**Cooperative/Collaborative Learning versus Traditional Learning: A Case Study**

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**Abstract**

This paper looks at collaborative learning versus traditional learning, supposedly one of the stated objectives of this course and analyzes students' utilization of those concepts in classroom settings. To do this, I will include a case study involving students who are attempting to undertake a group project and the dynamics involved therewith. Specifically, I would like to determine if people think they are working collaboratively just because they are in a group, assigned a group project and sitting at tables working in a group. I think not and I would like to start out documenting the methods I have used to put this project together. I observed this class one semester and took shorthand notes with respect to classroom dialogue. From these notes, I will examine the group's dynamics and ascertain if students only perceived that they were working collaboratively just because they were assigned to a group and directed to put together a group project.

**Paper**

**Methods:**

I will examine course content material from a freshman philosophy course and look at some of the stated goals and objectives. I will give examples of the professor's learning style and describe what I believe to be traditional learning versus cooperative learning. There were five groups assigned randomly to work together within this class of approximately twenty-five students. The group I will examine consisted of four members. The group was required to work together throughout the semester and submit written papers throughout the course. I collected all the papers from the group and was interested in seeing if the group members actually said one thing and did another or did they, in fact, work cooperatively and collaboratively, as their written papers would suggest. My hypothesis is that what people say they do and what they actually do are two different things. Although people will state in their writings that they hold certain beliefs to be valid and substantial, I would suggest that in actuality they do not always practice what they say they believe.

**Purpose:**

To examine my own teaching principles and practices to determine if the group dynamics of this freshman class can teach me anything about how to get students to work more cooperatively and collaboratively in a classroom setting and what I can do to facilitate that process.

**Dilemma:**

In the syllabus for this freshman class, it was asked, "Can learning be without failure?" My critique of the group under investigation is that they failed as a group to work cooperatively on the topic under investigation notwithstanding that the paper itself was a well-written, cohesive document. The paper in and of itself produced some very interesting facts and dilemmas for consideration and implications for the matter under investigation. However, using an old cliché: "The operation was a success but the patient died," what can we gather from the dynamics of the group under investigation? The overall project was indeed a success but the group failed miserably in its ability to use effective communication to work cohesively as a unit. Can one say that this group project was a success?

On the one hand, yes, it was successful. The group produced a final product of high quality but they failed to work together as a cohesive unit. Learning was, in this case, successful in one area and unsuccessful in another area. The students learned something but they also failed at another aspect of the project.

How, as educators, do we judge such efforts and make adjustments in our instruction to improve group cohesiveness? Each member within this group claimed to be working in the group while in actuality, each member was working either as an individual or as a secretive force behind the group dynamics. The actors themselves were unaware of their own actions as demonstrated by the group's activities and their method of decision-making. Each member affirmed his or her status as a group member but in practice the students worked as individuals. Each member of the group contributed and demonstrated a knowledgeable degree of expertise of the matter under investigation. Each member effectively demonstrated the history and background of the assigned material, changes and problems within that area of study and sound academic principles and citings with respect to their findings.

It is interesting to note that the professor was not judging the students on the finished product but rather on their success or failure in working within the group. The evaluation concerned itself with their ability to work as a cohesive group and whether through that collaboration they grew in their efforts to accomplish that feat. The professor I interviewed for this assignment informed me that he was totally uninterested in the finished product but was focused more on the group dynamics and what occurred or broke down within that group.

My goal herein is to discover how we can best promote self-directed and responsible learning in future students by examining the dynamics of this particular group. By documenting the events herein, I want to see if we can learn from the mistakes of these students. As future educators, can we glean from these events what it is we need to do to keep our students on track and working cooperatively and cohesively within a group? A former student describes as one of Dr. Matusov's goals for students as being, "…how to learn from the experience as a whole." In this writing, Ayal Goury goes on to state, "The field notes and discussions require the students to take an experience and learn from it." From this standpoint, I will analyze the group at hand and try not to view the group as a failure but a learning experience for future educators.

Specifically, I want to examine the process by which the group project was undertaken, researched, put together and presented by the group as a whole. There is a commonality of this group with other groups attempting to work cooperatively, cohesively and in consort with one another. A breakdown in group dynamics does occur. What to do when this happens -- this is the subject under investigation and what we, as educators, can do to facilitate the group process and prevent irreparable breakdowns. What happens in a cooperative learning environment that causes a break down in communication or conflict within the group? More importantly, what can we, as educators, do to be facilitators and coordinators in preventing such breakdowns from occurring?

**Case Study:**

I will first look at how this project proceeded to see what might be learned from the individual actors, their actions and how those actions negatively impacted and influenced the action of other members of the group. Ultimately, there was an irreparable breakdown in communication but I do believe that each student profited from the overall experience. The instructor reminded the class groups that their projects would be due very soon. Subsequent thereto, the professor became ill and was away from class for about two weeks. Each group decided to meet individually as groups during the professor's absence. One member of the group did not like the attitudes and philosophies of other group members and because this member was unable to contact the professor, the member decided not to meet with the others during the professor's absence. When this member did finally make contact with the professor, that member expressed concern that his/her opinions and contributions would not be readily accepted by the group as a whole.

From the beginning of class, one member of the group had written in one the term papers, "I think it is fine if your group finds a leader and the others become followers. This is a reality of life…Let's face it, some of us are natural born leaders, while others are natural born followers." Coincidentally, because two members of the group were passive, abdicated their option to "lead" the group, and resigned themselves instead to their roles as "followers," this one individual assumed the position of group leader. There was no vote on designated roles and there was only consensus by three members of the group as to the roles each would play. There was no input from the fourth member as to how events within the group would proceed. This self-designated "leader" accepted the passiveness of two members of the group as an indication that he/she should be the "leader."

The terminology "leader" as used by this one member of the group is indeed problematic. Is there really supposed to be a "leader" or a self-proclaimed "leader" within a group of cooperative learners? Is it a dictate or a mandate that someone actually "lead" the group? I think not. It would seem to me that if members in a group are working cooperatively, that each member has some input or say into particular courses of action the group wants to take. Before this one member of the group had an opportunity to speak to the professor, one of the "followers" handed this individual a note that stated, "We decided to concentrate on religion as the opium of the people." The "we" part of this message contained no agreement or consensus by the fourth member of the group.

This was therefore not a group decision but rather a decision by the self-proclaimed "leader" as to the topic this group would undertake. The "leader" gave one of the "followers" the unpleasant task of advising the fourth member of the group as to the decisions made by the self-proclaimed "leader" as to how the project would proceed. Then, the other "follower" gave a message to the fourth member announcing the topic under investigation. At no time did the "leader" or the other two "followers" ask for any input, comments, advice or opinions from the fourth member of the group. In one of the messages from one of the followers, it was stated, "…we decided." However, who is the "we" to whom this follower refers? The note by one of the "followers" consisted of five sentences. Two of the sentences contained the phrase, "we decided"; two of the sentences referred to what "we" are going to do and nothing in either note contained any request for comments, suggestions or advice from the fourth member of the group. These notes from the "followers" were instructions to the fourth member of the group as to what the group would be doing. The "followers" had taken their orders from the "leader" and advised the fourth member of group decisions made by the self-proclaimed "leader." The self-appointed "leader" of the group made the topic under discussion solely and exclusively.

Another note was give to the fourth member of the group, instructing that member as to what the other members were doing insofar as the group project was concerned. It was implied or suggested that the fourth member would comply and do as the self-appointed "leader" had directed and bring research material to class on the designated topic. The fourth member was told that if the message was not received "in time" that "they" would understand. The overall impression of the fourth member was that he/she had been excluded from the group decision-making process. The self-proclaimed "leader" had already chosen a topic and implemented a plan on how the group would proceed. At no time was this member asked for any input, concerns, advice or opinions with respect to the planned course of action. The fourth member of the group contacted the professor who advised that the fourth member should accede to the group and cooperate in the assemblage of the project.

When polled, 64.3% of the members of EDST390-011 responded that they had concerns about students being able to work cooperatively within groups. 33-1/3% of EDST390-011 expressed their concerns as follows, "What happens when all the children want the same job in the group or what if the person who has the head job becomes the leader and the other members become followers instead of equal partipates [sic]. How should a teacher deal with problems like these." This is precisely what happened in this group under discussion. Standing on the periphery of the group's activities, this professor gave this fourth member of the group, the best possible advice. Because of the positive feedback and encouragement of the professor, the fourth member of the group enthusiastically joined with the other members in their choice of topic and ignored the indiscretion of being left out of the planning process. The group met the following week and as had been the case from the very beginning, one of the "followers" announced to the fourth member the part of the paper for which that member would be responsible. The self-proclaimed "leader" decided the order in which the parts would flow and how those parts would be combined into one final paper. The fourth member of the group suggested and other members agreed that this fourth member would assemble the final document as a first draft to the professor. The fourth member considered this aspect of the project to be the only real contribution made except for the draft each member was to submit.

Up to that point, the self-proclaimed "leader" had made all decisions, recommendations, selections, topics, opinions and courses of action. The other two members had accepted their roles as "followers" and the fourth member had been totally excluded from all group decision-making in its entirety. The following week, the self-proclaimed "leader" and the two "followers" met and the self-proclaimed leader stated, "Maybe we could do a play where one of us is Karl Marx and he voices his opinion on the political aspects of religion and the other one could be Winston Churchill and maybe one of us could be the president or something." The self-proclaimed "leader" then queries of one of the "followers," "Do you feel comfortable with that? I know you said you don't always feel comfortable with doing something like that." Although there was an extensive conversation and dialogue between the self-proclaimed leader and the two "followers," the fourth member of the group was never consulted, advised or queried concerning any input into the planned course of action. The fourth member was not even advised as to what the group would be doing in the presentation until a few days before the presentation was due. At that time, it was announced to the fourth member that the member would play the role of Winston Churchill and given a part to read.

The date of the presentation was announced by the self-proclaimed "leader" to other members of the group. After all members had completed their first drafts, the fourth member of the group consolidated the writings in the agreed upon order and made only minor changes with respect to grammatical errors and/or typographical errors. The combined writings were submitted as a first draft to the professor who returned the document with suggested changes. To the fourth member's amazement, one of the "followers" submitted a second draft identical to the one first submitted by the fourth member and stated that the contents thereof should not be altered in any fashion. The "follower" and/or the self-proclaimed "leader" had made the unilateral decision of usurping the work of the fourth member of the group. The fourth member made the decision to completely withdraw from the group at this point; revised the draft in accordance with the professor's instructions and declined to participate in the presentation. The fourth member of the group was lambasted by one of the "followers" for the member's unwillingness to participate in the group presentation.

**Conclusion:**

"Students and teachers need strategies for helping them turn diversity into a positive force." Alexander Dumas goes on to state, "Because groupwork dramatically changes the teacher's role, professional development is vital to the implementation of cooperative learning (Cohen, 1994). To learn and employ cooperative strategies, teachers need access to extensive professional development that includes (1) the theory and philosophy of cooperative learning; (2) demonstrations of cooperative methods; and (3) ongoing coaching and collegial support at the classroom level." Mr. Dumas correctly assumes that teachers working in concert with one another can make group learning and collaborative learning in today's classroom a lifelong reality. This is not an American tradition. The emphasis heretofore has not been on individuality but conformity to norms. There has been no room or no excuse for one to deviate from the norm or disagree with one in authority.

Today's standards and the realities of the world in which we live dictate that we must learn to live and work in concert with one another not simply within the confines of the classroom but society in general. The case study I presented here was indicative of the process by which our students struggle with this issue and the more involved we become as facilitators in this process, the more adjusted and autonomous our students will learn to become. It is not simply sound pedagogical principles to foster autonomy and individuality but indeed, it is imperative to meet the demands of the diverse society in which we live. Hats off to you, Dr. Matusov, for your intuitive abilities to work collaboratively and cooperatively with the students within your charge. You are truly a wonderful facilitator in this marvelous process we call "cooperative learning." Having come from a regurgitative environment of yesteryear, I truly enjoy and appreciate your guidance in providing me and this class with the opportunity of learning in concert with you on how we can better help one another and ourselves, particularly our students, in adjusting to the demands of today's society.

True, this group failed in this instance to work cohesively as a group but they gained insight, knowledge, and understanding of themselves and one another. Together, we can all make a difference and my observation of the aforesaid group indicated to me that each member thereof left with a new sense of being and overall effectiveness in classroom instruction within a constructivist environment. Whether they knew it or not, they left behind a part of the old and they proceed forward with a new approach. There is no doubt that these students did succeed in some sense academically and were given a fine opportunity by their professor to improve upon their interpersonal relationships with others. We do a great service to our students if we will do as this freshman professor did and give our pupils the opportunity to experiment and work in concert (or discontent) with one another. It is the only way that we can allow our students to grow academically and autonomously.