

Empowerment Pedagogy: Co-learning and Teaching

By Edward J. Brantmeier

Co-learning is a philosophy of teaching that I first stumbled upon in 1996 when reading Frank Smith's book *Joining the Literacy Club*. I really enjoyed the concept of co-learning, especially how it changes the role sets of teachers and students from dispensers and receptacles of knowledge to joint sojourners on the quest for knowledge, understanding, and dare I say wisdom. Positioning oneself as a co-learner when teaching requires much unlearning of cultural conditioning because it challenges the traditional authoritative, dominant and subordinate role sets in schooling environments and the unequal power relationships in wider spheres of our world-- including economic structures. In its ideal form, co-learning: acts toward student empowerment; it dismantles asymmetrical power relationships in the classroom; it builds a more genuine "community of practice"; and co-learning moves students and teachers toward dynamic and participatory engagement in creating a peaceful and sustainable world. Ideal? Yes. Possible? Potentially, but dependent. Dependent on our desire and willingness to reflect on our own teaching to try to align our classroom roles, relationships and environments more with a co-learning philosophy. I do not really remember anymore how Frank Smith defined co-learning, but here is a brief look at how I am starting to see the philosophy in terms of classroom role sets, relationships, and environments.

Role Sets of Students and Teachers as Co-learners:

Student role-- **Empowered explorer:** independent or collective explorer of knowledge through disciplined means. Practical assignments: interest-focused inquiry projects such as choosing a movie, novel, non-fiction book, global issue, or host nation issue (-- Cultural Immersion Project assignments) that ask for critical engagement and critical reflection either orally or written.

Teacher role-- **Facilitator of learning:** a facilitator doesn't get in the way of learning by imposing information. A facilitator guides the process of student learning.

Practical behaviors: learning from student inquiry projects; connecting student knowledge to other ideas or fields of knowledge; acting as an active support for learning endeavors.

Student roles-- **Meaning-maker and responsible knowledge constructor:** one who engages in meaningful knowledge construction that promotes relevancy to her/his own life. Practical applications: Reflective and personal assignments work well here. (Ex. How do the ideas of negative racial stereotyping or globalization connect with your own lives? Or, Examine your own position and someone you love in terms of Bennet's ethno-centric and ethno-relativistic continuum.) Self-reflection is critical for this student role as a co-learner. Meaning-making, answering the question "so what?" is also essential here.

Teacher roles—**Scaffold builder and critical reflection enhancer**: one who assesses student knowledge and builds scaffolding to extend that knowledge to a broader and deeper understanding. Asking co-learners to reflect on what is being learned and the process of learning (meta-reflection about process) are important.

Practical behaviors: Bridging students understanding to multiple contexts (imperialism and oppression of Native American people bridged to Australian Aboriginal people). Synthesize multiple ideas together from student responses (on the board or overhead). Asking, “What are we learning about power, the process of legitimacy, structure, individual agency, gender, race, class, disability, sexuality, and what have we learned? How does this group’s ideas connect with that groups? (fostering substantive conversation and higher order thinking)”

Characteristics of a Co-learning Relationship:

- *All knowledge is valued
- *Reciprocal value of knowledge sharers
- *Care for each other as people and co-learners
- *Trust
- *Learning from one another

Characteristic of a Co-learning Classroom Environment:

- *Shared power among co-learners
- *Social and individualized learning
- *Collective and individual meaning-making and identity exploration
- *“Community of practice” with situated learning
- *Real world engagement and action

Lessons or Assignment Examples that Integrate a Co-learning Philosophy:

- *Global Network Mapping (Created by Tyler Sparks and Ed Brantmeier for Cultural Immersion Projects).
- *Overseas Oral Interview (Created by Manjari Singh, Michael Jones, Michelle Henderson and Ed Brantmeier for Cultural Immersion Projects).
- *Global Issues Journal Assignment (Cultural Immersion Projects).
- Cross-Cultural Conflict Scenarios (Created by Ed Brantmeier).

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