

Don't Wait: Collaborate!

The Writing Center at North Park University

-Annie Himpelmann September 14 2003

I'll be honest with you. My experiences with collaborative learning at North Park haven't been with the Writing Center. In fact, I thought it was a dumb idea when one of my professors decided to make it mandatory for us to bring our papers to a tutor last fall. I even cheated the system and had my good friend, who was a writing tutor, just sign the sheet off after a quick glance at my paper the night before it was due. No, no. My experiences with collaborative learning took place because of Anatomy class. After realizing how much it helped me, I decided that maybe collaborative learning in all subjects was not such a bad thing after all.

We were having an exam about the male and female reproductive systems. We had taken pages of notes, watched a birthing video, and even played with plastic models during lab. In five days it would be time to prove we knew the endometrial lining from the epididymis.

Now of course I did not start studying until the countdown hit day three. My friend, Lisa, and I were in the same class and decided it would probably be a good idea if we studied together. Since two brains are better than one, and we figured each of us would remember the things the other forgot. This was the beginning of our collaborative learning.

In order for our collaborative learning to work, we had to be able to get along. If Lisa was my arch nemesis, we would not have gotten much studying done. Since we were friends and felt comfortable with each other, we were able to say wrong answers and correct our mistakes. We also knew that each of us would work hard and one would not expect the other to be their personal all-knowing anatomy slave.

We decided that flash cards would be an easy way for us to quiz one another. Lisa and I probably made over seventy-five note cards each. Color coded and illustrated, they could have competed with any medical Northwestern student's notes any day. She had notes that I had forgotten and vice versa. We were going to be set.

Since we wanted to study off note cards, we first had to make them. We became accountable to one another for doing our own work the best we could. Collaborating with each other helped us stay in line and actually study the way we said we were going to. Many times it is easy to slip into the idea that there will be time later to finish a task, but since we became accountable to one another, we knew we had to do our share of the work on time. When I knew I would have to show Lisa how I was doing with my studying and not just my professor, I worked a little bit harder than usual. I did this because I knew that Lisa would also be working harder. I would have been upset with her if she did not do her part, so I made sure to do mine.

It took about a day and a half to finish the note cards, and we didn't have much time to waste quizzing each other. Every time we had the same break it would be, "What tube is between the epididymis and the urethra?" "THE VANS DEFERENS!" we would shout in joyful identification.

If Lisa ever got a question wrong, I would patiently give her the right answer and feedback as to how she might remember it next time. She would do the same for me. By having peer feedback, we were able to talk about the problems we were having and help each other in a way we probably would not have thought of on our own.

Then a serious problem arose. One night stood between us and the exam we were so diligently preparing for. That one night was also occupied by a Bulls vs. Celtics game. Lisa is a diehard Celtics fan being from the east coast, and I had to represent the Chi-Town pride by cheering for the Bulls. How could we pass up the opportunity to see our teams go head to head live at The United Center?

We decided to make the sacrifice. Who cared about anatomy? Basketball was much more important. But then I had a brilliant inspiration. "I know! We'll study on the El on the way to the game!" Lisa liked the idea. Soon we were on our way, shouting perfectly innocent phrases like, "The testicles produce the sperm!" and "The egg travels through the fallopian tubes!" over the roar of the El all the way to the game.

This situation taught me that learning and studying could be fun. I never would have imagined laughing so much during a study session before that infamous El ride. In any normal circumstances, sans collaborative learning, I would have confined myself to a cubicle in the library with a nalgene full of water, reading my Anatomy textbook for six hours straight until I felt like my head was going to explode. I am glad I learned my lesson about collaborative learning being fun early on in my college career! Using obscene humor to help us remember things or just laughing at our frustrations from studying so late killed the pressure and tension that so often takes place on university campuses. I am glad I was able to laugh at my frustrations with a sympathetic friend, rather than bury myself in them.

The next day we took that test downtown, just like the Bulls did to the Celtics. We would not have done nearly as well as we did if we had not collaborated in our learning. I actually remembered more than I normally would have if I just memorized the material by myself. By quizzing each other out loud and asking each other questions about how this or that worked, we put some application onto the material. Since we took the teacher out of the learning, we did what worked for us best in terms of studying the material. This method of learning proved to be effective, and we have our Anatomy grades to confirm it!

My little Anatomy incident helped me to realize how effective collaborative learning really is. After having this experience, I came to the realization that if I could learn that much by studying Anatomy with a friend, how much more I could learn and grow as a student if I shared my ideas and thoughts with others in every subject I had. When I took

Traditions of the West, a friend and I did another study session, and we rocked the test because we helped each other remember things better. In Art, I have gotten little comments on an idea that fine-tuned my thoughts into a wonderful piece of work. Each paper I write that a friend or writing tutor reads always improves after the session. Collaborative learning is a wonderful way for mature students to improve themselves and their academics. My expertise on the male and female reproductive systems can prove that point as strongly as sperm travel upstream!

[Worth noting: Annie's working relationships were, as described here, one-on-one relationships, chosen by the students out of common interests. And they worked *harder* for each other than they customarily worked for faculty, rather than goofing off. The students were evaluated individually, too.

The collaboration itself fostered a variety of different learning strategies—writing and drawing note cards would in itself help to make material more memorable than silent reading, because it requires active selection of information and slower thinking, not to mention that it creates a visual image different from the passive visual image of a textbook. And quizzing each other aloud processes the information aurally as well. As Annie rightly observed, asking each other questions about the material moved them beyond sheer memorization into application.]