



## Exploring Collaborative Learning Practices in Teacher Education in Uganda: Students' Experiences of Collaborative Learning at Health Tutors' College - Mulago

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### Abstract

*Collaborative learning (CL) has been described as a student-centred and innovative approach to teaching and learning, which promotes the development of 21st century skills such as collaboration, creativity, critical thinking, problem solving, communication skills, teamwork and personal development, and enhances academic achievement among learners. This study explored the experiences of students regarding collaborative learning at a Health Tutors' College in Uganda, in order to identify best practices for promoting and optimizing collaborative learning in teacher education. A qualitative approach was used and data was collected through focus group discussions, which elicited students' lived experiences regarding the collaborative learning approach on their Bachelor of Medical Education study program. The findings revealed that students had experienced collaborative learning in very few subjects, the lecturers' facilitation of collaborative learning was largely inadequate, as practices were largely teacher centred. Nonetheless, students had a positive attitude towards and preferred the collaborative learning approaches to the traditional teacher centred practices, even for their future careers. The study recommends sensitization and orientation of all college staff and students towards collaborative learning for full adoption of collaborative learning by the entire college community.*

**Key words:** Collaborative Learning, Student Centred, Collaborative Practices.

### INTRODUCTION

Collaborative learning (CL) has been described as a student-centred and innovative approach to teaching and learning (Skinner & Peterson, 2016; Babu et al, 2017; Moges, 2019; Laal & Mohammad, 2012). Laal & Mohammad, (2012) describe collaborative learning as an educational approach to teaching and learning that involves groups of learners working together to solve a problem, complete a task, or create a product. Collaborative learning also promotes the development of 21st century skills such as collaboration, creativity, critical thinking, problem solving, communication skills, teamwork and personal development among learners, which also enhance academic achievement (Gokhale, 1995; Laal & Laal, 2012; Laal & Mohammad, 2012; Lai, 2011; Moges, 2019b; Nayan et al., 2010; Simiyu, 2016). Inclán-Rubio (2019) contends that students of health sciences must be taught to work collaboratively during their school education, so that in clinical practice they can form and maintain working teams that can contribute to improving health services.

Furthermore, collaborative learning aims to support students' development of key skills, such as teamwork, communication, among others (Almajed, Skinner, Peterson & Winning, 2016). Almajed et al (2016) further argue that in order to design effective collaborative learning, teachers need to understand students' perspectives about collaborative learning, and yet few studies have examined students' understandings of collaborative learning. This highlights the need to explore students' perspectives of collaborative learning to obtain

detailed information of their lived experiences (Almajed et al, 2016). The current study therefore explored tutor students' perspectives of collaborative learning in terms of their perceptions, learning activities, lecturer facilitation, benefits, challenges and recommendations, to establish the extent of adoption and to optimize collaborative learning in health tutor education in Uganda.

## METHODOLOGY

A qualitative approach was adopted using a case study design, which elicited students' lived experiences with the collaborative learning approach on their Bachelor of Medical Education study program (Yin, 2018). The researcher used Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) to collect data. Three groups of students pursuing the Bachelor of Medical Education (BME) were purposefully selected (Creswell, 2014) and subjected to FGDs. Each group consisted of six students. The FGDs focused on students' experiences of the collaborative learning practices in terms of their descriptions of collaborative learning, the subject areas where they have experienced collaborative learning, the specific activities and roles of lecturers and students, benefits, challenges and recommendations to optimize collaborative learning in the Health Tutors' College. All the three FGDs were audio recorded and kept safely. The recorded FGD data were then transcribed and read and re-read several times by the researcher. Data was analysed in line with the main themes and presented as in the following section.

## RESULTS

### **Tutor Students' Perceptions/Descriptions of Collaborative Learning**

The study revealed that students' descriptions of collaborative learning point to working together, sharing ideas in groups to solve problems through group discussions, agreeing and then making presentations to the whole class. The following quotes are illustrative:

*"CL involves students working as a group but being supervised by a tutor or lecturer" (one student in FGD1)*

*"My understanding of CL is that it is a type of learning where students are grouped in groups, the teacher gives them an activity and the activity is done amongst students where the teacher marks the activity then gives them feedback for the outcomes" (FGD 1)*

*"It is a type of learning whereby the learners work together with fellow learners and teachers... for a common goal... there are student-student interactions and teacher-student interactions" (FGD 2)*

*"CL is a student-centred learning which can be done in groups and any other methods" (FGD 2)*

### **Courses Where Collaborative Learning was Experienced**

As regards the specific courses/subjects in which students had experienced CL, students reported that they had experienced collaborative learning in the courses of Anatomy, Physiology, Teaching Methods, History of Education, Philosophy of Education, out of the more than 20 subjects offered at the college.

### **Students' Activities of Collaborative Learning**

Concerning the specific collaborative learning activities that they participated in, students disclosed that they were mainly involved in receiving the tasks from their lecturers, (sharing responsibilities), researching and discussing, then presenting their agreed upon findings, giving and receiving feedback. The following quotes are illustrative:

*“We sit as a group, do discussions, come to the final conclusion and then we choose one member to teach the whole class, so that people give in their additions and subtractions.” (FGD 1)*

*“After being given a topic, everyone goes and finds the data about that topic, we come and share the knowledge each one has got.... one person presents, then other members give support”*

### **Lecturers’ Facilitation of Collaborative Learning**

Regarding the different/specific ways in which lecturers facilitated collaborative learning, students reported that their lecturers played various roles such as selecting and distributing topics to the different groups, guiding the discussions and at times making corrections and clarifications during presentations (in a few cases), giving general feedback. Otherwise, the majority of the lecturers simply gave out group tasks in form of course work assignments, leaving the students to find the information, discuss and then make presentations to the whole class with minimal guidance from lecturers. Students further reported that during presentations, some lecturers would not make clarifications but instead asked students to do more research about the given tasks.

### **Benefits of Collaborative Learning**

When asked to explain the various ways in which they have benefited from learning collaboratively, the tutor students mentioned deep learning, enjoying support from their peers, developing skills for research, communication, confidence and pooling of knowledge, among others. Here are some of the students’ quotes:

*“Collaborative learning reduces the burden of work since the work is shared...and you also get assistance from colleagues”*

*“...You get the urge of wanting to read, you get more knowledge, you feel the knowledge in you”*

*“I can call it critical thinking and research because when you are given a topic, you make sure you research thoroughly because you expect many questions.... And it also leads to deep learning”*

*“Learning is better by participating in collaborative learning than in lectures in the medical field you can easily remember what you have participated in”*

### **Challenges of Collaborative Learning**

Regarding the challenges they face in this model of learning (collaborative learning), tutor students enumerated several challenges that included the time for searching for the required information, group management, uncooperative group members, lack of commitment among some group members, lack of adequate guidance and feedback from lecturers, failure to share/access work from all the groups (some groups are selfish), failure of lecturers to clarify and add more knowledge to the students’, among others.

*“Lecturers not coming to rectify the mistakes made by students during presentations leaves students in suspense”*

*“Some groups not doing their work at all, such that they just learn from others (parasitically) and the topics given to such groups are totally missed out”*

### **Recommendations**

Asked about their recommendations to improve and optimize collaborative learning at the college, the tutor students elaborated several recommendations.

- Let collaborative learning be adopted in all the subjects/courses at the college
- Lecturers should be in full control to correct and guide the students

- Lecturers must be directly involved in group formation and determining group size because the fewer the number, the better, than having many members in a group that are inactive and uncooperative.
- CL has to have principles and rules...
- CL should be integrated with other methods of teaching, not to be used exclusively
- Lecturers should give enough time for researching and presenting the information,
- Students should be enlightened clearly why they are doing collaborative learning
- Lecturers should find time to monitor and listen to the individual groups.
- Lecturers should first look at the group work before it is presented to the whole class.
- More teacher guidance is needed to optimise collaborative learning

### **Collaborative Learning for the Future**

When asked whether and why they would implement collaborative learning in their future career as health tutors, students unanimously agreed that they would like to use collaborative learning in their future career, due to the numerous benefits they have realized from it.

*“For the future career of my teaching, I would like to continue with collaborative learning because it gives you the urge to dig deeper, unlike lectures where you remain on the receiving side.*

*Collaborative learning is recommended for the future because it exposes learners to practical skills”*

*“In medical learning, collaborative learning facilitates research and deeper learning, so I have to use it for my students”*

## **DISCUSSION**

Almajed et al (2016) contend that in order to design effective collaborative learning, teachers need to understand students’ perspectives about collaborative learning, and yet few studies have examined students’ understandings of this innovative approach to learning. The findings of this study are in agreement with Almajed et al’s (2016) contention, unlike several studies conducted in disregard of students’ perspectives (Nayan et al., 2010; Wameko & Abera, 2019). The students’ descriptions of collaborative learning as *‘a type of learning whereby the learners work together with fellow learners and teachers... for a common goal’* are in agreement with the views of other scholars (Laal & Laal, 2012; Laal & Mohammad, 2012) and provide a valid basis for seeking students’ views in the design and implementation of any pedagogical innovations and reforms. The finding that students experienced collaborative learning in just a few subjects out of the many that are offered at the college is congruent with the findings of other studies, that reported that some teachers prefer sticking to the traditional teacher centred practices rather than the recommended collaborative approaches (Wameko & Abera, 2019). This illuminates the need to sensitize and encourage all lecturers to embrace and adopt the collaborative learning approaches in all their classes.

The students’ collaborative learning activities were generally limited to mainly discussions and presentations with minimal teacher guidance. This may imply that students are not fully exposed to the activities that encourage them to explore their full potential for the development of collaborative and other 21<sup>st</sup> century skills as reported in many studies (Gokhale, 1995; Laal & Laal, 2012; Lai, 2011; Moges, 2019; Nayan et al., 2010). This calls for more opportunities to engage students in a variety of collaborative learning activities. The findings that lecturers rarely monitor, supervise and guide group learning imply that lecturers cannot easily inculcate collaborative skills among students, which also makes it hard for lecturers to fairly assess students’ contributions to the group work. These findings

are in agreement with other studies that have highlighted teachers' lack of full awareness and commitment to their roles in collaborative learning (Moges, 2019; Nayan et al., 2010; Wameko & Abera, 2019). Therefore, lecturers need to be encouraged and facilitated to monitor and guide group activities more closely.

The students' articulation and elaboration of more benefits than challenges of collaborative learning show preference of this mode of learning to the traditional teacher centred pedagogies. Such findings from health tutor students in the Ugandan context also add to the scholarship in other world contexts where students have exhibited positive attitudes and willingness to embrace collaborative learning in their future careers (Saba, 2017; Wyk & Haffejee, 2017).

For improvement of collaborative learning, scholars such as Hei (2016) argue that in order to overcome students' resistance to group work, they need to be supported in their group work and they need appropriate scheduling, such as sufficient time to work on group assignments without the stress of other simultaneous courses. The tutor students' recommendations in the current study are congruent to Hei's (2016) arguments.

## CONCLUSION

The following conclusions are drawn from this study. First, students' descriptions of collaborative learning portray a fairly adequate conceptualization of the collaborative mode of learning. Secondly, there are some practices of collaborative learning taken up by both lecturers and students which need to be enhanced for full implementation of collaborative learning in teacher education in general and health tutor education in particular. In other words, there are clear opportunities for collaborative learning that need to be fully taken up by both lecturers and students to address the needs of the competence-based curriculum being implemented in health training institutions in Uganda. Finally, students' preference of collaborative learning to the traditional teacher centred practices calls for immediate attention.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

This study makes the following recommendations. There is need to streamline and harmonise the collaborative learning practices in all courses/subjects offered at the college for all lecturers and students to embrace it for better learning outcomes. All lecturers and students need some training and orientation towards implementation of collaborative learning. Lecturers need to play a leading role in the advocacy for collaborative learning as a priority for 21<sup>st</sup> century pedagogy, and there is need to fully facilitate students to promote collaborative learning in health tutor education.

### Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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