

# Brief Encounters from the Taos Institute

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## COLLABORATIVE LEARNING



By Harlene Anderson, PhD.\*

When I begin an engagement I do so with the stance that I am entering a metaphorical space that has the potential for *collaborative learning*. Anytime collaborative learning is taking place I consider it both creates and evolves from a *collaborative learning community*. This standpoint is central to my practice philosophy and stance: my *ways of being and becoming* with others. This includes the way I talk, act, think and respond with them (Anderson, 1997; 2007). Though collaborative learning is most often associated with education contexts, when I view it from the position that learning and knowledge-creating are communal construction processes generated in social exchange or from a relational-collaborative-dialogical perspective rather than a hierarchical-dualistic instructive interaction one, then each client context (e.g., education classroom, business team, faculty senate, neighborhood citizen association or board of directors) that I engage with can be thought of as a collaborative knowledge-generating system.

Variouly referred to as action, collaborative, collective, cooperative, group, partner, peer, team and transformational learning, common among these distinctions is a grounding in assumptions about knowledge formation and use associated with social construction, narrative and dialogue theories and postmodern philosophy that offers an alternative perspective to longstanding views of the autonomous knowledge constructing individual and top-down informational learning (Anderson, 1998, 2000; Anderson & Goolishian, 1991; Anderson & Swim, 1993; Astin, 1985; Bonwell & Eison, 1991; Bosworth & Hamilton, 1994; Bruffee, 1983; Freire, 1970; McNamee, 2007; Shotter, Golub, 1988; Goodsell, Maher, Tinto, Smith & MacGregor, 1992; Johnson & Holubec, 1990; Kuh, 1990; Mezirow, 1978; Mezirow & Associates, 2000; Peters & Armstrong, 1998; Slavin, 1990; Weiner, 1986). Each invites an epistemological and a performative shift that requires both genuinely “walking the talk” and “talking the walk.”

In a relational and non-hierarchical approach to knowledge creation each member of the learning community, including facilitators and participants, contributes to the production of new learning and knowledge including its integration and application, and shares responsibility in these. This supposes that a collective learning experience is inherently transforming. What is being learned is transformed in the learning process, the learning or knowledge-making process itself is transformed in its making and likewise and the persons involved in the learning process are transformed. Transforming refers to the relational-generative process in which people engage with each other and with themselves in mutually sharing and inquiring into their experiences. As they critically consider and reflect on familiar reference frames new ones are created. As such, collaborative learning both creates and is a product of a collaborative learning community (Anderson, 1998, 2000; Anderson & Goolishian, 1991; Anderson & London, 2011, a, b; Anderson & Swim, 1993).

I emphasize that I think the generating of newness takes place in a metaphorical space that entails a web of relationships and an atmosphere that invites learning *with each other*. It is a space in which

a new discourse can be introduced, experienced and experimented with. In this participation, members begin to negotiate and learn the language of the discourse and community, acquire self-confidence and comfort in the language and create new language and knowledge for themselves that is meaningful and relevant.

### **A Few Things I Consider Important for Inviting Collaborative Learning**

- Have passion for and invite collaborative learning without imposing.
- Be willing and able to be decentralized.
- Grant “authority” and voice to learners.
- Appreciate and be genuinely curious about the expertise and knowledge that each person brings.
- Value difference, its ambiguity and uncertainty are critical to the development of newness.
- Be able to move, and help members move, beyond familiar languages, vocabularies and understandings.
- Help members develop bridges between familiar and unfamiliar language and knowledge discourses and communities.
- Trust that each member can be the architect for their own learning.
- Trust that each member can share responsibility for their and fellow members’ learning members.
- Trust each member’s expertise and judgment regarding what is critical to their daily and future lives.
- Trust that members will enhance their self-discipline, initiative and leadership abilities.
- Be reflective and open to your perspectives being examined and challenged.
- Express and live these values and attitudes in actions and words, inviting members to experience and consider them.
- Remember attitude and tone are critical to setting the stage for and maintaining a generative collaborative learning.

Keeping the above in mind encourages me and the people I work with to be engaged and participate, to have a sense of belonging and creating, and to share ownership and responsibility. Combined, learning is created that has *dynamic sustainability*: it will continue to develop after the learning community has formerly dissolved. Said differently, in my experience the learning process invites opportunity for continuous reflection on how we think concerning our world and our participation in constructing it, how we think of ourselves and others and how we want to live differently in our relationships and in our world.

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\*Harlene Anderson, Ph.D. is a co-founder and member of the Board of Directors of the Taos Institute.