



## Learning to Collaborate, Collaborating to Learn: Engaging Students in the Classroom and Online

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The National Association of Colleges and Employers identifies collaboration – building collaborative relationships with colleagues and customers representing diverse cultures, races, ages, genders, religions, lifestyles, and viewpoints; working with teams; and managing conflict – as one of eight competencies associated with career readiness (“Career Readiness Defined,” [2019], <https://www.nacweb.org/career-readiness/competencies/career-readiness-defined/>).

In *Collaborative Learning Techniques: A Handbook for College Faculty*, Elizabeth Barkley, K. Patricia Cross, and Claire Howell Major identify three essential features of collaborative learning: intentional designing of carefully structured group activities, engaging all students in working together towards stated objectives, and deepening understanding of the course curriculum ([Jossey-Bass, 2014], 4). With collaborative learning techniques, individual success is linked to group success, students actively help and support each other, there is individual and group accountability, students develop teamwork skills, and they engage in group processing where they evaluate their group productivity (Smith, “Cooperative Learning,” in *Using Active Learning in College Classes*, eds. Sutherland and Bonwell, [Jossey-Bass, 1996] 74-76). Research has shown how learning happens in social contexts, and collaboration can facilitate a student’s sense of belonging, but unless collaborative activities are well-designed, they can lead to a “divide and conquer” mentality among students (Eyler, *How Humans Learn*, [West Virginia, 2018], 93) and run the risk of unequal participation and student loafers (Barkley, Cross, and Major, *Collaborative Learning Techniques*, [2014], 32). To avoid such pitfalls, instructors must carefully design the task, orient students to the goals and purposes of collaborative learning, make decisions about the size, duration, and operation of the learning groups, assign the task in ways that support efficient accomplishment, assure active and constructive participation, and assess and evaluate learning (Barkley, Cross, and Major, *Collaborative Learning Techniques*, [2014], 37).

*Learning to Collaborate, Collaborating to Learn* focuses on the theoretical foundations for collaborative learning (constructivism, social constructivism, theories of collaborative advantage, social network theory, and theory of discourse and collaboration), and it presents a taxonomy of collaboration with three components: collaborative processes, levels of collaboration, and a trust continuum (12). The processes include individual reflection, dialogue, and mutual critique through review; the levels offer ways that tasks, roles, and outcomes can be organized by collaborative partners; and the trust continuum shows the development of trust among collaborative partners and the commitment to the collaborative process. Participants can organize tasks as parallel collaboration (allocating tasks among participants in parallel way), sequential collaboration (completing them in multiple steps over time), or synergistic collaboration (where they synthesize their ideas and work together through all stages) (13). Salmons recommends beginning with a small, ungraded activity or assignment to encourage participants to take risks and begin collaborating, and then having students generate a work agreement in which they clearly define roles and expectations, stating how they will proceed with the assignment and how they will be accountable to each other (47).

Theological and religious studies educators will likely find chapter 5 the most helpful, as it focuses on instructional design and includes questions to gauge students’ previous experience with collaboration (82), questions to consider when generating an agreement about the expectations of and for the group (92), examples of such agreements (93-94), and checklists that groups might use to ensure that they complete their tasks (95-96). Chapter 6 presents useful templates for self-assessment (110-111) and formative assessment (124).