



Learning Together by Helping One Another

Review of Claude Champagne's most recent book on co-development groups

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There are many ways to harness the potential of collaboration for teaching and learning. In the book *Le groupe de codéveloppement. La puissance de l'intelligence collective* [The co-development group. The power of collective intelligence, Ed.], Claude Champagne and his collaborators present a promising method, that of the co-development group, and testify to how it has allowed them to reflect, find solutions and ultimately change their professional practices.

In a context where the challenges in higher education are complex and diversified, where available resources are limited, where staff recruitment issues are felt in almost all colleges, and where a sense of professional isolation weighs on the morale of the teaching community, the title of this book is intriguing. Could professional co-development groups prove to be a method for supporting, developing, and even changing our practices individually and collectively in order to act effectively toward the college student population? At least, that's what one might think after reading Claude Champagne's recent book on professional co-development groups. The six-step process he proposes is meant to promote the emergence of collective intelligence by allowing participants to take turns presenting a situation that needs to be improved and collaborate on finding solutions.

This book is a valuable resource for teachers, professional staff, and college administrators who wish to set up or facilitate a co-development group. It provides concrete tools, ideas for adapting online development groups, and information on the guiding principles and foundations of the method. For each step of the process, the objective is specified and the roles to be adopted by the different actors of the co-development group are detailed.

The book also includes testimonials, and experience reports provide a glimpse into the possible applications of the development group in a wide range of sectors, including finance, community organizations, and the public sector. A chapter in the book is devoted to the applications of co-development groups in education. Angela Mastracci's text is particularly inspiring with regard to the ways in which pedagogical counsellors can deploy this method in colleges,¹ whether it is to enable teachers to be actively involved in their own development or to enhance their own pedagogical counselling skills.

But what do professional co-development groups consist of and, above all, how are they different from communities of practice, reflective practice or straightforward meetings between colleagues?

Group learning in six steps

From the very first pages, the author specifies that co-development groups should not be associated with other methods or informal trainings focused on individuals or on the mere sharing

¹ On this topic, read Angela Mastracci's exchange with three colleagues in pedagogical counselling, Debby Ann Philie, Anne Kafka, and Jules Massé, on p. 28 of this issue of *Pédagogie collégiale*. It offers an overview of the value that this method can have in terms of professional, pedagogical, and institutional development.

of resources; rather, it is a question of putting collective intelligence at the service of improving professional practices by relying on a structured approach. The author defines the co-development group as:

A structured method for activating the learning of people who believe they can improve, become more aware, more autonomous and more effective in their activities and who want to learn from each other by helping each other in a reflective process involving action and leading to action. In a safe and authentic setting, this individual and collective learning is initiated through an organized process of inquiry and consultation among members, based on current issues that are part of their practice (Champagne, 2021, p. 14).

A co-development group is typically composed of four to eight people, each with a predetermined role. The facilitator is the guardian of the framework and the process; they guide the group throughout the process. During the meetings, the other members take turns acting as a client or consultant. The client is the one who tells the group about the situation they want to change and who asks the consultants for support in finding solutions. The consultants first lead the client to broaden their understanding of the situation by asking open-ended questions, encouraging them to reflect and stimulating their ability to find solutions on their own. Then, they suggest courses of action and put their skills and experience to work for the benefit of the client.

This structured and pragmatic process has six distinct steps, which take place in a supportive, open and confidential space.

1. Presentation: The client presents to the group information about

the situation they wish to change and how they feel about it. During this stage, the consultants actively listen to the client without interrupting.

2. Clarification: The consultants question the client in order to fully understand what they are saying. This is a data collection phase to document the situation to be improved, but also to explore what was attempted by the client and to ensure that all angles of the situation have been covered.

3. Contract: This consists of the formalization of the client's request that will guide the rest of the process. This step allows a common understanding of the request and the contribution desired by the client.

4. Sharing: By putting their skills and experiences to work for the client, consultants contribute to the request. Here, the focus is not on finding the right solution, but

rather on opening up opportunities to present a variety of perspectives.

5. Review and action plan: The client reviews the information received and the suggestions made by the consultants. They then outline the project and identify the first actions they are committed to undertake.

6. Learning and integration: Each member of the group conducts a reflective exercise on the experience, particularly by considering the respect of the process, the attainment of the objectives, the learning achieved as well as the possible transfers to their own practice. At the next meeting, the client will share with the group the actions they have taken and the results obtained.

Outcomes

According to the author as well as the testimonies of several of his collaborators who have experienced it, the success of this approach is based on its simplicity, its accessibility, its pragmatism, and its results. A co-development group is meant to meet the need of professionals to take time out to reflect on a difficult situation in a structured and supportive environment with colleagues.

Another factor is that the proposed approach is meant to encourage the client to take a first step, however small, in order to take action and to consider the situation from new angles, which would give them a greater sense of empowerment. Claude Champagne specifies that co-development groups are not focused on finding or explaining the causes of the situation to be changed, but rather on effective and conscious action. Does this mean that theory and practice are opposed? Is action always the best way to initiate change? To these questions, the author argues that the right to make mistakes is inherent to the values conveyed by this approach.

The positive effects of co-development groups are not limited to the professional domain: the group is also a place for developing relational skills. If the presence of others activates things in and by itself, it is recognized that healthy social relationships and social support are determinant not only in improving a person's happiness and well-being at work, but also in their private life (p. 27).

Limitations

The author and his collaborators are careful not to imply that co-development groups are a panacea for all the problems encountered in professional practice. Moreover, the experience reports presented show that this approach is not suitable for all situations or for all individuals. A certain tolerance for risk, ambiguity and the unpredictable nature of encounters and exchanges is required in order to benefit from it. Whether it is due to personality, hierarchy or cultural considerations, some people may also be uncomfortable exposing their vulnerability to a group of people by exposing a problematic situation or being

questioned on the effectiveness of the actions they have undertaken.

Finally, the emergence of a collective intelligence within the context of a co-development group is only possible if time is allocated to it. It is necessary to plan at least 60-90 minutes to carry out all 6 steps of the process. The group members must commit to a cycle of several meetings so that each participant can play the role of a client at least once.

In the current context, are the benefits worth the investment in resources and time? In this book, the author and his collaborators argue that taking the time to reflect individually and collectively on our practices within a structured process may be a way to gain in efficiency. Will the current craze for co-development groups encourage institutions in the college network to take this gamble? This is certainly what those who, after reading this book, like me, will want to develop their facilitation skills and implement this mutual aid method in their professional environment. ■

Reference

CHAMPAGNE, C. *Le groupe de codéveloppement. La puissance de l'intelligence collective*, Québec, Presses de l'Université du Québec (PUQ), 2021.

* Individual members of the AQPC receive a 20% discount on all books published by PUQ.



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