

# The Basics of . . . COLLABORATIVE LEARNING

Gregg Walker, Oregon State University and Steve Daniels, Utah State University

## What is Collaborative Learning?

Collaborative Learning is an approach appropriate for natural resource, environmental, and community decision-making situations with the following features: multiple parties, deeply held values, cultural differences, multiple issues, scientific and technical uncertainty, and legal and jurisdictional constraints. It emphasizes activities that encourage systems thinking, joint learning, open communication, constructive conflict management, and a focus on appropriate change.

Collaborative Learning is a hybrid of soft systems methodology (SSM), experiential and adult learning theories, and the alternative dispute resolution (ADR) areas of conflict resolution, mediation and negotiation. Key notions of Collaborative Learning include:

- Re-defining the task away from solving a problem to one of improving a situation.
- Viewing the situation as a set of interrelated systems.
- Defining improvement as desirable and feasible change.
- Recognition that considerable learning--about science, issues, and value differences--will have to occur before implementable improvements are possible.

From ADR, Collaborative Learning incorporates communication methods designed to promote collaborative, mutual gains negotiation. While SSM is not well suited for dealing with differences in deeply held values, collaborative negotiation is. Collaborative Learning respects value differences and provides an opportunity for transforming value disputes into interest disputes. By incorporating features of SSM and ADR, Collaborative Learning promotes working through the issues and perspectives of a situation.

## How does Collaborative Learning work?

Collaborative Learning operates on three levels:

1. As a *philosophy* or orientation
2. As a *framework*
3. As a set of *techniques*

As a public participation or planning team approach, Collaborative Learning encourages people to learn actively, to think systemically, and to learn from one another about a particular problem situation. The first stages of CL workshop project, for example, emphasize common understanding. Activities might include information exchange, imagining best and worst possible futures, and visual representations of the situation, perhaps through the use of "situation maps." In middle stages, CL participants focus on concerns and interests regarding the specific situation, and how those concerns relate to other concerns. Out of these concerns, CL parties identify possible changes that could be made; "situation improvements." In latter stages, the participants debate these improvements, addressing whether or not they represent desirable and feasible changes in the present situation.

Throughout the CL process, participants talk with and learn from one another in groups of various sizes. For example, a CL process may use a "1-2-6" approach to discussing situation improvements. After each CL participant has developed an improvement, she or he discusses that improvement with one other person. Those two join four others and talk about each person's improvements. Within these discussions, active listening, questioning, and argument are respected. People clarify and refine their improvements through dialogue. Collaborative Learning emphasizes "talking with" rather than "talking at."

## What is the role of the sponsoring agency?

Collaborative Learning asks the sponsoring agency (e.g., USDA-Forest Service, State Department of Natural Resources, City of Corvallis) to participate, not as the facilitator or intermediary, but as a major player. The agency may be the decision-maker in the problem situation, but, within a CL process, does not function simply as an arbitrator. Agency personnel participate in CL activities as citizens and as representatives of the agency. Agency participants, just like others in the CL process, share their knowledge and expertise about the situation, ask questions, listen, and debate. Doing so does not compromise the agency's decision authority, but does allow agency personnel to speak from their values and beliefs both as employees and as citizens.

An agency may use Collaborative Learning processes within its organization. It may convene and sponsor Collaborative Learning activities for partnership development or public involvement. When using CL with the public, facilitators must not also be players. CL typically works best when those who direct the process are impartial about the concerns expressed and the improvements proposed.

## What does Collaborative Learning produce?

Collaborative Learning presumes that situations are dynamic, systemic, and changing. CL is a framework that can be adapted to a particular situation to generate:

- Dialogue between diverse communities: scientific, public, administrative.
- Improved understanding of the specific problem situation.
- Integration of scientific and traditional knowledge about the problem situation.
- Increased rapport, respect, and trust among participants.
- Clearly articulated systems-based concerns about the problem situation.
- Tangible improvements in the problem situation.

## How does Collaborative Learning relate to ecosystem-based management?

Collaborative Learning is both philosophically and practically compatible with the basic tenets of ecosystem-based management (ESBM). First, ESBM's commitment to ecological analysis and methods is consistent with CL's emphasis on a "human activity system" view of situations. Second, CL needs the best science and technologies that ESBM features to be a part of CL's learning activities. CL provides a venue for scientific and technical knowledge to be part of the civic discourse. Third, the CL framework adapts well to public participation. CL accommodates open participation, values local knowledge, and respects citizen interest and commitment. Fourth, CL provides the opportunity for the development of shared visions and goals upon which partnerships may be based. Collaborative Learning encourages a holistic, systemic view of a situation. It respects the complexity of a situation in a manner similar to ecosystem-based management.

**What Collaborative Learning is not.**

Collaborative Learning, while beneficial within an complex and controversial policy situation, is no panacea or "silver bullet." It is one of possibly many frameworks that can involve people in meaningful learning and discussion about challenging management and decision situations. It does not stress or demand consensus. It does stress learning, understanding, and the development of improvements in the situation. CL does not foster the development of a group "mentality" or "recommendations." Rather, CL encourages parties to make progress on improving the situation as they work through issues, values, and concerns.

Source: Daniels, S. E., & Walker, G. B. (2001). *Working through environmental conflict: The Collaborative Learning approach*. Westport, CT: Praeger.

**For more information contact:**

Gregg Walker, SPCOMM, Oregon State University. Phone: ; ph: 541-737-5397

Email: [gwalker@orst.edu](mailto:gwalker@orst.edu)

Steve Daniels, WRDC, Utah State University. Phone: ph: 435-797-9732

Email: [sdaniels@ext.usu.edu](mailto:sdaniels@ext.usu.edu)