Module 8 - Collaborative learning
Harnessing student interactions for deep learning

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Welcome to the collaborative learning module.

As you'll probably be aware, much of students' learning at university happens outside of formal classes, either in casual exchanges with fellow students, or in collaborative study groups. Some students feel more comfortable interacting with peers than with their teachers, as such encounters can be more relaxed and low-risk. Yet some students also show resentment towards teacher-imposed group learning and assessment tasks. So, with reference to contemporary theories of peer learning, this module explores ways to reconcile these tensions, with careful and respectful scaffolding, to productively harness the benefits of collaborative learning within more formal teaching and learning settings.

In collaborative learning, students work together, either formally or informally, to help each other understand content and concepts, solve problems, and create projects and products, with the teacher working as facilitator and moderator. These approaches are based on the understanding that interactivity and collaboration in groups encourages deeper learning than would be achieved by students individually, and builds a sense of trust, acceptance and belonging among students while also enhancing skills in communication, applied learning, and problem-solving.

There's nothing new about the concept of collaborative learning. It's a key feature of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of learning, as it was in ancient Greek and Roman cultures. The University of Bologna in Italy was founded in Medieval times by a community of scholars who came together to study collaboratively, and only later made the innovation of employing established experts to help expand the horizons of their scholarship.

Over time, university teaching drifted to the teacher-focused knowledge-transfer approach that predominated in the 19th century and much of the 20th.

However in the last 60 years or so there's been a swing back, coupling social constructivist learning theories from the work of Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky with the interdependence work of Kurt Koffka, Kurt Lewin and others, through to the contemporary connectivism of Stephen Downes and George Siemens, and the emerging field of students as partners and change agents.

More of all that as we progress through the module topics, in which you'll start by reflecting on collaborative learning experiences – formal and informal - that you've had. You'll then be invited to relate those experiences to the key principles of collaborative learning, to build a platform to give you confidence to use this approach in your own teaching. After that, we'll introduce you to a range of commonly used collaborative learning activities, and invite you to consider how you might select and apply them in your teaching context.

We ourselves have attempted to 'walk our talk' in this module, by setting up collaborative virtual spaces in which you can share the fruits of your thinking, exploration, and discovery with other participants.

There are some challenges in this, given that your participation is self-paced and asynchronous, so your postings may not take the form of a consecutive discussion. But it does have the potential advantage of creating, over time, a useful repository of your collective experience and wisdom about collaborative learning. And you'll gather evidence of your learning for your ongoing teaching portfolio.

Enjoy the journey.