working with colleagues from all the sections noted above, across a range of countries within Europe, EFFeCT hopes their joint experiences put together in this e-book and linked to the supporting website will help you in your journey whatever position you are starting from.

What follows in this section is a breakdown of a selection of the ideas and strategies our educational colleagues have found to facilitate or be problematic whilst experiencing Collaborative Learning. Alongside these you will find direct links to items or groups of items

¹ Ronfeldt, M., Farmer, S., McQueen, K., & Grissom, J. (2015): Teacher collaboration in instructional teams and student achievement. *American Educational Research Journal*, 52(3), 475-514



on the website to give further information, knowledge, strategies for overcoming, developing or initiating a particular aspect or group of support materials. Some will have multi-uses, others are specific to particular way-markers on the journey or individual contexts. We hope you enjoy your experiences!

It is one of the anomalies of the findings that sometimes an item is both a facilitator and an inhibitor, to highlight just one example – management. As you will see, teachers have found the ‘management’ in their school (year head; subject lead teacher; principal/head teacher etc.) to be either the most important factor in initiating and supporting the conditions for CL, and its biggest stumbling block.

This links with results mirrored in research data also. You will no doubt recognise and perhaps experience others in your own particular context.

These examples come from the questionnaires, interviews, observation, case studies, research and piloting of the Draft Methodological Grid used as the data-gathering methodology across educationalists in all six countries taking part in EFFeCT.

The context in which CL takes place is all important. Many of the pre-cursors necessary to promote and sustain the acceptance and practice of Collaborative Learning are missing in some contexts: sometimes in national or regional education policy, in schools, or in the personal involved in formulating and supporting school education, the physical buildings and in the practitioners themselves.

In general terms before moving to itemised examples of facilitating and inhibiting this influence positive and negative, as the EFFeCT project has illustrated, can be seen, in our opinion, on 6 important areas expressed and broadly split as follows.

1 Management

Central Control and Management

- Where a national framework for education exists, the onus on schools to follow the requirements covering its implementation which are managed by governmental departments and policy makers. Institutions have to cope with local, regional, national context, culture typical to the institution etc. **(– & +)**
- This central control has a subsequent knock-on effect on the descending levels of management in the regional, local and individual institutional context. **(+ & –)**



- Little opportunity for autonomy on the part of heads of educational establishments and consequently their staff on inputs and outcomes is left by the requirement to follow the criteria set centrally. **(largely (-) or neutral)**

Local management

- Institutions have to cope with financial, attitudinal, time factor, personnel conditions (e.g. age/experience factors), any country specific challenges, pedagogic culture of the institution etc.
- The management styles within the school itself affect all aspects of school life.
- A hierarchical structure can maintain the status quo and/or discourage 'change' and experiment.
- A hierarchical structure can also be the implementer and supporter of change and development.
- A corporate, democratic approach to management can lead to the development of new ideas and practices.
- The same approach may result in the failure to come to any decisions and lead to a fragmented approach.
- The attitude of the top or middle management to the necessary attributes of CL, time, space, opportunity, tolerance and support is crucial.

Demonstrates two sides of the coin.

2 Plant

- The physical layout of the building can inhibit or enhance the flexibility of activities, circulation, teaching and learning styles possible.
- It can also affect the rest of the categories below.

3 Curricular Requirements

- Special emphasis placed on specific subjects.
- Controlled timetables.
- Controlled subject content.
- Formulated to require specific learning/teaching styles.
- Little autonomy on the part of the school or teacher to adopt or adapt content or approach.

Are facts of school life that can hinder or assist strategies adopted.



4 Cultural Factors

- Historical practice with little or no ethos of sharing or co-operating.
- Ingrained suspicion of outside scrutiny, evaluation or self-evaluation.
- Past history of not deviating from centrally imposed norms.
- Few or no organised educational agencies promoting or supporting different ways of thinking and acting in teaching and learning.
- No or little awareness, recognition or take-up of research-led findings.
- Little emphasis on continuous professional development.

All the above have the possibility of being largely unhelpful, their reverse act as aids to effect change.

5 Attitudes

- Teachers regard their classrooms as their 'kingdom'.
- A 'closed door' regime.
- Reliance on knowledge and practice gained in the teacher's initial training.
- Reluctance to let others see what they are doing.
- Fear of being found wanting, 'found out'.
- No ethos or experience of 'sharing'.
- Incredulity at the notion they should share their educational ideas and practices with others.
- Set ways of preparing and teaching lessons – tend to teach as they were taught.
- Managers favour top-down control, showing reluctance to deviate from the accepted norms.

Illustrate some of the negative factors, their reverse tend to favour the development of collaboration.

6 Knowledge

- Although preparation courses for new teachers are introducing new ideas and practices, on taking up a post beginning teachers are initiated into the prevailing culture of the schools and face difficulties in putting their learning into practice.
- Many of the concepts, categories and criteria used in the educational papers/books etc. are not recognised or understood.



- When teachers have no experience of 'co-operation' they fear the concept will show up their weaknesses.
- Educationally collaborative learning is an 'unknown' to them.
- Provision of up-to-date knowledge both at specific curriculum subject level and the pedagogy of teaching the subject may not be available or taken up by individuals.

Knowledge in this sense applies mostly to pedagogy, although confidence in a teacher's own specialist subject/s also plays a part in their attitudes to change.

The amalgamation of the whole works towards making a supportive network for those seeking a collaborative approach to teaching and learning.

For ease of use the following specific examples taken from EFFeCT research data are sorted into '**Facilitators**' and '**Inhibitors**'. Set out under the headings above. Many are multi-functional and can be significant and useful in more than one category, they also apply across all levels of the progress towards Collaborative Learning. In our research these were designated as initially taking part *participative professionalism* {PP}, moving to a deeper level of involvement, *deep level collaboration* {DLP}, looking at *equity* {EQ} and the achievement of *deep/holistic learning* {DL}. The links to EFFeCT materials in the grids that follow lead to further information and strategies you can use to explore, initiate and develop CL in your own context. Some support materials make use of the abbreviations above (PP; DLP; EQ; DL) to clarify their appropriateness to your search for support where this happens guidance instruction is provided.

Area	Inhibitors
1 Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • hierarchical management • lack of communication • top-down decision making • attitude of senior person
3 Curricular Requirements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • clash of collaborative objectives with curriculum directives
1 Management / 4 Cultural Factors / 5 Attitudes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • lack of incentive to change
1 Management / 4 Cultural Factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • not important in present educational priorities
1 Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • no forward action plan for the school
4 Cultural Factors / 5 Attitudes / 6 Knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • little or no awareness • of recent educational research applicable to their context
1 Management / 4 Cultural Factors / 5 Attitudes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • entrenchment in tried and tested methods • ignorance of or low level of commitment to the ethos of collaboration
1 Management 4 Cultural Factors 5 Attitudes 6 Knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • fear of being judged • fear of failure/making mistakes • attitudinal stances (e.g. 'X' (I,s/he/they know best) • entrenched 'classroom is my kingdom' • negative attitude to risk taking • what level of 'comfort zone' individual or whole team participants have in being open to others • levels of commitment to the focus of the area/project in which collaboration is taking place e.g. literacy; gender equality; behaviour management etc. • the amount of experience participants have in former collaboration or co-operation
1 Management 4 Cultural Factors 5 Attitudes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the unequal commitment given to collaboration by some • whole of team not involved in CPD associated with collaborative project • assumptions about own/others ability/potential • time pressures; within school/outside commitments
1 Management / 4 Cultural Factors / 5 Attitudes / 6 Knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • no history of commitment to or support for CPD • no forum for discussion of alternative practices or attitudes prevailing
1 Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • little or no provision of support for development • lack of substitute cover for discussion experiment or training sessions • teacher turn-over disrupting cohesion of team • lack of finance • other priorities prevail

E-BOOK Chapter 3.2:
Facilitators and Inhibitors along the road to Collaborative Learning

Area	Facilitators
1 Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the supportive role of senior leadership
1 Management 4 Cultural Factors 5 Attitudes 6 Knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • creating the stimulus for change & motivation for collaboration e.g. <i>teacher self-awareness / a receptive co-operating</i> • team - team building <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ breaking down mistrust ○ an understanding of one another ○ teacher knowledge of pedagogical choices ○ openness to acquiring new methods ○ desire for improvement of the quality of teaching ○ commitment to success of students ○ wish for constant professional renewal ○ seeking for new relationships ○ debating the meaning of working together (PP) in local contexts ○ an open sharing ethos
3 Curricular Requirements 5 Attitudes 6 Knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • building on existing experiences • sharing individual agendas • exploring needs with colleagues to find collaborators
4 Cultural Factors 5 Attitudes 6 Knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • taking into account of the views of others • questioning own attitudes, beliefs, opinions and practices • assessing own attitudes, beliefs, opinions and practices <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ a willingness to change/modify own attitudes, beliefs, opinions and practices ○ adopting 'Role play' and customised 'games' as a tool to explore and discuss potentially problematic changes
1 Management 4 Cultural Factors 5 Attitudes 6 Knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • involving all concerned in the debate and policy making contributing to changes • facilitating face-to-face meetings to establishing connection between individuals and supporting the building of trust • creating a culture and environment for open expression and sharing through:- <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ an inclusive environment ○ facilitating the confidence to be willing to question and change over time
1 Management 5 Attitudes 6 Knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • making sure measures to be adopted are evaluated and the processes they lead to are reached collaboratively • that at all stages of development consideration is given to how the organisation and its members function and learn • leading to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ a cohesive culture with high team identity ○ allowing emotional and professional support of each other ○ the critical discussion of different aspects of teaching • support for innovation and change with respect to learning and teaching • formation of internal & external relations (local, regional, national) / enabling structures: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <i>self-organising / a balance between top down and bottom up initiatives / having an agreed work plan / time frame for initiative</i>

E-BOOK Chapter 3.2:
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<p>4 Cultural Factors 5 Attitudes 6 Knowledge</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • personal choice of partners, focus and objectives. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ commitment of all involved to collaboration at institutional and individual level ○ shared values and goals ○ clarity of purpose ○ an environment where views can be shared, failure is accepted, alternative views and differences are seen as a natural part of collaboration and innovation etc. ○ have an established atmosphere of respect ○ agreed channels communication
<p>1 Management 2 Plant 3 Curricular Requirements 4 Cultural Factors 5 Attitudes 6 Knowledge</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • confidence to make and acceptance of mistakes • having equity in purpose and processes • space for all opinions/ideas/fears to be heard • sensitivity to social inequalities in methodology and design • process equally accessible to teachers and non- teachers, students and all involved • information shared with others within the school not directly involved in this particular group
<p>1 Management 6 Knowledge</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ relationships characterized by mutual respect and fairness ○ supported by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ An institutional equity policy document ○ Staff on the governing body ○ Parents association ○ Students consultative body ○ Arbitration procedures ○ Centralised equal opportunities policy ○ Named and dedicated person to monitor equality • Leading to Deep Learning: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ With enhanced critical, independent thinking, autonomy, and self-awareness. Broadly conceived learning, encompassing the following functions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>Qualification:</i> (description: Pedagogical learning; social pedagogy, andragogy, heutagogy (co-led by the learner) principles; knowledge and skills for collaborative learning and leadership; affective learning; knowledge-creation; student learning) ▪ <i>Socialisation</i> (description: Professional identity construction, including collective identity construction and re-framing; institutional or community socialisation; development of engagement with community; emotional learning) ▪ <i>Subjectification</i> (description: Individual agency, confidence, autonomy; critical, independent thinking; enabling voice; being exposed to alternative ideas; becoming democratic professionals; reflection)