

Cooperative Learning Strategy as Tool for Classroom Management

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ABSTRACT

Cooperative learning is an innovative instructional strategy that employs a lot of motivational techniques to make instruction relevant and students more responsible. In Nigeria, especially Cross River State, traditional instructional methods such as lecture method still prevail in the classroom where innovative approaches are pre-dominant on the global stage. Some traditional, classrooms are generally chaotic, most so where the class size is large. Instruction is also heavily teacher-centred where students are mere recipients of information. Managing pupils' classroom behaviour in such classrooms has become an issue for teachers. Many teachers find it difficult to manage their classrooms for productive teaching and learning to take place. The current demographic explosion, generational shift in learning styles and global best practices, requires an urgent need for teachers to change the way they pass on instruction to the pupils. This paper seeks to examine the meaning of cooperative learning strategy, the concept of classroom management, the significance of cooperative learning, disadvantages and cooperative learning as a tool for classroom management.

Keywords: cooperative learning, classroom management & group learning.

Aims Research Journal Reference Format:

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1. INTRODUCTION

Johnson and Johnson (1991) analyzed three basic ways that students interact with each other as they learn. They found that students compete to see who is best, they work individually toward a goal without considering the effort of other students, or they work cooperatively with each other, having a vested interest in each other's contribution as well as their own. A quick observation of current classroom practices especially in Nigerian schools indicate that of the three interaction patterns identified above, competition is presently the most dominant. Literature on teacher education indicates that most students view school as a competitive enterprise where one tries to do better than other students. This competitive expectation is already widespread when students enter school and grows stronger as they progress through school (Johnson & Johnson, 1991). However, Johnson, in his piece "*Cooperation and competition*," in his theory of Social interdependence notes that positive interdependence exists when the outcomes of individuals are affected by their own and others' actions. This theory provides a platform for our work on cooperative learning as a classroom management tool. Studies on this topic also argue that 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.

One of the cardinal innovative practices in the field of education is cooperative learning. Cooperative learning is an approach to group work that minimizes the occurrence of those unpleasant situations such as class disruption and maximizes the learning and satisfaction that result from working on a high-performance team. A large and rapidly growing body of research confirms the effectiveness of cooperative learning in higher education (Smith, Sheppard, Johnson & Johnson 2005; Johnson, Johnson & Stanne 2006). Relative to students taught traditionally—i.e., with instructor-centred lectures, individual assignments, and competitive grading—cooperatively taught students tend to exhibit higher academic achievement, greater persistence through graduation, better high-level reasoning and critical thinking skills, deeper understanding of learned material, greater time 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 relationships with peers, more positive attitudes toward subject areas, and higher self-esteem. Another nontrivial benefit for instructors is that when assignments are done cooperatively, the number of papers to grade decreases by a factor of three or four.

When implemented well, cooperative learning encourages achievement, student discussion, active learning, student confidence and motivation. The skills students develop while collaborating with others are different from the skills students develop while working independently. As more businesses organize employees into teams and task forces, the skills necessary to be a "team player" (e.g., verbalizing and justifying ideas, handling conflicts, collaborating, building consensus, and disagreeing politely) are becoming more valuable and useful. Using cooperative groups to accomplish academic tasks not only provides opportunities for students to develop interpersonal skills but also gives them authentic experiences that will help them be successful in their future careers.

2. THE CONCEPT OF COOPERATIVE LEARNING

Several definitions of cooperative learning have been offered by educationists. Felder and Brent (2010) define cooperative learning (CL) as students working in teams on an assignment or project under conditions in which certain criteria are satisfied. These conditions include team members being held individually accountable for the completion of content which in turn facilitate the completion of the assignment or project. Johnson, Johnson & Holubec (2013) defined cooperative learning as the instructional use of small groups so that students work together to maximize their own and each other's learning. It is an instructional programme in which students work in small groups to help one another master academic content. Similarly, Duplass (2006) and McKeachie (2007) state that cooperative learning is instruction that involves students working in teams to accomplish a common goal, under conditions that include the positive interdependence, individual as well as group accountability, appropriate use of collaborative skills and group processing.

The idea that students learn more by doing something active than by simply watching and listening has long been known to both cognitive psychologists and effective teachers (Bransford, Brown, and Cocking, 2000 and McKeachie, 2002) and cooperative learning is by its nature an active learning method. Beyond that, cooperation enhances learning in several ways. Weak students working individually are likely to give up when they get stuck; working cooperatively, they keep going. Strong students faced with the task of explaining and clarifying material to weaker students often find gaps in their own understanding and fill them in. Students working alone may tend to delay completing assignments or skip them altogether, but when they know that others are counting on them, they are motivated to do the work in a timely manner. It is important to note that there different types of cooperative learning with their attending structures, this paper is based on the Johnson and Johnson (2014) model.

2.1 Types of cooperative learning

Johnson and Johnson (2014) identified four major types of cooperative learning, including the following:

(a) Formal cooperative learning

This consists of students working together, from one class period to several weeks, to achieve mutual learning goals and jointly complete specific tasks and assignments. Assignments could range from solving a set of problems, completing a curriculum unit, writing a report, conducting an experiment to reading a story, play, or book. Due to its highly structured nature, cooperative learning requires the teacher to function in a facilitator role. In formal cooperative learning groups, the teacher:

1. Specifies the objectives for the lesson (one academic and one social skill).
2. Makes a series of decisions about how to structure the learning groups (what size groups, how students are assigned to groups, what roles to assign to individual students, how to arrange materials, and how to arrange students' sitting).
3. Teaches the academic concepts, principles, and strategies that the students are to master and apply, and explains the (a) task to be completed, (b) criteria for success, (c) positive interdependence, (d) individual accountability, and (e) expected student behaviours
4. Monitors the functioning of the learning groups and intervenes to (a) teach collaborative skills and (b) provide assistance in academic learning when it is needed.
5. Evaluates student performance against the preset criteria for excellence, and ensures that groups process how effectively members worked together.

(b) Informal cooperative learning

This consists of students working together to achieve a joint learning goal in temporary, ad hoc groups that last from a few minutes to one class period. During a lecture, demonstration, or film they can be used to focus student attention on the material to be learned, set a mood conducive to learning, help set expectations as to what will be covered in a class session, ensure that students cognitively process the material being taught, and provide closure to an instructional session. During direct teaching the instructional challenge for the teacher is to ensure that students do the intellectual work of organizing material, explaining it, summarizing it, and integrating it into existing conceptual structures. Informal cooperative learning groups are often organized so that students engaged in three-to-five minute focused discussions before and after a lecture and three-to-five minutes turn-to-your-partner discussions interspersed throughout a lecture. In this way the main problem of lectures can be countered: "The information passes from the notes of the professor to the notes of the student without passing through the mind of either one."

(c) Cooperative base groups

Are long-term, heterogeneous cooperative learning groups with stable membership in which students provide one another with support, encouragement, and assistance to make academic progress (attend class, complete all assignments, learn). They also help one another develop cognitively and socially in healthy ways, as well as hold one another accountable for striving to learn. Base groups meet daily (or whenever the class meets). They are permanent (lasting from one to several years) and provide the long-term caring peer relationships necessary to influence members consistently to work hard in school. They formally meet to discuss the academic progress of each member, provide help and assistance to each other, and verify that each member is completing assignments and progressing satisfactory through the academic program. Base groups may also be responsible for letting absent group members know what went on in class when they miss a session. Informally, members interact every day within and between classes, discussing assignments, and helping each other with homework. The use of base groups tend to improves attendance, personalizes the work required and the school experience, and improve the quality and quantity of learning. The larger the class or school and the more complex and difficult the subject matter, the more important it is to have base groups.

(d) Constructive controversy

Exists when one person's ideas, opinions, information, theories, or conclusions are incompatible with those of another, and the two seek to reach an agreement (Johnson & Johnson, 2007). One of the central aspects of individuals promoting each other's success is disagreement and augmentation among members of cooperative groups when they have to make a decision or come to an agreement. Constructive controversy involves what Aristotle called deliberate discourse (the discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of proposed actions) aimed at synthesizing novel solutions (creative problem-solving). Constructive controversy begins with randomly assigning students to heterogeneous cooperative learning groups (usually of four members). Each group receives an issue on which to write a report and pass a test. Each cooperative group is divided in two. One half takes the con position on the issue; the other half takes the pro position. Each half receives the instructional materials necessary to define their position and point them toward supporting information.

The materials highlight the cooperative goal of reaching a consensus on the issue (by synthesizing the best reasoning from both sides) and writing a quality group report. Students then (a) research, learn about, and prepare their assigned position; (b) present a persuasive case that their position is correct; (c) engage in an open discussion in which there is spirited disagreement; (d) reverse perspectives and present the best case for the opposing position; (e) agree on a synthesis or integration of the best reasoning from both sides; and (f) reflect on the process so that they may learn from the experience. When used in combination, cooperative formal, informal, base groups, and constructive controversy provide an overall structure for school learning and classroom management.

2.2 Advantages of cooperative learning

While some disadvantages have been noted, the advantages far outweigh the disadvantages. When the teacher is not well trained on the concept, cooperative learning can degenerate into confusion in the classroom. Due to its complex and highly structured nature, it is time consuming for new teachers and requires adequate facilities and infrastructure.

Many scholars have identified several advantages of cooperative learning both to students and teachers. We find it necessary to highlight some advantages for teachers as identified by Panitz and Panitz (1996):

1. It develops positive student-teacher attitude due to the intense and personal level of interaction.
2. It provides alternate forms of student assessments like inter-group assessment which reduces work for the teacher.
3. When well structured, it reduces the number of scripts a teacher marks.
4. Teacher interaction with students leads to a better broader understanding of different learning styles.
5. Overall, cooperative learning as an instructional strategy provides opportunity for self-development for the teacher.

The following are noted advantages to students. It has been shown to have a positive effect on student learning when compared to individual or competitive conditions (Johnson & Johnson, 1999; Slavin, Hurley, & Chamberlain 2003).

1. Cooperative learning has the potential to meet more learning style needs than individualized direct instruction (Shindler, 2004).
2. The interpersonal and collaboration skills that can be learned in a cooperative learning activity teach skills that are critical for later personal and professional success.
3. It has the potential to produce a level of engagement that other forms of learning cannot (Slavin, Hurley, & Chamberlain 2003).
4. It can be a powerful tool toward several transformative goals including building communal bonds, learning conflict resolution skills, learning to consider others needs, and learning to be an effective team member (Watson & Battistich, 2006).
5. **Positive interdependence.** Team members are obliged to rely on one another to achieve the goal. If any team members fail to do their part, everyone suffers consequences.
6. **Individual accountability.** All students in a group are held accountable for doing their share of the work and for mastery of all of the material to be learned.
7. **Face-to-face promotive interaction.** Although some of the group work may be parceled out and done individually, some must be done interactively, with group members providing one another with feedback, challenging reasoning and conclusions, and perhaps most importantly, teaching and encouraging one another.

8. **Appropriate use of collaborative skills.** Students are encouraged and helped to develop and practice trust-building, leadership, decision-making, communication, and conflict management skills.
9. **Group processing.** Team members set group goals, periodically assess what they are doing well as a team, and identify changes they will make to function more effectively in the future.
10. **Social skills**—the teacher needs to establish rules so that all students are respectful, speak in a manner appropriate to the classroom setting, and utilize their time wisely during group interaction.
11. **Evaluation**—all activities should include both individual and group assessment.

Johnson and Johnson (2013) warned that cooperative learning is not simply a synonym for students working in groups. A learning exercise only qualifies as cooperative learning to the extent that the above listed elements are present. This is where teaching skills and classroom management become paramount in the business of teaching and learning. Cooperative learning has advantages for teachers as well.

2.3 Disadvantages of Cooperative Learning

Those who emphasize the disadvantages of cooperative learning, argue that it is imperative that the teacher who serves as the facilitator understands the strategy itself and its complex, interwoven components. For example, Barbara Gross Davis (1999) notes that collaborative group work requires careful planning on the part of the instructor such as intense student training on the rules and structure of this instructional strategy at the beginning of the school year. Similarly, Cornelius-Ukpepi, Aglazor and Odey (2016) affirm that “When the teacher is not well trained on the concept, cooperative learning can degenerate into confusion in the classroom. Due to its complex and highly structured nature, it is time consuming for new teachers and requires adequate facilities and infrastructure.” (Pg. 695 of Conf. Proceedings, April 2016). Other disadvantages identified in the literature include space and furniture constraints, human dynamics where high-functioning students could monopolize assigned tasks and render the cooperative learning groups dysfunctional. Additionally, groups finishing assigned tasks at different times engenders more teacher control and classroom management. This in turn creates more work for the teacher.

3. CONCEPT OF CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT

Kauchak and Eggen (2011) conceived classroom management as a comprehensive action teachers take to create an environment that supports and facilitates both academic and social-emotional learning. This is where the teacher takes decision on what he/she has to do in the class to minimize misbehaviour and maximized learning. Also, Ryan and Cooper (2004:66) see “classroom management as a process, a set of activities by which the teacher establishes and maintains those classroom conditions that facilitates effective and efficient instruction” examples of managerial behavior are developing teacher – student rapport, establishing productive group norms, and rewarding promptness. Classroom management is very important in the teaching- learning. For teachers, effective classroom management provides an environment for effective teaching and learning. Supporting this argument, Evertson and Weinstein (2006) wrote:

Classroom management is a topic of enduring concern for teachers, administrators and the public. Beginning teachers consistently perceive student discipline as their most serious challenge management problems continue to a major cause of teacher burnout and job dissatisfaction, and the public repeatedly ranks as the first or second most serious problem facing the schools (Evertson & Weinstein, 2006:3).

Traditionally, classroom management has been on how teachers react after students misbehave. The emphasis was on discipline. Research shows that these control-oriented teachers may be trying too hard and teaching too little.

Kagan and Kagan (1998) note that a well-structured cooperative learning activity becomes a classroom management tool because it does the following:

1. Create a caring, cooperative classroom through energizing class building activities.
2. Make your lessons come alive; use strategies to reach all your students
3. Reduce the achievement gap; Foster belonging for students of all ability levels
4. Establish a classroom environment where everyone wants to be – including you!
5. Engage students and avoid classroom disruptions through class building and teambuilding
6. Teach students the skills they really need to succeed in school and throughout their live
7. Promote caring, kindness, empathy, respect and responsibility without separate lessons

Cooperative collaborative activities which require group members to work together towards a common goal must as a matter of necessity build on team spirit, caring and mutual respect. These are ingredients of effective classroom management.

4. COOPERATIVE LEARNING AS A TOOL FOR CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT

Traditional instructional methods which are heavily teacher-centered continue to be prevalent and sends out the clarion call for alternative approaches to both instruction and classroom management. Our purposeful observation in several local schools in Cross River State, Nigeria revealed that in the current heterogeneous classrooms, students come with different characters, behaviours and attitudes that are at variance with traditional class rules and regulations usually set by teachers. It has become imperative for teachers to device means of managing students' behaviours to maximize teaching and learning. According to School Improvement Network (2013) effectively getting through a lesson plan while simultaneously maintaining classroom at the same time may be an even more difficult task. One idea to help engage students and keep them focused is cooperative learning instructional approach. Teachers can effectively manage their classroom and proactively prevent disruptive behaviours by developing safe and caring classrooms through well-structured cooperative learning activities. When students are actively engaged in constructive ways, the level of disruptive behaviours goes down.

Also, Long-Crowell (2015) said that working together in a group can be a great experience for participants especially when students feel a sense of belonging. Similarly, King (2006) notes that psychology teachers said that children (Students) crave the need to belong. They need to be encouraged to demonstrate their capability, to connect and to contribute to their immediate settings. King adds that some students misbehave for a purpose; some seek attention and others want to be validated. Also, students need to have a voice in decisions that affect them and sometimes actively seek opportunity to do so. This active search may be misinterpreted as discipline problems. King advocates the use of what he calls "cooperative discipline approach" to influence students to choose responsible behavior rather than the predominant punitive humiliating approach of canning, kneeling down with hands up in the air and eyes closed. No known study has shown this approach to be effective.

What has been proven through studies (Johnson & Johnson, 1999a; Shindler, 2009; Slavin, 1994) is that well-structured cooperative learning classrooms and activities in conjunction with corrective, supportive and preventative approach are effective classroom management tools. One idea to help engage students and keep them focused is cooperative learning. Cooperative learning is very effective when there's a high structure, clear goals and objectives, individual responsibilities within the groups and clear parameters for evaluating success. Shindler (2009) summarizes how this can be accomplished in the except below.

4.1 Student Roles within the Group

Assigning students roles within the group has many advantages (Johnson & Johnson, 1999a; Slavin, 1994; Slavin, Hurley, & Chamberlain, 2003). First, it provides students a clearer sense of their assigned role and what to do in the process. Second, assigned roles make it more likely that the necessary roles and duties will ultimately be performed. For example, if there were no designated manager or recorder, the function of a group may be limited and certain tasks may never get performed. Third, students learn that roles are useful in the accomplishment of collective efforts. They come to understand that those who can fulfill a certain role within a group can often be more valuable than those who are highly talented but provide a less focused contribution. Fourth, if roles are rotated regularly, students have the opportunity to take on roles that they may not otherwise have taken on normally. Some students will feel very comfortable taking the role of recorder but may never volunteer to be in a leadership position unless that role has been assigned to them.

On the other hand, the student who has an expressive personal and comfort with a leadership role may always find themselves taking over unless they are expected to fulfill another role that requires other skills. While it may not be entirely comfortable for students to work outside their natural strength areas, it provides them an opportunity to develop areas that could use growth. An added consideration is the opportunity to learn appreciation for effective performance in roles previously avoided. This contributes to admiration for others when they perform those roles. Role assignments in the cooperative learning classroom address two of the four reasons why he says students misbehave – attention and power. Having their individual roles provides the platform to be recognized in their roles and the feeling of empowerment that comes with have responsibility.

Experts suggest that class is divided into groups of four. Each group member is given a task which without one's part of the assignment the group work will be incomplete. Students are also made to understand that members of the group are not only rewarded based on the success of the group but are also individually accountable for their own work. This ensures that all group members are occupied throughout class activities and misbehaviour is minimized while learning is maximized. Accordingly, School improvement network (2013) maintained that highly productive cooperative learning groups often incorporate the following steps:

1. Cooperative learning groups work best if the students are not grouped by ability
2. Mix groups by interest (what it is that they're studying, birth dates, color they're wearing)
3. Designate (or have group members designate) a "material manager" responsible for all equipment
4. Designate (or have group members designate) a "recorder" to monitor results/conclusions.

Many teachers have been taught and trained to always be in charge of classrooms and students remain permanently mere recipients of knowledge. Teachers believe that they are a store house of knowledge which can be given out to students during lessons. In this regard, many students hardly go home with any skill or knowledge. Such students may become problematic. Abram (2010) found from a study on learner retention that, student learn best and retain more from methods in which they are actively involved (teaching others, practicing doing, discussing) than when they are passive learners. Freire (2007:20) affirmed that some teachers have been taught from day one that they need to be in control at all times and have been banking concepts of education.

When pupils are assigned groups and task given to each member, the teacher now keeps track of what the students are doing by calling their attention from time to time. This in itself helps to maintain discipline, if a child is held accountable for group success or failure that child would not want to take responsibility of failure and so he will sit up instead of disturbing in the classroom.

Kagan (2016:1) maintained that, the issue of control is key to successful cooperative learning. Many teachers fear by allowing students to talk and interact, they might lose control of their classrooms. In cooperative learning, we release a great deal of energy. We are allowing students to do what they most want to do: talk, interact, and move. In the cooperative learning classroom, we must always be able to stop the release of energy and/or direct it in a productive way. The social skills program associated with cooperative learning also eliminates many management and discipline problems. For example, students learn how to stay on task, appreciate rather than put-down ideas of others that differ from their own, and deal in positive ways with a teammate who is bossy, aggressive, or shy.

5. MAJOR ELEMENTS OF COOPERATIVE LEARNING

Borrowing heavily from Johnson and Johnson (2009), we outline the major structural elements that would guarantee a successful cooperative learning classroom. They believe that in order for student achievement and behaviour to improve considerably, two characteristics must be present:

A: When designing cooperative learning tasks and reward structures, individual responsibility and accountability must be identified. Individuals must know exactly what their responsibilities are and that they are accountable to the group in order to reach their goal.

B: All group members must be involved in order for the group to complete the task. In order for this to occur each member must have a task that they are responsible for which cannot be completed by any other group member.

Similarly, Brown & Ciuffetelli Parker (2009) and Siltala (2010) support the following five elements to be included in effective cooperative learning structure.

1. Positive Interdependence
 1. Students must fully participate and put forth effort within their group
 2. Each group member has a task/role/responsibility therefore must believe that they are responsible for their learning and that of their group
2. Face-to-face promotive interaction
 1. Members promote each other's success
 2. Students explain to one another what they have or are learning and assist one another with understanding and completion of assignments
3. Individual and group accountability
 1. Each student must demonstrate mastery of the content being studied
 2. Each student is accountable for their learning and work, therefore eliminating social loafing
4. Social skills
 1. Social skills that must be taught in order for successful cooperative learning to occur
 2. Skills include effective communication, interpersonal and group skills
 1. Leadership
 2. Decision-making
 3. Trust-building
 4. Friendship- development
 5. Communication
 6. Conflict-management skills
5. Group processing
 1. Group processing occurs when group members (a) reflect on which member actions were helpful and (b) make decision about which actions to continue or change.
 2. The purpose of group processing is to clarify and improve the effectiveness with which members carry out the processes necessary to achieve the group's goals.

6. SUMMARY

Research by scholars dating back to the late 1800s has established that collaborative work among students in classroom settings have enormous benefits both in the cognitive and social realms. This practice is a powerful way for students to learn; it also has positive effects on the classroom and school climate as it minimizes students' disruptive behavior, consequently reducing the needed discipline. It is important to note that teachers at all levels of education who have used cooperative learning have acknowledged that its impact stretches beyond classrooms. The benefits include positive adult relationships and psychological health in social life.

Our literature analyses support the need to cultivate in students the ability to work cooperatively with others because it is the keystone to building and maintaining stable marriages, families, careers, and friendships. They found that while ability to perform technical skills like reading, speaking, listening is valuable in navigating adulthood, cognitive skills like writing, computing, and problem solving, are valuable in cooperative interaction with other people in career, family, and community environments. It is important to note that the most logical way to develop the knowledge and skills is to work in cooperative learning environment.

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