Educational Empowerment of Collaborative Learning at the University

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Abstract

Collaborative learning is considered to be one of the most promising meta-paradigms of the postmodern age. The article seeks to answer the following problem question: how can student collaborative learning be empowered considering the aspects of legitimacy, competence, and inclusion in the learning process?

Based on the analysis of research literature, explanations are provided on how to educationally empower collaborative learning in the studies.

Keywords: collaborative learning, power, empowerment, educational empowerment, legitimacy, competence, inclusion in the learning process.

Introduction

According to Hargreaves (2001), collaboration is one of the most promising meta-paradigms of the postmodern age. One of the main traits of a learning organization in the contemporary society is performance based on collaboration. Communicative and collaborative tendencies are discussed on individual, organizational, as well as regional, national, and cultural levels. For several decades scholars (Bosworth and Hamilton, 1994; Tereseviciene and Gedviliene, 1999; Gedviliene, 2000; Alisauskiene and Milteniene, 2004; Barkely, Cross and Major, 2005) have been researching the impact of collaborative learning on the quality of learning. Jensen (2001) discusses the advantages of collaborative learning: personal and overall academic advancement, enhancement of social skills, and interdependence with a group through learning from peers. Despite the fact that authors agree on the immense positive impact of collaborative learning on the overall learning of a learner, they do not analyze how collaborative learning should be educationally empowered. Meanwhile, this is highly significant for the modern studies. Juceviciene et al. (2010) provide an in-depth analysis of the essence of educational empowerment in their monograph Educational Power of a University: Response to the Challenges of the 21st Century. However, these authors also do not respond to the question on how to educationally empower student collaborative learning.

Thus, the article seeks to answer the following research question: how could student collaborative learning be empowered considering the aspects of legitimacy, competence, and inclusion in the learning process?

The aim of this article is to provide rationale for educational empowerment of student collaborative learning.

Objectives:
1. Analyze and disclose the essence of the conception of collaborative learning.
2. Provide the essence of the conception of educational empowerment.
3. Define educationally empowered collaborative learning from the perspectives of legitimacy, competence, and inclusion in the learning process as well as provide its structure.

The article draws on the method of research literature analysis.

Methodology: analysis of the conception of collaborative learning is based on the conception of group as well as team work (Lewin, 1946; Thelen, 1949; Slavin, 1986; Tereseviciene and Gedviliene, 1999; Bagdoniene and Bliauadys, 2004, Psycharis, 2008) and cooperative learning (Slavin, 1983, 1984, 1985; Johnson and Johnson, 1991). Analysis of the conception of educational empowerment is based on the perspective of educational power as researched by Freire (1985, 1989, 1996), Kreisberg (1992) and Juceviciene et al. (2010). Where power can be approached as ‘power over’ and ‘power with’. Educational empowerment in this article will be founded on the ‘power with’ approach. In addition, educational empowerment is analyzed based on the approaches of empowering pedagogy discussed mainly by Freire (1985, 1989, 1996) and Shor (1992). Meanwhile, educational empowerment of collaborative learning is analyzed from the perspective of the theory of social constructivism and its founding father Lev Vygotsky (1986).

The article consists of three parts. The first step is to analyze the conception of collaborative learning and provide its summarized definition. Meanwhile, the second step is to work towards the analysis and understanding of the concept of educational empowerment.

The third part of the article analyzes educational empowerment from the perspectives of legitimacy, competence, and inclusion in the learning process and determines how these three aspects should be used to empower collaborative learning.

The third part of the article also provides a structure of educationally empowered collaborative learning (Figure 1).
Analysis of the conception of collaborative learning

Several learning theories conditioned the occurrence of the theory of collaborative learning. Collaborative learning is founded on different epistemological assumptions. Collaborative learning does not belong to a certain separate pedagogical trend. Its origin goes back to ancient Greece and its contemporary development relates to the psychologists of education and theorists of pedagogy of the beginning of the 20th century. An American educational reformer John Dewey (1897, 1916, 1963) is the founder of the democratic pedagogy and philosophy of pragmatism, based on which he suggests the following educational competence – a learner should accrue learning experience by assessing, testing, and comparing educational methods to their own existing experience and through the trial and error processes. According to Dewey (1963) education should reflect the reality of the entire society and should be a place where learners should be taught and should learn things that occur and are necessary in the real world. Kurt Lewin (1946) explored the dynamics of groups and deepened our understanding of experiential learning and action research. Lewin’s (1946) research is grounded on his intentions to integrate theory and practice. Both Dewey (1916) and Lewin (1946) explore the concept of democracy in a group structure and what impact it has on social science. Herbert Thelen (1949), a pioneer in the field of group dynamics, followed Dewey’s (1897; 1916; 1963) theories and structured the pedagogy of group research by building the foundation that is used as the grounds for the contemporary collaborative learning. Jean Piaget (1929, 1979), a Swiss developmental psychologist and the representative of cognitive constructivism stated that environment has an impact on the formation of individual knowledge. Piaget’s (1929; 1979) ideas have strong links to the modern learning paradigm – learners should grow into creators and not conformists. Therefore, Piaget (1929) emphasized the effectiveness of the teaching environment that generates much interaction and claimed that morality develops from peer interactions. Several decades after this perspective, the seventies witnessed a paradigm shift: understanding how crucially important was the social world in the learner’s intellectual growth. According to Rojas-Drummond (2009) this shift should be partly credited to the rediscovery in the west of Vygotsky’s work. Vygotsky (1986) emphasizes the approach of sociocultural accounts of psychological processes and claims that if we aim at understanding how thinking, learning, and development work, we must consider social and communicative nature of human life. There are two basic interpretations of Vygotsky’s (1986) thought: 1) due to engagement in collaborative activities, individuals can master something they could not do before the collaboration; 2) people gain knowledge, practice, and new competences as a result of internalization in collaborative learning. Vygotsky (1986) stresses that learning can occur through social activity, group interactions, and scaffolding. Much attention while discussing collaborative learning is also devoted to the theories of social learning. Jarvis, Holford, and Griffin (2004) state that, same as knowledge, learning is a social construct. Learning is defined via three social dimensions: social aim of learning, social structure of learning, and social relationships that are realized during learning processes. Mead (1934, as cited in Juceviene, 2007) analyses the impact of a social group on an individual. She separates three dimensions of learning in a social context: social structure (primarily connections), social order (discipline) and the social order conditioned by it, as well as a social group. These three dimensions condition the individual’s mind and their individual self as social constructs. Thus, the self depends on the others. Learning society emphasizes collective learning during which collective understanding and knowledge are created. Same as learning at an individual level, collective learning also acts in and interacts with a social environment.

Pursuant to aforementioned, understanding occurs that each element of learning requires a collaborative perspective and approach.

Collaborative learning is also often linked to cooperative learning. The most prodigious compilers and reviewers of research on cooperative learning are Slavin (1983, 1984, 1985) and the Johnson brothers (1991). Slavin (ibid) concludes that cooperative learning has the highest effect on student learning when certain groups are recognized and rewarded based on the group member individual learning. The Johnsons (Johnson, Johnson and Smith, 1991) concentrated on comparing learning outcomes from three types of learning structures: cooperative, competitive, and individualistic. ‘Promotive interaction’ is included in the cooperative learning. It means that learners work on their own achievement and at the same time encourage the achievement of the other group members in order to accomplish their group goals.

Summarizing the ideas of the above scholars and discussed theories, learning is impacted by a specific context, includes individual adequate adaptation to social rules through their modification and distribution among social networks, understands how an individual self is impacted by the others, can occur on individual or collective levels, is influenced by experience, and includes social participation.

Pedagogical rationale for collaborative learning.

Modern cognitive theory states that learners must be actively engaged in learning.

Slavin (1984) explains that collaborative learning methods have two important components: 1) reward structure that fosters collaboration and 2) the task structure. The main characteristic of the reward system emphasizes the understanding that two or more individuals are interconnected through a specific reward which they will receive and share among themselves if they do well as one unit. The task structure defines situations where two or more individuals are allowed, motivated, or required to complete a certain task together and at the same time coordinate their own performance with the goal to achieve successful results. Thus, collaborative learning is twofold and can be approached from two perspectives: 1) as a method used to learn and complete a certain task (e.g. learners use collaborative techniques to complete a certain project); and 2) as a goal in itself – learning to learn.
collaboratively (e.g. learning the group processes; learning building and developing the team structure).

Four main factors should be emphasized when discussing collaborative learning: context (social and academic culture, university and auditorium learning environment), content (scripted or improvised), educator (qualification and set of competences), learner (psychological, physical, financial, social aspects).

Collaborative learning context. Constructivist approaches to learning focus on learning environments where learners have the opportunity to construct knowledge themselves and negotiate it with the other participants. Collaborative learning creates a learning context that promotes knowledge construction processes.

One of the roles of an educator is to create adequate learning environments (Juceviciene, 2007, 2010) that would foster collaborative learning. Arends (2008) emphasizes the importance of a space structure. He states that such a space is characterized by democratic processes and active learner roles during the decision-making process about what and how they should learn.

Collaborative learning content. Using collaborative learning as a method requires in advance preparation. Content should be organized with great care and attention. An educator should consider the learners’ interests and prior learning, and should remember that collaborative learning requires great initiative and orientation from the learners. Thus, the content must be interesting, relevant, and motivating.

Too often educators tell the learners to get into small groups and simply work without providing any instructions. However, the very first feature of collaborative learning is intentional design. Intentional learning activities should be structured by educators for the students to be used during assigned tasks. The main focus should be on intentional structure (Barkley, Cross and Major, 2005).

Kollar, Fischer and Hesse (2006) discuss collaboration scripts that are considered to be scaffolds through which collaboration is improved by structuring the interactive processes among the learners. There are at least five components included in a collaboration script: learning objective, type of activities, sequencing, role distribution, and type of representation.

Collaboration scripts can vary in regards to freedom that students are provided in structuring their collaborative processes. In an open version students can be provided with a frame of reference in a form of a scenario without giving further instruction on what specific form the process should assume. For example, students may be asked to provide feedback to their peers, but the means to accomplish this task can be determined and chosen by the students themselves. The more restrictive collaboration scripts constrain the learners in their choices of the specific activities and how they should be accomplished.

Despite the fact that any kind of collaborative activity should be guided based on a specific collaborative script, Gerlach (1994, as cited in Bosworth and Hamilton, 1994) argues that a uniform collaborative scenario is not possible. Activities that may prepare students to work successfully in one collaborative setting cannot empower them to function effectively in other collaborative environments. Research studies do not provide one definite guidelines for addressing the characteristics of efficient collaborative learning assignments. Thus, all collaborative learning activities vary substantially in goals, methods, and desired outcomes.

Educator’s role in the collaborative learning situation. Gerlach (1994, as cited in Bosworth and Hamilton, 1994) states that in collaborative learning situations an educator becomes the one who sets tasks, manages classroom, and is a synthesizer. Their main task is to create conditions in which collaborative learning can occur. The main duty of an educator is to support the learners during their learning process. Initially, an educator who possesses a necessary qualification and is (should be) a more knowledgeable person, guides the learners through the ongoing activities. Later an educator may share this responsibility with the leading students. Continuous assistance is offered by an educator as soon as it is required, needed by learners. Wells (2000), Duffy and Orrill (2004) see the main role of an educator as a co-inquirer. Wells (2000) distinguishes two levels where the teacher needs to be involved in an inquiry-process: a) as a co-inquirer with the learners in the topics being investigated; b) as a leader and organizer of the main activities. Duffy and Orrill (ibid) propose three roles of an educator in scaffolding the learning of the learners. First, an educator engages the learners in an inquiry. Second, an educator functions as an expert inquirer, but not as an expert in a subject matter. The main tasks are to monitor learners’ discussions and ask thought-provoking questions. Third, an educator promotes reflection. This helps the students to be able to identify the key and most important aspects.

Learner Collaborative learning requires students to collaborate. All participants should actively engage and work towards the set objectives. What exactly are the specific collaborative skills that form the framework in which collaborative learning can take place. Bosworth (1994, as cited in Bosworth and Hamilton, 1994) introduces a Taxonomy of Collaborative skills (see Table 1 for Taxonomy of Collaborative Skills). Table 1 introduces a taxonomy of skills that facilitate collaboration. Some of those skills are the prerequisites for good collaborative activity. Others can grow and be nurtured through practice and experience in a collaborative experience.

The question when these collaborative skills in learners must be developed should also be addressed. The issue of transitioning the learners from the traditional learning foundation received during their general education to the education based on the modern learning paradigm in higher education (which is directly linked to collaborative learning) ought not to be omitted. Educators, who strive to use collaborative learning as a teaching method, cannot afford to spend much time teaching students how to learn collaboratively. On the other hand, learners who do not possess collaborative learning competence will not be able to participate constructively. Thus, the collaborative learning content as well as process should take into consideration this matter and incorporate at least some teaching on the collaborative learning.
In summary, collaborative learning is conditioned by four major factors: context – democratic social foundation and traditions of a certain culture and academic community and physical learning environments of a higher education institution; content – formal program and course outline as well as scripted teaching plan and more importantly improvised teaching and learning process realization based on the unique conditions of the situation; educator – qualification and competence to teach based on the method of collaborative teaching and learning; learner – should possess collaborative learning skills to be able to engage in this process.

Based on the aforementioned, it is important to emphasize two fundamental conclusions in regards to the conception of collaborative learning. This approach encompasses two main factors: learning and collaboration. Here, learning relates to content. Meanwhile, collaboration underlines the aspect of the form (manner) in how the content is shared. While the content mainly includes the level of knowledge (theoretical and practical) of the subject matter, it also encompasses the knowledge that one possesses about learning collaboratively. The form, on the other hand, explains how that knowledge is shared among the learners. Specifically, the manner of interaction is significant – rapport between an educator and learners, interpersonal relationships based on equal rights among participants, respect and constructive feedback.

**The essence of the conception of educational empowerment**

*Power. From the most general perspective, the term power is defined as – an opportunity to influence people, communities, society, events, processes, and simultaneously produce change. Based on the perspective of the targeted final result, educational power is also directed towards a person, group of people, communities, society, considering the main goal of achieving change in knowledge, understanding, abilities, and competences (Juceviciene et al., 2010).*


Kreisberg (1992) analyzes the relation between democracy and the theory of empowerment and states that there can be two different approaches depending on the used perspective. There are two main roots of power. The first one is the philosophy of power as the power of domination. Its fundamental expression is the power over. However, this power is grounded on the absence of trust and respect, and with the inferior’s fear of the superior. The opposite of the above approach is the power with, which has an expression of empowerment in itself. The term of empowerment was used as an objective by those who felt being discriminated and fought for their own rights. According to Kreisberg (1992), empowerment means being able to influence, to participate in decision making process, and in the acquisition of the ability to make changes. It is the power which is needed to be able to practice democracy. Kreisberg (1992) defines the occurrence of power with as personal and political relationships, where power is shared and is an expanding resource.

Thus, ‘empowerment is the process during which people and communities (as well as institutions such as organizations (Juceviciene et al., 2010)) increase the control over or creation of one’s life, participation in making decisions that relate to their own life’ (Kreisberg, 1992, p. 18).
From the psychological perspective empowerment helps to increase one’s own confidence and self-esteem. The main aspect is the individual’s ability to access important resources and to control them.

In his work *Education and empowerment: towards untested feasibility* Forrest (1999) explains that the reasons and levels of empowerment can be different. Some forms of empowerment can only be manipulating agitation (retaining the position of the power over), while other forms may strive to share power and to provide its competence.

Management and organizational psychology research results summarize that empowerment encompasses delegation, individual accountability, independent decision making, and belief in being able to perform effectively (Thorlakson and Murray, 1996; Darraugh, 1991). Empowerment is also perceived as having power to perform certain action which is perceived as a power construct between relations and motivation (Conger and Kanungo, 1988). The construct of relations is expressed as having power to manage and control other individuals (Koberg, Boss and Senjem, 1999). Motivational construct emphasizes one’s power to influence situations, not people. Thomas and Vethouse (1990) developed Conger and Kanungo’s (ibid) ideas and stated that upon relating empowerment to motivation, an internal and not external motivation should be underlined.

Walker (2000) states that empowerment can be linked to a person’s openness, with an ability to accept interpersonal differences, to move forward and to learn from each other. She states that an empowered person feels comfortable working with others who are different from them. The more comfortable they feel, the more empowered they are. Simultaneously the more empowered they are, the more open they become towards learning from differences. Such a person risks easier, but with more responsibility, seeks to create authentic interpersonal relationships and while sometimes making mistakes permits others to make mistakes too.

Thus, the concept of empowerment relates to the empowering impact of one person or to the creation of the empowering conditions, when striving to help another person to act, acquire knowledge, abilities, achieve a certain goal.

Therefore, the analysis of the work of philosophers, sociologists, psychologists, management scholars who discussed the concept of empowerment proves that this concept does not have one specific meaning, it has multiple levels. Summarizing the above information it can be stated that *empowerment is the process that is performed by an individual in power who seeks to share it with others and provides them with possibilities to strengthen the control and creation of their own life and participation in making decisions that relate to their own life.*

*Educational empowerment.* University – institution of science and studies: a) creates scientific knowledge; b) realizes studies and prepares the future intellectuals and professionals; c) distributes knowledge in the society and participates in creating innovations. What kind of educational power must a university have to be able to reach all of the above goals? Can a general educational power concept be applied to a university? Yes, if the mission of the university is to ‘not only be the source of the society’s development, but also its engine’ (Barnett, 2000) and if it has a symbolic fund that fits this mission, i.e. society agrees with this mission, specifically, is the society that has power.

In such a case, *university’s educational power is the possibility to influence students and other people who seek university knowledge, communities, and entire society through the educational impact while achieving changes in their knowledge, meanings, abilities, and competences.*

However, Jučevičienė et al. (2010) state that this definition is too broad and does not include the meaningful specificities of a modern university. In the modern societies the educational power of a university is not absolute or the one that should be deriving from the origin of a university. Upon the establishment of a university only its partial educational power is acknowledged. A certain part of a university’s educational power can be continuously given (e.g. registration and accreditation of programs) or taken away (not accrediting programs).

What kind of power does a university educator have and how can it be used? Tabak, Adi and Eherendelf (2003) analyze the power of an educator and state that it can be used to do either *good* or *bad*. A pedagogue uses her power in a good way when the difference between their own and student knowledge is significant. In this situation educator’s power is knowledge. Educators must remain critical towards the power of their own knowledge. It conditions their subsequent learning. In the educational process there will be a lot of instances when educators will share their own power with students. Drawing on Tanner (1999), Tabak, Adi and Eherendelf (ibid), offer a deep insight: sharing power between educators and students does not yet mean that educators’ power decreases. This sharing process empowers both an educator and a student. Morley (2003) agrees with this statement and declares that power is evidenced in the instances of the conception and practice of collegiality.

To begin with, empowerment in the university should be started with contemplations about what kind of students will be enrolling into studies (Wisker, 1996; Hiller and Jameson, 2003), because empowerment should be geared towards the fulfilment of their specific needs, including gender, race, social status, professional level, etc.

On the other hand, Lapan et al. (2002) emphasize that students should be empowered for: a) academic achievement; b) self-directed life-long learning; c) proactive and assertive performance in the information and knowledge society; d) active performance of citizens in the democratic society. Thus, this scientist relates the objective of empowerment not only with student’s success in performance in the university, but also after the graduation.

Rogers et al. (2004) state that empowerment is not an easy process, because an educator who wants to share her own powers must do so gradually. There are instances when students are not willing to accept these powers. First of all an educator must make sure that students acquire the competence and motivation for the shared power not to become a burden.
A student can also be empowered through the assessment of her knowledge and abilities (Massey and Osborne, 2004). In this situation a combination of traditional and innovative assessment methods should be utilized. Below are some of the theoretical statements based on which Massey and Osborne (ibid, p. 360-361) constructed their suggested assessment system:

1. Learners can be empowered through learning, such as following the principles formulated by Leach, Neutzé and Zepke (2001):
   a) during the first stage learners can be empowered as individuals who make decisions in regards to their performance during the course. Such type of the empowerment perspective is grounded on the specificity of adult learning where self-directed and participatory learning aspects are emphasized;
   b) individuals are active citizens, who strive for the empowerment equality in the context (Ushser, Bryant and Johnston, 1997);
   c) admitting the importance of communities and correcting its internal inequalities as well as the politics of differences should also be acknowledged. Empowerment should not be the same for everyone. Process that acknowledges empowerment for some may at the same time decrease power for others.
   2. The applied differentiated assessment system promotes empowerment, encourages students to challenge the dominant status quo opinions, perceptions, and understanding in the society (Gramsci, 1971).

Juceviciene’s et al. (2010) analysis and comparison of ‘power over’ and ‘power with’ occurrences in the university allows to conclude that whether the power will be practiced as hierarchical authority or a rational power sharing that empowers instructors and students to achieve the highest results as well as for the students to become outstanding professionals and active society members will take place, solely depends on the internal practices of a university.

Thus, firstly, the educational power of a university is linked to empowerment, so that universities are the places ‘where people know how to study and learn to know’ (Derrida, 1994, p. 322).

Education is more than just knowledge, skills and abilities. It is a socializing experience that develops people who make society. Subject matter, the learning process, interactions, the governance structure, the learning environments teach students what to be and what kind of the society to build.

How exactly can students be empowered to become members of the society who think critically, collaboratively, and act democratically?

McLaren (1989, p. 186) defines empowering pedagogy as ‘the process through which students learn to critically appropriate knowledge existing outside their immediate experience in order to broaden their understanding of themselves, the world, and the possibilities for transforming the taken-for-granted assumptions about the way we live’. Banks (1991, p. 131) declares that empowering means transforming self and society: ‘A curriculum designed to empower students must be transformative in nature and help students to develop the knowledge, skills, and values needed to become social critics who can make reflective decisions and implement their decisions in effective personal, social, political, and economic action’. Shor (1992) discusses the concept of empowering education and defines it as a critical-democratic pedagogy which is a student-centered program for multicultural democracy. He states that since the self and society create each other, the individual development should be approached as an active, cooperative, and social process. Hence, a student’s personal growth should be related to public life.

Shor (ibid), a leader in the field of critical education, links critical pedagogy to democracy and empowerment. He suggests that traditional approaches should be transformed into critical and democratic ones. According to him, people are born learners and education can either develop or stifle their inclination to learn. Shor (ibid) states that it is primarily an educator who defines the politics of the learning process based on the made decisions. Educators confront the limits of the traditional curriculum and it is up to them to either deviate from or follow the official syllabus. During the teaching and learning process they make numerous decisions – ‘themes, texts, tests, seating arrangements, rules for speaking, grading systems…’ (Shor, 1992, p. 14). Through these choices the politics of education is defined, as critical or uncritical, democratic or authoritarian, empowering or not. The rules of communication and interactions are a key mechanism for empowering or disempowering students. Despite the fact that the foundation of empowerment is a democratic learning process, this freedom comes with responsibilities that require leadership by an educator and mutual educator-student authority. The empowering pedagogy teaches students to care about public welfare.

Based on the aforementioned, student educational empowerment is the process that is performed by an individual who owns power and shares it with others as well as seeks to provide students with opportunities to increase knowledge, abilities, and competence of life-long learning and to participate in the decision making processes that relate to their current and future professional performance and to the control and creation of their own personal life.

Educational empowerment of collaborative learning through legitimacy, competence, and inclusion in the learning process

Cohen (1994) observes that learners do not usually collaborate well spontaneously. Some may not participate equally, others may be satisfied with low-level argumentation, some present scarce level of knowledge acquisition. Specific instructional support should be utilized to guarantee a higher quality of collaborative learning processes and individual learning outcomes. Such instructional support can be achieved through educational empowerment of student’s performance. In addition such educational assistance derives from the Vygotskyan (1996) concept of the Zone of Proximal Development and is known as scaffolding. It is seen as means to support a learner as they complete tasks that they would not be able
to accomplish if they were on their own. How exactly educational empowerment and Vygotsky’s zone of proximal development help to promote student collaborative learning in the studies?

To underline the main aspects of educational empowerment in the context of university studies, three major elements can be emphasized: legitimacy – provision of power, competence – being able to use that power in a specific context, and inclusion in a learning process – through methods and tasks.

The main factor that may ensure the provision of power in order to achieve legitimacy is a study programme. In the Change of pedagogical system and teaching model (Branson, 1990, modified by Juceviciene, 2002; Juceviciene and Petkunas, 2006) it is explained that an environment that promotes overall learning of students, that is learning from self, from environment, from other students, from an educator as well as various information sources, is the one that is grounded on a modern learning paradigm (Juceviciene, 2007). Thus, to achieve the presence of legitimacy, a study programme should be created based on the goals of the modern paradigm and a student must be enrolled in that programme. Such a study programme fosters collaborative learning and provides a student with a right to participate in this process.

Thus, two alternatives should be emphasized:

1. Permanent (continuous) provision of power – a study programme which is based on a modern learning paradigm and thus is encoded to promote collaborative learning in the studies;

2. Episodical (temporary, fragmentary) provision of power – a study programme which is not based on a modern learning paradigm, but the certain modules of which may either have study outcomes or learning methods that are based on a collaborative learning.

Therefore, the aspect of legitimacy may be present only when a study programme provides either permanent or episodical provision of power depending on how much its content is supported by a modern learning paradigm and when a student is enrolled in that programme.

When one of the alternatives of provision of power is present, a student’s collaborative learning competence should be assessed by an educator based on three main factors:

1. knowledge – the student’s level of knowledge (theoretical and practical) of subject matter and of learning in collaboration with others (content);

2. abilities – the student possesses the main collaborative learning abilities: cognitive, social, and reflective. A student is able to:
   a) actively and constructively share knowledge and experience (critical discourse);
   b) critically assess discussed information and contemplated ideas (thought process);
   c) monitor the quality of progress and actively control it.

3. attitude – ability to achieve agreement between themselves and an educator as well as with the other students (form).

Student’s collaborative learning competence may include three potential levels that are based on Vygotsky’s zone of proximal development. Vygotsky (1986), social cognitive theorist and psychologist, developed the zone of proximal development (ZPD), that defines the gap between what the learners have already mastered, termed by the author as the actual level of development, and what learners can achieve when provided with appropriate support (known as scaffolding) from the more knowledgeable other, the zone which is called potential level of development.

How could Vygotsky’s (1986) ZPD be applied to assessing student collaborative learning competence and subsequently empowering them to learn collaboratively? Based on the aforementioned, three alternatives of student collaborative learning competence may be possible:

1. Zone of actual development – a student possesses required level of knowledge (content) of both subject matter and knows how collaborative learning should be performed (has necessary knowledge, abilities, and attitude). Students who are in this level, may immediately be included in the learning process, through appropriate tasks and methods, which is based on collaborative learning.

2. Zone of proximal development – student lack subject and collaborative learning knowledge, but may achieve it through adequate support (appropriate scaffolding) received from the more knowledgeable other (e.g. a peer student who possesses necessary knowledge). By filling in this gap (receiving adequate knowledge from the more knowledgeable person), the student is moved to the zone of actual development.

3. Zone of potential development – at this level students do not possess required knowledge. Here, they need to be provided with information in subject matter as well as learn to learn collaboratively and thus acquire the necessary competence (knowledge, abilities, attitude). Two options are possible: a) a student acquires a certain foundation of required knowledge and moves to the zone of proximal development; b) a student is provided with all of the required knowledge and in this way is transferred to the zone of actual development. The latter option is more theoretical, than possible in practice.

This means that an educator should be able to locate a student’s ZPD level – specifically, how much knowledge a student possesses and how the teaching and learning process should be approached. Therefore, educators seeking to utilize educationally empowered collaborative learning strategies must be able to adopt differentiated teaching methods where a student’s individual learning style is recognized. An accurately prepared questionnaire can be used to determine one’s level of ZPD.

Based on the aforementioned, only those students who are in the zone of actual development, specifically those who possess collaborative learning competence – have required knowledge (content) and know how to share it with others (form), may be immediately included in the learning process. However, it may also be possible that collaborative learning may be the power that lets a student to move from one zone (e.g. from the zone of potential development to the zone of proximal or actual development) without any additional assistance.
Inclusion in the learning process is conditioned by several general factors: purposeful goals and content of interactive activities and tasks, democratic environment, differentiated teaching as well as homogenous and heterogeneous work in groups, physical aspects of the learning setting, psychological climate and rapport between an educator and learners.

Shor (1992) proposes eleven items as an agenda of values for the empowering pedagogy as well as more specific factors prevalent for the inclusion in the learning process:

1. Student participation and inclusion through goals, content, and methods.
2. Learning is grounded not only on cognitive and rational processes, but on the affective foundation as well.
4. Learning processes are situated in the psychologically or geographically relevant contexts.
5. Presence of a multicultural environment. Diversity is promoted.
6. Dialogic (democratic) discourse is maintained: not at the student (vertical relationship), but with the student (horizontal relationship).
7. Maintaining neutrality and multidimensional outlook through desocialization – critical consciousness.
8. Presence of democratic learning process – student rights, mutual learning goals, content, and methods agreed upon between an educator and learners.
9. Continuous researching of the contextualized problem through the discursive perspective.
10. Holistic learning ensured through the interdisciplinary perspective.
11. Transformational knowledge and experience as well as challenging the status quo achieved through the activist learning.

In summary, student educational empowerment can be achieved when: a study programme is encoded with modern learning paradigm (permanent provision of power) or the study outcomes or methods of some modules are based on the modern learning paradigm (episodical provision of power). Students should also possess a collaborative learning competence to be in the zone of actual development and may then be included in the learning process through adequate environment, tasks, methods, communication, etc.

Conclusions

1. Collaborative learning derives from various learning theories and is founded on different epistemological assumptions. It is conditioned by the theories of: democratic pedagogy, experiential learning, group dynamics, cognitive and sociocultural constructivism, social as well as cooperative learning. Collaborative learning is conditioned by four fundamental factors: context, content, educator, and learners. The concept of collaborative learning encompasses two main understandings: learning deals with content – the level of knowledge (theoretical and practical) on subject matter as well as knowing and being able to learn collaboratively; and form – the manner in which that knowledge is shared among the participants (nature of interactions when building constructive interpersonal relationships and kinds of approaches founded on respect).

2. Power can have two approaches: ‘power over’ – an unequal distribution of power, where hierarchical aspect is present; and ‘power with’ – sharing power equally among those participating in the process. Thus, empowerment is performed by a person who possesses power and shares it with others by

Figure 1 explains the process of collaborative learning which is educationally empowered through legitimacy, competence, and inclusion in the learning process.
providing them (people, communities, organizations) with ways to make decisions and simultaneously control and create own life. Subsequently, student educational empowerment is the process that is performed by an individual who owns power and shares it with others as well as seeks to provide students with opportunities to increase knowledge, abilities, and competence of life-long learning and to participate in the decision making processes that relate to their current and future professional performance and to the control and creation of their own personal life.

3. Student educational empowerment should be approached from three perspectives: legitimacy, competence, and inclusion in the learning process. Legitimacy – a student collaborative learning may be empowered if a modern learning paradigm is encoded in the study programme (permanent provision of power) or if certain modules include study outcomes or methods that are based on the modern learning paradigm (episodical provision of power). If/when the legitimacy aspect is present, an educator should assess student collaborative learning competence, specifically their knowledge, abilities, attitude based on the differentiated approach towards individual students. Three alternatives are possible: 1) a student is in the zone of actual development – possess necessary knowledge (theoretical and practical) of subject matter as well as knows and is able to learn collaboratively; thus, can be immediately included in the learning process; 2) a student is in the zone of proximal development – a learner lacks required knowledge and a more knowledgeable person is needed to provide a student with scaffolding and move them to the zone of actual development; and 3) a student is in the zone of potential development – does not possess any knowledge of a subject matter and does not know how to learn collaboratively, thus, does not possess collaborative learning competence. Here, they can either be moved to the zone of proximal development by receiving the fundamentals of necessary knowledge. Or they may be provided with all knowledge of subject matter and taught to learn collaboratively. The latter option is highly unlikely in practice. Students who possess collaborative learning competence are included in the learning process through adequate participatory, affective, problem-posing, situated, multicultural, dialogic, desocializing, democratic, researching, interdisciplinary, activist aspects.

References


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