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## COLLABORATIVE LEARNING

*A Mutual Process of Knowledge Construction of Both Individual  
and the Group*

### INTRODUCTION

I have been involved in Educational Action Research for more than two decades, promoting teachers to collaborate and form “communities of learners” as mediums of change. The mode of interaction in such communities is conversation, which I see as an optimal medium for mutual learning processes of the individual as well as the group, enhancing the co-emergence of new ideas.

Action Research as compared to other forms of research focuses on practice, on the participants' actual activity rather upon their attitudes or thoughts. Action, according to Hanna Arendt is the highest manner of being human: “It is through action that people reveal actively their unique personal identities and thus make their appearance in the human world” (Arendt, 1958: 179).

The same idea was backed by MacMurray (1957), who emphasized the primacy of action over thought, arguing that “Action is a full concrete activity of the self in which all our capacities are employed, while thought is ... a withdrawal into an activity which is less concrete and less complete” (p. 86).

Both refer to Action as a liberating activity, as freedom in the sense of peoples' ability to define themselves and create their own identities. To be free does not mean to retreat from the world, from the clash of opinions. Instead, freedom requires the presence of others or what Arendt termed “plurality”. People define themselves, create their own unique identities and the possibility of action, in relationship, through dialogue with others. Plurality signals the importance of others in both making our lives together and understanding ourselves. Following this argument I contend that Collaborative Action Research should be carried out in “communities of learners” that promote a dialogue with others, that enhance open conversation.

Community was typified by Fielding by its high relationship and high freedom, both of which facilitate the emergence of a medium in which participants can be themselves (Fielding, 1995). Thus, the community becomes a condition for individuality, whereby people feel they can voice their “half baked” ideas without

being ridiculed (Belenky et al., 1986). Belenky uses the term “real talk” to define a conversation that includes both discourse and exploration, and is typified by talking, listening, questioning, arguing and speculating. Compared to other forms of discussion, the topic in conversations cannot be predetermined, but arises in the process of conversing. Rather than leading the conversation, the participants are being led by it, opening themselves to others and at the same time opening the possibility of affecting their understanding of the world (Gadamer, 1981).

Thus, a “community of learners” is a self-organized group that creates its own agenda and assumes responsibility and ownership for its mode of functioning as well as for its “products” (Herbst, 1976). Led by open conversation rather than by pre-defined goals and objectives, participants can voice their unique individuality. In this respect, collaborative action research is an optimal site for practitioners to become fully aware of their selves as well as their capacities, through action. To be aware of the gap between one’s espoused theories and theories in use (Argyris & Schön, 1978). On the other hand, as a result of learning in a community of learners, of seeking for mutual understanding for common meaning, new group knowledge is generated, which emerges out of the conversation.

A community of learners is comparable to a multi-dimensional system, creating a multi dimensional web of interactions. This interaction is within the different inner dimensions of the mind (such as cognitive, affective, motivational, values, etc.), as well as between similar dimensions of the other participants of the group (Hardy, 2001).

My main argument in this chapter is that two processes of learning are promoted within a community of learners: that of the individual learner, as well as that of the group. The two processes are interrelated, but different knowledge is constructed in each: Personal knowledge or understanding, as well as Group knowledge, which we consider as “Group-voice”, or “Group-self” (Avraham, 1972). Each participant in the group acts both as an individual learner interacting with the other participants, as well as an outside reflector, able to reflect on the group process of knowledge construction. This double role of active within and reflecting without, we term Ecological Thinking (Keiny, 2002). As a result of this self-reflectivity, participants accept responsibility for their observations, explanations and interpretations of the way they build their system of knowing and acting (von Foerster, 1992).

My aim in this chapter is to trace collaborative learning as a dialectical process of individual and group learning. This is a process in which personal knowledge and group knowledge are mutually constructed. To illustrate this mutual process, I chose as case study our community of learners, which we term the Discourse group. It consists of seven educational researchers, each of whom acts also as a group facilitator of an educational change project, in different educational settings. Our group has been meeting regularly for six years, with the aim of gaining a deeper understanding of the mutual process of learning and knowledge construction. All meetings are tape-recorded and transcribed. Copies of the transcription are handed to the participants for further reflection. These formed the text, which serve as database for analysis.