

Literacy, Cooperative Learning and Constructivism

Camille Maydonik

36428084

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Instructor: Dr. Samson Nashon

University of British Columbia

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Abstract

This essay is an attempt to address literacy, cooperative learning and constructivism. Specifically, this essay will focus on learners within the general field of education and in second language (L2) learning and teaching.

Cooperative Learning as a constructivist teaching method is recognized as a valuable component of classroom learning. That being said, many questions remain regarding how teachers might structure and guide student's group-learning experiences. Mueller and Fleming's (2001) findings revealed that when working in groups, children require periods of unstructured time to organize themselves and to learn to work together toward a mutual goal.

Cooperative learning tends to be mistaken as small group work when in reality it is not. According to Johnson and Johnson (1998) a cooperative learning group "is a group whose members are committed to the common purpose of maximizing each other's learning" (p. 72). This essay will attempt to uncover the characteristics of successful literacy teaching techniques within the realm of cooperative learning and constructivism.

Constructivist Teaching

True constructivist teaching is difficult to achieve. Most teachers incorporate or are inspired by some aspects of constructivism in their practice, however, it is rare to witness delivery of material that has constructivism embedded throughout. Matthews (1994, p. 143) cites from Driver and Oldham (1986) one model for delivering constructivist instruction. This model has five elements:

1. *Orientation*, where pupils are given the opportunity to develop a sense of purpose and motivation for learning the topic.

2. *Elicitation*, during which pupils make their current idea on the topic of the lesson clear. This can be achieved by a variety of activities, such as group discussion, designing posters or writing.

3. *Restructuring of Ideas*; this is the heart of constructivist lesson sequence. It consists of a number of stages, including: (a) *clarification and exchange* of ideas, (b) *construction of new ideas*, or (c) *evaluation* of the new ideas.

4. *Application of Ideas*, where pupils are given the opportunity to use their developed ideas in a variety of situations, both familiar and novel.

5. *Review* is the final stage in which students are invited to reflect back on how their ideas have changed by drawing comparisons between their thinking at the start of the lesson sequence, and their thinking at the end.

The last element is often neglected due to many factors, most often, time constraints. Matthews (1994) explains that the final review stage is very important, as “students should at the same time be learning something about the process of effective learning” (p. 143). This process has been referred to as metacognition, learning-about-learning. Matthews (1994) further explains by stating: “Constructivist methods emphasize the engagement of the student in the learning process and the importance of prior knowledge or conceptualizations for new learning” (p. 144).

Formal Cooperative Learning

According to Johnson and Johnson (1998), “in formal cooperative learning groups students work together, from one class period to several weeks, to achieve shared learning goals and to complete specific tasks and assignments” (pp. 100-101). Teacher – student interaction is present, however, the teacher is used infrequently as a source for

ideas and solutions. “The teacher monitors the functioning of the learning groups and intervenes to teach collaborative skills and provide task assistance when it is needed” (Johnson & Johnson, 1998, p. 102). This can be difficult for some teachers who are more used to the “sage on the stage” approach to teaching. In formal cooperative learning, the teacher is a “guide on the side” and their role includes five categories (Johnson & Johnson, 1998, p. 103):

1. Specifying the objectives of the lesson.
2. Making decisions about placing students in learning groups before the lesson is taught.
3. Explaining the task and goal structure to the students.
4. Monitoring the effectiveness of the cooperative learning groups and intervening to provide task assistance (such as answering questions and teaching task skills) or to increase the students’ interpersonal and group skills.
5. Evaluating the students’ achievement and helping students discuss how well they collaborated with each other.

To elaborate on the fifth point, it is important for teachers to structure positive interdependence. Johnson and Johnson (1998) indicate that this is accomplished by introducing three responsibilities to students: (a) you are responsible for learning the assigned material, (b) you are responsible for making sure that all other members of your group learn the assigned material, and (c) you are responsible for making sure that all other class members successfully learn the assigned material (p.109).

Johnson and Johnson (1998) continue by stating that in order to evaluate and hold students accountable in formal cooperative learning, teachers can employ a variety of

strategies, including “observing the participation patterns of each group member, giving practice tests, randomly selecting members to explain answers, having members edit each other’s work, having students teach what they know to someone else, and having students use what they learned on a different problem” (p.110). At the end of the formal cooperative learning experience, students should be able to summarize what they have learned and understand where they will use it in future lessons. Formal cooperative learning mimics the real world and although it is not automatic or easy to incorporate into everyday teaching, it is a necessary approach to prepare students for their futures.

Cooperative Learning and Literacy

Learning in a second language classroom can be difficult for students because in contrast to situated learning, learning that occurs in a particular context and culture related to the presented activity, the knowledge presented is often abstract and out of context. There are two main principles related to situated learning; knowledge needs to be presented in an authentic context and learning requires social interaction and collaboration. This is where cooperative learning comes in for teaching and learning in a second language classroom.

Oxford (1997) describes three approaches to cooperative learning. Two of these approaches are applicable to second language learners. The first approach is the lesson-planning approach, called Learning Together. It is based on Johnson and Johnson’s (1998) five categories of teacher roles (mentioned earlier in this essay): (a) specifying objectives, (b) making decisions, (c) communicating the task, the goal structure, and the learning activity, (d) monitoring and intervening, and (e) evaluating and processing. Oxford (1997) reasons, “Virtually any L2 activity or task can fit into this structure. What

defines this model as cooperative learning rather than merely as group work – and as potentially valuable for L2 instruction – is the fact that interdependence, accountability, group formation, social skills, and structure are all built into the sequence and communicated to the students in multiple ways” (p. 446).

The second approach that is applicable to second language learning is “learning centers; each team must complete the assignment before the team can move on, with rapid completers helping slower completers” (Oxford, 1997, p. 447). A popular learning center approach to teaching reading and writing is the Four-Blocks Literacy Model developed by teachers who believe that to be successful in teaching all children to read and write means incorporating on a daily basis the different approaches to reading. The four different blocks are (a) guided reading, (b) self-selected reading, (c) writing and (d) working with words (Cunningham, P. M., Hall, D. P., & Cunningham, J.W., 2000). This approach is constructivist in nature because it provides substantial instruction to support different learning styles and uses a variety of during-reading formats and pre and post activities to make each block (learning center) as multilevel as possible. This approach can be used in second language classrooms, and as such, the Four-Blocks Literacy Model allows teachers to personalize student centered learning while engaging in cooperative learning. Furthermore, this model is inline with Driver and Oldham’s (1986) model for delivering constructivist instruction.

Integration

This essay has examined the characteristics of constructivist teaching, formal cooperative learning and literacy. This section will explore the characteristics of exemplary first-grade literacy instruction as described by Morrow, Tracey, Gee Woo, &

Pressley (1999) in order to draw the relationship between constructivist teaching, formal cooperative learning and literacy.

Physical environment in the classroom

Classrooms should be set up in a literacy-rich manner. Desks should be grouped to encourage social interaction and the perimeter of the room should be used for constructivist learning (literacy) centers. Themes and skills that are currently being studied should be prominently displayed.

Reading experiences

A variety of theme-based reading should occur on a daily basis. Students should also participate in partner reading independent of the teacher as well as guided reading with the teacher. This allows students to better understand how they learn.

Writing experiences

Students should write daily and their writing should take on different forms. Journaling can be done across the curriculum and students can keep records of science experiments or math projects. Students can explore both independent and collaborative writing. In collaborative writing, students are responsible not only for their writing, but for the writing of their small group.

How skills are taught

Language skills are best practiced and strengthened early in the day. This applies to first and second language learners. Planned skill development takes place during guided reading sessions in smaller groups where skill sets can be consolidated.

Teachable moments

Teachers must seize moments to explain or expand on concepts already learned. For example, in my teaching context, grade one French Immersion; students wondered why the letter *s* was added to word in a sentence. I had the opportunity to teach about plurals and students were able to build on prior knowledge.

Content area connections with literacy

Cross-curricular connections can be made daily. For example, reading and writing can be easily integrated into social studies or science. By integrating different subject areas, learning becomes more interesting and meaningful.

Classroom management

Classroom management begins with the physical layout of the room. Resources for learning should be accessible to the students so that they can self-direct their learning. The class can discuss routines and rules in order to ensure that the students feel a sense of responsibility to carry them out. Students must be accountable for their learning and teachers should establish a system for students to demonstrate their learning.

Conclusion

More often than not, teachers question the best way to structure and guide student's group-learning experiences. There is no question that true cooperative learning based in constructivist teaching practice can be difficult and time consuming to set up. However, the benefit to students developing literacy skills may outweigh the time needed to create and provide student-centered learning opportunities, such as cooperative learning (literacy) centers. Teachers must consider the characteristics of exemplary

literacy instruction in order to best facilitate cooperative group learning using constructivist-teaching methods.

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