The Advantages of Cooperation Versus Competition in an Educational Setting

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1. Introduction
Learning in most educational settings is structured either competitively or individualistically. Research findings, however, strongly bear out the greater effectiveness of cooperative structures for achieving increased cognitive and affective outcomes.

- Is it not our role as educators to teach through a cooperative medium and to lead the students to a self-awareness of where competition affects their lives and to what extent?
- Do we not through cooperative experiences lead them to an understanding of how beneficial these can be to them both within and outside of their academic careers?
- Is it not of the utmost importance that we make them aware of the undesirable effects of competition and foster within them a desire to function cooperatively in all aspects of their lives?
- Is it enough that we incorporate a cooperative methodology? Should we not have pupils relate this topic to their own experiences and decide themselves if it would benefit them to adopt this system?
- Does this goal allow students to see how society has convinced them that competition is a way of life, that there is an alternative that already exists: Cooperation?

It is my hope therefore to offer a variety of methodologies for applying cooperative structures to learning situations to promote academic and social development.

2. Cooperative Structures
There exist a vast array of formats available to teachers willing to use cooperation. These range from partner and group projects, the jigsaw format, peer teaching, cross-age projects, learning centers, cooperative board or card games and research projects. Peer teaching in particular can have multiple intrinsic benefits as many have realized that a student’s understanding of those subjects in which they consider themselves adept, was increased through explanations to fellow classmates. This allows them to see where their knowledge was deficient and increases their retention of previously acquired material.
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One intriguing application of this format is "A Fair Game". In this format we see peer teaching and cross-age projects used in conjunction with each other. The older students gain invaluable experience in dealing cooperatively and they increase their self-esteem through being allowed to impart some of their knowledge to others. The juniors in the system gain insight into the levels or abilities that can be reached. They see what their peers have achieved, notice their willingness to impart this information in a cooperative manner and gain a sense of who they should be.

The jigsaw format is another format that appeals to many teachers. This is an ideal method of covering a large amount of material while still benefiting from cooperative strategies, especially when used within a group project. The goal of this plan allows students to see issues from another's perspective thus increasing their ability to function more effectively within a cooperative group. In order for any group to reach its goals a consensus has to be reached and there are many factors required to bring this about:

- Unity
- Cooperation
- Openness
- Diversity
- Creativity
- Patience
- Respect
- Conflict

Placing ourselves in someone else’s position and imagining matters from their point of view can achieve many of these factors.

The jigsaw allows us to divide the subject material amongst the overall group, making each pupil responsible for a particular section. This helps promote positive interdependence and individual accountability along with developing social skills with regards to dealing with others and internal conflicts.

3. Conditions of Cooperative Learning

In general Cooperative Learning can be summed up as instruction that involves students working in teams to accomplish a certain goal. There exist certain conditions that must be present at all times for this to work and these conditions should include the following elements.

- Positive Interdependence
- Individual Accountability
- Face-to-face Positive Interaction
- Appropriate use of Group Skills
- Group Processing

Cooperative Learning (C.L.) is not simply a synonym for students working in groups. A learning exercise only qualifies as C.L. to the extent that the listed elements are present. C.L. can occur in or out of the class. In-class exercises, which may take anywhere from 30 seconds to an entire class period, may involve answering or generating questions, explaining observations, working through derivations, solving problems, summarizing lecture material and brainstorming. Out of class activities include carrying out experiments or research studies, completing problems or design projects, writing reports and preparing class presentations.
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There is a rapidly growing body of research, which confirms the effectiveness of C.L. Relative to students taught traditionally, i.e. instructor-centered lectures, individual assignments and competitive grading, cooperatively taught students tend to exhibit

- Higher academic achievement
- Better high-level reasoning and critical thinking skills
- Deeper understanding of learned material
- More on-task and less disruptive behaviour in class
- Lower levels of anxiety and stress
- Greater intrinsic motivation to learn and achieve
- Greater ability to view situations from others’ perspectives
- More positive and supportive relationship with peers
- More positive attitudes toward subject areas
- Higher self-esteem

There do however exist some possible barriers that may hinder effective group work, but as long as we are aware of these and work through them together we will succeed in our ultimate goal of cooperation. These barriers are

- **Lack of Group Maturity**
  Groups generally need to grow accustomed to each other over a period of time. As in any relationship, time is needed for them to flourish.

- **Uncritically Giving One’s Dominant Response**
  In order to achieve higher-level reasoning and deeper understanding of problems we should allow a series of answers and then choose the most adequate of these.

- **Social Loafing-Hiding in the Crowd**
  Some members may try to off load the majority of the workload onto others thus decreasing the amount of their own input.

- **Free Riding-Getting Something for Nothing**
  Members may not apply themselves at all if they feel that their efforts are dispensable or if they have to expel an excessive effort.

- **Motivation Losses Due to Perceived Inequity-Not Being a Sucker**
  Some, realizing that they are being forced to bear the brunt of the workload because of ‘free riders’, will decrease their input so as not to be seen as a ‘sucker’

- **Groupthink**
  Due to certain group dynamics many find themselves over-confident and thus will avoid any disagreements. This does not lead to in-depth analysis of problems and many questions will not be debated to their fullest extent.
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• **Lack of Sufficient Heterogeneity**
  In homogeneous groups all points of view and proposed solutions will be of a similar content. There is no chance of varying outlooks appearing and because of this not all members will contribute, as they will have nothing new or original to add.

• **Lack of Teamwork Skills**
  All members require the skills needed to relate to each other in a civilized manner. Some practice and experience, coupled with reflection, is very beneficial.

• **Inappropriate Group Size**
  If groups are too large the whole structure within them needs to be redefined and they can become quite impersonal. Many members may find themselves isolated and thus their level of participation will decrease.

4. **Conclusion**
By paying attention to these barriers and availing of the vast array of material and techniques available to us on Cooperative Learning it is possible to implement it effectively. The question is, however, is it in the pupils' interest to adopt these strategies and is the climate conducive to them? The answer is yes. The research, undoubtedly, shows how effective cooperative techniques are but we are dependent on the teachers to implement these. We are all well aware that it is not the content of the curriculum but rather how one imparts this knowledge, and the fostering of a life long love of learning that makes our endeavors worthwhile. The rewards available to the students are innumerable: higher levels of self esteem, enhanced social skills, a willingness to cooperate, ability to accept constructive criticism and a desire to learn and constantly reassess their progress. Classes are primarily composed of content and method, but while we may forget the content over time, if the method is cooperative by nature, its values will stay with us indefinitely.

*You cannot teach a man anything; you can only help him discover it in himself* — Galileo

**References**


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