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Cooperative Learning Vs. Small-Group Discussions and Group

Projects: The Critical Differences

Subject/Discipline:

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Text Body: In ["Collaborative & Cooperative Learning in

Higher Education: A Taxonomy," Cooperative

Learning in Higher Education, Winter 1992] a

taxonomy was proposed to bring some clarity to

the myriad forms of learning that have been

loosely referred to as Collaborative/Cooperative

in American higher education. The present

article, continuing this quest for identity

delineates the key differences between

Cooperative Learning (CL) and two other forms of

small-group learning used in higher education:

small-group discussions and group projects.

Cooperative Learning may be defined as a

learner-centered instructional process in which

small, intentionally selected groups of 3-5

students work interdependently on a well-defined

learning task; individual students are held

accountable for their own performance and the

instructor serves as a facilitator/consultant in

the group-learning process.

More specifically, CL can be operationally

defined in terms of six procedural elements,

which when implemented together, distinguish it

from other forms of small-group learning in

higher education.

1. Intentional Group Formation

In contrast to traditional methods of small-group

learning, such as small-group discussions and

group projects, in which students often select

their own group members or groups are randomly

formed by the instructor, CL typically begins

with the intentional selection of group members

on the basis of predetermined criteria which have

been deliberately designed to potentiate the

positive effects of smallgroup learning. For

instance, groups may be dcliberatcly formed to

maximize heterogeneity and diversity of

perspectives by grouping students with different:

(a) levels of academic achievement (e.g.,

high-low-medium GPAs), (b) learning styles (e.g.,

deep processors and shallow processors), (c)

academic majors, (d) personality profiles (e.g.,

as measured by the MBTI), (e) ethnic or racial

backgrounds, (f) geographical backgrounds, (g)

gender, (h) ages (e.g., traditional and reentry

students) or (i) class standing (e.g.,

lowerdivision and upper-division students), or

some combination of these selection criteria.

The criteria for determining group composition

may vary depending on the instructor's objectives

or the characteristics of students in the class,

but the essential factor is that group formation

is not left to chance; instead, careful

forethought is given to the question of who

comprises each learning group in an attempt to

create the optimal social learning environment.

2. Continuity of Group Interaction

In contrast to traditional small-group

discussions or buzz groups, which typically group

students sporadically for a relatively short

period of time, CL groups typically meet

regularly over an extended period of time. This

allows for continuity of interaction among group

members and creates the opportunity for social

cohesion and bonding to develop among group

members. In this fashion, CL groups are given the

time needed to evolve into a tightly-knit social

network.

3. Interdependence Among Group Members

Rather than simply allowing students to interact

in small groups and then hoping they will do so

in a cooperative manner, CL incorporates specific

procedures designed to create a feeling of group

identity among students and collective

responsibility for one another's learning. The

following procedures are used to increase the

likelihood that this sense of positive

interdependence develops within CL groups:

(a) Group production of a common product at the

end of the Cooperative Learning experience.

In contrast to the usual discussion, or buzz

group which gets together for informal discussion

of some courserelated issue, each CL group is

expected to generate a formal product which

represents a concrete manifestation of the

group's collective effort (completion of a work

sheet; a compendium or chart of specific ideas;

an overhead transparency which can be displayed

to other groups). The objective of working toward

a clearly defined, common goal is essential for

keeping individual students on task and focused

on a group goal.

(b) Assignment of interdependent roles for each

group member.

A sense of individual responsibility to the group

may be increased if each group member has a

specific and essential role to play in achieving

the group's final goal or product. For instance,

individuals within the group could be assigned

the following interdependent roles: group

manager--who assures that the group stays on task

and that all members actively contribute; group

recorder--who keeps a written record of the

group's ideas; group spokesperson--who is

responsible for verbally reporting the group's

ideas to the instructor or other groups; and

group processor? who monitors the social

interaction or interpersonal dynamics of the

group process. Roles can also be assigned on the

basis of different perspectives that group

members are expected to contribute to the final

product--e.g., historical, ethical, economic, or

global, etc. (For further information on this

concept of assigning multiple roles for purposes

of achieving multiple perspectives, see

"Cooperative Learning: Implications for Liberal

and General Education" in Cooperative Learning &

College Teaching, Winter, 1992.) Such role

specialization assures that each individual has

an explicit and well differentiated

responsibility to the group throughout the

learning process. A further advantage of role

specialization is that the quality of each

member's contribution can be more readily

identified and assessed by the instructor, thus

allowing for individual grading and individual

accountability--which is one critical feature of

CL.

(c) Team-building activities designed to produce

a sense of group identity and social

cohesiveness.

Such activities would include ice breakers or

warm-up activities when groups are first formed

(e.g., namelearning and personal

informationsharing); taking team photos; creating

team names; providing explicit suggestions and

concrete recommendations for promoting

cooperation and teamwork (e.g., exchanging phone

numbers with other group members; reviewing

individual lecture notes as a group; seeking

feedback from group members on individual course

assignments; encouraging group study sessions,

etc.) The underlying rationale for these

team-building activities is to create a social

and emotional climate conducive to the

development of an esprit de corps and a sense of

intimacy among the group's members, thus enabling

them to feel comfortable in future CL tasks that

will require them to express their personal

viewpoints, disagree with others and reach

consensus in an open, non-defensive fashion. The

key assumption here is that the potential

cognitive benefits of small-group learning are

more likely to be realized in a social context

characterized by group cohesiveness, mutual

trust, and emotional security. Furthermore, such

explicit attention to the social and emotional

aspects of small-group dynamics may be

instrumental in fostering social support and

emotional ties among peers--which are factors

known to have a significant impact on student

retention.

(d) Provision of individual rewards as an

incentive for promoting group interdependence.

This has been the most hotly debated CL strategy

for creating group interdependence because it

involves extrinsic rewards for cooperative

behavior. For example, if an individual student

improves her score from one exam to the next,

then all group members are rewarded by gaining

extra (bonus) points toward their individual

course grades. Or, if each group member's

performance exceeds a certain criterion (e.g.,

each group member achieves a score of at least

90%), then all members of the group receive bonus

points toward their individual course grade.

Some practitioners of CL oppose these strategies

because they feel it is unnecessary--students

will be intrinsically motivated to cooperate and

take responsibility for helping others as long as

they are given a well-defined task and the

opportunity to work together. Other practitioners

feel that providing extrinsic rewards for helping

others tends to destroy intrinsic motivation for

behaving cooperatively and altruistically.

However, those who do use these incentives feel

that, if group performance rewards are not large

(e.g., representing extra bonus points only,

rather than a significant portion of the course

grade), then such incentives can serve to promote

group interdependence and increase academic

achievement (Slavin, 1989).

Since the issue of whether or not to use

extrinsic rewards for promoting interdependent

behavior in CL groups is still unresolved at the

precollegiate level and has yet to be

investigated at the college level, it is perhaps

best to consider this strategy as an optional,

rather than essential procedure for promoting

group interdependence.

4. Individual Accountability

Though procedures for ensuring interdependence

and cooperation among group members are essential

elements of CL, students are graded individually,

i.e., all group members do not receive the same

group grade (in contrast to most group projects).

Recent educational research consistently supports

the importance of personal accountability and

individual grading for realizing many of the

positive outcomes of CL. This precollegiate

research is reinforced by findings reported by

social psychologists on the phenomenon of social

loafing--i.e., the effort produced by individuals

will decrease when they arc placed in a group,

unless the output or effort of each individual is

uniquely identifiable (Williams, Hark ins, &

Latane, 1981). These research data are consistent

with familiar, anecdotal reports of

high-achieving students who often contend that

they dislike group projects in which all group

members receive the same group grade because

their individual effort and contribution to the

group's final product often exceeds the efforts

of their less motivated teammates--who

incquitably receive the same grade for the group

assignment.

5. Explicit Attention to the Development of

Social Skills

In contrast to the strictly academic goals of

most small-group work in higher education, a

major objective of CL is the intentional

development of students' interpersonal

communication and human relations skills. To

achieve this objective, CL incorporates the

following procedures:

(a) Explicit instruction on effective skills for

communicating and relating to others are given to

students prior to, and in preparation for their

involvement in small-group learning activities.

Such instruction may include strategies for

encouraging and supporting other group members,

active listening, constructive disagreement,

conflict resolution, and consensus building.

Thus, students receive some preparation and

guidance for handling the social and emotional

demands of small-group work, rather than being

left entirely to their own devices.

(b) Provision of opportunities for students to

reflect on, and evaluate the process of social

interaction.

Meta-social awareness is encouraged by having

groups and/or individuals assess the quality of

group interaction with respect to already-learned

principles of effective interpersonal

communication. Furthermore, students are asked to

reflect on how the nature of their social

interaction in CL groups has affected their

individual learning. (For example, by having

students answer such questions as: Do you find

that you learn more or less when you verbalize

your thoughts to other group members? When there

is disagreement between yourself and another

group member? When you question the reasoning of

other group members?) Opportunities to reflect on

such questions pertaining to both the group's

social process and its impact on the individual's

learning may serve to promote students'

meta-social and meta-cognitive awareness

simultaneously.

(e) Effective interpersonal behavior displayed by

students within groups is explicitly noted and

verbally reinforced by the instructor, then

shared with the entire class?as specific

exemplars or models to be emulated in future

group interactions.

The instructor is alert not only to the cognitive

aspects of group work, but to the social aspects

as well. Specific, effective forms of

interpersonal communication exhibited by students

in their learning groups are praised and utilized

by the instructor for educational purposes--as

concrete, behavioral illustrations of key

human-relations principles.

6. Instructor as Facilitator

In contrast to most small-group discussions and

group projects, where students are left on their

own to verbalize their ideas and conduct their

work, CL involves the instructor as a facilitator

and consultant in the group-learning process.

Though the instructor does not sit in on

individual groups (such intrusiveness might

disrupt the student-centered advantage of group

learning), he/she will circulate actively among

the groups, offering encouragement, reinforcing

positive instances of cooperative behavior,

clarifying task expectations, catalyzing

dialogue, or issuing timely questions designed to

promote elaboration and higher-order thinking.

Being careful not to be overly directive or

authoritative, the instructor functions as a

learned peer or collegial coach, interacting with

students in a much more personal, informal, and

dialogic fashion than would be possible in the

traditional lecture or lecture-discussion format.

Moreover, the opportunity to interact with

students in small groups may not only benefit the

students but may also enable college instructors

to better know their students (e.g., know their

names, their styles of thinking, and their styles

of communicating and relating to others).

Conclusion

The foregoing six features of CL, taken together,

distinguish this instructional technique from the

methods of smallgroup discussion and group

projects which have been traditionally used in

higher education. Faithful implementation of

these six features of CL may be essential for

assuring that the full spectrum of benefits

associated with small-group learning are actually

realized.

Research involving large-scale, metaanalyses of

hundreds of studies at the precollege Ievel

provide overwhelming empirical documentation for

the cognitive, social, and affective benefits of

CL--operationally defined in terms of the six key

procedural elements described herein (Johnson &

Johnson, 1989; Slav in, 1990). Research on CL

college level is much less extensive, but results

thus far are very consistent with those reported

in precollegiate settings (Cooper & Mucck, 1990;

Johnson & Johnson, 1989; Johnson, Johnson, &

Smith, 1992).

If more practitioners in higher education begin

to carefully implement the six critical features

of CL in their classrooms, then the benefits of

CL for college students could be assessed with

the same degree of rigor and replication as it

has at the precollegiate level. We encourage

college faculty to conduct their own assessments

of CL in their individual courses. Such local

assessments would be consistent with the national

call for classroom research (Cross, 1987) and the

new scholarship--the scholarship of teaching

(Boyer, 1990 ).

We also encourage high-level administrative

support for faculty who attempt to implement and

evaluate CL in their classrooms--e.g., via

provision of needed resources, recognition/reward

in promotion and tenure decisions, and in the

form of incentives such as: small grants,

stipends, or released time. Such administrative

support would not only stimulate CL practice and

research, it may also serve as a stimulus for

faculty development and campus-community

building. For instance, faculty development

workshops or retreats could be offered to bring

CL practitioners together for purposes of

preparing them for effective implementation and

evaluation of CL. It is noteworthy that a recent

Carnegie Foundation survey revealed that over 70%

of college presidents rated "greater effort to

build stronger sense of community" as "very

important" for improving the quality of campus

life at their institution (The Carnegie

Foundation and the American Council on Education,

1989). CL may be one mechanism for building

community among college student--within the

context of the classroom teaching, and among

college faculty--within the context of faculty

development.

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[Add a Review]

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