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Paul O. Myhre currently serves as associate director at the Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion. Prior to coming to the Wabash Center nearly a decade ago, Myhre taught at Saint Louis University, Pacific Theological College in Suva, Fiji, and was involved with pastoral ministry in Alaska and Wisconsin. His recent written work includes an edited book, Introduction to Religion Studies, published in 2009 by Anselm Press; a chapter "Pedagogical Issues and Shifts over the Last Twenty-Five Years in Theological Education in North America" for the book Handbook of Theological Education in World Christianity, to be published in 2010; a chapter entitled "Exploring Archival Materials: Undergraduates in the Archives" for Undergraduate Research in Religious Studies to be published in 2010; and an essay published in a 2009 edition of ARTS Journal entitled "Encountering Navajo Cosmology through Sand Paintings: Teaching a Method for Engaging Visual Texts."

Collaborative Research as a Form of Collaborative Pedagogy: Background and Theory

The idea of collaborative research is not new. Faculty and students have engaged in various forms of collaboration in research and learning for decades. What may be new is the idea that faculty and students can collaborate in meaningful ways that will prompt original research and insights. Also new is the idea that students can engage in original research without constant prodding or over-the-shoulder gazing by the professor and the notion that undergraduate students in the humanities possess a capacity to provide original contributions on their own or in partnership with a professor.

In part, the work of collaboration requires first a reappraisal of what original research entails, how students might engage in it, and how professors might carve out specific tasks in the research process that are learner specific. In short, can the project be divided such that the student can work independently of and in collaboration with the professor on distinct units of research so as to contribute something significant and “original”?

Second, collaborative pedagogy requires a reappraisal of what constitutes authoritative knowledge. Faculty have long maintained that they are the arbiters of what knowledge is and that students have not yet encountered enough of the material germane to the field of study or possess the skills requisite to make that determination. In collaborative pedagogy, authority for making decisions about what constitutes knowledge is redistributed and becomes a negotiated domain where faculty and students participate in its construction.

Third, collaborative pedagogy recognizes the domain of knowledge about anything larger than any one individual can determine. Hence, students can know something about a given topic as well as a professor and may develop lines of inquiry that are quite different from those of their teacher. The cultural, social, and psychological regions of human knowledge production are diversified, and collaborative pedagogy recognizes that one dominant voice may not provide insight as thoroughly as multiple voices speaking about a particular topic.

Jane Vella has written much about education and adult learning in particular. Her comments on adult education name well some of the salient dimensions of collaborative pedagogy: “[It] is based on mutual respect, honors the learners as the subjects of their own learning, and trusts in the power of human beings to work together and communicate in honest dialogue” (xvi).

Collaborative pedagogy is a method for teaching and learning that respects all participants in the learning environment as having something specific to contribute to the overall learning of a group — even if that group is only two people, a faculty member and a student. Quoting Johnson, Johnson, and Smith, Ted Penitz offers basic principles of this pedagogical method. It is a means by which “knowledge is constructed, discovered, and transformed by students. Faculty create the conditions within which students can construct meaning from the material studied by processing it through existing cognitive structures and then retaining it in long-term memory where it remains open to further processing and possible reconstruction.”

This pedagogical method advocates active learning as the dominant mode for student knowledge acquisition. Barkely, Cross, and Howell articulate the method as including three

basic principles: intentional structuring of assignments; co-laboring work in study, research, and writing; and student responsibility for learning. Citing Matthews, they assert, “Collaborative learning occurs when students and faculty work together to create knowledge.... It is a pedagogy that has at its center the assumption that people make meaning together and that the process enriches and enlarges them.” Most of the research around collaborative learning suggests that student learning is heightened through it, that it increases capacity for subsequent study in related and unrelated subjects, and that it aids student retention of knowledge acquired through collaborative means. Overall student satisfaction with one’s collegiate experience has also been shown to improve when students engage in collaborative research.

Collaborative pedagogy is also a method for teaching and learning that does not presume to know what the outcomes might be before a study is undertaken. It is by design collaborative and requires all persons involved — faculty and students — to articulate goals, develop research strategies, and contribute specific pieces or parts to solving or wrestling with an overall research question. Units of study and paths of inquiry are typically divided so as to make the work manageable for students and faculty.

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