

Collaborative Learning, Bringing the Community into the Classroom

“A Speaker-Leadership Series”

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INTRODUCTION

Today’s students in higher education learn through mass media, i.e.: Twitter, Facebook, computers, the internet, YouTube, AIM, E-Mail, smart phones, and texting all within a high tech environment. Exposing students to this engaging environment will only help maximize their overall learning.

Teaching by lecturing as a sole delivery method is not the most effective way to engage most students in learning. Students today come from a different cultureⁱ. Students learn differently because they are from different ethnic backgrounds and cultures that are diverse. Today’s society is global. Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT) student body is global “including AALANA (African-Latino-Native American), women in technology, deaf and hard of hearing and international students.”ⁱⁱ

The college student today is from a different population than fifty years ago. Having a diverse population of students in higher education means that faculty should provide instruction in multiple ways to reach multiple intelligences. Some of the examples of the different teaching styles faculty may incorporate are visual-audio methods of learning.

A teacher must understand how a student processes information. If a student is bored using long standing “status quo” methods such as rote and lecture teaching methods then - the student will not retain the information.

BACKGROUND

How do students learn today compared to fifty years ago? Educators are taking a closer look at how students learn in the college classroom. One of the criteria that an educator must consider is how do you measure success? “Where is the beef in the college classroom?” How does Generation X - “the twenty something,”ⁱⁱⁱ and the “Y” Generation,^{iv} learn?

In other words, did those instructors teach the student to address learning as a critical thinking tool? Is the delivery of the subject matter solution oriented with an approach to solving problems? Was the classroom experience rewarding? Did these teaching methods approach learning with an eye on the impact of ethnic diversity and different learning styles? ^v

Some theories and frameworks in academe have focused on approaches to learning that promote social constructivism among students that look at the social transformation of the course matter. Teaching students as one group vs. recognizing individual learning styles fails to view the theories surrounding multiple intelligences (Gardner 1983) and learning styles (Kolb 1981). Admittedly, some of these theories are geared towards traditionally disadvantaged groups however they are applicable to any student learning in college. ^{vi}

The term social constructivist approach means that different teaching methods are blended with traditional teaching methods. The days of lecture halls are not over! A social constructivist approach applies learning approaches such as collaborative learning, problem –based learning and peer learning groups in the classroom to help students learn. Studies have shown that students who have innovative learning approaches have more meaningful learning experiences. ^{vii}

COLLABORATIVE LEARNING

Why is collaborative learning important? As an educator you must teach your students about how to engage in critical thinking. Critical thinking in the sciences or any other discipline is to improve the thinking skills of students and thus better prepare them to succeed in the world. ^{viii} College is not just academic growth, but it is also emotional growth.

The connection between collaborative learning and critical thinking is an important connection. The connection between the community and higher education ensures that students make the leap from the textbook to the reality of everyday life within their discipline. We [as educators] often fail to teach students how to think effectively about this subject matter, that is, how to properly understand and evaluate it. This second ability is termed critical thinking. ^{ix}

“True critical thinking is higher-order thinking, enabling a person to, for example, responsibly judge between political candidates, serve on a murder trial jury, evaluate society's need for nuclear power plants, and assess the consequences of global warming. Critical thinking enables an individual to be a responsible citizen who contributes to society, and not be merely a consumer of society's distractions.” ^x

Rote learning (routine or repetition, or unthinkingly) was the method of learning for many baby boomers and still a method used by many educators today. In some disciplines such as math the rote method is the only method to teach that topic. ^{xi}

It's important for today's students to have a sense of community outside the classroom. The future of America; our financial and global responsibilities are contingent on or students thinking outside of the *box*.

It is very hard to measure how a student learns inside the classroom. “As anyone who’s ever snoozed through a giant freshman psychology 101 lecture knows - sitting in a classroom doesn’t equal learning; knowledge doesn’t come by osmosis.”^{xii}

What is collaborative learning? Collaborative learning is:

- a. *Blackboards and overheads;*
- b. *Videotaped lectures;*
- c. **Hosting an outside speaker;**
- d. **Groups of four or five-teams in classrooms;**
- e. **Co-teaching;**
- f. **Pressing the computer and media into the service of teaching.**^{xiii}

More specifically, I used guest speakers in my Juvenile Justice^{xiv} class to enhance collaborative teaching and to bring the community into the classroom. I engaged professionals from various disciplines including the criminal justice field. Some of the demographics of my student population for my class consisted of criminal justice students who took the class as a required course and students from other disciplines who took it as an elective.

There were approximately 27 students in my class. The students that were enrolled in the class included freshman, seniors, African Americans, hearing impaired, Caucasians, men, women as well as a students from Texas, Las Vegas and obviously from Upstate New York!

The speakers would typically come from 7pm-8pm once a week. I taught a four hour evening class one day a week. The following list shows the types of speakers that presented to the engaged students: Rochester Teen Court, A Children for the Attorney(formally called a Law Guardian), a Monroe County juvenile probation officer, Pathways to Peace - Aftercare Services-Office of Children and Family Services, and the I’m Ready Program – a Rochester City School District alternative learning center.

An informal survey taken of the 27 students in my Juvenile Justice class at RIT showed that approximately 95% of the students said “that the Speaker-Leadership Series was the best part of the course.”

According to Fryer in his article “Bringing Culture into the Classroom”,^{xv} he corroborated the **benefits of a speaker in the classroom**. He claims that “Inviting these speakers allows for a truer voicing of cultural values that does not solely rely on textbook and teacher interpretations.” In addition, all participants have the opportunity to learn how cultural values are affected by factors such as religion, nationality, socio-economic status, and personality. Thus he goes on to support his theory by explaining that students can have enriched classroom discussions and foster international contacts among the classroom, and the community by listening to different speakers.

Fryer supports my theory that bringing speakers into a classroom creates excitement and stimulation in any classroom. Speakers who share their professional experiences with the students were a major benefit for not only RIT but for the entire local community.

The leadership/speaker series was validated when I asked for a show of hands on how many students had volunteered at any organizations in Rochester, New York (Rochester); or surrounding counties (independent of their co-op/ internship). Very few students responded that they had ventured into the city of Rochester. Many students participated in internships in the Upstate New York area; however, few of them had internship opportunities in the city of Rochester. This validates the need to bring the community into the classroom.

Of course, traditional teaching will always be there. Without incorporating new media like You Tube to enhance delivering the subject matter, students won't be able to maximize their learning experience. Using creative teaching methods is vital to ensuring that students are provided with exceptional opportunities of receiving information that is blended and diverse. This will assist students with the much needed critical thinking skills that our country is in high pursuit of today.

Each Summer Brown faculty from Brown University are invited to talk about important issues that are occurring in our world today^{xvi}. RIT in its symposium with speakers regarding the Attica Riots encouraged intellectual discussion and debate (Spring-2010-Criminal Justice Department). At the very least these types of speaker series even on a larger scale promote critical thinking and debate. These are just a few examples of how collaborating with the local community (businesses, organizations and agencies) enhances education.

CONCLUSION

Collaborative learning is important because it promotes discussion, ethnic diversity, and different styles of teaching. Again, the benefits for the student and the teacher are that leaders from the field enter the classroom. The delivery of the message is important. The students make short term connections to the speakers through learning about different careers, agencies, and community projects; in real time - regarding real life events occurring in their community.

In short, collaborative learning, bridges the gap between the classrooms and the real world. The rewards and educational value from linking collaborative learning to traditional teaching pedagogies has great rewards and educational value.

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