

Cooperative Learning: A Theoretical Perspective

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Abstract

Cooperative learning has been the centre of research in the past century due to its positive outcomes. Cooperative learning is a group learning activity wherein each learner in a group is held accountable for his or her learning and is motivated to increase the learning of others. It can also be regarded as classroom environment where students interact with one another in small groups to achieve a common goal. Cooperative learning works so well on all the teaching dimensions. It is a successful strategy which enhances active learning among students. The present paper analyses the theoretical implications of Cooperative learning.

I. Introduction

The crux of cooperative learning lies in the cooperation among students inside the classroom. This teaching method can be practiced at all age group and no matter whether it is kindergarten students or university students. Cooperative learning has been applied to various fields and is found to be very effective. Parker (1994) defines the small group cooperative learning as classroom environment where students interact with one another in small groups while working together on academic tasks to attain the common goal.

The important aspect of cooperative learning is students work in small groups and help each other in learning process. According to Cooper, Robinson and Mckinney (1994), the group's success may not be possible unless each member contributes the part very well. In order to achieve the goal each member should help each other. The achieved success is a group success that is achieved with the contribution of every member.

In the cooperative learning educational design, students and teachers are in great cooperation with each other and together bring intimate learning and social atmosphere in the classroom. In contradiction to the conventional teaching classrooms, cooperative learning promotes student centred climate in the classroom. In such classrooms students feel more relaxed. Learners construct deep understanding of the material in a cooperative learning environment because they have to evaluate, integrate and elaborate on their existing knowledge. Cooperative learning represents the best means to acquire mastery over the material. Loertscher (2007) reports that, in cooperative learning, the teacher's role is that of an organizer, moderator, helper, evaluator, and information resource as opposed to transmission model where the teacher serves as an information dominator or knowledge provider. Plenty of research studies defines students perform well when they are exposed to cooperative learning than on traditional or conventional teaching method.

DEFINITIONS OF COOPERATIVE LEARNING

Cooperative learning has been defined variously by the practitioners in education all over the world. Given below are some of the definitions of cooperative learning.

Olsen and Kagan (1992) states:

Cooperative learning is group learning activity organized so that learning is dependent on the socially structured exchange of information between learners in groups and each learner is held accountable for his or her learning and motivated to increase the learning of others. (p.8)

PRINCIPLES OF COOPERATIVE LEARNING

Positive Interdependence

The main principle in any cooperative learning technique is positive interdependence. Students in a cooperative learning environment fully participate and put forth maximum efforts to complete tasks within the group. Each member of the group is responsible for the work that is assigned and each one should make sure everyone in the group learns the assigned material. Positive interdependence works when learners are associated with fellow group members in such a way that they cannot succeed unless other members in the group do and vice versa. Every group member has to coordinate work together for the completion of the task. Positive interdependence creates the commitment to each other's success.

Promotive Interaction

Promotive interaction can be defined as each member assists and encourages one another for the completion of the assigned task in order to reach the group's success. This involves peer tutoring, temporary

assistance, exchange of information and material, challenging the concepts of others, giving feedback and encouragement. Students learn how to overcome problems and complete the task that has been assigned. Promotive interaction matters when students support and facilitate each others' efforts to complete tasks in order to reach the group's goals.

Individual accountability

In a cooperative learning environment, each member of the group is completely responsible for the task assigned to him or her. Each member should master the work that is being assigned. The group's success is assessed based on the contribution by each member. Individual accountability matters when each member is held responsible for the team's success. One of the most important factors in cooperative learning is individual accountability.

Social skills

In order to accomplish the group's task inter personal and intra personal skills are necessary. Each member must have a good communication skill. It is necessary for the members to get to know each other, accept and support each other to resolve the conflicts. Imparting good social skills among students guarantees good interaction and thus builds good working relationships. Decision making, trust building, communication, conflict management, leadership are all included in the needed social skills. Many students lack these because they are not exposed to cooperative learning environment. Johnson, Johnson and Smith (1991) observes, the more socially skilful students are, and the more attention instructors pay to teaching and rewarding the use of social skills, the higher the achievement that can be expected.

Group Processing

Group processing is another important element of Cooperative learning. Group's effectiveness is frequently assessed, and decision is taken on how it can be improved. It is necessary to have effective working relations among group members to achieve success. Members in the group should be able to make decision whenever needed. Johnson and Johnson recommend five steps to improve the quality of the group work.

- 1) To assess the quality of interaction among the group members as they work to maximise each other's understanding.
- 2) To examine the process by which the group does its work to give each learning group feedback.
- 3) Set goals for improving their effectiveness.
- 4) Conduct whole class processing session.
- 5) Conduct small group and whole class celebrations.

COOPERATIVE LEARNING AND SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

Cooperative learning has been the focus of research in English language teaching over decades. The four aspects which are important while learning a second language are listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Second Language Acquisition means learning a foreign or subsequent language in other words, it is a process by which people learn languages in addition to their native language. Studies predict that cooperative learning methods are favourable in learning a second language.

McGroarty (1993) states:

Cooperative learning provides a powerful tool for language acquisition because it establishes an instructional context that supports many of the aspects of language development taken as central by theories. (P.20)

Cooperative learning advocates teaching language skills through interactive methods. Student centeredness in the classroom provides ample opportunities in learning a second language. Students feel more comfortable in a cooperative learning environment and their inhibition for using a second language decreases. Slavin (1995) claims that students engaged in cooperative learning develops higher level thinking skills, improved interpersonal skills, greater intrinsic motivation, heightened self-esteem and positive attitude towards learning. Students acquire a second language much easier and faster when exposed to a cooperative learning environment.

Johnson and Johnson (1999) emphasises that cooperative learning helps to develop the language skills of the learners. Compared to competitive and individual learning, cooperative learning results in greater student achievement. Kagan (1995) highlights the point that single greatest advantage of cooperative learning over traditional classroom organization for the acquisition of the language was the amount of language output per student. Studies in second language acquisition reveal that cooperative learning is potentially beneficial for ESL students in many ways.

COOPERATIVE LEARNING STRATEGIES

Cooperative learning has been proclaimed as an effective instructional method for teaching different subjects. Discussed below is some of the important cooperative learning methods.

Student Team Achievement Division (STAD)

This method was developed by Slavin in 1983. Heterogeneous learning teams are arranged by the teacher in the STAD method. Students then studies worksheets based on material presented by the teacher. Teams practice studying together but tests are taken individually. The individual scores contribute to an overall team score. This encourages each student to work because each contribution matters. According to Slavin, Teams work together in peer tutoring format to learn the material. Often team members either quiz each other or use worksheets to guide and discuss information to be mastered.

Teams Games Tournaments (TGT)

TGT follows the same classroom format as STAD except mastery is demonstrated through competition in a classroom environment. This tournament is played between three similarly scoring students from different teams. Individual player scores contribute to their team score. As in STAD, recognition serves as a tool to motivate students to help one another. Slavin (1995) reports: Team Game Tournament is identical to STAD except in its use of academic game instead of quizzes. Its effects are similar to those found for STAD. For the game students from different teams are placed in groups of three students of comparable ability. Although study teams stay together for six weeks, game table composition changes weekly.

The Jigsaw Method

In this cooperative learning technique, which was developed by Eliot Aronson et al (1978), group mates share information with each other. Students begin in their home group team. Each home group member is given information on one part of an overall topic. Students become expert on one aspect of the lesson, meet in expert groups, and help others in their group to learn the material. Success is measured through individual quizzes.

Team Accelerated Instruction (TAI)

Team Accelerated instruction is an approach to mathematics instruction developed by Slavin for elementary and early middle grades students. This method combines individual and team learning. Students work at their own level on math worksheets. Others in their group check the worth with the help of answer sheets. This enables students to help each other even if they are working at different level. Team rewards are based on individual productivity and accuracy.

Cooperative Integrated Reading and Composition (CIRC)

This technique is an adaptation of STAD specifically designed for teaching reading and writing. Student pairs from different reading groups work together on reading and writing tasks such as identifying main ideas, writing drafts, vocabulary, and spelling. As with TAI, students work with others but their own level. Team rewards are based on individual improvement scores.

Group Investigation

This technique was developed by Shlomo Sharan (1992). In this technique, students work together on projects. The whole class works on one overall theme, with each group investigating one aspect of the theme. Each group decides how it will conduct the investigation and assigns tasks to the members. Groups plan and carry out presentations of their findings to the whole class. Finally students collaborate with teachers to evaluate their effort. It is a kind of advanced cooperative learning with the teachers' role being that of facilitating investigation and helping to maintain cooperative norms in the classrooms.

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