

Collaborative teaching: Advantages and challenges

Teaching and learning in an open space certainly presents a number of challenges that are not faced when teaching in a single cell classroom. It was one of the criticisms of the open-plan spaces in the 1970s (Woolner, 2010). But it also presents a number of advantages too and the case study by York-Barr, Ghore and Sommerness (2007) details them well.

The research, conducted in a Mid-west urban elementary school found that collaborative teaching relationships were productive and rewarding (p. 301) with a substantial increase in student achievement. The study focused on English language learners (ELL) in a diversely populated K-6 school of about 600 students. Prior to the study English language learners attended separate classes taught by different teachers. Against a backdrop of declining performance on statewide tests the school set out to establish a greater level of collaboration among teachers focusing on creating a more coherent educational experience for students.

Significant emphasis was placed on teacher professional development and support with collaborative practice prior to the setting up of the collaborative teaching classes. Teachers timetables were reorganized and new structures created in order to support collaborative planning and instruction. Once set up teams met regularly to discuss ongoing assessment data and differentiated teaching and learning strategies.

In most cases the instructional teams developed in ways that supported not only student but also teacher growth. The teams didn't all work out though; some struggled due to different learning philosophies, content knowledge and the value they placed on collaborative teaching. The perceived benefits though looked like this, and it's worth detailing them in full:

- More flexible and creative use of instructional time that advantaged students;
- Knowing more about all the students and seeing different student strengths given the opportunity to view them in varied learning contexts;
- Greater shared ownership of students and student learning;
- Increased reflection on individual and collective teaching practices;
- More learning from and with colleagues about students and about teaching and learning;
- Increased collective expertise resulting in greater effectiveness with a variety of students;
- Decreased teacher isolation, increased support and feeling valued by colleagues;
- Itinerant teachers experiencing varied collaborative designs and strategies then being able to share those experiences and ideas across classrooms; and
- Having more energy and greater enjoyment from teaching.+(p. 317)

Of course it wasn't all positive and it's important to read the challenges that teachers found too:

- Loss of instructional and decision-making autonomy;
- Decreased flexibility and creativity given a set schedule for when additional instructional personnel would be present in classrooms;
- Increased communication demands given instructional interdependence among teachers;
- Role shifts and confusion about how to share instructional time (e.g., who leads, who follows, how to co-teach) and how to share responsibilities (e.g., assessment, reporting);
- Feelings of insecurity because teaching became public and teachers were expected to work with more diverse students than they had in the past; and
- Differing philosophies, which was the term often used to describe differences between teachers related to orientations or beliefs about instruction and professional practice.+(p. 318)

The findings from this group of teachers, and in particular their lists of challenges and opportunities makes a very useful starting point for schools setting out to explore collaborative teaching situations. These points might well form the start of a number of conversations about how an open learning space with collaborative teaching can be best utilized. How can the opportunities be maximised and the challenges minimized in order to create the best possible learning and teaching environment?

Collaborative teaching: What might it look like?



When we talk collaborative teaching in open learning spaces shared by a number of teachers, I'm not always sure we're talking about the same thing. There are a number of approaches that can be considered as collaborative but there are some substantial differences between them. This is very relevant when looking at open learning spaces and shared teaching areas.

Often I hear comments from teachers who used to work in open-plan units that they still have their own class, occupy their own part of the space, plan work for their own students and rarely engage in working alongside colleagues. Whilst the space offered potential for collaboration it wasn't always harnessed. I acknowledge that this wasn't always the case but it was a big factor in the failure of the open-plan schools.

Collaborative teaching can be defined as two or more people sharing responsibility for educating some or all of the students in a classroom (Villa, Thousand and Nevin, 2008, p. 5). They suggest that it involves the distribution of responsibility among people for planning, instruction and evaluation for a classroom of students (p. 5). What they do not add, is one person teaching, to be followed by another teaching a different subject, or one person teaching while the other ones preparing material at the photocopier!

Collaborative teaching, at times called co-teaching or team teaching, has been around for quite a while in one guise or another. It first gained popularity in the 1950s, then evolved during the 1960s before becoming widespread in the early 1970s, particularly in open-plan primary schools, before enjoying something of a resurgence in the 1980s (Friend & Reising, 1993). Now as we move into modern open learning spaces teachers are once again examining how teaching collaboratively can impact on student learning and outcomes. There is though I believe a resistance towards collaborative practice, at times caused by the legacy of open-plan.

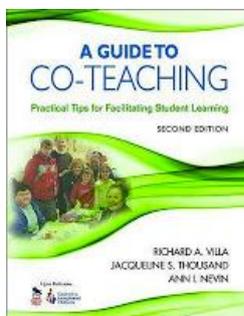
Villa, Thousand & Nevin (2008), and I've included a few of their references here, report four different models of co-teaching, (developed by the National Center for Educational Restructuring and Inclusion, 1995). These are *supportive*, *parallel*, *complementary* and *team teaching*. It's worth exploring the differences between them.

Supportive teaching describes the situation when one teacher takes the lead instructional role and the other moves around the learners to provide support on a one-to-one basis as required. Friend and Reising (1993) refer to this as *one teachers/ one driftsq*

Parallel teaching is when two or more teachers are working with different groups of learners simultaneously in different parts of the classroom, what Friend & Reising (1993) calls *station teachingq*

Complementary teaching is when ~~w~~when co-teachers do something to enhance the instruction provided by the other co-teacher(s). For example, one co-teacher might paraphrase the other's statements or model note-taking skills on a transparency+(Nevin, Thousand, & Villa, 2007).

Team teaching by comparison is when two or more teachers do what teachers do for a class, to plan, teach, assess and take responsibility for all the students in the room, taking an equal share of responsibility, leadership and accountability (Nevin, Thousand, & Villa, 2007).



A guide to co-teaching: Practical tips for facilitating student learning is a very useful read for anyone interested in collaborative teaching models and the authors extensive work is key for anyone interested in further reading. It unpacks the four models extensively with plenty of examples. The authors suggest that no one approach is better than the others and all have their merits. Their suggestion is that as teachers gain confidence in a collaborative situation they will find situations where each of the four models are useful and appropriate. The case study by York-Barr et al (2007) which I've looked at in a [previous entry](#) looks like a good example of the team teaching approach.

I'd also highly recommend looking at a great post on team teaching by [Kathleen Morris](#). She talks about the day to day running of a collaborative pair of teachers and addresses issues such as planning, assessment, reporting etc. Judging by all the responses she's had there's a lot of interest in the subject. I'm interested in how these different approaches apply to modern open learning spaces and what sort of evidence is available on how they impact on student outcomes.

What place the library?

I've recently been challenged in my thinking about the role of libraries in schools with open learning spaces. I'd be interested to hear how schools are innovating and approaching this.

Take a look at a school with hubs or studios accommodating several teachers, maybe 80 children, with access within the space (and of course online) to resources for reading, science, maths, art, social sciences and so on, and the question becomes, *why* do students have to walk to another building in order to go to the library? Shouldn't the physical collection of books be diffused across the school and put into the hubs? The traditional library space emerges somewhat incongruent.

Philosophically speaking the diffusing of the collection fits nicely with one of the advantages of flexible learning environments. It's about just in time access to resources, building students' capacity to make informed choices about where to learn, and what and whom they need to learn with, and enabling learners to be able to become increasingly more independent. It's crucial that children can see resources around them to help in their lines of inquiry, or to trigger new directions in thinking. Having resources tucked away in another part of school where there is the potential for us as teachers to gatekeep them is counterproductive. But I know there are some challenges.

Maybe the challenges though are centred on the way one thinks about a library. Certainly the more fixed mindset part of me starts thinking a bit too traditionally and is concerned with the nitty-gritty of a library space - how do you manage the issuing of books, the returning and the end of year audits when the books are in more than one place? How too do you efficiently spread a library collection across learning spaces designed for particular age groups, whilst still allowing children to explore material for both older and younger learners? Perhaps more importantly, where does the librarian go and how does their role change? This is a possibly the more important question.

I was fortunate to be able to spend some time with Lisa and Peter, a couple of the [NZ National Library](#) team, during the recent [Ignition2012](#) unconference. The discussion centred on two aspects of the library- that of a service rather than a physical space and also on being that treasured space where children learn to love books.

Think less about a book room and more about an information resource was the first point. If a library is simply a place for books then it has a very short timeline ahead of it indeed. Think more about the library as a service, having a teacher-librarian who can act as a filter, a connection maker, an information expert for learners. Someone who can support inquiry learning through the development of information literacy competencies in addition to the development of children as readers.

In this case if this is the model for the librarian, then where the library is becomes less important. How the teacher-librarian can add value to the learning that goes on in the hubs is. It's about a partnership in learning- more of a Learning Commons approach, where children are encouraged to become critical consumers of information (OSLA, 2010, p. 3). It's a question I know [Amesbury School](#) in Wellington are addressing with the intentional appointment of a teacher librarian to work within their new learning hubs.

The second point though is an important one, and it's about the place of a library as one of helping to engender a love of books and of reading. It's often a place of sanctuary for many children, particularly those who don't always enjoy being outside during the breaktimes. And a wander through our library space over a few lunchtimes this week revealed just that.



Children talked about why they liked the library - it's a friendly space, a thinking place one commented, it's just like coming here to read. It's quiet and I find books I've never even seen before it's a place to think said another. I don't have many books at home and we don't buy them, so this is a great place to discover new ones They talked about sharing book ideas with each other, or of the accidental adventure of stumbling upon new things to read. Others were sat around on beanbags, not reading but discussing their latest challenges with Blender, a new design tool they'd discovered, sharing tips and their new learning.

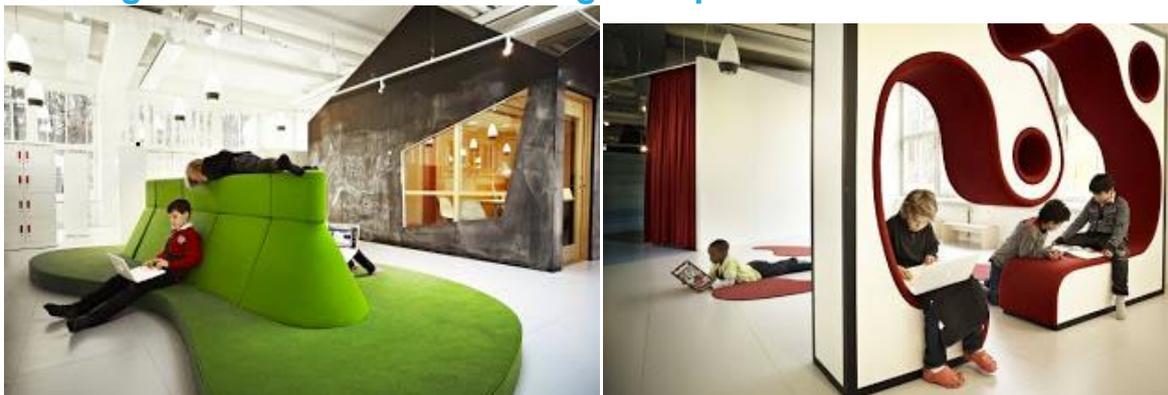
And it's the same sort of feeling at my local library too. I spent an hour there this morning as part of my current fascination with the emerging genre of graphic novels and how they can engage reluctant readers. The place was busy, with children, teens and adults all absorbed, whether online or offline, with reading and discussion. It's an important local facility and it's not a place I'd want to lose in a hurry.

In the end for schools it's probably a case of and, and with a combination approach to the library and the service it offers students that is going to emerge as the preferred model. There is still I believe a place for schools to create a sanctuary of reading, that quiet place the children referred to fondly but that doesn't necessarily require all of the collection to be housed in that one space. Perhaps it's more of a literary watering hole that's needed, a comfortable, invitational information grazing space, offering a taste of available materials.

In that case perhaps much of the collection *can* be spread around the school, where it's available to learners just in time for what they need, when they need it. And with it the teacher-librarian, a floating information expert- on hand to work with children and teachers alike, to maximise the available offline and online resource.

As new types of learning environment develop in schools consideration does need to be given to models of library space. Not only the physical entity but also the service they provide. It's an exciting area, and one ripe for innovation.

Pushing the boundaries: What might be possible?



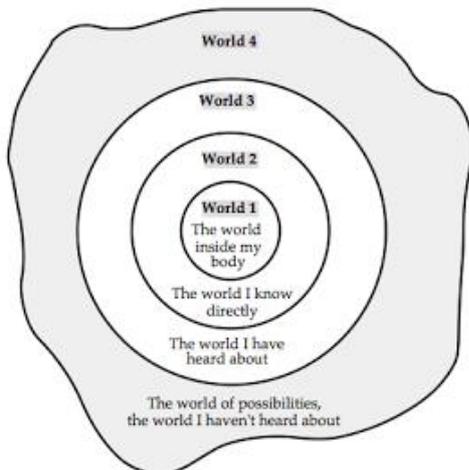
Take a look at these: They are images of a Rosan Bosch design for the School without Walls in Stockholm.



It's an extraordinary looking school with beautiful design, custom built furniture, an iceberg that features a cinema, a relaxation room, and multiple spaces for different types of learning. It's more like a building at Google, Nike or Lego, than it is a school - perhaps reminiscent of any number of the creative business spaces Kursty Groves features in *I wish I worked there!* There are certainly a lot of similarities.

What is important about seeing designs and schools like this, in my mind, is that it challenges us to consider what might be possible. Of course it may well be out of our financial reality or perhaps not aligned with our own pedagogical vision and belief but it does at the very least expose us to some new and different thinking. It's an example of what one school building does look like, although is very removed from my own experience and until now, what I have stage heard about.

John Holt's (1971), and still relevant today, model of Four Worlds reminds us about what we do and what we don't know.



Julia Atkin (1999) sums it up really well:

She says that each of us has four such worlds. The first world is the world inside our skin. The second world is the world the individual knows about from direct experience. The third world is the world the individual knows about, but has not experienced in any direct way through the senses. The fourth world is the infinite world of possibilities which the individual has not as yet heard of or even envisaged+ (p. 14)

Google images of a classroom and what you end up with is a pretty standard, industrial notion of what a common learning environment looks like. Generally there are rows of desks facing the front and

generally, the teacher's at the front. These are familiar images - for many of us the world we are familiar with from direct experience.



Try learning space instead and you find things that are looking a bit more interesting- there are different shapes and sizes of furniture, different learning settings, more obvious technology and a generally more open feel to the spaces - this for many teachers is the world that we have heard about but as yet haven't got personal experience of.

But as teachers and educators as well as designers, how do *we know what we don't know*, in terms of what schools and classrooms might look like? It's the same working with children on imagining future learning spaces too. What comes next? How can we start looking into that fourth world of infinite possibilities?



[Beautiful Learning Spaces](#) is definitely a great place to start. There are some stunning school designs featured here that will push our thinking in terms of what might be possible. Many are featured on architects and educational websites but here they have been collected together in one place. There are also videos being added too. It's a quickly growing resource, being curated by @acampbell99 and @Jennzia I really look forward to seeing this site grow and the world of infinite possibilities explored further.

Collaboration?



We talk a lot about collaboration when it comes to teaching in modern learning environments. It's used in terms of the way teachers work with each other, the way teachers work with students, and students work with students. But are we talking about the same thing?

Collaboration, when it comes down to it is one of those words that has perhaps become slightly difficult to define. Dillenbourg as far back as 1999 suggested that the term had become fashionable and had resulted in overuse and overgeneralization; something that he suspected made it difficult to articulate the various contributions that authors were making on the subject.

So when a group of teachers we spoke with recently talked about their team situation, a number of scenarios arose. For example at times the group talked about working alongside each other on a particular task, or to solve a particular problem. They'd work together, all contributing to the discussion, until a decision had been reached, or the task completed. Picture it in Lego, it's everyone, hands on, building the same model. Is this collaboration?

Or how about the example of the same group of teachers taking a task, breaking it up into parts, and then, individually, going off to complete the different sections of it. Later they return, between them putting the pieces together, and using this approach, complete the task. Is this collaboration?

Thirdly, the example of something needing doing, an event needing organising, and one person taking it on, coming back to explain to the group what is going to happen. Would this be collaboration?

Arguably, and coming back to Dillenbourg (1999) in a collaborative approach work is done together whereas in a more cooperative approach a task is split and then reassembled. He refers to this as the division of labour and adds that many consider collaboration to be synonymous with coordination with one party taking the lead role, and simply reporting back.

A number of authors have written on the different stages of collaboration as it shifts from coordination, to cooperation, to collaboration (Peterson, 1991). Possibly though in a teaching team sense, there's not such a neat and tidy movement through the stages. Instead depending on the task, the purpose, and the level of input required from everyone, maybe teams shift between collaboration, cooperation and coordination.

Perhaps therefore, when approaching a particular task, teaching teams need to be mindful of the approach that is most appropriate, at that particular time, for that particular job, before deciding if they will collaborate, cooperate, or coordinate.

Or maybe, just maybe, this just a case of semantics, and to what extent does it matter how we define collaboration anyway? Perhaps, we just need to get on with it!

1970s Open-plan in New Zealand

Much of my own reading around open-plan schools has been centred on research carried out in England. A recent visit to Auckland University library though uncovered a Department of Education publication, a *Report on Open Plan Education in New Zealand Primary Schools*, published in 1977.

By the mid 1970s, according to the report, there were 200 open plan units in New Zealand, catering for 3.5% of primary children. This was set to grow to 474 and 8% by the end of 1978. At the time of

the report two-thirds of the units had been operating for less than two years. Many of these units existed in schools that also had more traditional teaching classrooms.

The report was the result of a systematic study into open-plan schools, albeit in their early stage of development in New Zealand, and brought together views of teachers, principals and architects. What it recognized was that increased numbers of children were being taught in open-plan schools, and that whilst there was a body of evidence in the UK in support of them, the debate lacked an adequate empirical basis in New Zealand practice (p. 9). The report therefore set out to address such areas as the adequacy of training of teachers for open-plan, the attitudes towards it from teaching staff and the professional educational practices required from teachers.

The report's primary recommendation was that:

We recommend that the development of open plan education be continued and that this development be subject to continuing evaluation (p. 11).

The report discusses the general satisfaction with open-plan education and the favourable views of benefits for children expressed by a majority of the principals of schools with open plan units, teachers in open plan units at the time of the survey, and teachers who had formerly taught in open plan units (p. 12).

Despite its recommendation the report did make some qualifications; that many principals and teachers were dissatisfied with some features of the open-plan units; that 55% of teachers reported a higher level of stress than when working in a traditional classroom; that some teachers were concerned about the effect on new entrants, disruptive children and shy children; and that only a minority of teachers received any training for teaching in the new spaces.

In response to some of these qualifications the report suggested that in building schools with open-plan units, there should also be provision for more traditional spaces as well. It noted that spaces should not be built to accommodate any more than the equivalent of four classes of children, and that there should be a withdrawal space large enough for fifteen children. It also suggested that pre-service training be provided in areas of co-operative teaching and in the use of open-plan spaces.

I think what's interesting looking at the report now was the relatively small amount of it dedicated to student outcomes and learning. The information collected on students consisted, as it says, of the opinions of both present and former open plan teacher, principals and inspectors (p. 57). Of these a large majority surveyed agreed that achievement was at least as high as in conventional classrooms (p. 66). Of real interest though is the fact that of the principals (83% of whom headed schools that also had traditional classroom spaces) a large majority favoured open-plan.

There's a lot more to be pulled out of this report and I'm interested to look further into the views of teachers at the time. It's interesting too, to consider the projections that there would be potentially close to 500 open-plan units in New Zealand schools at the end of the 1970s. I wonder how many there are left now?

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