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Collaborative Practice In An Inclusive Environment: Putting Learning Into Context

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This paper developed out of a collaborative opportunity that arose in an independent high school with an inclusive policy at the time that Curriculum 2005 was introduced. Definitions of collaboration and inclusion are offered with a discussion on the inter-relationships between these two concepts and Information Literacy. The paper describes the classroom practice and provides links to examples of the planning and the students' work. The positive outcomes for both teacher and student learning are described.

Introduction

This paper has developed out of collaborative practice in a large, independent, boy's high school in South Africa. The school implemented an inclusive policy at the start of 2001, a policy that has proved particularly challenging in an environment that prides itself on its excellent academic results. The paper is also the outcome of the investigation of two concepts: the role of knowledge sharing in the school environment and the perception of the library domain as a service provider in the school.

Information Literacy

Information literacy, achieved through the mastery of information skills, is mainly about developing understanding and insight, about the interpretation of information to guide decisions and solve problems. Information skills are the skills that are needed to develop that understanding and insight (McKenzie, 2000). This is highly relevant to Curriculum 2005 that designates prescribed skills as outcomes that have to be achieved transparently. For a student to demonstrate whether he or she has achieved an outcome, it is necessary for them to demonstrate the process by which they have learnt as well as their understanding. The tools for these processes or scaffolds for learning are essentially the tools of information skills.

Collaboration

The challenges provided by the implementation of Curriculum 2005 and the integration of ICTs into the curriculum have formed inter-related catalysts for collaborative development. Zhao et al refer to aspects of the school context that are of central importance to the success or failure of an innovation: the human infrastructure, the technological infrastructure and social support. The implications for teachers are that they need to realize that technology integration requires support from others (Zhao et al, 2002.)

Learning in the 21st Century school environment is supported by an integrated and holistic system or structure. This system is a dynamic relationship between the organization of information and the collaboration between educators.

Collaborative practice is receiving increased attention in school reform. It occurs when two or more teachers meet regularly to concern themselves with the details and interstices of teaching and learning. It is a forum for critical enquiry and fruitful reflection (Howland & Picciotto, 2003, p. 12).

The importance of collaboration in an inclusive school environment is emphasized by Kiesau-Bramer and Krautkamer as follows:

Collaboration is the essential feature of inclusive school communities, in which everyone belongs and participates in meaningful activities, affiliations and alliances among community members are facilitated, and mutual support is the norm. Collaboration involves direct interaction between co-equal parties who participate voluntarily, share in decision making, plan resource allocation, and set common goals. Collaboration applies to numerous school tasks, processes, and activities, including planning the curriculum, assessing students, setting schedules, defining staff roles, designing individual student support plans, and teaching. (Kiesau-Bramer & Krautkramer, 1999, p.144).

They tabulate the characteristics of collaboration as follows:

Characteristics of Collaboration:

Co-equal parties	Joint decision making
Voluntary participation	Trusting, respectful relationships
Shared responsibility	Mutual support benefits
Shared accountability	Converging values

Collaboration should therefore be seen not as a hit-and-miss occasion incidental to the functioning of a school or the pursuit of a curriculum, but as an *essential action*, inherent to the optimal learning environment, and structured into the learning process. The need to join together to solve problems is the basis for many of the collaborative interactions that teachers experience, and especially so in an inclusive school community (Kiesau-Bramer & Krautkramer, 1999, p.134).

Inclusion

Inclusion is a commitment to educate each learner to the maximum extent possible. It involves bringing the services to the learner, rather than moving the learner to the services. It requires that the learner benefits from being in the class and not having to keep up with the others! There are several factors characterizing inclusion:
- Appropriate and enhanced classroom teaching strategies to accommodate diversity
- The focus is on the classroom
- Teaching and learning factors are examined
- Strategies are available for teaching
- The regular class environment is adaptive and supportive
- Systems of support are flexible
- There is an array of choices
- Social development is given prominence
- Cooperative learning and peer instruction methods
- Programmes are individualised to meet the needs of the learner and NOT the learner to meet the needs of the programme
- The main message is one of systemic change to respond to diversity
- Focus is on ability and;
- Problem solving is collaborative
- Lifelong independent learners are encouraged through the development of knowledge and cognitive strategies and skills.

In an inclusive environment, the Learning Support Specialist (LSS) is tasked with accommodating diversity in the classroom. Within the ethos of inclusion it does not take long to realise that every learner requires their needs to be met. Not only are the present learners a different generation, in that they embrace technology and have media savvy but they have a new and unique style of learning and communicating. Learning styles vary as do hemispheric dominance and learner strengths.

Codrington (1998) mentions the following prerequisites for the methodology in classrooms of the future:

- Learners need to be guided into the discovery of knowledge
- Multi-media must be actively embraced as the millennial generation learns best when all senses are involved
- Educators must make use of multi-tasking and a high level of interaction
- Educators must embrace technology (especially computers and the Internet) as an integral part of a meaningful and effective education
- Educators must change the way they think about evaluation

Therefore, classroom practice must change radically to accommodate these needs.

Putting Learning Into Context

The Learning Support Specialist (LSS) saw ICT-based learning as an ideal means of accommodating diversity in the classroom. The Teacher had the subject knowledge, the LSS had the strategies, but both felt ill equipped to tackle the ICT that was crucial to the whole learning process. The Librarian was approached and a significant collaborative partnership evolved.

In 2002, the first collaborative opportunity arose in the history department at Grade 8 level. One of the History teachers (Mr W) had three classes, two of which each had 8-9 learners requiring support. The topic in term two was the Vietnam War and in term three, World War I. For the first topic, Mr W hesitantly agreed to attempt a new type of delivery and a unit was developed through collaboration among the three of us around his suggested outcomes.

We used a co-operative approach initially, starting with a KWL in a round-robin. The students had first to share their prior knowledge and then their questions with the class. Some deep questions emerged such as "If America lost the war, why didn't the whole world become Communist?" The product was a presentation in a choice of formats that had to be delivered from a particular point of view e.g. war correspondent, ground soldier, Viet Cong etc. Online resources were collated and cached in the Global Resource Centre and the classes were held mostly in the Library or the Computer Lab.

For World War I, the scene was set using "For King and Country" the story of a simple young infantryman who walked away when life in the trenches became too much. The story contrasts his innocence with the sophistication of the officers making decisions about the war in their relative comfort. It is an indictment of war. After the film, the students had to study the assassination in Sarajevo and dramatize it. These are examples of how we accommodated different learning styles.

For most of the classes at least two facilitators were present: either the teacher and the LSS or the teacher and the Librarian. Students with questions asked the nearest person for assistance. In the beginning, we referred to each other. As time progressed, the LSS and the Librarian were able to answer more and more content questions, and the Teacher became more confident with the technology and the methodology. Our interaction as we learnt modeled the collaborative work that we expected of the students. We were all learning together.

Ensconcing Collaborative Practice

At the start of 2003, Curriculum 2005 was implemented in Grades 8 and 9. Overall planning for this had taken place in late July, with departments meeting as Learning Areas for the first time. In the Natural Sciences each teacher was given an integrated unit of work to design. The first resource-based unit was designed around the topic of the *Life and Death of Elephants in the Kruger Park,* looking at what characteristics, conditions and challenges affected the lives of the animals.

A methodology had to be worked out that would incorporate the diverse range of skills (or lack of them) that 160 boys had brought from an infinite variety of feeder schools and backgrounds. The unit devised by the teacher was reworked by the HOD and the Librarian to incorporate the necessary information skills. Resources were restricted to those that were paper based and each class was taken through a preparatory skills lesson that introduced the concepts of a range of resources, mind-mapping and keywords, and reporting opinion "in your own words". These classes were taught by the Librarian in the Science Labs, with the teachers present. It was an ambitious start. Of the seven classes, we were able to double up on some in the Library, with at least three facilitators working (and learning) together.

Shortly afterwards, the same classes used original resources to investigate a chosen aspect of the school's history. This was planned in the same way with two different history teachers. The history lessons, in turn, overlapped with a further Natural Science unit on rivers suitable for white-water rafting, in which online resources on rivers of the world were introduced through the Global Resource Centre and the Librarian co-taught with the NS teachers. The products of these three units already demonstrate a progression in skill levels amongst the majority of students. The most significant progress has been in breaking the reliance on "cut and paste" and an increased confidence in "writing in your own words".

The feedback from the teachers involved in the collaborative work has not only been positive, but highly enthusiastic. The process, with as much emphasis on skills as on content has revealed the students learning and their weaknesses. The students are learning to interpret information and are gaining in their understanding and insight. At the same time the facilitators were able to reflect on the learning process and interact, increasing our own understanding and insight.

Conclusion

What we have achieved is no more than the ideal that every teacher-librarian might aspire to. We have perfected neither the process nor the product. However we have been able to capitalise on an opportunity with significant results for both the teachers and the learning.

Through collaboration, the barriers between the ICT lab, the Library and the Classroom dissolve and the Librarian is a key member of the collaborative team. S/he is involved in the learning process from the planning stage through to the assessment stage and is as likely to be found in the classroom and the ICT lab as in the Library. Teaching and learning happen in all three locations depending on the particular stage of the process. The traditional complaint that teachers do not bring classes to the library or do so without consulting with the Librarian thus falls away.

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Biographical Note

Mary Reynolds is the College Librarian at St Stithians Boys College in Gauteng, a position she has held since 1989. Prior to that she held positions in medical, architectural and university libraries both in South Africa and England in the 1970's. Mary finds it fascinating, but challenging to be involved near the cutting edge of school library practice as it has evolved in parallel with the integration of technology and the demands of Curriculum 2005. She has been extremely fortunate in that the college has supported and encouraged the development of the library services on a campus of five schools with four libraries. She is at present studying through the University of Pretoria for a Masters degree, focusing on the relationship between ICTs, school structures and collaborative practices. She has presented papers at previous ISASA and Millennium Minds conferences and to the international ISIS Online Conference. During 2001 she attended the ASLA XVII conference in Queensland before visiting schools and other educational agencies to investigate collaborative practices and the knowledge management concept in education from the school librarian's perspective. mreynolds@stithian.com

Dr Irene Lategan is the Head of Academic Support at St Stithians College in Randburg. Since January 2001, an Inclusion Model has been practised at the College, whereby learners with special educational needs are included in the mainstream. She has a D Ed in Orthopedagogics and research for her thesis was undertaken in Australia (Queensland) and New Zealand (Auckland). She spent eighteen years in specialised education and has attended and presented at conferences nationally and internationally. Areas of particular interest include meeting individual needs in the classroom, ICT based learning, generations X & Y, assisting teachers in accommodating diversity in the mainstream classroom, holistic approaches to reading and cognitive education. Email: ilategan@stithian.com