

Defining the concept of open collaboration from a sociocultural framework

Eugene Matusov & Cynthia White

This paper attempts to define open collaboration as a type of working together that provides shared ownership for joint activity and promotes opportunities for learning in a safe environment

Table 1 Open collaboration and some other types of joint activity with different areas of participants' mutual engagement¹⁾

Types of joint activity	Participants' mutual engagement in				
	Development of global goals	Solving local problems	Deliberate integration of efforts	Respect for people's agency for actions	Efforts for integration of the activity with other aspects of participants' life
Open collaboration	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Closed (pseudo) collaboration	yes	yes	yes	no	no
Cooperation	no	yes	yes	yes or no	no
Division of labor	yes or no	no	yes	yes or no	yes or no
Competition	no	yes	no	yes or no	no

for all participants. There is growing interest in collaboration in the social sciences, as many researchers have started appreciating the social nature of practices communities, and institutions where individual development occurs. This interest, probably, inspired by some of Vygotsky's (1978) writings, has led some developmental psychologists to examine whether working collaboratively is more productive than working alone. However, recently it has been argued that solo activity and joint activity are two inseparable aspects of any sociocultural activity (Csikszentmihalyi & Sawyer, 1995; Matusov, 1996a). It also has become evident that all sociocultural activities promote individual development, however, what is involved in the development may be drastically different for different activities and forms of participation (Lave, 1993; Rogoff, Mistry, Göncü, & Mosier, 1993; Rogoff, Matusov, & White, 1996).

In examining "desirable" individual development, we believe it is necessary to consider local community definitions of desirable forms of engaging in sociocultural activities that promote a desirable direction of development. For example, some communities emphasize solo activity and explicitly teach their members to engage in this manner. From our personal participation in some specific communities, we have found that "open collaboration" is the critical, but not the only, type of activity organization that promotes our safe learning and "desired" development.

To define open collaboration from a **sociocul-**

tural framework, we will focus on the salient aspects of this type of joint activity (i.e., **areas of participants' mutual engagement in activity**). What we call open collaboration is joint activity where participants mutually engage in defining and developing global goals within the activity itself, solving local problems, coordinating participants' efforts, respecting each other as highest agencies for their own actions, and attempting to integrate their ongoing activity with other aspects of their lives. Open collaboration is illustrated below with an example from an innovative public elementary school, which utilizes an educational philosophy emphasizing shared responsibility for learning and teaching among adults and children (Rogoff, Matusov, & White, 1996). To highlight its salient aspects, we also will contrast open collaboration with some other forms of joint activity (see Table 1).

Development of global goals involves defining what the activity is about; from a sociocultural perspective, this process is always embedded in the activity itself to some degree (Leont'ev, 1981; Matusov, 1996c). In the innovative school, children and adults mutually engage in developing goals of an activity:

... many **co-operators** [parent volunteers] advised taking a flexible approach.

1) A "yes" entry under, say, solving local problems, means that in open collaboration, closed pseudo collaboration, and competition, all participants engage in this area; how local problem are solved may not be the same for the four types of joint activity.

They suggested preparing in advance but not expecting to use much of what **was** prepared, because it is important to go with kids' interests and build on the many "teaching moments" beyond the cooper's structured goals (Rogoff, Matusov, & White, 1996, pp.402-3).

The intertwining of children's emerging interests and the **co-oper's** teaching goals guides and involves children in development of their inquiries and motivation.

Unlike collaboration, **cooperation** does not require the participants of a joint activity to attempt to actively integrate each other's goals and motives of participation (Durkheim, 1933/1964; Leont'ev, 1981). In cooperation, the participants' goals have to be compatible with each other (i.e., realization of global goal of one participant helps to realize global goal of another participant), and coordination is achieved through compartmentalization of the joint activity into individual self-contained actions. For example, the US-USSR alliance against Nazi Germany during World War II did not preclude the allies from plotting against each other in anticipation of victory over Germany and realizing their own global goals of world domination.

Solving local problems involves shared ownership for emerging problems in the activity. For example, in the innovative school, when material supply or interpersonal problems emerge in the activity, a **co-oper** often treats them as learning opportunities with the children rather than **as** annoying obstacles that the adult must resolve by herself (Rogoff, Matusov, & White, 1996).

In contrast, **division of labor** often precludes participants from working together on emerging local problems when the problems occur in areas assigned to or managed by individual participants who may be working remote from their co-workers. For example, a company that produces computer memory chips in Singapore may be unaware of emerging problems of dust settling in hard drives in the assembly line of another company whose plant is located in Malaysia, even if the chips and hard drive will end up in one computer and the companies may be concerned about compatibility of their products.

Deliberate integration of efforts involves attempts to weave participants' purposes together. As one teacher in the innovative school

reported (in Matusov, 1996c), his focus of attention in a collaborative classroom instructional **conversation** with children is on connection of a child's talk with the conversation flow. When the teacher feels that the connection is unclear for the other children, he asks the child to explain or helps the child to do so.

In contrast, **competition** does not promote deliberate integration of efforts. Here, participants try to co-regulate their efforts in a dynamic environment where participants try to seize emerging opportunities for their own use. For example, in boxing, if one fighter drops an arm it opens an opportunity for the opponent to knock him out by co-regulating his reaction to the original action.

Respect for people's agency for actions involves recognition and appreciation that other participants have considerations to their actions that must be worked with rather than worked on. This point has been eloquently argued by Purkey:

Attempting to get others to do what is wanted without involving them in the process is a lost cause. Even if the effort to control people . . . is successful, the energy expended is usually disproportionate to what is accomplished. Each individual is the highest authority on his or her personal existence. Given an optimally inviting environment, each person will find his or her own best ways of being and becoming (Klag, 1994, p.1, describing Purkey's position).

In the innovative school, adults try to collaboratively guide children to learn to be responsible for their own learning and behavior by encouraging the children to be:

. . . making choices and solving problems in ways that fit [children's] individual needs while coordinating with the needs of others and with group functioning. For example, the children clean up the classroom not with threats of punishment or offers of bribes but through developing the understanding . . . that their next project will be easier if they have room to work . . . (Rogoff, Matusov, & White, 1996, p.405)

Although in **closed (pseudo) collaboration** decision making is also based on consensus and broad participation, participants do not consider each other as highest agencies for their own actions within the joint activity context. Often the acknowledgment of the highest agency is removed from the participants in the name of "group," "institution," or "activity" interests. This pseudo collaboration promotes participants' effective surveillance of one another, rigid prioritization of the common cause over individual concerns, and disrespectful coercive relations (e.g., control by guilt) among the participants (see Barker, 1993).

Efforts for integration of the activity with other aspects of participants' life involves participants' acknowledgment that the current activity is embedded in a larger context of all participants and that the activity has to be flexibly prioritized among participants' other needs. Thus, participants' commitment and engagement in the activity has to be negotiated and re-negotiated over time.

In contrast, in **closed (pseudo) collaboration**, all other needs are discounted in favor of the current activity. Barker (1993) describes how in a self-managing workers' team a worker (a single mother) was punished for being late too often because of her sick children. The team seemed to deny the validity of all non-work-related needs that may interfere with the team's goal.

In conclusion, our definition of open collaboration raises questions about several issues that, given more space, would be interesting to consider. For example, would our definition of open collaboration:

- (1) be applicable to very young children for whom intentionality and verbal communicative skills may be less developed;
- (2) address situations when providing respect for individual agency is in conflict with maintaining safe ecology for other participants and the community at large (Matusov, 1996b);
- (3) accommodate people with incompatible (and even hostile) beliefs about values and "desirable" development; and
- (4) address cultural diversity of communities around the globe and in historical time.

References

- Barker, J. R. (1993). Tightening the iron cage: **Concertive** control in self-managing teams. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, **38**(4), 408-437.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. & Sawyer, K. (1995). Creative insight: The social dimension of a solitary moment. In R. J. Sternberg & J. E. Davidson (Eds.), *The nature of insight*. Boston: MIT Press.
- Durkheim, E. (1933/1964). *The division of labor in society*. New York: The Free Press.
- Klag, P. (1994). A new look at Invitational Education. *The Collaborator*, **5** (14), 1-2.
- Lave, J. (1993). The practice of learning. In S. Chaiklin & J. Lave (Eds.), *Understanding practice: Perspectives on activity and context*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Leont'ev, A. N. (1981). The problem of activity in psychology. In J. Wertsch (Ed.), *The concept of activity in Soviet psychology*. White Plains, NY: Sharpe.
- Matusov, E. (1996a). When solo activity is not privileged: Participation and internalization models of development. Manuscript is submitted for *Human Development*.
- Matusov, E. (1996b). *How does a community of learners maintain itself: Ecology of an innovative school*. Unpublished manuscript.
- Matusov, E. (1996c). *In search of sociocultural definition of the notion of goal*. Unpublished manuscript.
- Rogoff, B., Matusov, E., & White, C. (1996). Models of teaching and learning: Participation in a community of learners. In D. Olson & N. Torrance (Eds.), *Handbook of education and human development: New models of learning, teaching, and schooling*. London, UK: Basil Blackwell.
- Rogoff, B., Mistry, J. J., Göncü, A., & Mosier, C. (1993). Guided participation in cultural activity by toddlers and caregivers. *Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development*, **58**, (7, Serial No.236).
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.