

Why Cooperative Learning? Building Teams that Learn Together Using the Forming – Storming – Norming – Performing Model

by Irina Prodan, Iasi County School Inspectorate

Keywords: collaboration, challenge, task solving, facilitation of learning, forming–storming–norming–performing

Abstract

While our educational practice is still largely bound to a teacher-centred approach, where students are relegated to the role of passive receptors of information, where school success is measured in terms of the quantity of information that is assimilated and correctly reproduced, we need to take into account that beyond the school gates, the real world will present itself to our students as a multitude of challenges they will have to find suitable solutions to. To this end, they will have to be able to identify information on their own and to efficiently work in teams that learn together.

How do we learn?

Allow me to engage you in an exercise of imagination. Suppose that someone hands you an object you see for the first time and asks you to demonstrate its functionality with no instructions whatsoever. Try to empathize with this hypothetical “*you*”. How do you feel? You might probably try to decipher the object’s mechanism by minutely studying its components, one by one, while trying to understand how they work together to achieve one common goal. It is either success or failure. Regardless of the result, you are further asked to place the object in the framework of a new manoeuvre and hence in a new role that denies or, on the contrary, complements its initial function. What effect does this new appeal to creativity have on you? Do you take it as a challenge or as a renewed plunge into a state of helplessness?

Further on, try placing peers who find themselves in a similar situation into this landscape of mental simulation. Perhaps some of them have managed to easily set the mechanism of this novel object into motion. Place yourself in a hierarchy of expertise against them, starting from the expert who masters all the object’s intricacies and inner workings all the way down to the one who thinks that is the least skilled. You now have the option to build groups of

novices and experts in order to learn from one another and subsequently prove the mastery acquired in this tandem, as artistically as possible, while the other groups will support your strivings with cheers and applause. Do you feel more confident and relaxed? What do you think the atmosphere is like?

I will now transpose this imaginary setting into the concrete reality of *The Teacher as a Change Agent* course, a training experience I underwent in October 2018 in Oslo, Norway, within the SEE Grants Programme. The mysterious object that caused contradictory feelings and led to learning was nothing other than a yoyo, with such a commonplace toy triggering the following question to reflect upon: what is the difference between learning alone, through discovery, from your own mistakes and cooperative learning?

What does, first of all, cooperative learning involve and what impact does it have on our students' education?

According to a study published by the Washington Centre for Improving the Quality of Undergraduate Education, this process is based on a series of assumptions about learning and about those who learn. According to the study, **learning is an active and constructive process**. In order to acquire knowledge, ideas and skills, our students need to actively work with them purposefully. This new material should be placed in the context of what they already know or should be used to reorganize what they thought they knew. In cooperative learning situations, our students do not simply acquire new information and ideas, but they use them to create something new. This intellectual processing – constructing meaning and creating something new – is of the utmost importance for learning.

Secondly, **learning is largely dependent on the context in which it takes place**. Cooperative learning activities set challenging tasks and questions for our students. Instead of starting from knowledge and ideas that are afterward put into practice, cooperative learning activities often start from problems for which the students need to gather pertinent information and ideas. Therefore, rather than being passive observers of questions and answers, or of problems and solutions, students become active practitioners.

Thirdly, **learners are diverse**, as our students have various backgrounds, experiences, aspirations and learning styles. As teachers, we can no longer fit their learning needs to a Procrustean bed. When students work together, teachers receive immediate feedback on the way they learn, as well as on the experiences and ideas that students employ in their task

solving. The diverse perspectives that lay the foundation of cooperative learning are revealing not only for teachers, but also for students.

Finally, **cooperative learning is inherently social**, as students are encouraged to discuss, and it is during these conversations that learning takes place. Collaborative learning results from the intellectual synergy of many minds coming together to solve a problem, and the social stimulation of mutual engagement in a common endeavour. This mutual exploration, meaning-making and permanent feedback lead to real and deep learning.

How little is enough?

This is probably the question that should underlie any educational process and learning event. Cooperative learning implies that teachers will inherently take on the role of facilitators, but this hypostasis does not entirely minimize their task of conveying knowledge. Nevertheless, how much information will we, as teachers, provide our student with in order to stimulate their motivation, involvement and curiosity to learn, to invite them to explore so that they actively engage in their learning? While our educational practice is still largely bound to a teacher-centred approach, where the students are relegated to the role of passive receptors of information, where school success is measured in terms of the quantity of information which is assimilated and correctly reproduced, we need to take into account that beyond the school gates, the real world will be presented to our students as a multitude of challenges they will have to find suitable solutions for. To this end, they will have to be able to identify information on their own and to efficiently work in teams that learn together. I am going to showcase just how little we are still prepared to do so with another experience of *The Teacher as a Change Agent* training course.

The challenges of cooperative learning

Again, an invitation to place yourselves in an imaginary situation. This time, the challenge is to build a Lego structure while working in a team whose members are not allowed to communicate verbally, with each of them having received an instruction that must not be disclosed to the rest of the group. How do you manage to coordinate your efforts in order to achieve the task?

In our concrete experience, the Lego structure was an utter failure. While striving to carry out their own individual instructions, none of the team members considered their peers' tasks and needs. In this uncoordinated attempt, the exercise became a framework of mute and

reciprocal sabotage that inevitably resulted in chaos and frustration. Following David Kolb's experiential learning cycle, this stage was followed by group reflection on the experience, with five pieces of advice issued by the group members on cooperative learning:

1. Group members need to have clearly-established roles;
2. Groups need to function according to an agreed set of rules;
3. The groups need to reach a unitary vision on the task;
4. Planning is necessary before proceeding to solve the task;
5. All the team members should have the opportunity to express their views.

Engaging students in cooperative learning using the Forming – Storming – Norming – Performing model

This model starts from the assumption that teams that learn together are not functional from the very beginning. In other words, grouping students and assigning a task is not enough, considering that their personalities and needs are different. Proposed by the American psychologist Bruce Tuckman in 1965, the forming–storming–norming–performing model describes the stages that teams go through on their way to performance.

According to Tuckman, the **forming** stage will have most of the team members in a positive and polite gathering. Some will probably be anxious since the task is still not clear to them, while others will feel excited by the challenge ahead. Since the roles and responsibilities of the group members have not been set yet, the teacher is still in the centre of the activity.

In the **storming** stage, the team members will attempt to test the limits that were established in the initial stage and this is where most of the teams fail. The storming stage begins when there is a conflict between the team members' working styles. People can work in different ways to achieve their goals, but if differing working styles cause unforeseen problems, the team members may become frustrated. This is also the stage when some team members may begin to question the goals and refuse to carry out their tasks, while others may start to feel stressed, especially if they sense that they do not receive support or that no working relationships have been established with their peers.

Gradually, the team will move towards the **norming** stage, where the team members will start resolving their differences, appreciate their colleagues' strengths and respect the authority of the team leader. When the team members get to know one another better, they may socialize

together, help each other and offer positive feedback. A sense of commitment towards the goal is developed and the team members start making progress to achieve it.

Finally, the team reaches the **performing** stage if the common effort leads, without conflict, towards goal achievement.

Conclusion

The experiences described hereby were part of the “creating the frame” stage of *The Teacher as a Change Agent* training course. Beyond its ludic approach, the lesson of cooperative learning has underlined its importance in preparing our students for a dynamic labour market, as their challenge will be to deal with problems that do not yet exist and for technologies that have not yet been invented.

Resources

Leig Smith, Barbara, MacGregor Jean T., *What is Collaborative Learning?*, Washington Center for Improving the Quality of Undergraduate Education, <https://www.evergreen.edu/sites/default/files/facultydevelopment/docs/WhatisCollaborativeLearning.pdf>

Forming, Storming, Norming, and Performing – Understanding the Stages of Team Formation, https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newLDR_86.htm