

# Collaborative learning

## Strategies to study productively with others

One of the great things about being a university student is the social environment. There are a lot of bright, interesting people to talk to at university and some of your university contacts will become lasting friends. This social environment also provides many opportunities for you to work together and learn from each other.

The term collaborative learning broadly refers to students working together and using a variety of practices in order to use course materials, answer questions or to solve problems (Colbeck et al., 2000).

### Why study collaboratively?

Although some students prefer to work alone, many students learn material better when they can discuss it with others. Two heads **can** be better than one! You can benefit from someone else's strengths, and they can benefit from yours. Teaching someone else is also an effective way to reinforce your own learning.

Sharing and clarifying ideas in pairs or small groups both increases your interest in your studies and enhances critical thinking and interpersonal skills. Collaborative problem solving is thought to promote 'deep learning', which enables students to apply critical thinking skills in other contexts, and improves knowledge retention (Johnston et al, 2000). Your peers can also provide a supportive, non-threatening environment for you to try out your new skills or ideas.

Many students find learning from each other enhances their problem-solving abilities. Similarly, students who work on group projects learn team-working skills that are highly valued in the professional workforce.

This pamphlet presents some practical ideas about how you can study productively with your fellow students.



## Limits to working with others

Before discussing collaborative learning strategies, it is important to understand the difference between collaborative learning and copying someone else's work.

The first is a study strategy that enhances your own skills and knowledge through group work, the second is PLAGIARISM – both yourself and the other person.

The following table explains the differences:

<b>COLLABORATIVE STUDY EXAMPLES</b>	<b>PLAGIARISM EXAMPLES</b>
Brainstorming or discussing an essay question	Reading someone else's work and copying the ideas or the exact phrases
Talking with someone who is familiar with the subject area about his or her opinions, ideas or resources on a particular topic.	Getting a copy of the completed assignment from someone who did it last year, and copying the responses
Sharing approaches and ideas about problem solving so everyone in the group then has the skills to attempt all the questions on an assignment or problem sheet	Halving the workload on an individual assignment or problem sheet by dividing up the questions and sharing the answers

## Finding someone to work with

Some faculties organize formal study groups to assist you to meet and share experiences with other students studying the same subjects. If you do not know other people in your subject area then you may have to be more pro-active in your efforts to meet other students with whom to collaborate. Talk to fellow students in your tutorials or practical classes, or post notices on department list serves or bulletin boards.

## Working collaboratively

The following time management and motivation strategies can encourage friends to work with and help one another. Rather than being overwhelmed with all your academic tasks, work together to help each other to finish tasks and achieve goals.

(See also the LLSU flyer: *Active learning*.)

## **Plan your study**

- Plan what and where you will study with your colleagues. For example, go to the library with friends and agree on how long you will stay, what you will achieve and when you will have a break.
- Stay motivated and on track by sharing your study plan *'tonight, I plan to complete the tutorial questions for my history class tomorrow'*, and then compare progress afterwards.

## **Organise a study group**

- Schedule a regular collaborative group study time with people in your class who have similar timetables. You can focus on your academic tasks such as tutorial questions or discuss content or practice answering exam questions.
- Develop a routine to your study. Consider your group study sessions as important as your lectures and do not miss them. If you do you will let the group down and may miss valuable information or discussions.
- Arrange to meet with your group at the same place at a regular time each week. This will save time organizing subsequent meetings.
- Residential colleges or student housing provide many opportunities for collaborative learning, as students are located conveniently together. However you need to distinguish between time for productive study and social/fun time.
- Three is a good number for a study group as it ensures you have a responsibility to contribute, and the group can still continue if one person is away. More than three becomes difficult to organize.
- Review and revise the week's work by discussing it with a small study group or in pairs. This can be helpful for subjects where cumulative learning is important.
- Always have a specific learning focus for your study time. For example: review your vocabulary, tackle difficult tutorial problems, talk about the case you all had to read, or discuss a contentious issue.

## **Share the routine tasks and discuss management strategies**

- There are many ways you can help one another save time. For example, it takes as long to make two copies of an article as it does to make one, so why both stand in the queue? One person can photocopy, and the other can find the next article. At the next library session, swap tasks. However always make sure that chores are shared fairly.
- Students in courses with high contact and outside class hours can also help one another by talking about and sharing strategies for managing and balancing both academic tasks and life demands.

These strategies may seem fairly simple and obvious but they will all help you get into the habit of working cooperatively with other people. This in turn improves learning and saves time.

# Collaboration as an active learning strategy

## Play the role of the client/patient

This is particularly useful for students who have practical subjects where they have to work with people (for example, medicine, physiotherapy, psychology or information systems). Practicing your skills with other students is a basic active learning strategy; practising a clinical examination makes it more memorable than just hearing about it. Practising your interview techniques may also improve your interpersonal skills. Take turns to play the part of the interviewer or client/patient to develop your clinical skills.

## Play the role of examiner

When you review a topic or sets of problems, think of possible questions an examiner might ask. Music students, for example, can prepare for their aural recognition exam by testing each other and sharing strategies of how to remember, link and categorize various pieces of music. Similarly, if you know people studying subjects that require large amounts of specialized vocabulary to be assimilated, such as anatomy or a language, you could test each other and share strategies for learning the terms you need to understand and apply. In these small group environments, you are more likely to focus on active learning strategies such as categorizing and problem-solving skills than on less successful study techniques such as rote learning without understanding or last minute cramming.

## Discuss and debate

If you are a strong aural learner, verbally articulating ideas to others can help you to better understand your position on an issue. Talking and arguing, refuting others' ideas or having to defend or refine your own, are good ways to test and clarify your ideas. They also help you to formulate an opinion, respond to an issue or to brain storm an essay topic. Thus you can enhance your understanding and problem solving ability by working with someone else.

## References:

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