LEARNING TO COLLABORATE: ANALYZING SPECIFICITY OF MANAGING COLLABORATIVE LEARNING IN HIGHER INSTITUTIONS OF LEARNING – A LITERATURE REVIEW

FRED KASIRYE

Doctoral Candidate in Management, Caucasus University, Georgia

ABSTRACT: The space in which higher education institutions thrive is fast changing, and the demands and expectations from society are rapidly increasing (Hazelkorn, 2015). A wide thirst for 21st-century skills, the connection between research and development, the need for innovation, knowledge transfer, and stakeholder networks have raised the interest in collaborative learning within HEIs. This is therefore propagating a desire to do more with less as public spending on the education sector continues to dip.

To this end, collaborative learning or otherwise referred to as cooperative learning, becomes a low-hanging fruit to explore in the circumstances satisfying both the needs of the institution (Knowledge generation) and of those that embrace it (innovators, employers, governments, etc.) to obtain the benefits of the valued life-transforming education. Through this study, three objectives, which include: – ascertaining the ability of lecturers to manage collaborative learning environments, establishing the need for institutional frameworks for collaborative learning management, and ascertaining the effectiveness of curriculum design and management in ensuring collaborative learning, are investigated. Literature on these aspects is elaborately reviewed to answer the research question.

The study makes a case for the need to build the capacity of lecturers to enable collaboration among learners. It also identifies a need for institutionalised practices to embed a collaborative learning atmosphere as well as an integrated curriculum design approach to make learning content more exploratory and time relevant.

INTRODUCTION

Collaborative learning in higher learning institutions is fast attracting the attention of scholars and third parties, including communities, business players, and governments. The motivation ranges from the thirst to develop future-ready players, fast-changing dynamics in all fields of life, as well as the need to improve post-university collaboration through business and community initiatives in a world of diversity. The contribution towards a better tomorrow is partly a role. Universities can play through institutionalising collaborative learning while doing instruction.

The method is seen as a tool to inculcate the much-desired 21st-century skills, including critical thinking, communication, creativity, problem-solving, perseverance, and collaboration. Through University level group work, where students collectively work on assignments, projects, and initiatives and are tasked to make presentations in this direction, these could enable and inculcate collective responsibility and accountability among learners, which inadvertently builds abilities to collaborate for tasks and challenges outside the confines of the University. In addition to this is the connection between research and development, the need for innovation, knowledge transfer, and stakeholder net-

works, which raise the interest in collaborative learning within HEIs.

To this end, this paper seeks to analyse the specificity of managing collaborative learning in higher learning institutions by conducting a literature review. This views the readiness of the lecturer, available institutional frameworks, as well as the structures of laid-out curricula.

Theoretical focus

Four distinctive theories influenced the study. These include: the social interdependence theory, which views a group as a dynamic whole; the cognitive-developmental theory, which underlines the importance of peer interaction in learning; the motivational theory, which addresses goals and rewards in group dynamics; and lastly, the behavioural learning theory that views the relationship between external reinforces and extrinsic rewards.

The inter-relatedness of these theories in developing this education management business decision-making model was pivotal to the success of the research offering viable attachment to the observations made through the study. The choice of multiple theories to focus this study on was largely based on the varied interpretation of collaboration, interests of stakeholders, and motivation factors.

Methodology

The research analysed the specificities of managing collaborative Learning in Higher learning institutions. It used a literature review approach to identify, classify and interpret research on the subject matter. The review was made from a wide range of resources on the topic, both published and not published. Particular reference was made to thematic works explaining the researcher's philosophy and focusing on the keywords. In order to compile the literature, both Ebscohost and Google Scholar were deployed as the primary catalogues. It is after this that comprehension, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation were done to generate findings.

Three objectives were set to ascertain lecturers' ability to manage collaborative learning environments, establish the operational, institutional framework for Collaborative learning management, and ascertain the effectiveness of curriculum design and management in ensuring collaborative learning.

Against these objectives, the following questions were set to guide the study.

R1: *Is professional training relevant for collaborative learning management?*

R2: *Are institutionalised guidelines instrumental in driving the goals of collaborative learning?*

R3: *How can collaboration be reflected in curriculum development?*

Findings and discussion

Understanding the concept of Collaborative learning.

Laal and Ghodhsi (2011) define collaborative learning as an educational approach to teaching and learning that involves learners working together to solve a problem, complete a task or create a product. The term is often used interchangeably with cooperative learning, and the approach is widely considered a panacea to solving the problems of the world in which we live today by creating the right mindset amongst individuals for the common good (Johnson, Johnson, & Roger, 2014). The literature analysis was undertaken in a particular order as per the questions.

R1: *Is professional training relevant for collaborative learning management?*

Unlike lower levels of education across the world, oftentimes, university lecturers dive into their jobs without prior professional training in classroom management but on the merit of their academic performance in the fields of their specialisation. These are, however, at the forefront of the learning journey for their students throughout this level, ushering them into the world of work. As a result, lecturers deploy a multitude of teaching approaches based on their own past experiences (Evans & Kozhevnikova, 2011). While collaborative learning research suggests, it is very effective in preparing learners for the world of work where teamwork is a required skill and performance indicator (Slotte, 2004). Given the level of preparation required, lecturers prefer not to deploy it in their work methods.

Ordinarily, lecturers in the course of doing business and taking on multiple classes tend to take the conservative path characterised by individual workings through tests and examinations. These deprive learn-

ers of the opportunity to do peer interactions when attempting tasks, especially those that require deeper discussion and assessment of the environment in which they survive and have the liberty to interpret it variably and have a scale of unique positions on a common aspect. The situation is not helped when a subjective aspect of a study is assessed by a conservative lecturer who wouldn't tolerate open discussions, perceptions, and appreciation of the matter.

A multiplicity of challenges facing the world today requires diverse approaches with collaborative input. Peck and Tucker (1973) summarised a couple of earlier research on the subject of teaching, suggesting that teachers' attitudes and beliefs towards their learners and other people and the whole idea of learning greatly influenced their approach to teaching. Although later, interest moved to incorporate cognitive aspects to teaching, collaborative learning takes more of all aspects into perspective. Interdependence, individual accountability of both lecturers and students as well as interaction are key aspects to ensure effective learning (Johnson, Johnson, & Roger, 2014).

Therefore, changing times dictate that universities alter their way of teaching to what is considered more constructivist and collaborative (Garrison, 2016). This brings in the student-centred approach, which could as well focus the lecturer on special training for purposes of handling individuals in a class with a personal approach, especially in the current times of the information age (Jumani, Malik, & Akram, 2018). Universities have tended to undertake this role in standardising their teaching approach to position differently in a competitive space. However, going by Sloman's (2006)description of the training, it encompasses the need to get both hardware and software tools to perform workplace duties well. This obligation is much more demanding and extensive than a few tech software classes would provide.

The skillset needs, and the gap created by changing trends is placing compatibility pressure on the older generation of lecturers. Gillies & Boyle (2010) identify a couple of challenges in the way of management of the learning process, which include but is not limited to monitoring students' on-task behaviour, managing group work time, and providing relevant materials, among others. Ruys et al. (2012) cite the low level of attention given to the preparation of learning materials, as well as the grouping of learners without offering them the guidance required to collaborate effectively. Another study done among secondary and primary

teachers exhibited challenges with organising students to enable them to execute collaborative tasks successfully. This, too, points to multiple gaps (Blachford, Kutnick, Baines, & Galton, 2003). It is evident, therefore, that lecturers would require adequate training to register effective delivery and empower learners alike for both the foreseeable and unforeseeable future as a first step in learning to collaborate.

R2: *Are institutionalised guidelines instrumental in driving the goals of collaborative learning?*

Education institutions at various levels tend to institute acceptable and unacceptable standard operating procedures to ease implementation, monitoring, and evaluation. While as observed above, University lecturers tend to have the liberty to choose from an array of methods without specific limitations. The onset of interest in collaborative learning by Institutions of higher learning brings with it a need for restructuring toward the demands of the day, dropping the old-school tendencies for more competitive and dynamic ones that enable the wholesome development of human resources (Pijano, Scott, & Knight, 2014).

This raises the question as to whether education institutions can measure up to the demand for evolving needs of collaboration by instituting mechanisms that will see them serve optimally as expected by their stakeholders. Changes in operations and structure are key to this end to inform the new business models. The present times see greater expansion, new school profiles, wide scope of programs, a mix of student profiles, and uptake in technology advancement, internationalisation, administration, and instruction models, as observed by the sector feasibility study report by Trembley et al. (2012).

Johnson et al. (1990) stress foundational elements upon which structures can be built. These elements include positive interdependence, face-to-face that promotes interaction, individual accountability, interpersonal & small groups, as well as the group processing of the learning experience in which learners are exposed by their lecturers. To this end, a relatively new conceptualisation of education as has been known is embraced, pronouncing the integration of factors such as social interaction and socio-political aspects in the school environment, thus the institutional metacognition education management business model (Labarrere, 2016). This change, however, must have an institutional dimension making them (HEIs) tend towards a

clear structure and norms to inform decision-making in the entire education community (Miranda, 2002).

The HEIs would have to strategically associate themselves with a cognitive process of problematisation, prioritisation, and design of improvement actions which different teams should be able to monitor. Some scholars refer to it as organisational learning (Senge, 1992). When schools view themselves as learning organisations, this helps them manage significant and transcendent changes in their patterns as well as actions for the clientele they serve, according to Gonzalez (2007). These clients have since changed with the times of digital transformation and globalisation, among other factors. Lessons would ultimately involve the entire school as an organisation and not only the individuals but also how the school can adopt close cooperation internally and externally (Bollen, 1997). It is only when we see the process of change from the perspective of shared metacognitive ability, thereby allowing for collective planning, performance, and monitoring, that HEIs will learn how to collaborate and give off the same seamlessly in the way of nature of education expected to create a global citizenry able to collaborate across different aspects of life for a common good.

R3: *How can collaboration be reflected in curriculum development?*

Changing learner needs dictate that curricula at HEIs are revised regularly to reflect the realities of the day and the future, both envisaged and unknown. The curriculum review process is not new to lecturers across the globe as it is often a minimum requirement by relevant Ministries of Education for universities to operate and have courses accredited. The success of curricula that embodies the reorientation of classroom management to collaborative learning rests entirely on the shoulders of the teachers (Huizinga, Handelzalts, Nieveen, & Voogt, 2014) but should be accommodative of learner and prospective employer interests and perspectives. Seeking changes in the direction of policy is easier said than done, and when it comes to teachers, the matter is worsened, as they are often conservative in their ways (Gorsuch, 2000).

Therefore, there is a need to understand that many education initiatives fail due to the lack of change in teachers' beliefs, necessitating that they, too, buy into the proposals, change their style, and fit into the new normal. This is not any different from other organisational change dynamics that require teams to embrace

change together. Why have HEIs not been considered part of organisation frameworks that subscribe to this common organisational change practice? Constant knowledge generation, questioning the status quo, and constant discovery should be normal in the learning space.

Therefore, just like in other entities, teachers require a consistent, intentional, sustained, and focused professional development agenda to bring them up to speed as the current times demand more than knowledge for practice from the traditional teacher (Cochran – Smith & Lyte, 1999). Promoting curriculum change via teachers can be attained while utilising teacher development and stimulating the collaborative design of the curriculum (Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Yoon, 2001). Creating organic think tanks at all times and allowing for scenarios of no answers is a learning process.

When teachers appreciate the reforms, become part of the process, and take the central seat in the entire process as agents of change, this implements an organic process that implements the new curriculum. When completed, these materials reflect the teachers' context and the aims and intentions of the reforms towards a common win-win goal. The teachers will then actively engage in implementing and evaluating the practices, thus offering continuous learning and modification, thus covering gaps between the ideals of collaborative learning and their classroom realities. These open instruction methods eliminate lecturer bias in the knowledge ecosystem allowing for continuous knowledge breeding.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper comes to the following conclusions:

First, to meet the minimum expectations of collaborative learning, lecturers should undergo professional training in this approach if they have to consciously and subconsciously impress the expected outcomes upon the learners.

Secondly, it is observed that for institutions to position favourably in the changing space of education, practices such as collaborative learning need to be institutionalised and standard operating procedures instituted in order for institutions to position favourably in the changing space of education.

Thirdly, the development and execution of curricula need to be done collaboratively, with subject matter

experts taking the lead and cognizant of the interests of all stakeholders, i.e., learners and the wider industry.

Declaration of conflicting interests

I (the author) declare no conflicts of interest concerning this article's research, authorship, and/or publication.

Funding

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