DECONSTRUCTING COLLABORATION

Rachel Smydra and Cynthia Miree

Introduction

More now than ever, we live in a culture where people collaborate to create text, music, books, software, and many other things in joint fashion. This process has carried over into most corporate settings where employees work as teams primarily because organizations realize the benefits of employing team-oriented approaches. Corporations acknowledge that products and solutions generated collaboratively are often successful because team players must consider diverse opinions and options from an array of contributors. The reaping of these same types of benefits found in the workplace is why collaboration is an important part of academia. The technique is especially useful in assisting students in developing critical thinking and negotiating skills that they can use in the workplace or in graduate courses.

While most people consider collaboration to be a context wherein people work together to produce a unified result, the rules regarding collaboration in academia often differ from those outside of academia (e.g., a corporation). From an organizational perspective, producing a quality high end prod-

uct is often more important than isolating who contributes what, how much, and in which way. From an academic perspective, however, given the importance of measuring individual discipline-related competencies, these distinctions, in terms of any single end product, take on a much greater value.

Defining what constitutes ethical collaboration within academia is not as clear-cut as one may think. Faculty and students may have very different ideas about when collaboration is appropriate and what constitutes appropriate collaboration. Further, one should not assume that students can move from discipline to discipline with the idea that collaboration means one thing. The purpose of this article is to encourage faculty to reconsider their perspectives on students' understanding of appropriate collaboration within the context of a broader university experience and, as a result, rethink their approaches to defining, explaining, and guiding student collaboration.

Student Perspective on Collaboration

Over the past few years, a handful of students have been charged with academic misconduct that occurred while participating in collaborative activities that students considered within the realm of reasonable and appropriate collaboration. The academic context for these cases ranged from working together on homework assignments to applying knowledge (albeit incorrectly) acquired from group study sessions to test material to working together on take-home exams. While some of these cases were well within the realm of inappropriate collaboration, others contained substantial grey areas.

For students, understanding "the rules of engagement" for appropriate collaboration within academia is not as simple as one might think. Students often face different faculty standards regarding collaboration among the many disciplines at Oakland University. For example, an engineering instructor may encourage students to work with others to complete complex tasks or assignments where an English instructor may ask

71

students to postpone sharing their insights on a particular set of readings with peers until a class discussion. Even though many instructors expect that students will understand these boundaries as they move across disciplines apparently, they do not. Further, when instructors communicate these various protocols and expectations either orally at the beginning of the semester or written among many course-related statements on a course syllabi, they may not be as salient as one might expect.

In a recent senior level class at Oakland University, as a part of a regular class discussion on academic integrity, two key themes emerged regarding the students' understanding of appropriate collaboration that merit further reflection.

- **Theme One: Most students have a working definition of collaboration and understand its benefits.**

The definitions shared by these students ranged from simply working together to complete a project to sharing ideas and "helping each other out" with more difficult assignments (see Table 1). Indeed, one of the central themes that emerged from their responses is that collaboration typically involves working with others toward some mutual benefit (e.g., completing a group project, getting a better understanding of concepts, or completing difficult homework assignments). Further, the students considered collaboration to be a beneficial activity. Table 1: Student Perspectives on Collaboration provides a summary of these responses.

- **Theme Two: Students receive what they perceive to be little or conflicting guidance on how and when to collaborate.**

When asked to provide examples of appropriate versus inappropriate collaboration, the responses are more widespread (see Table 1). Some students believed that working with others to complete an activity or assignment was appropriate as long as the instructor does not explicitly discourage them from doing so.

Table 1: Student Perspectives on Collaboration
(including examples of
appropriate and inappropriate activities)

Common definitions of collaboration:

- Working with someone else [on a task (efficiently)], [to complete a project or assignment], [to achieve a goal], [learn key concepts for a class]
- Sharing ideas, the work, or experiences to reach a goal
- Working as a team
- Comparing ideas and helping each other determine answers
- Applying individual knowledge to achieve a common goal
- Talking about ideas or emailing each other to chat
- Splitting up work between friends
- Brainstorming together
- Any group help

Examples of Appropriate Collaboration

Studying for exams, working together on homework or projects (both graded and not graded), problems with multiple parts that are done as a group, students giving each other tips on how to do things, proofreading, editing or helping to fix problems, working together on assignments that do not receive individual grades, anything that the professor has not specified should be completed alone, splitting up work and getting together to discuss how the problems were solved, group projects, sharing notes

Examples of Inappropriate Collaboration

Individual assignments with individual grades, letting other students copy one's work with the explanation of concepts, letting someone copy responses for an assignment, working together on take home tests/quizzes, splitting up work and giving each other only the answers, sharing information on individual projects, collaborating during tests/quizzes, taking credit for something you haven't done, working together when the professor gives specific instructions not to do so

While most of the students agreed that specific faculty instruction is the best indicator for knowing how and when to participate in collaborative activities, many stated that they have received limited guidance from instructors regarding acceptable collaboration standards. In addition, students expressed confusion as to the perceived conflicting standards of acceptability from discipline to discipline and sometimes from class to class within a single discipline.

One example that emerged from the discussion involved a multi-section class where one instructor discouraged students from working together to complete problem sets while another instructor in a different section was silent on the matter. Rather than asking a clarifying question, the student decided to work with others because the instructor gave no written or oral guidance to the contrary on the course syllabus or in a classroom discussion.

Another example involved two students in a science class. The instructor encouraged students to work together. On one particular assignment, the students claimed they did the work together but because they submitted common incorrect answers, the instructor saw this as a red flag and surmised that one student had copied from the other. When questioned by the students, the instructor indicated that even though she did not clarify the boundaries of appropriate collaboration, she felt the students should have had a "common sense" understanding of acceptable collaboration.

Clearly, collaboration presents the opportunity to enrich a student's deeper understanding of contextual problems. However, what constitutes appropriate collaboration presents some grey areas. Many universities, including Oakland University, have publically available official descriptions and policies regarding collaboration. Oakland University's Student Conduct Regulation #5, states:

- Unauthorized collaboration on assignments. This is unauthorized interaction with anyone in the fulfillment of academic requirements. Individual (unaided)

work on exams, lab reports, homework, computer assignments and documentation of sources is expected unless the instructor specifically states in the syllabus that it is not necessary.

- Completion of original work. When an instructor assigns coursework, the instructor intends that work to be completed for his/her course only. Work students may have completed for a course taken in the past, or may be completing for a concurrent course, must not be submitted in both courses unless they receive permission to do so from both faculty members.

The bottom line of these regulations is that the classroom instructor has the last say on whether students may collaborate, the ways in which they may collaborate, and the extent to which they may collaborate. Many disciplines encourage students to work in groups on assignments and in test preparation; other disciplines assume that students will not collaborate at all unless instructed to do so. Given the university's commitment to general education, it is highly likely that students will be exposed to some of these differences in expectations regarding collaboration as they matriculate.

As students move from department to department and classroom to classroom, they must understand that the rules as to what is acceptable change. Many do not, however, and thus the dilemma for students is apparent.

Faculty Perspectives on Collaboration

Many faculty members talk informally about the role and meaning of collaboration within the academic context. To gain a sense of their understanding on collaboration in a more formal way, we solicited 20 of our colleagues to respond to a series of questions designed to glean their understanding of collaboration and their perspectives on its use by faculty and

Table 2: Faculty Perspectives on Collaboration
(including examples of
appropriate and inappropriate activities)

Common definitions of collaboration:
- Working together to solve a problem by sharing knowledge, skills, and other resources
- Two or more students working together to produce a product with in a singular voice
- Working jointly on a task
- Discussing assignments
- Cooperating on a project in which participants share an understanding about their shared labor (it should be a mutually beneficial arrangement)
- Equally sharing in the work to gain from the collaboration
- Combining individual work into a single coherent document

Examples of Appropriate Collaboration
Working together in groups to define and complete individual parts of a group assignment and then combining and editing those parts into a coherent document, discussing how to apply theory and/or where the examples illustrate the theory

---

Examples of Inappropriate Collaboration
- Working together on an individual assignment, quiz, or test
- Making little or no contribution to project but still accepting a grade
- Discussing answers (in a computer lab, texting, email)
- Sharing an assignment or examples with others
- Getting test answers from a test taker

---

student (see Table two). Table 2: Faculty Perspectives on Collaboration provides a summary of their responses.

In general, the students' understanding of collaboration (based on the class discussion) seemed to closely mirror faculty definitions of collaboration. Nevertheless, it is apparent

that students think about appropriate forums for collaboration in much broader terms than faculty. For example, many faculty members describe their use of collaboration for group projects or other assignments and laud the use of this process to facilitate learning.

Indeed, most of the faculty definitions of collaboration packaged this process within the context of group assignments or team projects. Thus, we were not surprised to find that faculty descriptions of inappropriate collaboration center on what would be best described as "free riding" or "social loafing" behaviors. At the same time, faculty members clearly felt that working together on tests and quizzes constitutes inappropriate collaboration.

Perhaps what was most striking about the faculty responses is the lack of commentary on students working together to complete assignments that are eventually submitted for individual grades. When asked if they thought students understand the difference between appropriate and inappropriate collaboration, many instructors responded affirmatively and noted that the ability distinguish between the two was simply a matter of "common sense."

Clarifying Appropriate Collaboration

Collaboration exists at the nexus of a task and mutual effort. However, this effort can be undermined because of different value systems. Without clear instruction as to what constitutes appropriate collaboration, the effectiveness of the pedagogy comes into questions, especially when students who make assumptions about guidelines find themselves on the brink of unethical behavior.

Even though instructors aim to have collaborative efforts mirror the workplace, within the academic environment the nature of the task, the amount of mutual effort, and a set of guidelines setting forth the collaborative process and faculty expectations determine if students have participated in the

process appropriately. Since these criteria may morph from not only discipline to discipline but from classroom to classroom, it appears that many students are in need of more explicit instructions regarding what is appropriate because of individual codes of ethics. Further, given the differences between faculty perspectives on appropriate collaboration and students' ideas on what is appropriate, when instructors do not explicitly discuss or publish their expectations with students, the potential for error on the part of the student escalates. Again, we have seen more than one case of academic misconduct where the students (albeit without malice of harm or deceit) have received sanctions because they misunderstood or misinterpreted appropriate collaboration within the context of a single class.

In an effort to avert these unfortunate instances, we recommend the following:

- In group work, when an instructor expects high levels of mutual effort, setting forth protocol to ensure that all students do indeed contribute is essential. When completing individual assignments, while one might expect little to no mutual effort, the degree to which students participate in collaboration depends on not only their individual code of ethics but also on their understanding of faculty expectations in this area. In some cases, faculty expectations are obvious (e.g., in-class exams and quizzes); in other areas, they may not be as clear. When expectations are not as clear, we recommend that faculty not only explicitly state their expectations regarding collaboration, but that they also make a comment within this statement that clarifies the differences between appropriate collaboration within the context of group work and work that will ultimately be submitted for an individual grade.
- We also recommend that faculty put their expectations in writing on their syllabi and mention these expectations within the context of a broader discussion of aca-

demic conduct. It is also a good idea to reiterate these expectations prior to each assignment. Finally, faculty may consider developing short statements of ethical academic conduct that would highlight the faculty member's standards and expectations regarding collaboration along with other aspects of this process. Indeed, adding these specifics and spelling out guidelines in a clear manner emphasizes an instructor's dedication to integrity in the classroom and clearly supports Oakland University's commitment to maintaining high standards of ethical academic conduct.