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The Role of Cooperative Learning In the Teaching of Community and Developmental Subjects: The Case of Teaching History at Secondary School Level

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Abstract

In this conceptual paper we argue the case for cooperative learning. Generally teachers have the option of structuring lessons competitively, individualistically, or cooperatively. Students can compete to see who is best, or work individualistically toward a goal without paying attention to other students, or work cooperatively with a vested interest in each other's learning as well as their own. From our experience as teachers and lecturers in the humanities, we observe that, of the three interaction patterns, competition is presently the most dominant. A vast majority of students view school as a competitive enterprise where one tries to do better than other students. Cooperation among students-who celebrate each other's successes, encourage each other to do homework, and learn to work together regardless of ethnic backgrounds or whether they are male or female, bright or struggling, disabled or not, is still rare. In this paper we therefore examine the role and effectiveness of cooperative learning in the teaching of History at secondary school level showing both its strengths and drawbacks. We conclude that cooperative learning makes learning real and meaningful because it relates well with everyday life experiences of the learners.

Key words: cooperative learning, teaching, History, students, secondary school.

1. Introduction

As observed by Keraro,*et al.* (2007), the teaching approach that a teacher adopts is a strong factor that influences students' motivation to learn. Teachers have the option of structuring lessons competitively, individualistically, or cooperatively. Hence they motivate learners differently. It has been, however, argued that since society is highly competitive; learners must be educated to succeed in a "survival for the fittest" world. Hence competition is presently the most dominant approach to teaching and learning. Competition by its nature creates winners and losers. Yet knowledge is a social construction for it is socially constructed in collaborative groups (Alexpoulou and Driver, 1996; Bianchin, 1997; Kelly and Green, 1998).This paper, thus argues the case for cooperative learning in the teaching of History at secondary school level showing both its strengths and drawbacks. The paper starts by briefly exploring the concept of competitive learning and other important concepts in the paper before making an exposition of cooperative learning and its effectiveness in the teaching of History at secondary school level.

Statement of the Problem

From our experience as teachers and lecturers at high school, college and university level we observe that teaching is highly dominated by the competitive approach to teaching and learning. We also note with concern that this dominant approach to teaching and learning creates a few winners and countless losers. Yet there is a better approach to teaching and learning in form of cooperative learning. Cooperative learning with its constructivist approach to teaching and learning argues the case for students working together in their endeavors to solve their learning problems. We understand that this approach promotes innovation and

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creativity if properly administered in a social setting. It is this conflicting situation between practice in the classroom and the desired situation that triggers us into researching and writing this paper. The paper thus explores the value of cooperative learning, not only in the school setting, but in the total human universe.

Statement of Purpose

This paper sought to investigate the usefulness of cooperative learning as compared to traditional competitive approaches to learning. The paper argues the case for cooperative learning in teaching and learning, using History at secondary school as case study.

2. Conceptual Framework

In this paper we are guided by the constructivist theory of learning as our conceptual framework. The theory is built on the belief that an effective teacher is nothing more than simply a facilitator. As a facilitator a teacher creates an environment in which learners organise meaning on a personal level (Cooper and Robinson, 2002). We believe that a teaching strategy that involves students actively is more likely to lead to socio-economic creativity and meaningful learning. This cannot be achieved through conventional approaches to learning.

The Case for Cooperative Learning

Competitive learning isan interpersonal, competitive learning situation characterised by negative goal interdependence where, when one person wins, the others lose (Roger and Johnson, 1994).Individualistic learning situations are those situations where students are independent of one another and are working towards criteria where their success depends on their own performance in relation to established criteria. The success or failure of other students does not affect their score (Ibid).Cooperative learning is defined as involving the structuring of small groups so that students work together to maximize their own and each other's learning (Ibid). Felder and Brent (2007) say the term refers to students working in teams on an assignment or project under conditions in which certain criteria are satisfied, including that the team members be held individually accountable for the complete content of the assignment or project. Thus in a cooperative learning situation, interaction is characterized by positive goal interdependence with individual accountability. Positive goal interdependence requires acceptance by a group that they sink or swim together (Roger and Johnson, 1994).

Cooperative Learning is one of the appropriate teaching techniques which lead to less anxiety and increase students' self-awareness from their learning procedure (Powel and Enright, 1990). Cooperative Learning offers a pleasant learning situation for all students, competition is amended as friendship, the spirit of cooperation and participation is reinforced, and all students are entitled to be thoughtful and creative (Keramati, 2001). In this technique students are gathered within small, peculiar groups in which they work together to reach their objectives and are responsible for their learning (Johnson and Johnson 1994). In fact cooperative learning is organised and managed groupwork in which students work cooperatively in small groups to achieve academic as well as affective and social goals. In hundreds of studies, cooperative learning has been associated with gains in such variables as achievement, interpersonal skills, and attitudes toward school, self, and others (Cohen, 1994; Johnson and Johnson, 1989; Sharan, 1980: Slavin, 1990). Beyond these overall gains, research also suggests that cooperative learning may lead to gains in thinking skills (Johnson and Johnson, 1990; Qin, Johnson and Johnson, 1995). Therefore, as a classroom organisation and instructional method, cooperative learning merits serious consideration for use in History lessons.

The main purpose of cooperative learning is to actively involve students in the learning process; a level of student empowerment which is not possible in a lecture format. The underlying premise is founded in constructivist epistemology. It is a process which requires knowledge to be discovered by students and transformed into concepts to which the students can relate. The knowledge is then reconstructed and expanded through new learning experiences. Learning takes place through dialogue among students in a social setting. The approach employs a variety of learning activities to improve students' understanding of a subject by using a structured approach which involves a series of steps, requiring students to create, analyze

and apply concepts (Kagan, 1990). Cooperative learning utilizes ideas of Vygotsky, Piaget, and Kohlberg in that both the individual and the social setting are active dynamics in the learning process as students attempt to imitate real-life learning. By combining teamwork and individual accountability, students work towards acquiring both knowledge and social skills. It is a teaching strategy which allows students to work together in small groups with individuals of various talents, abilities and backgrounds to accomplish a common goal. Each individual team member is responsible for learning the material and also for helping the other members of the team learn. Students work until each group member successfully understands and completes the assignment, thus creating an atmosphere of achievement (Panitz, 1996). It is argued that this process results in a deeper understanding of the material and more potential to retain the material.

According to Roger and Johnson (1994), there is a difference between simply having students work in a group and structuring groups of students to work cooperatively. A group of students sitting at the same table doing their own work, but free to talk with each other as they work, is not structured to be a cooperative group, as there is no positive interdependence. Perhaps it could be called individualistic learning with talking. For this to be a cooperative learning situation, there needs to be an accepted common goal on which the group is rewarded for its efforts. If a group of students has been assigned to do a report, but only one student does all the work and the others go along for a free ride, it is not a cooperative group. A cooperative group has a sense of individual accountability that means that all students need to know the material or spell well for the whole group to be successful. Putting students into groups does not necessarily gain a cooperative relationship; it has to be structured and managed by the teacher (Roger and Johnson, 1994).

According to Adams and Hamm (1990) a cooperative learning lesson often begins with some direct instruction where the teacher presents new material. This is followed by cooperative groupwork. During the group work, students often take on roles in order to help them feel responsible for participating and learning. The teacher monitors groups to see that they are learning and functioning smoothly. Team spirit is stressed with students learning how to learn by participation with their peers (Kagan, 1994).

Teachers who use cooperative learning have learning objectives that are academic, affective and social. Students are encouraged not to think only of their own learning but of their group members as well. Cooperation becomes a theme, not just a teaching technique (Jacobs, 1997). Further, cooperation features throughout the school like in teachers cooperating with one another and letting their students know about this collaboration (Jacobs, Lee and Ng, 1997).

Communication is structured very differently in cooperative learning classes. Because students learn in collaboration, they consequently engage in extensive verbal negotiations with their peers. The cooperative group provides a more intimate setting that permits such direct and unmediated communication (Shachar and Sharan, 1994). Such a context, proponents of cooperative learning believe, is key to students engaging in real discussion and wrestling with ideas. In this context then, students will be given opportunities to stretch and extend their thinking.

3. Benefits of Cooperative Learning in History

Above all, History is an interactive subject about life, especially life as influenced by human beings. As such History can simply be seen as nothing else but reality. The best teacher of reality is experience. This is what cooperative learning offers to History students. Panitz (1996) lists over 50 benefits provided by cooperative learning. These benefits can be summarised into four major categories: social, psychological, academic and assessment.

Cooperative learning promotes social interactions; thus students of History benefit in a number of ways from the social perspective. By having the students explain their historical reasoning and conclusions, cooperative learning helps develop oral communication skills. Because of the social interaction among students, cooperative learning is not only used to help students empathize with the people that lived on earth before them, but also to model the appropriate social behaviours necessary for employment situations. By following the appropriate structuring for cooperative learning, students are able to develop and practice skills

that will be needed to function in both their communities and the workplace. As already alluded to above, these skills include: leadership, decision-making, trust building, communication and conflict-management.

The cooperative environment also develops a social support system for students. In a History lesson setup this would not only refer to other students, the History teacher, administrators, other school staff and parents but also those who lived long back become integral parts of the learning process supplying multiple opportunities for support to the students (Kessler and McCleod 1985). Students also benefit psychologically from cooperative learning. Johnson and Johnson (1989) claim, "cooperative learning experiences promote more positive attitudes" toward learning and instruction than other teaching methodologies. This would mean students develop positive attitudes towards History as a subject. Because students play an active role in the learning process in cooperative learning, student satisfaction with the learning experience is enhanced.

Cooperative learning also helps to develop interpersonal relationships among students. The opportunity to discuss their ideas in smaller groups and receive constructive feedback on those ideas helps to build student self-esteem. In a lecture format, individual students are called upon to respond to a question in front of the entire class without having much time to think about his/her answer. Cooperative learning creates a safe, nurturing environment because solutions come from the group rather than from the individual. Errors in conclusions and thought processes are corrected within the group before they are presented to the class.

Students also tend to be inspired by instructors who take the time to plan History activities which promote an encouraging environment (Janke, 1980). Receiving encouragement in a cooperative setting from both the instructor and peers helps to develop higher self-efficacy. As a result of higher self-efficacy, student grades tend to increase; thus, cooperative learning methods provide several academic benefits for History students.

Research indicates that students who were taught by cooperative methods learned and retained significantly more information than students being taught by other methods. Requiring students to verbalize their ideas to the group helps them to develop more clear concepts; thus, the thought process becomes fully embedded in the students' memory. Discussions within the groups lead to more frequent summarization because the students are constantly explaining and elaborating, which in turn validates and strengthens thoughts. Students also benefit from cooperative learning academically in the sense that there is more of a potential for success when students work in groups. Individuals tend to give up when they get stuck, whereas a group of students is more likely to find a way to keep going (Johnson and Johnson, 1990). Cooperative learning calls for self-management from students because they must come prepared with completed assignments and they must understand the material which they have compiled. As a result, a more complete understanding of the historical material is developed.

There are also many benefits of cooperative learning from the aspect of assessment. It provides instant feedback to the students and instructor because the effectiveness of each class can be observed. As instructors move around the room and observe each group of students interacting and explaining their theories, they are able to detect misconceptions early enough to correct them. Only a few minutes of observation during each class session can provide helpful insight into students' abilities and growth. Cooperative teaching methods also utilize a variety of assessments. Grades are not dependent solely on tests and individual assignments which only allow for right or wrong responses, leaving little or no room for reflection and discussion of error or misconceptions. With cooperative learning, History teachers can use more authentic assessments such as observation, peer assessment and writing reflections.

4. Drawbacks of Cooperative Learning In the Teaching of History

History teachers who are unfamiliar with cooperative learning are likely to face a number of challenges, some of which include loss of control of their classroom, being unsure of the techniques used or possibly even think that it is too time consuming. It is also believed that to avoid drawbacks of cooperative teaching it is important to recognize what has been said against it. Many researchers have proved that cooperative elements alone do not ensure maximal productivity from a learning group; there has to be both cooperation

and conflict (Johnson and Johnson, 1991). Group work practices have been criticized as being ineffective because many problems like conflicts of ideas, disagreements, misunderstanding and free riders can be found during the processes of the strategy.

As put forward by Johnson and Johnson (1990), it has been viewed that when students interact conflicts among their ideas, conclusions, theories, information, views, opinions and preferences are obvious. Furthermore, when cooperative groups fail, there is the tendency to fix blame on others and the weaker group members become the scapegoat. Therefore, misunderstanding might rise up. There are still some cases where pupils, even in small groups, tend to be silent participants and depend on the thinking of other students.

As already seen above cooperative learning is a structured approach that requires instructor support and guidance. In order for cooperative learning to be utilized in the classroom, history teachers must receive training to be proficient in implementing the techniques. Without proper training history teachers may resist using cooperative learning techniques in their classroom because they are afraid they may lose control of their teaching routine. Teachers may have a difficult time giving up their control of the content that is being covered (Panitz, 1996). They are accustomed to presenting the curriculum to the students and are unable to give students the freedom to learn on their own. Showing their expertise in History is important for some teachers. Giving up the opportunity to show off this expertise may deter them from using cooperative learning in their classrooms. Also, if students are expected to explore on their own, then they may have questions that the teacher cannot answer. Both of these possibilities may cause a teacher to lose confidence in her/his teaching abilities. History teachers can still be experts, but they will be using their knowledge as a facilitator rather than a giver of information.

Depending on the age level, History students may resist using cooperative learning in their classrooms. Lecture does not require much interaction and participation from the students; therefore, they can get as much or as little from the class as they like. Being required to work in a group may ruffle a few feathers with the students because now they are being asked to participate and contribute to their learning. In addition, they are also asked to learn new concepts and taught how to work in a group. They may not be accustomed to working in a group, and therefore, may be unsure of the dynamics involved in group work.

Since cooperative learning is centred on group work, History students may be concerned that other members of their group are going to bring their grades down. This is especially true if students are grouped by mixed ability, requiring higher ability students to guide lower ability students. Deciding how groups should be formed is an important part of the cooperative learning planning process. There has been some debate as to how groups should be formed in order for students to effectively work together and reach their maximum potential. Mixed ability grouping allows for all group members to be involved, though the type of involvement differs. Advanced students can teach struggling students, but concerns arise about advanced students doing all the work and struggling students not being motivated to be involved at all. There are also concerns that gifted students are held back by the lower ability students in their group. If students are grouped with others of the same ability level, then the lower ability group may feel frustrated and unmotivated to try. Also when cooperative groups fail, there is the tendency to fix blame on others and the weaker group members become the scapegoat. Therefore, misunderstanding might rise up. There are still some cases where pupils, even in small groups, tend to be silent participants and depend on the thinking of other students.

5. Conclusion

It is thus concluded that cooperative learning is very useful and very effective in teaching History depending on the expertise of the teacher and orientation of the students. The most important requirement for an effectively structured cooperative History lesson is that students believe that they sink or swim together. Within cooperative learning situations, students have two responsibilities: learn the assigned historical material, and ensure that all members of the group learn the assigned material. This promotes positive interdependence. Positive interdependence exists when History students perceive that they are linked with

group mates in such a way that they cannot succeed unless their group mates do (and vice versa) and/or that they must coordinate their efforts with the efforts of their group mates to complete a task. Positive interdependence promotes a situation in which students see that their work benefits group mates and their group mates' work benefits them; and work together in small groups to maximize the learning of all members by sharing their resources to provide mutual support and encouragement and to celebrate their joint success. Like any other teaching methods, cooperative learning has its own peculiar weaknesses but these can be effectively handled with proper orientation and expertise.

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