PARTICIPATORY COLLABORATION: BUILDING PARTNERSHIPS IN CURRICULUM PLANNING

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Participatory collaboration involving multi-stakeholder engagement generates opportunities for creativity and innovation in curriculum planning, building partnerships between students, teachers, institutions, and communities. Integrating student voices at planning and design levels places students at the center of this process, where meaningful input can help shape the overall learning experience. A participatory culture aids in shifting the focus of education to a learning paradigm and enhances our capacity to support and promote critical thinking across the curriculum. It embraces a constructivist view of teaching and learning, promoting and supporting authentic learning spaces within and beyond the confines of the traditional classroom setting.

Keywords: participatory collaboration, engagement, curriculum design, curriculum planning

Participatory collaboration supports a *learning paradigm* as put forth by Barr and Tagg (1995), where the focus of education is placed on fostering student-centred educational practices. Engagement of multiple stakeholders in the academic milieu generates opportunities for creativity and innovation in curriculum planning that builds partnerships between students, teachers, institutions, and communities. Integrating the student voice at curriculum planning and design levels provides a forum to place students at the centre of this process and promotes a culture of learning in the postsecondary context.

This paper emerges as a conceptual examination of this concept of participatory collaboration, based on a recommendation to foster more inclusive learning environments from a recent study on critical thinking in social work education. In this study, critical thinking is described as an iterative, holistic and multidimensional process (Samson, 2018), that pushes educators to reconceptualize the process of teaching and learning to promote critical thinking across the curriculum. A student-centred approach to education that incorporates participatory collaboration is one way of supporting and promoting critical thinking in across the curriculum (Samson, 2018). As such, this is one way forward in the shifting context of higher education from the more traditional, instructor-focused environment to a learning-centred one (Barr & Tagg, 1995). This paper will contextualize this concept of participatory collaboration, highlight some key questions for consideration in terms of how to incorporate this into the curriculum design process, and connect the important role that scholarly, learner-centred teaching has in supporting more inclusive, connected, and collaborative learning spaces.

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PARTICIPATORY COLLABORATION: IN SUPPORT OF A LEARNING PARADIGM

In understanding the concept of participatory collaboration, McLoughlin and Lee (2008) described a *culture of participation* that supports pedagogical approaches that allow for increased engagement of learners in molding the face of the education they receive via *participatory choice, personal voice,* and *co-production* (p. 10). A participatory culture is detailed as one that includes: minimal barriers to access and participation, support for sharing contributions, mentorship (novice to expert), connection to one another, a sense of ownership for creativity, and a sense of collectivism (Bass, 2012, p. 5).

According to Barr and Tagg (1995), a *learning paradigm* helps create a learning space that supports knowledge creation via student creativity and innovation. Barr and Tagg (1995) propose that students need to be active participants in their journey of learning. Student input, then, is a key component of designing "holistic, complex, and meaningful environments" (Barr & Tagg, 1995, p. 22). As our society rapidly evolves and technological advances change the face of what we know and how we do things, so too have our educational institutions evolved. Organizational/institutional management and learning systems have transformed the very hub of our communication processes and serve to support the transition of institutions of higher education from instructional to learning centres. Ahead of their time perhaps, Bar and Tagg (1995) laid the foundation of ingredients necessary to foster and develop effective learning-centred educational institutions. Increased technology expands our understanding of the concept of learning spaces - they extend well beyond physical boundaries of the classroom; tapping into this forum reinforces a collaborative approach to learning and teaching. Technological advances provide venues for stakeholders at distances, or unable to attend in-person, to have a voice in the planning/design process as well. The proliferation of modern technology has aided the shift toward a *learning paradigm*, that has spurred on rapid growth in both scholarly teaching and the scholarship of teaching and learning via enhanced knowledge acquisition and mobilization in this modern era.

Curriculum design can involve instructional design specialists and teachers who use their expertise to create effective learning environments (Konings, Seidel & van Merrienboer, 2013). Konings, Seidel and van Merrienboer (2013) suggested that integrating the diverse expertise of multiple stakeholders in the education process can improve the quality of the curricular design process and the learning spaces they generate. Students' interpretations and perspectives influence learning; hence, inclusion of students in the design process improves the alignment of students' perspectives and those envisioning the learning spaces (Konings et al., 2013).

In a curricular model that blends the perspectives of designers, teachers and students, Konings, Brand-Gruwel and van Merrienboer (2005) noted that while student perspectives are important, students cannot totally engage in *self-determined* learning; rather, involvement of other key stakeholders is paramount to creating effective learning spaces. There is some evidence to suggest that involving students in curricular/instructional design activities results in increased student engagement, an increased sense of individual responsibility to the learning process, and improved motivation and self-confidence (Bovill, 2013). This study by Bovill (2013) incorporated a qualitative case study methodology to examine participatory approaches to curriculum development and related outcomes of involving students and teachers in the design process in a higher education setting in the UK. Though findings from this research design will not be generalizable, they demonstrate some positive outcomes as a result of student engagement in the curriculum design process.

Involving multiple stakeholders in curriculum planning aids in supporting a pedagogy of collaboration and connectivity. McLoughlin and Lee (2008) identified three *Ps* in relation to the concept of connectivity: *personalization* (learner choice, agency, customization, self-regulation and management), *participation* (communication, collaboration, connectivity, and community); and *productivity* (learner-centred content, contribution for knowledge, generativity, creativity and innovation) (McLoughlin & Lee, 2008, p. 16). It is noteworthy to highlight that many of these components are also identified as essential features to the promotion of critical thinking; hence, participatory collaboration is an important consideration in promoting student engagement and critical thinking. Educators across multiple disciplines have conducted extensive research on identifying effective pedagogies to support engaged learners, including critical, problem-based, experiential, and inquiry-based approaches to teaching and learning. Table 1.0 provides an example of effective learning and teaching activities that have been implemented to support and promote critical thinking.

By extension, many of these strategies and activities incorporate salient features of a participatory culture. Educators can apply this focus to engaging students and other relevant stakeholders in the curricular design process. Engagement in the design process encourages students to think critically while being involved in reshaping the curriculum; it helps shift the focus of education toward student learning as a central driver, rather than being teacher-focused (Bass, 2012).

Table 1

Learning and Teaching Activities that Foster Critical Thinking

Learning and Teaching Strategies to Foster Critical Thinking Across Disciplines: *Concept mapping; Scaffolding learning via course content and assessment tasks; Problem-based learning; Inquiry-based learning; Use of real-life experiences to support critical thinking; Peer coaching; Online, asynchronous activities and assignments; Case study approaches; Experientially-based activities and assignments; Debates/controversies/argumentation activities; Open-ended & topic discussions; Portfolios; Critical incidents; Service learning; Senior thesis/project; Teaching explicit principles of critical thinking within courses; Promote transferring application of critical thinking to new contexts; Activities that incorporate key subject-area concepts to think deeply about; Creative problem solving; Clinical experience debriefing exercises and assignments; Reflective writing; Written assignments; Simulations & role playing; Strategic Management Simulations (SMS) found in nursing; Use of poems and literature; Online & asynchronous learning environments; Studying abroad; Co-teaching; team teaching; IPE*
Other Influencing Factors: *Setting/Learning environment; Class size; Educator training, skills, and level of experience; Educator attitudes toward critical thinking; Students' prior knowledge; Interactions between students and teachers; Emphasis on knowledge construction; Collaborative learning spaces; Safe spaces; Educator confidence and enthusiasm; Active & purposeful training of teachers in critical thinking; Explicit course objectives on critical thinking (infusion); Student-centred approach to teaching & learning; Assessing critical thinking development over successive assignments/longer intervention periods; Use of formative assessments; Intentional curriculum design to promote critical thinking; Embedding critical thinking objectives within subject-specific courses (emersion); Use of questions/Socratic question as teaching tools; Incorporating a variety of active learning activities, assignments, projects, etc., in the classroom and beyond across disciplines*
Learning and Teaching Strategies to Promote Critical Thinking in Social Work Education: *Trigger events/critical incidents; Reflection/critical reflection; Sequential learning/scaffolded; Discussing & planning assignments with students; Ethical dilemmas; Use of controversial events; Discussion forums; Use of simulations; Learning diaries/biographies/portfolios; Case method teaching; case-based learning; Capstone projects; Integrative seminars and field practicums; Writing assignments/activities; Class discussions; Blended learning environments: in-class; virtual (synchronous/asynchronous); Debates; Multimodal learning that merges arts, writing and field experiences ; Role play scenarios; real life examples; Team-based learning via integration seminar experiences; Use of real-life experiences to support critical thinking in relation to decisions, discretion, and making professional judgements; Challenge student perspectives in meaningful contexts; studying abroad; A "theory mindedness approach" to learning course concepts; Teaching research skills; Logic modeling; Use of evidence and scientific principles in assignments; Collaborative/team teaching; Interprofessional education (IPE)*

Note. Table 1 adapted from "Critical Thinking in Social Work Education: A Delphi Study of Faculty Understanding," by P. Samson, 2018. Retrieved from https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/etd/7395.

EMBRACING A CONSTRUCTIVIST VIEW IN A COLLABORATIVE DESIGN PROCESS

Incorporating the input of multiple stakeholders (students, teachers, community organizations/agencies, and industry) involved and interested in the educational milieu into the process of curriculum design serves to challenge that traditional view of education where

academics are often seen and *experts*; it also supports student engagement and improved learning (Bovill, Cook-Sather, & Felton, 2011). Overall, there has been a lack of involvement of students in curriculum and course design efforts. Bovill, Cook-Sather and Felton (2011) contended that permitting students to become partners in the planning process supports diversity, develops a shared responsibility for teaching and learning via collaboration, enhances relationship-building between students and teachers, and serves as a relevant mechanism to improve student motivation and engagement in the process of learning. Extending this partnership building process to other interested stakeholders with a vested interest in educational outcomes, such as field/practicum/internship organizations can enhance this activity of collaboration. According to Wood and Kompare (2017), inclusion of participatory collaboration in curriculum design supports a democratic process that may well aid in integrating critical thinking across the curricula.

In supporting participatory collaboration in the field of design, a constructivist view to teaching and learning comes to life. A constructivist view of teaching and learning captures components that are integral to a participatory culture and includes components such as: peer collaboration; hypothesis generation; cognitive structuring that organizes, evaluates and groups together perceptions, memories and actions; and provides a setting where students can be taught to be more self-regulated and self-directed in their learning (Devries, 2000; Mezirow, 1991; Schunk, 1996). This view supports peer collaboration and sees students as active participants in their learning, where teachers promote learning activities that challenge thinking, values and belief systems to promote deep learning. An example of this approach is incorporating case-based activities that challenge students to engage in problem-solving processes to resolve scenarios or dilemmas. Case-based learning (highlighted in Table 1.0) aids students in collaborating with one another, which in turn contributes to critical and creative thinking (Schell & Kaufman, 2009; Tsui, 2002). Prominent features of constructivist learning environments include: multiple representations of reality; recognition of the complexity of real life; an emphasis on knowledge construction; an emphasis on authentic learning within relevant/meaningful contexts; case-based learning grounded in real life examples; and emphasis on collaboration in the construction of knowledge through the social interaction of learners and teachers (Jonassen, 1994; Loyens & Gijbels, 2008). These components support a shift in educational paradigms to a *learning paradigm* that focuses on supporting the learning process for students rather than on institutional outcomes/objectives (Barr & Tagg, 1995). In creating a *learning paradigm,* the goal is to foster collaborative learning spaces (between and among students and faculty) that encourage student success in multiple formats (classroom to virtual environments). Supporting collaborative learning in authentic environments is important.

Participatory collaboration enables students to have a voice in the planning process, where they can claim ownership of their learning and generate more inclusive learning spaces (Tsui, 2002). These key features of participatory collaboration serve to strengthen students' motivation to learn and engagement in the educational process overall, both of which enhance critical thinking (Samson, 2018).

There are issues of contention with this concept of participatory collaboration. Some of these challenges include difficulties achieving consensus on what is deemed to be a priority among a group of interested stakeholders; power imbalances can occur; conflicting agendas and demands can create tension and resistance; and differing perspectives can pose barriers (Wood & Kompare, 2017). The notion of academic freedom for faculty members can generate tension in relation to this concept as well. Inclusion of partners from the community and industry can pose

challenges in the academic environment given risks associated with shifting a university course or program into a job training endeavor. Hence, balances may need to be negotiated in this complex venue, that at times can present conflicting needs, priorities and values. In mitigating some of these trials, Wood and Kompare (2017) suggested developing shared goals, having agreement on the nature and scope of the work to be undertaken, being clear about decision-making processes, and clearly defining roles, responsibilities and expectations of all involved. It should be acknowledged that there is limited research in this area.

FOR CONSIDERATION…

As educators spanning the breadth of academic disciplines, some important questions to consider as a starting point for conversation around this topic include:

1. How do we create space for participatory collaboration in curriculum design and planning within our own disciplines?
2. Who are the interested stakeholders in the educational design process in your discipline/field of practice? and How might they be leveraged to support engagement in this process?
3. Can you think of one example of how to engage in participatory collaboration in designing a course or assignment in your field of study?

In providing an example of how this concept of participatory collaboration might be operationalized in a specific field of practice, perhaps Schools of Social Work can invite students and community agencies/partners to curriculum planning days or retreats to allow for input, feedback, and collaboration on how to improve specific courses; this process could extend to small or large class sizes. If this was scheduled at the end of the spring term, there would be sufficient time for educators to incorporate feedback and suggestions into their syllabi for the upcoming Fall semester, well in advance of anticipated departmental deadlines for approval. Including other stakeholders within the educational milieu of social work education via a participatory, collaborative curriculum planning framework could enhance engagement on a broader scale, and further the integration of theory with practice for social work students. While not being the only driver for curriculum development, a planning day held during the spring or summer can be one way of expanding voice in the planning and design process. There is limited scholarship in this area, so it warrants further consideration.

CONCLUSION

Participatory collaboration is a concept that has value across the range of academic disciplines in supporting the creation of inclusive, diverse curriculum and supporting authentic teaching and learning environments for students. This paper has provided a brief overview of this topic, the relationship to a constructivist lens for teaching and learning and supporting a shift in educational focus to a *learning paradigm* as put forth by Barr and Tagg (1995) over two decades ago. The rapidly evolving and shifting contexts of education today provide an interesting forum to engage in new, bold partnerships to continue to drive quality education in the 21st century. A research agenda that more fully examines this concept in terms of efficacy and sustainability over time would be of value.

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APPENDIX A

Preliminary List of Supporting Literature for Learning and Teaching Strategies to Foster Critical Thinking, Including Participatory Collaboration

A Preliminary List of Supporting Literature
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