

**Networking: The Key for collaborative work in Higher Education. Case of the Mexico's Postgraduate Students in Education Network.**

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**Abstract**

The following investigative work presents the importance of collaborative work and how to utilize networks as a vehicle for the development of such a complex competence. This text does not only theorize but also projects the concept in praxis with the presentation of the case of the Mexico's Postgraduate Students in Education Network. This case shows an unprecedented effort that reflects a proactive leadership exhibited by the current generation of Mexico's educational researchers in formation. They have done so by taking the future in their hands with the creation of the necessary conditions that enabled the establishment of an external learning community that has provided them with some of the competencies that society requires from them.

**Collaborative Work, Networking, Educational Investigation, Postgraduate Students.**

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**Introduction**

Higher education institutions as social representations are expected to look beyond their buildings, classrooms, equipment and curricular structure. They should also concentrate some efforts in the complex task of consolidating solid relationships and interactions between the people that are part of their educational community. The combination of the previous two statements will provide the total package that's expected by the current Mexican public policy in higher education.

With this national reality in hand, higher education institutions need to transit from their rigid schemes that only allow the mere transition of facts to their students, into becoming flexible institutions that worry about the formation of competent citizens that after college will be able to be aware, know how and live in a community setting (Delors, 1998).

In order to successfully accomplish the above (Hargreaves, 2001) invites institutions to broaden its horizons by wagering in a more participative, versatile and ambitious school:

"...their is a current tussle between the post industrial and post modern worlds, which is characterized by accelerated changes, an intense concern with time and space, cultural diversity, technology complexity, national insecurity and scientific uncertainty. . . [and on the other hand] the modern educational system which is monolithic, continues on pretending in obtaining profoundly anachronistic goals and in its core possesses inflexible and opaque structures... "

Here were the importance of academic cooperation lies, because it only emerges when their is a common goal at hand and everyone works together in order to achieve global success.

The essence of this collaborative piece is to capture the perception that one can reach its goals only if the other members of the team reach their goals as well. No single team member possesses all the information, abilities and resources that are necessary. Unfortunately, even though teachers definitely have at least one goal in common, its rare to observe them working together, tending to be individualists and highly sensible or unwilling to change for newer methods. Again, no sole institution can reach the mission of forming honest, ethic and humanistic vision driven citizens by them selves; which emphasizes the need external collaborative groups and inter institutional forums of participation.

All the information above should take us into introspection in a personal level to think, when do we take time to evaluate our interpersonal relations and as institutions our collaborative work efforts? How many times do we meet to celebrate our academic successes and analyze our areas of opportunity in these previously mentioned areas? In most of the cases there is neither time nor the necessary space for the required reflection.

**Theoretical Framework**

The attention to all these complex ties inevitably restates the necessity of collaborative work within the academic structure. In the meantime the educational system is still tied to their traditional notions; the organizational rules as a topic only reserved for the administration and the pedagogical matters only to be meddled by the classroom rulers. The classical division of work within the educational field fuels this fragmentation, without stopping to realize there are actually other collaborative strategies.

Some of the strategies that we could are on betting on the establishment of a collaborative work ambiance within the institution, which would allow a joint reflection and discussion between its participants. Discussion that could help identify current or future issues, provide alternatives to those and a space for the follow-up to the given solutions (Clark, 1991).

Another option is the construction of learning communities in which the new teachers and the ones with experience could meet to the ends of exchanging information that could help both reconsider the validity of their current knowledge and believes; only if it helps improve their practice and promotes student learning (Cochran-Smith y Lytle, 2003). This idea is complemented by (Cano, 2003) with the suggestion of a mentorship program that could also satisfy the academic's staff emotional (self confidence and esteem), social (companionship an interpersonal relations) and intellectual needs (past, current and new knowledge) when becoming a part of an institution.

The advancement towards the suggested academic reflection mentioned above could be sparked with the use of techniques such as lectures, academic debates and case analysis studies (Delors, 1998). All together these theoretical proposals crystalize under the following graphic.



Graphic 1 Theoretical Framework

This framework provides a clear demarcation on the context in which collaborative work and networking help promote reflection, serve as a tool for diagnoses and bring group consented actions into the institution.

Methodology

The global scale changes that have been experimented during the last years of the 20th century and the 21st have reflected on the higher education models with the introduction of continuous modifications to its structure and their way of operating. Within the mentioned transformations we should highlight the rupture between the traditional social integration ways, without having been substituted by other alternatives. The Delors report already had warned us about this situation by expressing that it is impossible not to pay attention to the phenomenon most of the world countries are experimenting with the expression of an acute crisis in the lack of nourishment of social bonds (Delors, 1998).

Some of the situations that have helped create this phenomenon are the increasing cultural migrations, the abandonment of the rural areas, the lack of planned urbanization and the rupture on traditional solidarity ways based on proximity. Which is why higher education institutions now need to get out ivory tower (UNESCO, 1998) and take notice on both the context that surrounds them and the demands the disciplinary society to which it belongs demands from them.

The only thing the previous context provides is an area of opportunity to be remedied in part thru the networking as a tool available within the learning communities.

Such strategy is not new inside the Mexican educational research context, since the 60's networks existed (on mathematics education) and since then to 2006 there have been twenty-six identified (Gutierrez, 2009).

Not because of their forty year presence they have lost importance, on the contrary, networking's importance has been renewed into becoming a strategic piece that help academic communities transition from study groups to networks and in time evolve into formal learning communities, process which is shown in the graphic above.

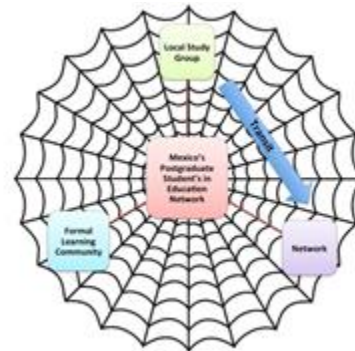


**Graphic 2** Types of collaborative work and their evolution according to their formalization

These spaces provide a helping hand to higher education institutions by aiding them in the challenging task of offering the educational investigators some of the competencies today's society requires from them. Some of these competencies are collaborative work, flexibility, entailment, critical analysis and development of trust (Clark, 1991).

**Results**

Given the revealed importance about collaborative work, two students which are part of the Master's in Administration and Development of Education of the National Polytechnic Institute decided to take initiative and established the Mexico's Postgraduate Student's in Education Network. This action, taken in January 1st, 2014, was taken in order to formalize the informal study group sessions and to expand them by including other higher education institutions that focus on the same topic, which is education.



**Graphic 3** Evolution process of Mexico's Postgraduate Students in Education Network

The network has succeeded in the creation of new, safe and respectful learning spaces in which sixty students members of the network, parting from horizontal relationships, have been able to present their respective discoveries, investigation results and successfully socialized useful information.

The spheres in which the researchers in formation have had the opportunity to do the actions above mentioned are in work meetings, thru virtual networks and towards the construction of the First Student's in Educational Investigation Colloquium.

The innovation of the Students in Educational Investigation Colloquium relies in the fact that it is an academic activity created, coordinated and conducted by the students, not the other way around.

### Conclusions

Through this process the students have learned that the learning process is greatly determined by the quality of the horizontal relations established between the higher institutions actors. They have also realized that working jointly is always a struggle; it is not always easy to unite visions, generate collective strategies and share with others what little or much has been learned. Collaborative work requires a very specific set of tools, but when people recognize many of the mentioned benefits, they know that not doing anything brings more damage than at least trying your best.

As a result we could say that part of the lonely road sometimes researchers walk thru, now it is not so lonely because we think, work and act as a team. Networks support us in the process of identifying that what maybe annoys us as researchers to some other is just a piece of cake. It also provides us with an amplified vision of the context, keeps us informed on new developments and updated in respect to what happens in other campuses that have similar interests as us.

Creating and administrating a network is a huge responsibility but was necessary in order to level the field and provide spaces in which consolidated educational researchers can share their experience to the future generation. Little by little the network has grown, it is not necessarily a sign of success but at least we are taking action, working and growing together in order to reach our collective goals.

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