

## Session 7

# Learning From Others: Learning in a Social Context

**Teachers and Students  
Must Develop Many Skills to Form a Learning Community**

William J. Smith  
June 20, 2016

### **Response File: wjs\_session7-social-context\_20June-2016**

Business organizations are rapidly embracing interactive work places that facilitate the creation of learning communities within which peers help one another build the knowledge and the skills necessary to improve the delivery of existing products and services and to develop new ones. As Darling-Hammond *et al.* (2003, pg. 132) point out in this session, there are also many benefits for schools that create interactive classrooms that facilitate social learning. I intend to create an interactive learning community that includes not only the students in my classroom, but also their parents or guardians and community members.

### **Benefits**

The benefits of learning communities include significantly better student learning than those in competitive or individualistic situations. Students' reasoning is more sound, they generate more and better ideas and solutions, they transfer more information and processes from one situation to another, and they perform better on traditional tests. (Johnson and Johnson, 1999) I and others have found a cooperative learning environment motivating as well Darling-Hammond *et al.* (2003, pp. 132). I have found cooperative learning especially effective for complex long duration tasks that are too complex for competitions based on short term (month or less) goals or for individuals.

## Roles

As for many organizations, interactive workplaces, such as a classroom, call on all participants, students and teachers alike, to perform many roles. To create the interactive classroom teachers plan carefully, lead in designing tasks, develop resources and establish the classroom culture and norms for interactions. Within the interactive classroom they created, teachers act as expert, model, guide and facilitator of social interactions between students and between students and teachers. (Darling-Hammond *et al.*, 2003, pg. 131) Students play several roles as well in an interactive classroom to create a learning community. In such a classroom students listen, communicate, delegate responsibility, and attend to each member. (Oakes and Lipton, 1999 pp. 215-216)

## Questioning

Questioning is one of the most important communication skills for members of a creative learning community. A well-timed question from a teacher or peer,

can determine when and what a student is ready to learn and can provide information about the developmental level of each student in a particular domain. Questions can also serve to extend students' thinking further and provide opportunities for them to articulate and reflect on their thoughts. Questions can serve as "scaffolds" by guiding the student through a logical thinking process or by prompting the learner to think about a problem in a new way. (Darling-Hammond *et al.*, 2003, pg. 129)

## Group Work

Like questioning, group work facilitates the development and maintenance of a learning community. I agree with Darling-Hammond *et al.* (2003, pg. 133) that "A classroom climate of trust, where students have opportunities to share their views without fear of being wrong, is essential to these student-to-student interactions.

Based on my observation of several science group work tasks I also agree with Darling-Hammond (2003, pg. 132) that such tasks allow, and often require, different students to make different contributions. Many science activities are multiple ability tasks such as observing, manipulating materials, recording data, hypothesizing, and writing reports. To be completely successful, the group must identify and highlight the strengths of all its members, which can increase the participation rate of low status

students and interest, challenge, and reward all students. Both formative assessments and the teacher's knowledge of the strengths and weaknesses of members help ensure that group work results in community and individual learning.

Once groups form, their

work is carried out through a division of labor and through repeated cycles of work—students first research a topic, in order to share their expertise with their classmates, and finally perform a consequential task requiring that all students have mastered the content generated by each group (Brown & Campione, 1996a). Each of these activities—conducting group research, sharing, and performing a consequential task—relies on the interactions and collaboration of the students and their teacher. With each cycle of work, students have multiple opportunities to learn from one another through these interactions. (Darling-Hammond *et al.* 2003, pg. 130 )

### *Reciprocal Teaching*

The ultimate goal of reciprocal teaching is to have students teach other. When students teach other, they work independently, often in groups. This independent work frees time teacher time for instruction tailored to special needs students. Most classrooms will have special needs students who either speak English as a second language, have mental or physical handicaps or have exceptional skills.

Reciprocal Teaching, often applied to learning reading comprehension, was originally designed with seventh grade students. Paola Pilonieta and Adriana L. Medina have verified that an adaptation of this strategy works to teach reading comprehension to first graders in a 24 week program. They refer to their adapted reciprocal teaching strategy as RTPG or Reciprocal Teaching for the Primary Grades. (Piloneta and Medina undated, Piloneta and Medina 2009)

The social interactions and communications among teachers and students promoted by Reciprocal Teaching is a model that I plan to use extensively in my own classroom.

## References

1. Darling-Hammond *et al.* 2003. *The Learning Classroom: Theory Into Practice*. Detroit: Annenberg Media.
2. D.W. Johnson and R.T. Johnson 1999. Cooperative learning and basic elements of cooperative learning (Chapters 2 and 5). In *Learning together and alone: Cooperative, competitive, and individualistic learning* (pp. 13-47 and 69-89). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
3. J. Oakes and M. Lipton 1999. *Teaching to change the world*. Boston: McGraw-Hill College, pp. 215-216.
4. A.L. Brown and J.C. Campiones 1996. Psychological learning theory and the design of innovative environments: On procedures, principles, and systems. In L. Schauble & R. Glaser (Eds.), *Contributions of instructional innovation to understanding learning* (pp. 289-325). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
5. Paola Pilonieta and Adriana L. Medina undated. [Reciprocal Teaching for the Primary Grades: "We Can Do It, Too."](#) Washington, D.C.: Reading Rockets, a multi-media service produced by WETA Public Television Station.
6. P. Pilonieta and A.L. Medina 2009. Reciprocal Teaching for the Primary Grades: "We Can Do It, Too!" *The Reading Teacher*, 63(2): 120-129. October.