

Discover how collaborative dialogue within student-peer groups can influence the way students learn through such interactions.

Imagine walking into an art classroom filled with beautiful paintings hung neatly on the walls. The students, seated in groups, work quietly. The teacher sits in a corner of the room and calls out the students' names one at a time. Picking up their artwork, they eagerly approach her for feedback. Upon seeing this, you might exclaim, **"Wow! This teacher has fantastic classroom management skills!"**

The Power of



Figure 1. My non-collaborative art classroom.

VIVIAN LOH

I used to perceive these characteristics as essential to the ideal art classroom, one that is ever ready for an unannounced visit by the school administrators or visitors. I teach at an elite school for 13- to 16-year-old boys. Although collaborative learning among students is encouraged, many teachers are hesitant to explore the potential of student-peer interaction in their classrooms and prefer

how I might improve my teaching. Data were collected through journaling, audio recording, student journals, and interviews. Through my research, I found that when I changed from a teacher-centered approach to encourage more collaborative dialogue among my students, they became more engaged and there was a stronger sense of community within the class.

A third important attribute is an **adaptation of responsive teaching strategies**. While still maintaining control, teachers must be willing to step into the background to support the students' learning needs and growing independence and be ready to step up again when the situation requires it. During the beginning phase of the art unit, I had observed that my students needed time

Collaborative Dialogue

a teacher-centered approach because it is more manageable. In comparison, they view student-peer interaction as time-consuming and are uncertain about the depth of learning that takes place during such an interaction.

Lev Vygotsky (1978), a developmental theorist and researcher, first wrote about the importance of both teacher-student and student-peer interaction in the process of learning in the late 1970s, and it has had an important impact on the educational environment ever since. As a committed art teacher, I want to engage my students in learning actively. This has resulted in my having to give up some of the control I have over the class, as well as the belief that I am the sole information provider within the art classroom. According to Jaquith and Hathaway (2012), knowledge gained through first-hand inquiry is powerful. I wish to give autonomy to my students so that they can acquire and develop knowledge and skills through personal and collaborative paths.

Conditions for Collaborative Dialogue

Research has revealed that the biggest hindrance to effective discussions is that teachers have a difficult time shifting from an information-giving role to that of a facilitator (Dillon, 1987). Teachers tend to dominate class discussions, turning them into mini-lectures with one-way communication. As a practicing art educator, I undertook a 6-week qualitative case study in order to yield rich insights into

I propose that an investigation focused on art pedagogical practices that might enhance my own ability to facilitate meaningful collaborative dialogue among my students might include a focus on five attributes of meaningful collaborative dialogue.

The first attribute is an **increase in competence level**. At the start of the art unit, when collaborative dialogue was newly introduced, some students appeared to be under pressure when they could not come up with ideas to contribute to the discussion. They were uncertain about how to ask constructive questions. Others thought it was a waste of time when they did not receive the feedback they wanted from their peers. During the middle and late phases of the unit, the students became more confident and comfortable talking with their peers about art. In some cases, the discussion extended to the sharing of personal intentions, where art and life overlapped. This suggests that collaborative dialogue becomes more meaningful over time and with practice.

Secondly, **time set aside for listening, reflecting, and talking**. I have observed that thinking takes time, and learning how to respond takes more time. It is important for teachers to help their students slow down or allow time for them to talk to their peers and write about their feelings and responses to their aesthetic experiences (Heid, 2005). Conversations between peers become more meaningful when teachers allocate time for students to listen, reflect, and share.

to get used to learning collaboratively. This challenged me to recalibrate my teaching practices—I needed to check regularly on the students to make sure they were talking, asking questions, and listening to each other. During the later phases of the unit, I reduced my involvement when I observed that the students were more at ease with holding collaborative dialogue. Such timely intervention is necessary to meet students' varying needs for the space to develop meaningful constructive dialogue.

A **willingness to listen to diverse opinions** constitutes the fourth attribute. Hagaman (1990) has suggested that individuals should be encouraged to listen carefully to the comments of others in a discussion group and be willing to reconsider their own judgments and opinions. According to Willis (2007), coming to a single "correct" judgment for the group during discussions should be viewed as counterproductive to collaborative learning. Students need to develop a willingness to be challenged by others and value this process as helpful for the reconstruction of their own ideas. A willingness to do so will build confidence and resilience.

The fifth attribute is the **establishment of a caring community within the art classroom**. Care is defined as the reciprocal relationship between two people who engage in understanding and empathy toward one another (Nodding, 1992). Heid (2007) elaborated on Nodding's definition by stating that it is the responsibility of the teacher to cultivate an environment that supports the



Figure 2. Collaborative dialogue bonds students and strengthens the sense of community within the class.

reciprocation of care in the art classroom. Studies in neuroimaging have shown that when students participate in well-designed, supportive groups, their brain scans reveal significant transference of information from the intake areas into the memory storage regions of the brain (Willis, 2007). This implies that collaborative dialogue is best facilitated in a caring classroom. Reagan (1994) cited Carol Gilligan, who maintains that women tend to be more comfortable with relationships, and their sensitivity to the needs of others makes them particularly receptive to collaborative work. I found that my male students welcomed collaborative dialogue too. They shared that listening to different perspectives exposed them to new ideas and knowledge that they might otherwise not have had access to if they learned independently. However, negative comments not supported by explanation were considered hurtful and unbeneficial. To address this issue, students should be asked to provide reasons for their judgments, reflecting on the criteria employed in making these judgments (Hagaman, 1990).

Unfolding Collaborative Dialogue Practices: A Closer Look at a Teacher's Self-Reflexive Process Through Instructional Design

The Gift of Change art unit was designed to facilitate collaborative dialogue within my classroom. Collaborative dialogue refers to knowledge-building dialogue. It is a cognitive and social activity (Swain, 2000). The unit incorporated discussions about brainstorming, creating, and critiquing throughout the artmaking process. Two classes of 14-year-old boys participated in the unit, which was based on the "big idea" (Walker, 2001) of creating change in communities. I found the work of Abigail Housen (1999) and Robin Alexander (2005) to be helpful in designing the brainstorming phase.

Coming Together: Brainstorming by Thinking Aloud

At the start of the unit, the students were given the following prompt:

You are in a situation that you are unhappy with and you wish to see a change. There is an opportunity to meet with the person(s)

who can help to change that situation. You decide to make two clay artworks to bring along for the meeting. The artworks are meant as both a gift and a conversation starter.

I introduced artists whose works shared a similar big idea. The first image I showed was *Art-Eggcident* by Henk Hofstra. Typically, I would start to explain the work to the students. For this art unit, I kept quiet to give the students some time to look at the image.¹

Anthony: Why did the artist make eggs?

Me: That's a very good question. Before we answer that, can you tell me the different ways we can cook eggs?

Students: Scramble eggs! Hardboiled eggs!

Me: Good! Think a little harder now. When do you see eggs presented in the same state as *Art-Eggcident*?

Dusky: When I am hungry in the morning!

Anthony: On the frying pan!

Jerry [very softly]: The streets are frying the eggs.

[Some students laugh.]

Anthony: I know! It's about climate change!

SUDDENLY [the students] were the ones doing the talking and thinking as they built on one another's responses to arrive at different interpretations.

Me: How do you know?

Anthony: Because Jerry said that the streets are frying the eggs, which means that the roads are getting hotter.

[Some students cheer and clap.]

Students: Wohooo!

Me: This is interesting. Anthony, you just mentioned that you built your answer based on Jerry's comment?

Anthony: Yeah.

Matthew: I think there's another possible change here. The artist wants to encourage people to harness energy from the heat!

[Some students clap excitedly.]

While facilitating the collaborative dialogue above, I asked questions based on the students' comments and refrained from giving answers. Many students raised their hands to share their ideas and I noticed an increase in engagement level. Suddenly they were the ones doing the talking and thinking as they built on one another's responses to arrive at different interpretations. This finding supported Vygotsky's (1978) belief that students are able to produce something together that they could not produce alone in an environment that has both structured teacher guidance and collaboration with peers.

My art classroom was transformed during this brainstorming phase. I witnessed how the students gained different perspectives through the incorporation of the skills of listening and responding within classroom dialogue, with a marked increase in the ability to hear diverse points of view. My role in this collaborative environment was to watch for episodes of students' behavior that provided exemplars and highlighted them when they happened, as with the case of Anthony and Jerry. The students felt it was an interactive lesson and appreciated being able to express personal opinions. Previously, in my non-collaborative art classroom, students listened passively to my explanation about artworks. Those who did not find my explanation interesting became disengaged, resulting in pockets of private discussions that disrupted the class. Learning became engaging and enjoyable when my students

were encouraged to express their ideas freely, build on answers, and consider alternative viewpoints. This supported Gibbs's (1995) finding that students gained a greater level of understanding of concepts and ideas when they talked, explained, and argued about them with their peers instead of just listening passively to a lecture or reading a text.

Staying Together: Progressive Creation

On one particular day, student-artists gathered excitedly around a few desks that had been pushed together to form a large circle. I had just told them that they would take turns sharing their artmaking experiences and artistic intentions with their peers. Sharing as a large class during the art lesson was a new experience for them, as they had often worked independently, turning in work without the benefit of peer critique and affirmation.

Ping's voice was shaky when he began to talk about his artwork in front of the class. He apologized with embarrassment that his art was about an unpleasant family issue. He likened that to washing his family's dirty linen in public, "My artwork is about change, and the idea I want to communicate is my difficult relationship with my dad."²

He explained that it had been 4 months since he had last spoken cordially with his father. He felt that his father did not understand him and mostly talked down to him. Ping had decided to stop talking to him, as they would always end up arguing. He did not like being in this situation. His first clay piece showed a big smiley face and a smaller one.

For the second piece, Ping intended to make a frame to go with the first piece. The frame was supposed to bind the two faces together, and this was his hope: that he could be close to his father again.

There was a deep silence as the class listened to Ping's sharing. Finally, Scott raised his hand to say that he felt Ping knew exactly what he wanted to do for his artwork and he should carry on with this very strong idea. He only had one suggestion, and that was for Ping to present this gift of change to his dad.

As a teacher-observer, I was amazed by the power of Ping's sharing. I knew the benefits of a critique session, but I had rarely conducted it with my younger middle school students, as I thought that they would be bored listening to others and I would end up dealing with discipline issues. For this unit, the individual sharing was short and focused, and peer response was invited but not compulsory. My students subsequently shared that this process gave them the opportunity to be reflective. Some of them felt that they could use the suggestions given by their peers, while others felt that talking about their own work and listening to others deepened their learning.

As for Ping, the experience of sharing in front of his classmates gave him the courage to make progress. He spoke to his father about his sharing after that class. In the subsequent weeks that followed, he invited his father to go out for meals with him—just the two of them. His father also asked to see his artwork.



Figure 3. *My Father and I* by Ping.

The CREATIVE JOURNEY in the collaborative art room was not lonely, even though the artists embarked on very personal artmaking journeys.

Working Together: Critique and Crisis

The final phase of my art unit traditionally signaled a winding down of activity in the art classroom, when students would hand in their artwork and complete a self-reflection sheet. This was not the case for the Gift of Change unit. I planned a student-led critique session with three critique formats for the students to choose from: interview, positive critique, and gallery walk. I was eager to find out if my students' comfort level with collaborative learning had increased over time. Group leaders were appointed for each group and handheld devices were used to record the discussions.

By removing myself physically from the group critiques, I explored the potential of student-peer interaction and how students learned through such interactions.

Andy comfortably assumed the role of a student leader for the interview group. He appointed the interviewer for each student-artist and read the prompt clearly to the group:

Imagine you are a young rising artist about to be interviewed by an art magazine. Your manager has prepared eight questions for you to choose from. Select five of these questions for the interviewer to ask you during the meeting.

I prepared the eight interview questions before the lesson because some students had shared during the brainstorming phase that a difficulty they faced with peer feedback was thinking of meaningful questions to ask. About 15 minutes into the critique phase, Andy ran up to me excitedly to report that his group had completed all of the interviews. I could see from their faces that they were proud to be on task. The students shared that the interview session went smoothly because the prescribed questions had put everyone at ease. The interviewers need not think of probing questions on the spot and the interviewers could choose from a range of questions to talk about their works. However, some student-artists shared that they would have preferred a chance to contribute one or two of their own interview questions. Interview time should also have been allocated for each

student-artist so that everyone had a fair chance to talk about their work.

The positive critique group, on the other hand, went beyond the time limit. Their prompt was as follows: *If you were the artist, suggest one thing you would do to improve this artwork.* The discussion was not always focused on positive suggestions, but the group members shared with conviction and without inhibition how they felt about the artworks. For example, Adam, the quietest boy in class, was challenged repeatedly by some of his peers regarding his artistic intention.

They felt that although well-made, his work did not quite match his intentions. Instead of offering him suggestions, the discussion turned into a debate. Andy shared later that he did not feel that the conversation was helpful in suggesting new ways for him to improve, but he felt he became a stronger person. He knew he was quiet, but he surprised himself when he defended his artistic intentions for over 10 minutes. Ping expressed it this way: "Questions or issues which many people have problems with are worth talking about."

The prompt for the gallery walk group was the most open-ended: *Make personal responses to the artwork after the artist has given a presentation about his works.* From the playback of the recording, it was obvious that the discussion went off topic after 5 minutes, with several failed attempts to bring it back on track. The sharing by the student-artists went well, but the members generally did not know how to respond to the artwork and what questions to ask. Subsequently, the members shared with me that some guidelines on what to ask and how to respond would have been useful.

Concluding Thoughts

The journey I took with my students to learn about the potential of facilitating collaborative dialogue has opened up new questions for further discussion and exploration. Time was a recurring issue for the students throughout the unit. One student thought that debating an issue was a waste of time because it took too long. Some felt that if

their peers were not as engaged, they would rather learn independently so as to not waste time. I saw a need in my future classroom practice to help students understand that learning takes time to develop and broaden.

Vygotsky (1978) argued that children are capable of performing at higher intellectual levels when asked to work in collaborative situations than when asked to work individually (p. 153). In the art classroom, I observed that the student-artists became more reflective of their artwork and artmaking journey through collaborative dialogue. As critics, they also became participants and advocates for each other's creative processes. They walked the creative journey together from the start, when ideas were first conceived. They offered diverse responses on how the work could be improved during critique sessions. These responses had the potential to become a springboard for new ideas. The creative journey in the collaborative art room was not lonely, even though the artists embarked on very personal artmaking journeys.

Although I valued the efficiency and manageability of the teacher-centered approach, I now perceive collaborative dialogue between student and peer as essential in an ideal art classroom, where students develop significant inquiry when given the space and time to reflect individually and in collaboration. As much as possible, I strive to give my students the autonomy to co-create a collaborative environment where they are both the artists and the critics and are comfortable assuming both roles.

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AUTHOR NOTE

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Pseudonyms used throughout.
- ² Students quotes that appear in the article are excerpts from transcribed class observations conducted between July and August 2013.

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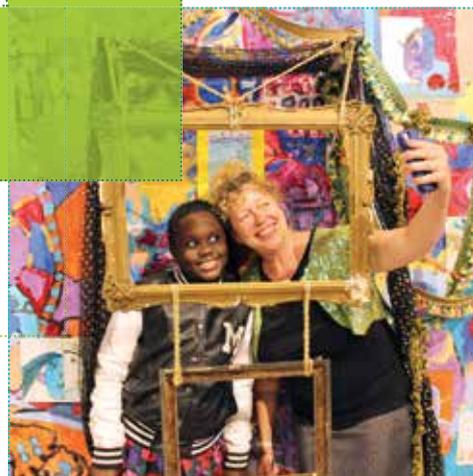
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