

Sharratt, L. & Planche, B. (2016). *Leading collaborative learning: Empowering excellence*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin. Pages: 320. ISBN: 978-1483368979

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Sharratt and Planche's book is a particularly interesting work about practices in leading collaborative learning. Before even starting the book, I took a moment to analyze the structure, which lends itself to a short review consisting of three parts: pedagogy, structure, and content.

Part 1: Pedagogical Aspects

Having been a teacher for over 15 years, I was initially drawn to the book's pedagogical aspects. There is a glossary, diagrams to facilitate understanding, a comprehensive table of contents, and of particular interest, a detachable "Implementation Matrix of the 10 Non-Negotiables of Evidence-Proven Collaborative Learning Practices" (size 9 x 22 in.) presenting a summary of the work. The book's other pedagogical features include a tools list (appendices) that can be reused to put collaborative learning into practice in schools. Added to these features is the Book Study, which provides readers, whether they are students, administrators, or researchers, with reading comprehension questions. Finally, each chapter ends with three headings: "Applying Our Theory of Action," "The Impact of Collaboration on Student Learning," and "A Pause for Reflection" that assist with assimilating the theoretical aspects of the chapter and putting them into practice while remaining reflective.

Part 2: Structural Aspects

As a researcher, my sense of scientific rigour is deeply satisfied by the structural aspects of the book that support the above-mentioned pedagogical elements. The presence of simple, easy-to-understand texts makes the data that was rigorously collected for writing the chapters accessible. The epigraphs highlight important passages from the text or add citations from research participants. Many explanatory diagrams facilitate understanding and help build the reader's knowledge, which meshes with the book's socio-constructivist foundations. In order to demonstrate the possible applications of theoretical concepts, the text is peppered with photos and experiential stories from experiments conducted in the field. Without a shadow of a doubt, these authors both talk the talk and walk the walk. The chapters each end with a presentation of two key themes from the matrix and a preview of the next chapter.

Part 3: The Content

As for the content, the foreword by Jim Knight, the introduction by John Hattie, and the afterword by Michael Fullan are written by renowned authors who bring a perspective different from and complementary to the work of Sharratt and Planche in approach or in their views on success factors in leading collaborative learning. Bibliographic references also show the complementarity of their research. The book consists of six chapters.

Chapter 1, "Leading Collaborative Learning," lays the book's foundation. It defines and explains what they mean by "leading collaborative learning" by providing details about "Co-Laboring" (p. 6) and "Deeper Learning" (p. 8). The importance of leadership and the "power of a positive learning stance" (p. 19) as a way to cultivate the leadership are also addressed.

Chapter 2 takes the reader "from theory into action" (p. 26) by presenting the conditions for success (organizational structures, culture, and systemic process (p. 26)) while drawing on constructivism frames

as a process to learn and lead. The “Collaborative Inquiry Approach” (p. 28) also allows the use of assessment “for” and “as” learning. Finally, most of the chapter is devoted to what the authors call the “Theory of Action for Leading Collaborative Learning” (p. 32), which they break down into 4 practical components: (1) Assessing to plan, (2) Planning to act, (3) Acting to make sense of finding, and (4) Making sense of impact to refine and learn. This process becomes the general model for how managing collaborative learning management works.

The following chapters move from discussions of large-scale collaboration with the educational system to considerations of smaller-scale collaboration with and between students. Chapter 3, entitled “System Leaders Working Alongside School Leaders,” examines leadership in education and its relationship with the leaders of each of the schools. They present the shift from collegiality to co-learning and its pitfalls. However, most of the chapter is dedicated to the 4 structures that drive learning: (1) networked learning communities, (2) the case management approach, (3) learning walks and talks, and (4) Systemic inquiry. These structures are added to the general model to make it more pragmatic.

Chapter 4 provides a look at leadership on a smaller scale by suggesting that the school leaders work alongside teacher-leaders. The content of this chapter is more practical than that presented in previous chapters. They discuss the notions of influence, time management, the importance of using empirical data, as well as, the skills that should be sought when choosing teacher-leaders. Data collection is central to this chapter, with emphasis on the Data Wall and Case Management Meetings, which together can really put FACES on each student’s instructional needs.

Chapter 5, entitled “Teachers Working Alongside Teachers,” presents structured and unstructured approaches to collaboration. It also suggests changing the “what” in learning conversations by using one of 4 methods: (1) the case management approach, (2) the 4 Cs model, (3) observational inquiry, and (4) collaborative assessment of student work. The 4 Cs model should take place 4 times a year and includes co-planning, co-teaching, co-debriefing and co-reflecting. However, there are a series of challenges to overcome when applying these methods: time, facilitation, absence, and fear. Fortunately, the authors make suggestions for overcoming these challenges.

The sixth and final chapter offers ways to collaborate directly in school, the classroom, and between classes that enable teachers and students to work alongside each other. The approach most emphasized is inquiry-based learning, which must be guided by the teacher and can even be used for learning assessment. Thus, teachers work as Stewards in the class using Universal Design principles and each of their interventions with students must demonstrate both customization and differentiation to encourage deeper learning.

In Conclusion, a Brief Critique

Right from the preface, the authors make it clear that the definition of collaboration in education has greatly evolved and no longer just consists of teamwork, collegiality, or sharing resources. Collaboration must be a commitment to each other on the part of students, teachers, or administrators for a purpose: learning together. This collaboration becomes a culture shared throughout the education system’s hierarchy. Basing this culture on the fundamentals of constructivism (Walker, 2002) and a reflective approach (Argyris & Schön, 1974; Schön, 1983), aspects of structured management play a major role. Their theory of action model (p. 32) is much like the steps of the management process proposed by Koontz (1961): planning, organizing, leading, and controlling, especially by integrating the collective notion and reflective practice as a means of regulation. These concepts situate Sharratt and Planche’s in relation to Senge’s (1990) work on the learning organization. Many parallels can also be made between the leadership behaviours that build readiness for collaborative learning and the steps for building a culture of co-learning presented on page 56 and the work of Waters, Marzano, and McNulty (2003) on the 21 responsibilities of administrators in education. Beyond these theoretical, sometimes dated connections, the authors have done innovative research.

In addition to producing highly interesting results, the authors bring an innovative touch to this research because they use neologisms that underscore the meaning they have given to certain words. For example, they use “co-laboring” to highlight the concept of working together. Or “sustain-ability” to express the ability of leaders to maintain best practices even after leaving a school. The use of these neologisms promotes their use and understanding while contributing to developing a culture through a common language.

The 10 pages of bibliographical references show a concern for thoroughly supporting their work with scientifically researched data. The 28 references from the authors' previous works demonstrate the continuity of their research and confirm their expertise in leading collaborative learning as a way to empower excellence in education.

This book is certainly worth reading for administrators, teachers, and the people who train them so that they can finally tear down the classroom walls and develop a culture of learning together in our schools to provide students with deeper learning.

References

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