

Book Review / Compte rendu

Garrison, D.R. (2016). *Thinking Collaboratively: Learning in a Community of Inquiry*. New York: Routledge. Pages 147. Price: \$39.95 USD (paperback). ISBN 978-1-138-82432-4

Reviewed by James Barmby, Associate Vice President, Student Experience and Registrar, Nova Scotia College of Art & Design University

There is a scene in *Annie Hall* where Woody Allen's character is standing in line for a movie and getting very annoyed by a man behind him loudly sharing a series of opinions on popular culture. To Allen's exasperation, the man launches into a distorted explanation of the theories of Marshall McLuhan. Rather than entering into a futile debate, Allen simply produces Professor McLuhan, who had been lurking nearby in the theatre lobby. McLuhan quickly dismisses the statements made by the self-described McLuhan expert, rendering the man mute. "Boy," says a relieved Allen to the camera, "if life were only like this!"

Twenty five years in post-secondary administration has provided me with some basic principles essential for providing an education of quality but, in trying to support these principles, at times I have been at a loss to cite supporting research. Often there simply wasn't any evidence at all beyond my own intuition. No more. Upon reading *Thinking Collaboratively: Learning in a Community of Inquiry*, I now have my own McLuhanesque authority readily at hand, thanks to the book's author, Randy Garrison, who tells it like it is (or how it ought to be).

In eight succinct chapters brimming with sound logic, solid research and tempered insights, Garrison lays out a framework for providing a quality educational experience. His intended readership is not only those orchestrating the educational experience inside the classroom, but also those outside the classroom with a supporting or leadership role. Central to this framework, and the means to achieve an educational experience of quality, is collaboration.

Collaboration is a powerful tool, and our world is rife with examples. In industry, the creation of the platform upon which the K-car and the original minivan was built, and which saved Chrysler from potential extinction, is attributed to collaboration (Wenger,

McDermott, & Snyder, 2002, p. 2). In the arts, most of what we enjoy, especially in theatre and music, is the result of collaboration. Bryan Adams, for example, attributes much of his song writing and production success to working collaboratively. For him, the song is more important than the ego and, when collaborating with other song writers, “the best idea wins.” (CBC/Radio-Canada, 2015)

Certainly most individuals are capable of learning on their own, but, as Garrison points out, the autodidacts among us are susceptible to misunderstandings that may go unchecked when there is no opportunity to have their comprehension of a concept tested, corrected as needed or, if correct, reinforced through group discussion. As well, without the benefit of collaboration in the learning experience, we may be depriving ourselves of the opportunity to learn from others, just as their learning would be the less for not having gained from our ideas. Garrison convincingly illustrates that the best assurance of a quality educational experience is through collaboration that, at some point or other, will involve not only students led by teachers, but teachers working with each other for the purpose of professional development, and institutional leaders working to ensure an effective teaching and learning environment.

Garrison recognizes that collaboration can make some people nervous, as it might mean losing control, exposing one’s own lack of knowledge or a weakness, or giving up power and authority. Collaborative problem solving activities in the classroom may not achieve the explicit desired learning outcomes proposed but, as Garrison points out, if the students are aware of how the collaborative model works and the importance of the meaning they intend to acquire, learning outcomes will indeed be realized although perhaps not exactly as planned.

Garrison notes that it is unusual for faculty to collaborate with each other. While there is little stigma in a new faculty member benefitting from the mentorship of a senior faculty member, the likelihood of two seasoned faculty collaborating is small. Peer to peer professional development may present a variety of potential issues that would be of little concern to people working in teams, but could be alarming to those who have grown used to seeing themselves functioning largely as independents. Through collaborative activities, Garrison contends, faculty have an opportunity to develop trust in one another, and learn from each other for the benefit of all concerned.

The antithesis of collaboration, Garrison argues, is a bureaucracy that diffuses the purpose of the organization. Leaders in such an organization will find it composed of disillusioned and withdrawn members, subdued by discouraging checks and balances explicit or implied, because the leadership lacks confidence or the ability to persuade. Leaders who do not create an environment of trust and respect, and who do not extol a vision that will shape and drive a positive and effective organizational culture, are leaders in name only.

To compensate for the leadership’s lack of collaboration, there may be an overemphasis on public relations and communications messaging. Decision making will likely be more centralized, which in turn brings an increased risk of unintended consequences. Attempts by leadership to appear to be collaborative eventually prove to be disingenuous over time. Ultimately, no one is deluded except perhaps the leaders themselves.

Significant portions of the book are taken up with many concepts about learning that Garrison clearly articulates, supports with evidence, and illustrates. For example, Garrison astutely points out the primary reason many distance education courses are less than

satisfactory is not primarily because of the limitations of technology. Rather, the problem lies in distance courses inadvertently adopting the stand-and-deliver classroom model, where meaningful student engagement is already found lacking.

Garrison offers a solution, not surprisingly, which he refers to as the Community of Inquiry model. Similar in many ways to Wenger's Community of Practice model, although much more specific and prescriptive, Garrison's Community of Inquiry model is a thoughtful and resonating explanation of how to provide an effective educational experience using collaboration as a means to ensure student engagement and learning.

Every student deserves a highly engaging educational experience that is challenging and rewarding, yet ultimately free of regret or disappointment for the students who have entered into it. There is no doubt Garrison has produced an excellent exploration of how this experience can be achieved. To that end, if only I had my way, Garrison's book would be mandatory reading for every educator and academic leader. The likelihood of such a scenario is extremely small, but not as small as the much more enjoyable prospect of having Garrison, in the flesh, lurking nearby the next time I am drawn into a debate about quality education. Although I would love to say "Boy, if life were only like this!" once Garrison appears and silences the misguided on my behalf, I expect that day will never come. Instead, I will be keeping my copy of his book close at hand and referring to it from time to time, and so should anyone who has any concern for the future of higher education. 🍁

References

Wenger, E., McDermott, R. A., & Snyder, W. (2002). *Cultivating communities of practice: A guide to managing knowledge*. Boston, Mass: Harvard Business School Press.

CBC/Radio-Canada, (2015, October 15). "Q With Shadrach Kabango. Get Up! Bryan Adams is back with an ode to classic rock 'n' roll." Retrieved from <http://www.cbc.ca/radio/q/schedule-for-thursday-october-15-2015-13271958/get-up-bryan-adams-is-back-with-an-ode-to-classic-rock-n-roll-1.3271966>