

# WE Thirst!

By Rich Edelen

**“Respect your fellow human being, treat them fairly, disagree with them honestly, enjoy their friendship, explore your thoughts about one another candidly, work together for a common goal and help one another achieve it.”**

-Bill Bradley

Collaboration as defined by Merriam-Webster online dictionary is to work jointly with others or together especially in an intellectual endeavor. For me, throughout my life, collaboration has been a significant experience; whether it is through athletics or academics, working with others to achieve a similar goal has been the structure that has provided me with success in all that I have done.



Granted, the team is only as strong as the weakest individual on the team; however, with teamwork and collaboration, each individual gains confidence in each other individual on the team, thus allowing for individual growth within the framework of the collaborative effort. I suggest there is no endeavor an individual can undertake without relying on the successful work of a supporting cast, or a cast of equals working behind the scenes. Many may dispute this claim with the existence of individual sports like tennis, golf, bowling and others. Critics of my belief will also attempt to rationalize the success of business moguls like Donald Trump, Bill Gates, and Warren Buffet, as well as the success of politicians like Ted Kennedy, Abraham Lincoln, Rosa Parks, and Winston Churchill as individually successful. Although, without a strong supporting cast and a team that believes in their effort, none of these would be as noticeably successful as they are in our modern society. As stated by George Shinn, owner of the New Orleans Hornets of the NBA, ““There is no such thing as a self-made man. You will reach your goals only with the help of others.”

After seeing the success of teams over my lifetime, it is obvious to me that working together with those around you and with similar goals will provide success for you as an individual, and moreover it will allow for success in whatever your endeavor.



With this in mind, I embark on my journey as an educator and life-long learner. From the beginning of my career as an educator in the outdoor education industry, I witnessed individuals accomplish tasks with the help of their friends, classmates, and teachers that they never would have been capable of accomplishing on their own. For example, young students climbing fifty-feet into the canopy of a tree in order to walk to the other side of a plank attached to a similarly robust tree only to safely repel onto terra firma. Accomplishing this chore, better yet risky maneuver, would not have been possible without the attentiveness of the naturalist guiding them in their struggle, or the audible, and sometimes physical support of their classmates below urging them onward.

As I left educating in the out of doors for the more traditional classroom, I realized that the success of my students was not just reliant on the teamwork of the faculty, administration, and parents, but also on how closely each individual worked within the classroom and the larger community of the school. After settling in my first year, I have worked to make group activities paramount in my eight grade Physical Science classes as well as my senior-level Astronomy course. All of my students work collaboratively in teams outside of the classroom honing their excellence on the court, the field, the stage, and even the podium. Why then, can they not collaborate within the confines of my classroom?

During this past two years, I have embarked on a journey that initially felt like a solo journey. However, over time, I soon realized it was a journey along side like-minded individuals composing a team of graduate students working toward the successful completion of their Master of Art's in Educational Technology (MAET) through the Department of Educational Psychology at Michigan State University. From the beginning, in the Certificate courses, to the capstone course of the Master's track, our instructors stressed collaboration; we participated in group activities like the Point-Counterpoint project

and worked in virtual houses with study buddies. During the former activity, we were placed in groups to argue the pros and cons of technology in education across groups, and the latter activity in the capstone course, we collaborated through critiques of each other's work, refining our ideas, and producing a quality portfolio that adequately represented us, the individual, throughout the course of the entire program.

**“Great teamwork is the only way we create the breakthroughs  
that define our careers.”**

-Pat Riley

Keeping my life-long belief, that collaboration is critical for success, and learning how modern technology allows for creative collaboration in education, I continued my journey in the classroom to get my students to learn from one another and teach each other.

*There is no mistaking the societal trends over the past couple decades from a highly competitive focus, in schools and in industry, toward the need for greater collaboration and teamwork skills.*

**Curtis Bonk.** *The World is Open*, Chapter 8 – Collaborate or Die!

Bonk goes on to describe the prevalence of interconnectivity through Internet activities like blogging, wikis, and video conferencing as well as discussion boards leading the trend toward greater collaboration over the past few decades. Additionally, Bonk cites the abundance of internet connected cell phones and computers as another key reason for the trend toward collaboration.

Again, in the vein of collaboration and using many methods discussed by Bonk, I urge my students to understand why it is critical they learn how to operate with amongst their peers and to learn to think as a group. In doing so, I discuss an anecdote by James Surowiecki presented in his book *Wisdom of Crowds*, in which the author discusses the problem of locating a sunken submarine. The naval operation relied on

many well-respected individuals to attempt to locate the submarine based upon their naval experience and previously known locations; however, no one person was able to locate accurately the fallen submersible. As time went on, more and more people became involved in the search for this sunken vessel and, in doing so, they began pooling their thoughts and thinking as a group. Once the group made a final decision on their best approximation of the location of the submarine, the recovery effort continued. Only this time, their effort was a success. The group located the submarine just a few hundred meters from where they had collaboratively predicted. One further example of the power of group thinking, or collaboration, presented by Surowiecki is the problem of guessing how many jellybeans are contained in a one-liter mason jar. Surowiecki asks individuals in to guess the amount and in most cases, the individual is wrong. However, Surowiecki then puts all the individuals in a group to discuss their thoughts on how many jellybeans can be contained by the jar and to the surprise of the group, their collaborative decision was within one or two jellybeans.



As the late, great NFL coach, Vince Lombardi, stated, “Individual commitment to a group effort -- that is what makes a team work, a company work, a society work, a civilization work.” Keeping this in mind, I ask my students to commit to learning as a group and not to be satisfied until each one of their group members has a clear idea of the concepts discussed and the complexities of any project assigned.

I provide students in my eighth grade classes the opportunity to collaborate in myriad of activities. For instance, on an everyday basis during group work in class, they discuss problems and possible solutions, and then I quiz them, as a group, by choosing one person in the group to answer. Furthermore, I allow this student to conference with their group members, though all members must agree on the correct solution before responding, and I select the student to answer prior to the quiz question. Additionally, students collaborate on group video projects, robotics projects, as well as class and group discussion boards through our Microsoft SharePoint course management system.

As I have discovered in my MAET courses, group discussion boards are hotbeds for debate on ideas and critical analysis of individual thoughts, allowing all group members an equal voice in determining a solution to their given task and addressing any misconceptions from the classroom discussion or demonstration. In my Physical Science classes, these discoveries also hold true. Students that are wallflowers in the traditional classroom have no problem expressing their ideas in the online discussion boards through SharePoint, and, thus, as the year progresses, they become ever more comfortable with expressing themselves in class. Additionally, and luckily, collaboration is an aspect of education my students not only encounter in my class, but they later find collaboration through team work in their outdoor education trips and extra-curricular activities like athletics, robotics, plays, and musicals as they progress into the Upper School.



In addition to the collaboration in my eighth grade classes, I ask my senior Astronomy students to collaborate throughout the year as well. Students work in groups to make presentations on topics discussed in the classroom, through cross-curricular art projects, and through quarterly video interviews of the public at Griffith Park Observatory.

With regard to the latter example of group work in my Astronomy class, I ask students to choose at least three misconceptions in physics and astronomy and study them in detail. Next, I require them to submit a list of questions they have accumulated through their research and decide upon who will interview willing members of the public and who will video the interviews. After videotaping the interviews and their visit to the Observatory, students must then edit their interviews and produce a five-minute video interlaced with music for sharing with the larger collaborative learning community through YouTube.

In conclusion, collaboration has been a critical part of my growth as a member of many communities, such as my current employer, the MAET program, discovery of natural wonders, research, extreme activities, and through working with my students in gaining an understanding of concepts discussed in class. Additionally, my students are not just gaining skills for working toward a great grade and understanding of concepts, they are gaining 21<sup>st</sup> century literacy skills that will help them in all facets of

their life. Curtis Bonk furthers the discussion on group work, by saying, “collaboration is not just a highly acclaimed social-phenomena, it is a vital learning principal.” I agree with Bonk’s statement here and I am ecstatic over the lessons I have learned through the MAET courses and the required collaboration. Every day I work with my partners, I learn and I teach. This program has allowed me assurance on my beliefs of the strength of group work and collaboration. Every day, we encounter people and have the choice to work and learn with them, or work against them. It is our nature to work together, we thirst for companionship and we thirst for knowledge. Without collaboration, our thirst goes on and we die, either mentally or physically.



**“We must remember that one determined person can make a significant difference, and that a small group of determined people can change the course of history.”**

**-Sonia Johnson (American feminist, activist and writer)**

## Bibliography

All quotes – [www.ThinkExist.com](http://www.ThinkExist.com)

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Chapter 8 – Collaborate or Die!

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