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REVIEW ARTICLE

WHICH TEACHING STRATEGY TO CHOOSE: COOPERATIVE CLASSROOM TEACHING STRATEGY OR COMPETITIVE CLASSROOM TEACHING STRATEGY

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ABSTRACT

The merits of Cooperative classroom strategy and competitive classroom strategy are often debated by educators. These two teaching strategies can be quite different and opposite to each other nevertheless have their strengths and weaknesses. It is reasonable to assume that any given classroom should emphasize or combine different structures at different times. This paper discusses the difference between a cooperative classroom and a competitive one and which is one of these teaching strategies is better than the other and characteristics of an effective classroom.

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INTRODUCTION

Learning is both a personal and social process that results when individuals cooperate to construct shared understandings and knowledge. Therefore, education is a personal transaction among students and between the teacher and students as they work together. The students' commitment to learning is nurtured by their knowing that (a) their contributions to classmates' learning, and (b) their own progress in gaining knowledge and expertise, are perceived, recognized, appreciated and celebrated by their classmates and the teacher (Johnson et al., 1995). A key component of being an effective teacher begins with providing structure in the classroom. Providing structure maximizes student learning opportunities, minimizes distractions and generally makes the overall atmosphere of the classroom more pleasant. Most students will respond positively to structure especially those who do not have any structure or stability in their home life. A structured classroom also translates to a safe classroom. Students enjoy being in a safe learning environment. Too often teachers provide students with freedoms in which they often abuse. A lack of structure can destroy a learning environment, undermine a teacher's authority, and generally leads to failure for the teacher and the students. An unstructured environment can be described as chaotic, non-productive, and generally as a waste of time.

Educators often debate the merits of the cooperative classroom against those of the competitive classroom. These two teaching strategies can be quite different with merits and demerits. Human beings do not act in isolation; their behavior is often strongly influenced by their associations with other people. The dynamics of classroom interactions is often an important feature in student motivation. One important example of the importance of social interactions is classroom goal structure - the reward structure prevalent in a learning situation. A competitive structure is one in which learners perceive that they will be rewarded based on comparisons with other learners. One person can win in a competition only if another loses. The goal of students in a competitive classroom is to do better than their classmates. A cooperative structure is one in which learners perceive that they are working together with other students to gain rewards. In this environment, a student's success depends on the comparable success of other students. An important goal of students in a cooperative classroom is to encourage and enable other students to succeed.

Cooperative classroom structure

In a cooperative classroom structure the students are usually divided into small groups and encouraged to work together to maximize their own learning as well as that of each student in the group. Activities can include children reading their work aloud to each other and critiquing and editing each other's writing projects, using flash cards to help each other study spelling words or multiplication tables, and grouping students

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together to work on a larger project such as a science experiment, a history presentation or the analysis of a social problem.

The advantages of the cooperative classroom structure include

- Children learn important cooperative social skills that they will need later in their working lives.
- Students can actually learn better when they also help teach other students.
- Children who might be left behind in a more competitive environment can be brought up to speed by their peers.

The disadvantages of the cooperative classroom structure are

- It can be hard for a teacher to accurately evaluate the progress of individual students.
- Students may not be motivated to excel if they know their classmates will do whatever work is needed on a project.
- Students can become frustrated when their individual efforts go unrecognized.

In a cooperative environment the success of one learner depends on or interacts with the success of other learners. Effective cooperative learning has two major components: positive interdependence and individual responsibility (Johnson and Johnson, 1994; Slavin, 1990). That is, the members of the group must depend on one another to the extent that each member has responsibilities, each wants the others to succeed, and no one feels that his own success or failure will hurt the others in the group. In addition, since effective cooperative learning is likely to include considerable amounts of small group activity and face-to-face interaction among learners (Johnson & Johnson, 1992), effective social skills are necessary to enable learners to interact effectively with peers. The urge to cooperate has always been an important factor in human endeavors, and have often been employed by good teachers working with groups of learners. However, only in recent years has there been careful research to document the components that make cooperative learning work most effectively.

Cooperative Learning is positive interdependence, face-to-face promotive interaction, individual and group accountability, interpersonal and small group skills, and group processing. In order for a learning situation to be cooperative, students must perceive that they are positively interdependent with other members of their learning group. Students in the group are concerned about the performance of all group members as well as their own. Cooperation is working together to accomplish shared goals. In a cooperative environment, students have incentives to help other students meet instructional objectives. The students who master the objectives most quickly often benefit from explaining the information to students who have not yet mastered it. These slower students benefit from the help they receive. In cooperative learning, the success of the group depends on each person within the group performing up to specified standards. Sometimes this involves a group project, which will receive a group grade.

The Competitive Classroom structure

Competitive classroom is sometimes called as individualistic learning, the competitive classroom is the more traditional form of learning. Student study alone and complete their own assignments while trying to learn the presented subject matter. Tests and quizzes measure each student's progress. Letter grades or percentages are given for both assignments and tests. The students often compete with each other for the best grades and for the teacher's recognition.

The advantages of a competitive classroom structure include

- Children face the real-world challenge of competition.
- Students are encouraged to do their very best.
- Independent thinking and effort are encouraged and rewarded.
- Children can still work in teams, but compete against other teams: It can be a great way to "enliven the classroom environment."

Some of the disadvantages of a competitive classroom structure are

- Some students may become frustrated and even apathetic if they fall too far behind the rest of their classmates.
- Earning high grades and teacher approval may come to be seen as more important than actual learning.
- Getting along with others is de-emphasized.

Competitive environments take advantage of the apparently natural inclination of human beings to develop and enhance their own self-esteem by comparing their own performance to that of others. There is considerable evidence that especially for extremely high-performing students competitive environments stimulate higher levels of learning and performance than would be likely to occur in non-competitive environments. In the field of sports, it is a truism that teams are likely to improve when their competition improves. Competition plays a comparable role in education: many students thrive on favorable comparisons to other students. Schools that introduce academic competitions often find that students benefit tremendously from the motivation and recognition that accompany the competition.

In competitive environments, the peer norms and sanctions actually make it undesirable to help others within the norm group to succeed. The traditional classroom often develops clearly anti-academic norms. As the peer group becomes increasingly important during early adolescence, peer pressures against achievement may overwhelm parental or school pressures that favor achievement. When it is effective, a cooperative goal structure often succeeds because it reverses this incentive structure and therefore results in more effective use of academic learning time. In addition to promoting academic goals, cooperative learning is highly effective at producing harmony among students where there might otherwise be disruptive tension - as when students have been integrated to achieve interracial balance or where students with special needs have been mainstreamed into regular classrooms (Johnson and Johnson, 1989).

It is very important to be selective in the use of competition. When everyone is forced to compete, losers often lose more than the winners gain. Constant exposure to failure in competitions is likely to lead to learned helplessness - an extremely debilitating form of failure avoidance. In spite of its downside, competition has advantages which make it desirable for at least occasional use in instructional settings.

The following guidelines are useful

- Use competition only with those students who are likely to benefit from it. This means to use competition only with students who have a chance to win. However, people vary in their attitudes toward winning and losing. The important point is that it is improper to use competition as a motivational tool when it is likely to backfire - and consistent losses at competitions usually do weaken motivation.
- Structure the competition so that all participants have a good chance of winning. There are many ways to do this: ask different questions to people of different abilities; arrange the students in teams so that abilities even out; or introduce an element of chance into the competition.
- Have students compete against themselves rather than against other students. By evaluating students on the basis of their own personal gains, we can give everyone an opportunity to succeed. In fact, since the weakest students have the most room for improvement, this procedure can even give an advantage to the very students who are usually at a disadvantage.
- Combine competitive environments with cooperative environments in order to derive the benefits of both. Have students work together on a team to compete against other teams.
- Reward effort and improvement as well as pure performance. This does not mean to reward effort and improvement instead of performance - reward effort and improvement as well as performance.

Characteristics of an Effective Classroom

No matter which teaching strategy the teacher chooses she has to make it effective. The following are the characteristics of an effective classroom:

Behavioral expectations are clear

Students need to understand their teacher's expectations for their behavior while in class. Clear and concise classroom rules and discipline plans should be posted in the room. Students should understand exactly what the consequences are for misbehavior. Further, teachers should enforce rules consistently and fairly.

Assignment and assessment expectations are clear

Students need to understand their teacher's expectations for both school work and classroom behavior. Classroom rules and discipline plans should be clearly posted in the room. Grading should be completed quickly so that students have feedback from which they can review.

Daily Housekeeping Tasks Are Completed Quickly

Teachers have to complete daily housekeeping tasks. Ineffective classroom managers allow these to become unorganized and take up too much time. It is key to have systems in place. By creating these systems upfront in a convenient and organized manner and ensuring that students follow them every day, teachers can spend more time on their daily lessons.

Students are engaged

When a teacher walks into a classroom and sees the students engaged in what is going on, learning is taking place. Teachers who are able to have students involved and working have the best chance of success. One way to accomplish this is to help students become more involved in decision making for their own educational experience. Keeping students engaged is definitely a key factor in a well-managed classroom.

Learning is student-centered

In an effective classroom setting, the focus of lessons is the student. In a classroom where the teacher does little more than stand in front of the class and talk, there is a much greater chance of losing student interest. Lessons should be developed with the students, their interests, and abilities in mind.

Instruction Is Varied

Students are engaged to a much greater degree through varied instruction. Sticking to one method of delivery is monotonous and should be avoided. Instead, a mix of learning activities like whole group discussions, teacher-led discussions, and role playing exercises can help keep students involved in the curriculum while meeting the needs of those with different learning styles.

Learning Is Related to Life

In the best classrooms, students are able to see the connection between what they are learning about and real life. By making these connections, learning becomes much more personal and teachers have a much greater chance of keeping students engaged. Without connections, students often lose focus, complaining that they just don't see why they need to learn the topic being taught. Therefore, try to fit how what you are teaching relates to the student's world in your lessons every day.

Conclusion

Given that competitive and cooperative teaching strategies each have their advantages, both could be incorporated into a classroom — provided teachers remain on guard against the pitfalls of each strategy. For instance, students could study their spelling words in small groups or in pairs, but could still be responsible for their own test grades. Science and history lessons could be taught in the more traditional competitive way, but larger, cooperative projects could also be part of the lesson plan.

Students could also be allowed more say in how they face a learning problem by choosing their own collaborative activities when appropriate and deciding how they would like to be tested. Trying to incorporate cooperative and competitive classroom teaching strategies into a single class requires commitment and effort on any teacher's part. However, the benefits to the students might just be worth that extra effort. Rather than rejecting competition completely, it is desirable to use it in accordance with the preceding guidelines in order to maximize its benefits while avoiding its shortcomings.

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