



How Collaboration Leads Learning

There is currently much interest in the social and cultural contexts of learning. As cultural research is relatively new to educational settings, the implications of social processes such as collaboration are only just beginning to be explored.

Traditional views of children's learning and development have been dominated by theories of developmental psychology, derived from Piaget's stage theory, which focuses on classifying the individual child in terms of age and stage of development. This led to much concern about children reaching developmental milestones on time, which in turn led to cognitive testing in efforts to determine if children were 'on time' (Rogoff, 2003).

The focus on testing and classifying young children failed to analyse the complex cultural nature of learning, and the powerful role collaboration plays in the learning process. Over 60 years ago, Vygotsky argued for developmental theorists to explore child development in terms of social and cultural conditions. However, dominant developmental theories prevailed and sociocultural contexts of learning and development remain largely ignored.

The assessment of children's learning and thinking through standardised testing does not reflect the complex reality of children's lives. It tells us little about children's theories, ideas or abilities (Dalberg, Moss and Pence, 1999). Indeed, the very way we work with young children often leaves children with few opportunities to reveal their



that we read the world through sight, sound, smell, touch and taste, and that these senses function as a resource through which experience is transformed into cultural symbols, or forms of representation; such as music, dance, art, drama, poetry, science, maths, technology and language. Vygotsky argues that children learn to use these cultural symbols during the collaborative processes of interacting with more skilled partners, such as peers or adults.

Vygotsky's theory is known as sociocultural theory and identifies a 'zone of proximal development' where children's interactions with more knowledgeable others leads learning. The individual child's development is therefore fostered through social and cultural activities (Rogoff, 2003).

In visits to early childhood classrooms (grades one, two and three) I have often observed learning environments where children's primary interactions have been with the teacher, and opportunities for children to collaborate, share ideas and build on each other's understanding are special occasions. These occasions may be 'group

interests, ideas and abilities to either ourselves as educators and carers, to peers or the general community.

Elliot Eisner (1994) notes

'times' or short collaborative projects set by the teacher.

Barbara Rogoff (2003) argues for a move away from the relationship between teacher and students where the adult role is to 'fill' students with knowledge. Rather she advocates for classrooms to become places where adults and children engage in collaborative integrated projects and jointly construct knowledge.

So what might an integrated project look like? And if we don't use standardised testing how do we assess children's learning?

Susan Wright (2003) describes an integrated approach as one where children can depict and describe ideas in multiple ways and from different perspectives, both collaboratively and individually. For example, children could represent their ideas through drawing, clay work, music, dancing, dramatisation or storytelling.

The following drawings demonstrate a collaborative integrated project that was undertaken by students from grades one, two, and three. The project, *Learning to see: Seedpod exploration, an integrated collaborative experience*, was an exercise in seeing with the senses: sight, sound, smell and touch. During this project the children explored seedpods and developed their own theories about seedpods based on their individual and collaborative investigations of the seedpods.

I asked the children what they knew about seedpods. We shared our theories about seedpods. I showed

the children a variety of pods. We discussed them and looked at them very closely. I held up a seedpod and asked the children to look at it very carefully, to close their eyes and draw it in the air with a finger.



I asked the children to make the shape of the seedpod with their bodies.



Next the children were asked to choose a partner and take a seedpod. Children explored the pod very carefully with all their senses and discussed the pod with each other. What does it smell like? Describe its texture? What sound does it make when you tap on it? Tell each other a story about the seedpod.



Still with a partner, I then asked the children to make the shape of the seedpod with their bodies. Here these children problem-solved until they were satisfied with their representation of a star anise. Much assessing and self-assessing occurred, as the partners negotiated through taking on suggestions and trying out many possibilities.



Here the children acted out the following seedpod drama. 'Pretend you are a seedpod', I said, 'that has fallen from a rainforest tree. The pod bursts open and the seeds fall out into a flowing stream. The stream carries the seed swirling away. The seed lands on a bank and starts to sprout into a plant'.



Notice how some children spontaneously formed small groups of two or three and acted out the drama as a unit responding to each other in a dance. Other children performed individually but were aware of their peers' movements

and took up some of these movements in their own interpretation.



'Take a magnifying glass', I then told the children, 'and look at the textures and patterns of the seedpod. Talk about what you can see with each other'. Here the children formed natural small groups and learning took place as individuals compared theories and challenged each other's theories. Individual children shared thoughts and ideas - which led to group learning.

After the children had explored the seedpods with all their senses and represented their understandings about seedpods through discussion, storytelling and drama, I asked the children to choose some seedpods to draw.

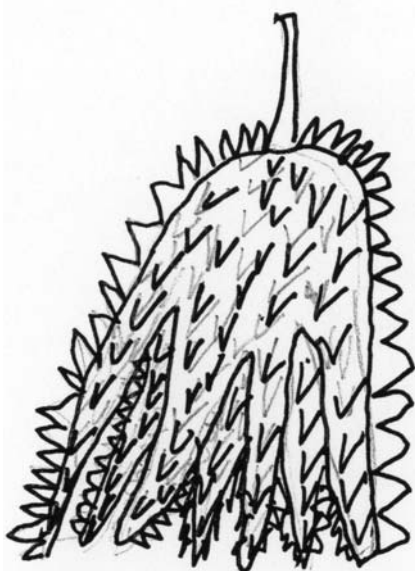




Documenting children's learning

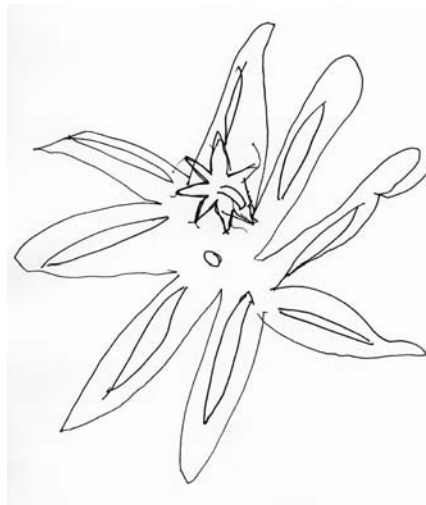
Instead of assessing individual development and maturation, we should offer opportunities for children to reveal their ideas, interests, abilities and meanings. The early childhood institutions of Reggio Emilia in Italy have inspired documentation of children's learning. Here the documentation of children's learning through video recordings, photographic images, audio recordings, children's work and written notes makes children's learning visible and enables the educator to reflect critically on their own practice.

Documentation is also seen as an important vehicle from which early childhood educators can make their claims about the importance of early childhood education legitimate and public (Dahlberg, Moss and Pence, 1999).



Through these drawings of seedpods, we can see how learning occurs as children actively take part

in social processes with peers and teachers. Children have the opportunity to share their own theories with each other and the teacher, and actively build upon this knowledge as they explore the seedpods with all their senses. Children express their understanding through their bodies and minds using various forms of representation including language, drawing, drama and storytelling.



In schools, children and staff are all part of learning communities. Too often we see the learning process as one where the teacher does the teaching and the children do the learning. At the core of collaborative learning is the notion that children are active constructors of knowledge and that learning occurs between and within all members of the group.

Thank you to the students and teachers of Fairholme College, Toowoomba.

Kari Winer

Lecturer
Department of Early Childhood
University of Southern Queensland
In collaboration with Lyn Merry and Karen Cottle, Fairholme Junior School, Toowoomba.

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