

ACQUISITION OF SOCIAL SKILLS IN COOPERATIVE LEARNING – A KEY FOR SUCCESSFUL EVERY DAY AND BUSINESS COMMUNICATION

Andrea Hamburg

University of Oradea, Faculty for Economics

ahamburg@uoradea.ro

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Abstract: Cooperative learning, a method borrowed from social psychology, is a relatively new concept in didactics gaining more and more ground at all levels of education. Thus it is successfully adopted in many educational institutions including universities in the U.S.A., Canada and other West European countries. Having the slogan “together we succeed, alone we fail” it emphasizes the importance of efficient collaboration in all fields of social life in order to obtain high performance and induce synergy.

Following study chooses to deal with one of the five basic elements of cooperative learning, namely social skills which are to be developed and acquired at all levels of education, higher education included as a key for successful every day and business communication.

1. INTRODUCTION

Cooperative learning, a method borrowed from social psychology, is a relatively new concept in didactics gaining more and more ground at all levels of education. Thus it is successfully adopted in many educational institutions including universities in the U.S.A., Canada and other West European countries. Having the slogan “together we succeed, alone we fail” it emphasizes the importance of efficient collaboration in all fields of social life. Nowadays the majority of jobs require skills in teamwork which doesn't mean that people are just working together, side by side, but they really need to cooperate in order to obtain high performance and induce synergy. Working in teams efficiently is however no innate skill, it has to be taught and acquired during the educational process. At this point comes cooperative learning with its main objective of teaching people/students these skills and offering them efficient ways and models for long-term collaboration and stimulation of individual and group performances.

Researchers of different fields had been tackling the issue of cooperation, among them the most pertinent results having reached the theorists of social interdependence, theory transferred in the 1970s also to the domain of didactics. The three types of behaviour manifested by people according to the researcher couple Johnson and Johnson – cooperation for the achievement of common goals, individual work with no link to the objectives of other people and competition, i.e. working against each other – show three levels of interaction in terms of social interdependence: that is positive interdependence in case of cooperation, no interdependence in the second one and negative interdependence while competing with each other. Based on the ideas that in cooperative groups no one can manage to obtain performance and reach his/her objectives unless each individual group member does his/her job and the group reaches its goals by gaining results and that performances obtained in cooperative groups are higher than the sum of individual achievements, cooperative learning promotes positive interdependence as one of the basic constituents of efficient collaboration. Thus cooperative learning operates with five basic principles which are: the above mentioned positive interdependence, individual responsibility within the group, interaction between group members, developing social skills and permanent evaluation and feedback on group work.

Following study chooses to deal with one of these five basic elements of cooperative learning, namely social skills which are to be developed and acquired at all levels of education, higher education included.

2. SOCIAL SKILLS. DEFINITION AND LEVELS

Social competence (skills) refers to one's interpersonal skills with surrounding fellow people such as: family, friends, acquaintances, authority figures (teachers, coaches, etc.). In the eyes of Betty Osman "Social competence refers to those skills necessary for effective interpersonal functioning. They include both verbal and nonverbal behaviors that are socially valued and are likely to elicit a positive response from others."¹ Or putting it in an other way: "Social skills are all the things that we should say and do when we interact with people. They are specific abilities that allow a person to perform competently at particular social tasks."² As already mentioned this competence as all the other competences has to be taught and gained through long practice until it becomes an automatism. Socially competent individuals are generally characterised by following features: 1) they know about social rules, roles and routines applied in social situations (at school, home, social gatherings, etc.); 2) interpret other people's behaviour and reactions in most cases accurately; 3) react to other's emotional states with empathy; 4) want to act and do act in accordance with the rules, roles and routines known as well as their "readings" of other's emotions; 5) interact socially in a confident way and can handle potential rejection respectively 6) generally act in a socially competent manner gaining thus acceptance within relevant peer groups and friendships. The term "social competence" covers according to some researchers a wider range than "skills" which suggests that practicing certain socially positive behaviours is enough to be socially successful, to win acceptance in relevant social groups and to have friends. In their opinion one may possess the skills (behaviours) but lack one or even more of the above listed other components failing thus to be socially successful.

The ability to acquire these skills and the level of acquiring them may be influenced by a lot of psychological and neuronal factors like learning difficulties, Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity disorder (AD/HD), language processing disorder and so on. For a hyperactive and impulsive individual for instance it is very difficult to wait his/her turn in a conversation, so he/she may interrupt other people not on purpose, his/her misbehaviour being no intended action but one conditioned and triggered by neuronal connections. It is also important to know that social interaction consists of following three basic elements: *social intake* i.e. noticing and understanding other people's speech, voice inflection, kinesics (body and eye movements) and even cultural behaviours; *internal process* which means interpreting what others say, recognizing and handling own emotions and reactions and last but not least *social output*, the way one communicates with and reacts to others by verbal (speech) and nonverbal means (gestures, body language).

Besides other social competences one of cooperative learning's main concerns is to teach students how to cooperate efficiently with each other conveying them ways of meaningful communication, of constructing and maintaining mutual confidence, of leading the group and engaging in constructive controversies managing at the end to solve their conflicts. By acquiring skills of collaboration students improve their cognitive knowledge as they gain the ability of learning from each other.

Teaching social skills raises a set of questions like: what kind of social skills have to be taught, how to teach and continuously improve them, how to monitor students' activities and evaluate the efficiency of group work? One of the social skills to be taught can be the ability to undertake different roles in a group and to act, communicate in concordance with them. The steps to be followed in this respect are: explaining the social skill at issue,

¹ Kristin Stanberry, Learning difficulties and social skills: What's the connection?,

<http://www.greatschools.org/parenting/social-skills/learning-difficulties-and-social-skills.gs?content=792>

² Michele Novatni, in: idem

showing how to use it, asking students to verbalize it by finding fitting phrases (e.g.: A way of solving this problem is..., or Another possible answer is ...), putting students to demonstrate in role plays the usage of the skill concerned followed by class-analysis and finally engaging students in solving tasks concomitantly using the social skill in practice as often as possible. Success in group activities is influenced by a great number of interpersonal skills. It has also to be mentioned that social skills group work is based on have four levels as follows: forming, functioning, formulating and fermenting level.

At the first level one may find basic skills and norms necessary for organizing and running the group. Behaviour should be guided by elementary rules such as: no noise making in the group, staying with one's own group, speaking silently and in turns, not disturbing one's colleagues working, calling colleagues by their first names, keeping eye contact with the person whom one is speaking to, concentrating on group tasks avoiding being nasty with others. Students have to learn how to arrange group and surroundings without making too much noise and spending too much of precious working time on it. Speaking silently is essential for group work in order not to disturb other groups. Each time students disobey this rule, the teacher or a person responsible for silence within the group should warn them of it. In group work everybody should get the opportunity to speak but in turns. To assure this rule a speaking order can be set up. Many of these norms seem to be an issue just in elementary schools and mentioning them in case of higher education would make one smile, but the reality shows quite often the opposite of it, many university students have almost no command of basic social skills.

The second level of cooperative skills refers to organizing group activities for task accomplishment and to maintaining positive work relations among group members. At this level students must have the skills of sharing ideas and uttering opinions, of asking questions to complete information and understand other people's point of view respectively way of thinking. Giving explanations regarding group work ('we have to...') having in mind time limit as well ("Do we have enough time left for this?") and offering solutions for task solving ("Why don't we try this?"), encouraging each member to participate ("What's your opinion about it?"), asking for help and explanations and offering support when needed are further skills necessary in successful group work.

Encouraging fellows can take verbal and nonverbal forms such as mimics, eye contact, appropriate gestures, in one word a wide range of kinetic elements. Animating the group by encouraging members and expressing one's feelings are further skills contributing to a friendly, open atmosphere vital for efficient functioning of cooperative groups.

At the third, formulating level one experiences superior cognitive processing, a premise for going deeper into and keeping in mind material studied. At the base of these processing strategies are following skills: resuming loudly discussed material without consulting the sources, expressing ideas correctly – it is important to complete insufficient answers or correct mistakes in the utterances of group members –, making connections – students have to recognize connections to items learnt before –, using memorization techniques (charts, images, drawings introduced for better, easier learning), controlling each other by speaking out ideas.

At the fermenting level one may acquire skills necessary for handling controversies. A great part of learning process takes place when students represent controversial ideas and come up with arguments for their reasoning and conclusions. At this point it is important to learn not to criticize persons but ideas. Thus conversation has to be maintained within the frame of politeness, students have to analyse other people's ideas to see in what respect they differ from own conclusions, to ask for arguments in order to give reasons for one's choice, to draw conclusions synthesising own ideas and other members' reasoning bringing them together in one idea, to improve the answers formulated by the

group, to find new, possible answers and to deepen understanding by putting questions leading to a more profound analysis.

3. TEACHING COOPERATIVE SKILLS

Acquiring a skill supposes passing following stages. First comes skill presentation and description accompanied by presenting situations of application. Afterwards skill (competence) should be described in terms of adequate, concrete actions and behaviours making it measurable and quantifiable, the last stage being exercising the skill and correcting mistakes after following scenario: drilling the skill, getting feedback, analysing observations, changing behaviour and drilling the skill once again repeating the whole process from step 2 to 4 until skill is performed correctly having become an automatism. A skill is well fixed when individuals don't think about the steps to be passed any more but act unconsciously demonstrating an adequate applying of the skill. Observing students working together and trying to put acquired skills into practice teachers can identify students encountering difficulties in doing it correctly. In their case it is important to make sure students realize the necessity of using the skill in question, that it is better for them to acquire it than not having it at all. They can be motivated in learning cooperative skills by applying different materials on the walls stressing upon the advantages in using these skills and rewarding students making use of cooperative skills. As a following step the teacher has to make sure students know the essence of said skill and know when to use it, in other words it is an issue of what, how and when. The skill must be explained and demonstrated as many times as necessary for students to understand it and to know what they should see and hear when skill is applied correctly. Positive – scenes where the skill is applied adequately underlining the importance of using it – and negative – situations evidently lacking the usage of social skills – role plays can be very useful in this respect.

To make skills measurable and quantifiable teachers can use so called T-charts containing the name of the skill to be acquired (e.g. encouraging participation) and two different columns for olfactory (nonverbal) and auditory (verbal) manifestations when using the skill in point and ask students to give examples for the two items. When students are already conscious of the importance of cooperative skills, know what they are and how they manifest themselves, they should be put into situations of exercising them and be even encouraged to use them. One to two skills should be introduced per week and exercised those ones formerly acquired. By monitoring each group teachers should note the frequency in using social skills. It is advisable to give one student in each group the same monitoring role and to observe at the beginning 2 to 4 skills increasing their amount as they and him/herself become more and more familiar with the process.

Offering feedback regarding the usage – frequency and adequacy – of social skills is essential in their acquiring process. Students have to discuss and reflect about applying skills in order to improve their usage. In this process they should get support from their teachers by getting models of evaluating group work and functioning. Last but not least teachers have to make sure students keep exercising skills until they become unconscious and uncontrolled acts.

In acquiring most skills a slow learning period is followed by rapid improvement, then stagnating performances and another period of great advances thus students getting from the stage of unconscious incompetence upto the point of unconscious competence i.e. automatic usage. The first stage is that of awkward drilling of the skill accompanied by conscious efforts in acquiring it. The second step in learning process, the “artificial” usage of the skill, means students, although having passed the period of awkwardness, feel unnatural and uncomfortable in using the drilled skill. After applying it mechanically they

get through conscious competence to the stage of unconscious competence when the skill integrated in their behaviour appears as a natural, automatic act.

Students' skills need however continuous improvement in order to simplify the process of using skills, to correct it by giving up inadequate or useless actions and to permanently develop individuals' teamwork abilities. Feedback is offered not only by the teacher, but at the end of an activity by group members to each other, as well. Each group has to analyse one member in turns and underline his/her contribution to accomplishing the task. Thus every group member gets once this positive feedback which has to be sincere and true. To create a link between present and future ways of action at group level the members plan how to improve their social skills at the next activity assuming responsibility for achieving the objectives set. At the end group members celebrate common efforts in acquiring social skills congratulating each other or choosing other ways/forms of celebration.

When speaking about cooperative learning and teaching social skills one should not forget about the cultural component of these skills either, called intercultural or cross-cultural competence because cooperative groups may be very heterogeneous what race, nationality, culture, etc. concerns and thus may think about and represent social skills in a very different way. While in high contact cultures for instance encouraging coworkers in a group includes tactile elements such as hugging, patting each other's shoulder, grasping one's hand, in a more reserved culture such manifestations are totally rejected. Thus when learning about social skills students have to develop empathy and gain sensibility for those aspects, as well.

4. CONCLUSIONS

As teamwork is a more and more wide-spread form of doing a job, cooperative learning – based on principles like: positive interdependence, interaction between group members, individual and group responsibility, the importance of social skills and others – becomes the key to success in every day and business communication, thus in future social and professional life. Moreover as group performance achieved in cooperatively structured groups is superior to the sum of individual achievements, cooperative learning is capable of inducing synergy. But for a successful functioning of the group individuals have to acquire interpersonal and social skills such as the ability to cooperate and should have sufficient motivation to use them. Social skills to be taught refer to forming cooperative groups, developing leading skills necessary for efficient functioning of the group, acquiring cognitive components and the ability to analyse other people's arguments in an "intellectual" conflict. For the acquisition of these skills students have to understand their utility, they need to get them demonstrated in order to be able to perform them. Permanent drilling of the skill should be completed by evaluation of skill performing proficiency and continuous improvement until achieving the level of automatism in using the skill in question.

Another important aspect in teaching and learning social skills is their cultural component – intercultural or cross-cultural competence – students have to develop awareness of for an empathic and sensible way of handling possible culture-based differences in perceiving and applying social skills.

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