

Action research in physical education: focusing beyond myself through cooperative learning

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Cooperative learning

CL has evolved from three decades of scholarly work in the fields of social relationships, group dynamics, learning, and instruction (Barrett 2005; Dyson 2001, 2002; Gillies 2006; Grineski 1996; Johnson and Johnson 1991; Metzler 2005; Slavin 1996). The ability of CL to accommodate individual differences in the classroom, pupil achievement gains, equity in instruction, and social and personal development contribute to its popularity (Antil et al. 1998). According to Slavin (1996), CL programmes emphasise team goals and team success that can only be achieved if all members of the team learn the objectives. Even though pupils work together, each one needs to do their part in order for the whole group to have success.

Metzler (2005, 273) described CL as taking ‘one large step beyond just learning next to one another to learning with, by, and for each other’. The emphasis is on positive interdependence, and the need for every individual within a group to achieve an acceptable level of success within a given task. CL shifts the focus for learning on to the pupils, seeking to encourage them not only to learn from the experiences in which they are involved, but also to help their peers share in this learning experience (Dyson 2005).

In CL, small, structured, heterogeneous groups of students are consciously created by the teacher so as to ensure that a full mix of gender, race, ability, and socio-economic background is achieved in every group (Barrett 2005; Dyson 2001, 2002; Dyson and Rubin 2003; Grineski 1996; Johnson and Johnson 1991; Metzler 2005; Slavin 1996). These are not the haphazard teams picked by either teacher or pupil on the spur of the moment to allow competition within a lesson. Instead, they are selected in an effort to maximise the engagement of all pupils, without allowing the situation to be hijacked by one or a few pupils. It is not just a case of putting the pupils into teams and hoping they will learn; these groups are used for the duration of the learning task, whether that is short (one or two lessons), extended (three to five lessons), or for an entire unit (in this case 14 weeks). These groups are the foundation of CL in that they allow pupils to become comfortable with one another, and therefore more capable of helping each other to grasp the learning objectives of any given lesson.

Five elements are integral to the successful implementation of CL in the classroom: positive interdependence, interpersonal skills and small group skills, individual accountability, promotive face-to-face interaction, and group processing (Johnson and Johnson 1991; Gillies 2006; Kagan 1992; Metzler 2005; Slavin 1996). However, there are three elements that consistently appear in most research studies: group goals (positive interdependence), interpersonal skills and small group skills, and individual

accountability (Antil et al. 1998). The effective integration of these three elements into any CL curriculum is noted as the key to the successful use of this model of teaching (Slavin 1996). Positive interdependence refers to each group member learning how to depend on the rest of the group while working with the group members to complete the task. Individual accountability refers to the 'answerability' of the task, such as the teacher finding out whether the pupil has completed it. Interpersonal skills and small group skills are developed through the tasks in which the pupils participate and include listening, shared decision-making, taking responsibility, learning to give and receive feedback, and learning to encourage each other (Dyson 2001).

The two other elements widely used with CL are face-to-face promotive interaction and group processing. Face-to-face promotive interaction is literally head-to-head discussion within the group while group members are in close proximity to each other. Group processing is the time allocated to discuss in a reflective dialogue how well the group members achieved their goals and maintained effective working relationships (Dyson 2002; Dyson, Griffin, and Hastie 2004; Gillies 2006; Johnson and Johnson 1991).

The occurrence of positive interdependence, interpersonal and small group skills, and individual accountability within this study would ultimately decide the relative success or failure of the teacher's implementation of CL (Metzler 2005). They would also form the structure of the research and allow me to develop as an action researcher during the use of CL with my classes. In this way the 'knowledge and understanding generated by AR is put into use as an integral part of the AR process' (Capobianco and Feldman 2006, 499).

Recently, Van Looy and Goegebeur (2007) questioned whether the use of an innovative process such as CL could function in actual teaching practice. They concluded that the trainee teachers in their study had made observable improvements in their teaching when they were involved in an AR project. The authors concluded that AR could potentially create stronger ties between theory and practice for teachers and facilitate stronger professional development.

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Features of co-operative learning - interdependence on each other / face to face interactions / doing your bit (taking responsibility) / interpersonal and group skills / team talk

Nodweddion o ddysgu cyd-weithredol – cyd-ddibyniaeth / rhyngweithiad wyneb i wyneb / gwneud eich rhan / sgiliau rhyngpersonol a grŵp / siarad tîm