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Teaching to training teachers through cooperative learning

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Abstract

This paper reflects on the benefits of cooperative learning methodology applied to higher education contexts. It highlights the significant outputs linked to resorting to this methodology with undergraduate students of Early Childhood and Elementary Education Teaching studies. Specifically, this research focuses on the teaching of linguistic (L1) and literary competences. In this regard, it analyses two practical experiences developed during the last few years with students of the University of Seville (Spain), and it compares the results of applying this methodology with other more traditional ways of teaching/learning.

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1. Defining cooperative learning

Nomenclature

CL cooperative learning
PBL project-based learning
PIES positive interdependence; individual accountability; equal participation; simultaneous interaction

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Felder and Brent offer the following definition for CL: “The term *cooperative learning* (CL) refers to students working in teams on an assignment or project under conditions in which certain criteria are satisfied, including that the team members be held individually accountable for the complete content of the assignment or project” (2007, p. 34). Therefore, cooperative learning implies the organization of group work in the classroom in order to achieve academic, affective and social goals at the same time. It also promotes the development of both social and thinking skills.

According to David and Roger Johnson there are some important principles for cooperative learning to be effective: Positive Interdependence, Individual Accountability, Face to Face Interaction, Appropriate Use of Collaborative Skills and Group Processing. Furthermore, after David and Roger Johnson, Kagan & Kagan (2009) set 4 basic principles (PIES) fundamental to cooperative learning: they recognized Positive Interdependence and Individual Accountability, and developed two new additional ones: Equal Participation and Simultaneous Interaction. In our research we followed Kagan’s principles. These authors define these terms as follows:

Positive Interdependence refers to two distinct conditions that promote cooperation: a positive correlation of outcomes and interdependence. (...) A positive correlation occurs when outcomes go up or down together, when they are positively linked. The word interdependence refers to how the task is structured. If a task is structured so no one of us can do it alone, but we can do it working together, then we are interdependent. (2009, pp. 12.2-12.21)

Individual Accountability. When using cooperative teams, we ensure each individual is held accountable for thinking, contributing, and learning. To do this, we can isolate individual performance before, during, and after teamwork. (2009, p. 12.11)

Equal participation. We structure so that students participate about equally. Participation is an integral part of the learning process. Students learn by interacting with the content and with fellow students. For equitable educational outcomes, we need participation to be relatively equal. (2009, p. 12.14)

Simultaneous Interaction. Active engagement increases student learning. If students are only occasionally engaged, they learn less than when they are regularly engaged. Effective cooperative learning produces simultaneous, rather than sequential, engagement. (2009, p.12.19)

One obstacle when implementing cooperative learning is making students understand there are significant differences between cooperative learning and group work. Perhaps key words that differentiate cooperative work from group work may be responsibility and partnership. When students are asked to work cooperatively they have to pay attention to group functioning, preparing and planning all the work that is going to be done together. There is a common goal and they should be aware that the success of the task depends on what each of them does to achieve it. There is no place for competition[†]. If the PIES principles are present we are carrying out cooperative learning. Kagan’s principles can be used as a reference for the instructors to check their tasks’ designs and their lessons’ delivery. As they state: “When all of the PIES principles are in place, we can be sure we will get academic and social gains” (Kagan & Kagan, 2009, p. 12.1).

Hence, cooperative work has many advantages at different levels. It is effective in promoting higher academic achievements with a deeper understanding of learned material, better high-level reasoning and critical thinking skills, better development of interpersonal and social skills, increasing abilities to view situations from others’ perspectives, more supportive relationships with peers, lower levels of anxiety and stress, and greater intrinsic motivation to learn.

[†] For some approaches to individualism, cooperative work and competition, see Coll, 1984, and Johnson & Johnson, 1978.

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