

Skills and strategies to support collaborative learning

Although a great deal can be learnt by an individual working on their own there is abundant evidence that learning is an essentially social relationship – the long history of teachers, tutors, facilitators, mentors and coaches bears abundant witness to the importance of relationships in learning. Equally the importance of parents and grandparents and peer support is a demonstrably significant component of successful learning. There is clear evidence from comparative anatomical studies that in the higher apes brain size is directly correlated with the quality of social interaction. Learning requires interaction.

However, it is not enough just to have a teacher or equivalent, the learning relationship needs to be a positive one in terms of the quality and integrity of all learning situations. It is also important to stress that the quality of relationships is not just a matter of teacher/learner it is equally importantly to do with learner/learner and teacher/teacher relationships. Perhaps the best way of capturing the essence of the link between relationships and learning is to cite Day and his colleagues:

Some recent studies show that trust remains a powerful and strong predictor of student achievement even after the effects of student background, prior achievement, race, and gender have been taken into account. Therefore, school leaders need to pay careful attention to the trust they engender in teachers, students, and parents if they wish to improve organizational performance still further. (Day et al 2009:244)

Trust is the essential prerequisite for any collaborative human activity from the most intimate relationships to the deepest friendships to professional relationships to working in teams to living in community trust is the essential ingredient.

For learning to take place there seems to be a need for challenge as well as trust and empathy as critical elements but also sensitivity, responsiveness and respect as well as the core skills of listening and attending. These aspects are expressed in two particular areas. Firstly, the relationship between teacher and learner and secondly the emotional climate of the school. The relationship between learner and teacher is best understood with reference to Vygotsky's

concept of the zone of proximal development which describes the gap between what the learner working alone can achieve and what can be achieved with the support of a skilled helper, facilitator, mentor or teacher. The quality and integrity of the learning relationship has enormous potential to optimise the learner's potential and to significantly enhance their progress.

The emotional climate of the school might be best understood in terms of the emotional literacy of the school as a community i.e. the behaviours, strategies and norms that inform relationships and the policies and resources that are devoted to optimising positive relationships. There are numerous formulations of the possible components of a model of emotional literacy – a generic framework might include the following elements:

- Recognising emotions in self and others and developing strategies to manage those emotions
- Being aware of personal strengths and areas for development
- Being empathic and sensitive to others articulating concern
- Being sensitive to differences and respecting and valuing alternative perspectives
- Listening and responding appropriately “Yes and...” not “Yes but...”
- Analysing problems and developing effective responses
- Engaging with others and building positive relationships
- Summarising and synthesising, building consensus
- Cooperating, negotiating, and managing conflict using team based approaches
- Help-seeking and help-giving
- Monitoring and reviewing task and processes

These skills and behaviours are relevant and available for all members of the school community from five (and younger) to 50 (and older). They are essential to effective learning and managing and leading and being together in community. In essence the skills for learning are the skills for living and working and need to be embedded in every dimensions of the school's life.

Emotional literacy involves factors such as people understanding their own and others' emotional states ; learning to manage their emotions and empathise with others. It also includes the recognition that emotional literacy is both an individual development and a collective activity and is both about self-development and the building of community so that one's own sense of emotional well-being grows along with that of others . . . (Matthews 2012:253)

If one of the functions of schools is to prepare young people for a life in relationships, living in a community and for employment then it must be recognised that life involves collaborative working and learning. Success in relationships and as a member of any type of community requires emotional literacy. Most jobs involve collaborative problem solving; most workers, right across the employment spectrum, cooperate to complete tasks, meet deadlines and find effective solutions to a diverse range of issues. Learning requires multiple alternative social relationships; in schools these need to include relationships with other learners. The school's structures and relationships need to optimise the opportunities for problem based collaborative working if it is to be genuinely preparing people for lives other than teaching. In practical terms this means that:

- Schools recognise that personal relationships are primarily a moral issue at the heart of the school's values and purpose.
- The school works towards building a high trust culture as the essential precursor to improvement and learning.
- Leadership in the school is focused on developing an emotionally literate community largely through modelling and dialogue.
- Training is provided to ensure consistent usage of the interpersonal skills necessary to secure effective learning notably listening and empathy.
- There is a deeply embedded culture of review and reflection (essentially 'What went well?') that permeates learning activities, meetings and all social interactions.