

Collaboration 1: Collaboration is the key influence in the quality of teaching January 03, 2012

One of seven posts about collaboration and why it nearly always fails to deliver results, inspired by Morten T Hansen's [Collaboration](#).

The quality of the teacher is [the number one factor in the improvement of an education system](#), collaboration is the key factor in improving the quality of that teacher.

Collaboration helps increase academic success, yet most collaboration doesn't work. The Microsoft-supported [ITL Research](#) revealed in a large-scale study:

"Innovative teaching happens more in environments where teachers collaborate. In schools where teachers report more frequent collaboration with one another on teaching practices, innovative teaching scores tend to be higher... Teachers told us that collaboration can be an important mechanism for sharing teaching practices and for mutual support toward improving them."

Anecdotally, this has also been [the prime driver](#) in the continued growth and success of the [TeachMeet](#) movement since 2006, and [EdCamps](#) since then, providing environments in which teachers, for whatever reason, feel comfortable sharing. We'll explore over this series of posts what makes collaboration work sometimes, and fail others.

In education, the ITL Research mentioned earlier offers some light as to how further barriers might be approached.

*"If innovative teaching is not yet commonplace, under what climates and conditions does it flourish? For a host of reasons, ecosystems (be they educational or biological) have strikingly different features in different places. Accordingly, we might expect different approaches and conditions to be driving factors in the different parts of the world represented in this research. **We report here on factors that emerge as salient across countries, drawing from both survey data and qualitative reports.***

Collaboration relies on a supportive culture, alignment of incentives, and times built into teachers' schedules during which collaboration can take place."

And when John Hattie undertook his study of 800 reviews he found that the most effective teaching practices included a reliance on "the influence of peers, feedback, transparent learning intentions and success criteria... using various strategies, attending to both surface and deep knowing:

- Reciprocal teaching (teachers enabling students to learn and use self-learning)
- Feedback (specific response to student work)
- Teaching students self- verbalization or self/questioning
- Meta-cognition strategies (awareness Problem-solving and knowledge of one's teaching

In short - the most effective teaching requires the most effective collaboration. The challenge, I believe, is that in education, as in the world of business, many or most collaborations are not effective.

Morten T. Hansen spent years trying to work out why leaders sabotage themselves by promoting more collaboration in their organisation:

"In their eagerness to get people to tear down silos and work in cross-unit teams, leaders often forget that the goal of collaboration is not collaboration in itself, but results. Leaders need to think differently, focusing on what Hansen calls disciplined collaboration."

In [Collaboration](#) he examines companies like Hewlett Packard, Proctor & Gamble, Apple and BP to find out how the best teams know when to collaborate, and when not to.

In education, the sign of a bad collaboration might be summed up flippantly with the line: "Oh no, not another wiki..." The web is littered with "collaborations" that may have made the teachers involved feel fluffy and warm, but which added little to the results of the learning process.

Morten T Hansen outlines from his decade of research six key reasons for most collaboration's failure, and over the next six blog posts, we'll explore each one in turn.

<http://edu.blogs.com/edublogs/2012/01/collaboration-2-collaborating-in-hostile-territory.html>

Collaboration 2: Collaborating in hostile territory

January 03, 2012



Pic from [Andrew Becraft](#)

Collaborating in hostile territory

Sony was a company that took pride in its decentralised specialist divisions, divisions whose pride led to them competing against each other. When five divisions were asked to collaborate to create a new music behemoth, [Sony Connect](#), the result was disastrous.

The personal computer division based in Tokyo, the portable audio team behind the Walkman, the flash memory player team, Sony Music in the US and Sony Music back in Japan just couldn't work together, so strong was their competition. The PC and Walkman groups released their own competing portable music players, and the Music and other electronics divisions of the company released three competing music download portals. The US group wanted to use flash memory and the MP3 format. The Japan group wanted to use minidisc and Sony's proprietary ATRAC format for music downloads. By May 2004, a very disconnected Sony Connect finally launched and was taken apart by the media and users.

In the meantime, Apple innovated its narrow, well thought-through line of MP3 player products with no competition worth the name. Apple's divisions had, through Steve Jobs and a culture of unity, collaborated on one perfect player. Sony's interior competition had decimated any chance of creating one dream competitive product.

Competitive units (*within* an institution) cannot collaborate.

*(I've added this note after a great comment, below: competition **within** an institution breaks collaboration. But competition and collaboration are not mutually exclusive. If a leader can unite an organisation in collaboration and turn competitiveness to the **outside**, then the collaboration will work very well - think: football teams, corporations, or a country of school districts [uniting to realise the benefits of scale](#) that come from a nationwide online learning community, rather than letting commercial organisations pick up the financial benefits by uniting to pick off 32 Local Authorities at once.)*

So, then, what does this mean for education? In a school there are many competitive units: individual teachers have, traditionally, been the kings or queens of their manor, the closed-door profession meaning that what happens in their classroom, good or bad, is their responsibility. The result can be a competitive one - "my kids", "my class", "my results". Where teachers are recompensed on performance in any way, even in the form of feedback from superiors, this heightens the sense of competitiveness, making collaboration between teachers in a school impossible. The ingredients of competition - closed doors, one-teacher-one-class, rewards and praise for good performance - may have to be dismantled first, before collaboration can be encouraged.

Between schools within a district, a similar competitive nature exists, if not more so, as schools vie for finite resources from one source - the district. Therefore, for a district to enable collaboration between schools yet more ingredients need removed or altered: funding has to be allotted strictly on a per-pupil basis, not on projects or bids, for example.

Update: Peter Hirst points out further examples of school systems removing competition to enable collaboration, notably in Finland:

Thought I'd [link you to an article that intrigued me...](#) The main basis is that by removing competition in Finnish schools collaboration thrives and they succeed - there's no private schools, no school league tables, no performance pay and no standardised tests...

It is no surprise, therefore, that international collaborations of the kind that [eTwinning](#) encourages might work better for teachers and schools than collaborating closer to home, but the question that now remains, is collaborating for what? If there's nothing to be lost through competition, there is also, perhaps, a perception that there is nothing to be gained. Cue: collaboration for collaboration's sake.

<http://edu.blogs.com/edublogs/2012/01/collaboration-3-overcollaboration.html>

Collaboration 3: Overcollaboration

January 04, 2012



Photo from [B Prosser](#)

Overcollaboration

BP fell into the trap of having the emergence of far more networks and subgroups than were strictly necessary to get a result. There was a period where there was “always a good reason for meeting”.

Through social media, particularly in education, it can feel that there are just too many places to go, [too many hashtags to follow](#), too many LinkedIn Groups and Nings to join in order to get some strong, actionable learning out of them.

The result of this over-collaboration can often be disastrous for the student publishing their work or seeking someone to collaborate with - "it's just another student blog", "it's just another wiki of debatable quality" might be the thoughts running through the minds of teachers and students elsewhere when the initial callout for peer support and comments goes out.

Even if comments are made, are they genuinely helpful in the way that structured, framed formative assessment can be within the walls of a classroom, or are they perfunctory "well done", a digital kiss on the cheek before moving onto the next request?



Pic of the deadly Baguio Airport by [Storm Crypt](#)

Overshooting the potential value

Sony again made a collaboration slip-up when they went to collaborate with Columbia Pictures in 1989, the idea being that filmmaking and film delivery could be brought together in interesting ways. The problem arises when the films are no good, and any synergy is rendered useless: "Synergy: big wind, loud thunder, no rain." (as cited in [Deals from Hell](#)).

When I'm working with startups in a [Business Model Generation workshop](#), inspired by [the book of the same name](#), one of the challenges for them is seeing between who is a potential paying customer and who is a worthwhile partner. The key in partnership is in the name: it should be considered a lifetime commitment, and a partner can never be converted into a client at a later date. Clients are what businesses need, in order to gain results.

In the creative industries, there is yet further questioning of the value of collaboration. The best films (and definitely the easiest filmsets to work on) have *one* director who just directs. He or she tells people what it is *they* want. There might be some room for negotiation, or for a "why don't we try it this way", but by and large the director knows what they want and they don't so much collaborate during the shoot as get the thing done before sundown.

I wish it was as easy as that, though. Collaboration is often better than a lone genius going about their *art*. Gordon Torr spends an entertaining 288 pages struggling between creative examples of where the lone genius has won the day, and creative teams where synergy was the only way to success in [Managing Creative People](#). He never does reach a conclusion, although he does point out that job titles and hierarchy are a key killer of creative potential, something that relates to how [collaboration's costs can oft be misunderstood](#) (my next post)...

In an education context, to gain results in the literal or pure learning sense, we need to know who and what resources constitute 'clients', from whom we'll get stuff to enrich our minds, and who we want to view as collaborative partners because the sum of those parts will be greater than the individuals themselves. It's not a given that two people collaborating will offer this secret sauce, so we have to think very carefully about with whom we collaborate, what we get out of it, what they get out of it and the potential for both parties to get something new out of the partnership and collaboration.

Never again should the words "get into some groups" or "partner up" be uttered without some thought by the students, and by their teacher, about who is going to offer whom a genuinely additive partnership for a collaboration.

Collaboration 5: Underestimating the costs

January 05, 2012



Picture by epSos.de

Underestimating the costs

There are environments where people are under the impression that others are just out for their own gain. There is a distrust of “helping the other side”.

Schools might find this in several forms: parents who don't want their children to be in mixed ability classes, where students can help improve each other's capacities; teachers who don't want to share their resources, in case it ends up becoming an ever descending spiral to the lowest quality denominator in their department or school; students who don't want to share their ideas for a project, lest they "give away their ideas" and let another student gain just as good or better a grade.

Generally, the costs of collaboration are always there, subconsciously or explicitly. The leader's job is working out how much those costs represent for the actors in a potential collaboration, how much the collaboration is likely to bring to them and see whether there is a mental profit leftover for each collaborator. If not, then the costs may be too great, the perception being that collaboration will only go to "help the other side" (and somehow take away from me).

<http://edu.blogs.com/edublogs/2012/01/collaboration-6-misdiagnosing-the-problem.html>

Collaboration 6: Misdiagnosing the problem

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Pic from [Mark](#)

Misdiagnosing the problem

How many schools do we know where leaders want to share good practice between staff but don't know where it is, when the real problem is that people are unwilling to share their good bits of practice?

National resource- and idea-sharing platforms, 'owned' by a Government or commercial organisation, have consistently [failed](#) to bring the majority of educators to their doors as the problem they have identified - people don't have anywhere to share - is a misdiagnosis.

The problem, for large numbers of educators, is that they are unwilling to share no matter who, what or where the platform is.

Once you know that this is the problem, one can begin to work out with those people what kinds of environment might encourage them to change their behaviour.

<http://edu.blogs.com/edublogs/2012/01/collaboration-7-implementing-the-wrong-solution.html>

Collaboration 7: Implementing the Wrong Solution

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Picture from [Noel C](#)

Implementing the Wrong Solution

Following on from misdiagnoses, is finding the wrong solution. Learning Management Systems, [as described earlier](#), were the wrong solution to the wrong problem. IT managers were convinced that some IT, instead of some psychology, would help solve the problem of teachers not sharing their work and ideas.

The same's true of those trying to 'protect' young people by not allowing them or encouraging them to post to the open world wide web: the problem is not so much internet predators as the lack of media literacy skills to not put oneself at risk online. The right solution here is not internet filtering or setting school blog platform defaults to 'private', but to set school blog defaults to 'public' and initiate a superb media literacy programme for every student, parent and teacher.

Morten T Hansen's answer is that we need disciplined collaboration, where leaders i) evaluate what opportunities there are for collaboration (where an upside will be created), ii) spot the barriers to collaboration (not-invented-here, unwillingness to help and preference to hoard one's ideas, inability to seek out ideas, and an unwillingness to collaborate with people we don't know very well).