

Cooperative Learning in the University Classroom

Ben F. Tholkes
Western Carolina University

Maurice Phipps
Western Carolina University

Abstract

As educators in park and recreation studies, we need to be open to new and creative teaching techniques in order to add variety to our classes and to facilitate learning in our classrooms. The purpose of this article is to offer an alternative teaching method and to provide examples of classroom experiences. Specifically, this article examines the use of cooperative learning in the recreation classroom. Examples are provided to illustrate the use of cooperative learning to teach the history of park and recreation and a jigsaw learning experience will be used in teaching a course unit on campus, military, and employee recreation. The final example describes a role playing technique used to examine Brandenburg's barriers to leisure.

Keywords: Cooperative learning, teaching methods, classroom experiences

Bibliographic Information

Ben Tholkes and Maurice Phipps are Assistant Professors at Western Carolina University, Park and Recreation Management, Cullowhee, North Carolina 28723.

Introduction

Changes come very slowly to the college and university classroom. From the days of John Dewey (1938), educators were urged to use a variety of teaching methods in the classroom. However, a walk taken down most university hallways would confirm the fact that many professors still lecture to their students. Johnson, Johnson, and Smith (1991) explained that, "professors seem drawn to lecturing, crashing their teaching on the rocks due to the seductive and tempting attractions of explicating knowledge to an adoring audience and teaching as they were taught" (p. 5:1). There are a number of reasons for using lectures in a university classroom, however, it may be beneficial to mix the lecture with other teaching methods using a more active method through cooperative learning activities.

Johnson et al. (1991) explained that the theory of cooperative learning includes actively involving students in the learning process. Research has shown (Johnson & Johnson, 1989; Millis, 1991; Natasi & Clements, 1991) that cooperative learning techniques have positive results in the classroom. This article examines three cooperative learning activities which have been used in a Foundations of Park and Recreation class in order to add variety to the classroom experience.

Cooperative Learning in a University Classroom

The change from the lecture teaching method to a more cooperative learning method does not need to be a complete or abrupt change. Johnson et al. (1991) give some reasons why it may be appropriate to use lecturing, including when: (a) a large amount of information needs to be communicated in a short period of time, (b) the information may be complex and needs to be carefully explained to students, and (c) some students may be auditory learners.

College and university faculty may also choose to lecture rather than use cooperative learning due to a number of constraints imposed by the college classroom. First, higher education classes usually impose rigid time requirements on faculty. Cooperative learning activities may need to be free flowing and may be difficult to interrupt after 45-50 minutes. Second, faculty may also lecture due to the size of many college classes. It may be difficult (but not impossible) to use cooperative learning techniques with large classes. Third, if peer review is a requirement for university promotion and tenure, faculty may be hesitant to use cooperative learning techniques when peer reviewers are accustomed to and expecting to see a lecture. Some peer reviewers may perceive the cooperative classroom to be chaotic. These are times when innovation in the college classroom may not be understood or rewarded. The lack of understanding of cooperative learning by peers may be the most important reason for gradually implementing cooperative learning into the college classroom.

Cooperative Learning Concepts

Cooperative learning requires that five principles be integrated into group work: (a) positive interdependency, (b) individual and group accountability and personal responsibility, (c) face to face promotive interaction, (d) interpersonal and small group skills, and (e) group processing.

Simply putting students into groups and not integrating the above five principles can lead to a dysfunctional group with corresponding miseducation rather than a highly functioning cooperative learning group (Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec, 1992). Dysfunctional groups may have students attempting to get a 'free ride' which may create frustrating communication blocks and other group problems. Johnson, Johnson, and Holubec, who are employed at the University of Minnesota Cooperative Learning Center, described the five elements of cooperative learning as follows:

Positive Interdependency

The group members must believe that they are all in this process together. The perception must be that one group member cannot succeed unless every group member succeeds. Each person's efforts benefit the group, creating a commitment to individual and group success.

Individual and Group Accountability, and Personal Responsibility

Each group member must be accountable for contributing a fair share of the work

and must not depend on other group members to do all the work. This includes assessing those who need extra assistance, support, and encouragement. As students provide instruction to a group member who needs assistance, they 'cement' their own knowledge. The purpose of using cooperative learning in groups is to help improve the knowledge of each individual in the group. A commitment is required to ensure that everyone contributes and understands all the material connected with the project.

Face to Face Promotive Interaction

Cooperative learning groups are both personal and academic support groups. Through interpersonal interactions, cognitive learning is increased. Techniques such as oral explanations, discussions, connections to other learning, testing each other, doing perception checks, and teaching each other all help to improve the learning which takes place. Cognitive rehearsal is enabled by talking about concepts which aids retention of material as well as checking for each individual's understanding. Personal commitment is increased as the group promotes this kind of working together.

Interpersonal and Small Group Skills

To get the task accomplished most effectively, groups must function as a team. This requires that all members practice good team skills which include: effective leadership, decision-making, trust building, communication, and conflict management. Everyone must also be motivated to use these skills. Leadership is distributed. Anyone that moves the group forward in the task is taking a leadership role.

Group Processing

Group processing includes discussing how the group is working. How effective are relationships? Are the goals being met and is the task being accomplished? How can the group improve? Is the group standing by the group norms which they have set? What can you do when group norms are ignored or dysfunctional behavior happens?

For the group to be a high function cooperative learning group, *all* of the above five elements need to be included in the group strategies. If the group has the motivation to build in all these elements, a higher functioning team will grow resulting in more student learning.

Sample Cooperative Learning Activities

It may be helpful to provide three examples of activities which are being used to bring cooperative learning into the college classroom. The examples provided here are used in a foundations course in park and recreation management. The course meets for 50 minutes and has approximately 40 students enrolled. Students consist of park and recreation majors, recreational therapy majors, and a number of students who have not declared a major. The goal of this course is to give the students a broad overview of the field of parks and recreation.

The Timeline

One of the areas covered in the foundations course is the history of recreation. The first time this section of the course was taught, it was conducted as a lecture which emphasized the important dates and events which the students needed to know. Presenting this history lesson through a lecture proved to be very difficult for the students and the professor. The students seemed to lose interest in the information very quickly.

The next time the history of recreation was covered, a timeline was drawn on the board in order to present a visual progression of the dates and events. This method of teaching seemed to hold the students' interest better than the lecture method. The students knew that once the timeline was completed, the class time would be over. This was not the ideal teaching environment but it was a step in the right direction.

The third semester that the history material was taught, the teaching method focused on getting students more involved in the learning process. This time, the instructor put the important dates on the board and divided the class into three person working groups. The timeline contained only the important dates and the students were asked to work in their groups and use their course textbooks to find the events to match the dates on the timeline. Each student group was given a copy of the timeline and students were allowed to select any date on the timeline as a starting point. As the students completed their work, they were encouraged to put their answers on the board until the entire timeline was completed. Once the timeline on the board was completed, the students discussed the importance of the date/event on the timeline and selected a date/event they were interested in and researched the topic to present to the class.

The entire timeline activity required about 40 minutes to complete and led into the next activity which was to have the students report on their selected event during the next class session. The students worked well in their groups and were eager to put their findings on the board. This activity stressed the importance of cooperation in small groups plus the importance of helping others in the class complete the assignment. By moving around the room, the professor could offer support, answer questions, and observe the progress of the groups. The simple timeline activity also provided an alternative to teaching this material using the lecture method.

Jigsaw Activity

The jigsaw activity is designed to give each student a piece of a learning puzzle, provide the students with time to put the pieces together, and, if desired, examine the students' knowledge of the material. This activity applies the theory that the best way to learn information is to teach the material to someone else (Johnson et al., 1991).

The jigsaw activity can be used with any number of students. A chapter in our foundations of parks and recreation course textbook examines the topics of military recreation, campus recreation, and employee recreation. If students work in groups of three, each student is responsible for one section of the chapter. Prior to class, students are instructed to read the entire chapter but the jigsaw activity is not explained until the

day of the class. In class, each student chooses a part of the chapter they would like to teach to their group. Students are then given 5 - 10 minutes to review their section of the chapter and to prepare a lesson plan. Students are encouraged to be creative in their teaching, but classroom observation has shown that many students will attempt to use lecture to teach their section. Once again, the students tended to teach as they were taught.

After students have reviewed their section of the chapter, the jigsaw is put together by each student teaching his/her section to the group. This part of the activity may take 20 - 30 minutes depending on how well the material is covered and if the group shares questions and answers. Students must be certain that each member of their group knows all of the material from the entire chapter.

The final part of this activity can be handled in a number of ways. The activity can be ended at this point and the instructor can review the activity with the students and emphasize the importance of learning through teaching each other. If the instructor would like to end the activity by testing the students' knowledge, a quiz can be given to the students individually or a group quiz can be given in the groups of three. The students, if given the option, usually ask to be allowed to complete a group quiz which does give them one more chance to cooperate and help each other through the quiz. The group quiz allows all three group members to work together on the quiz and they all receive the same score based on their combined knowledge of the material.

Equity Activity¹

The goal of this activity is to have students look at recreation through a perspective other than their own. The activity begins with a review of Brandenburg's leisure barriers (1982). Brandenburg explains that people have different barriers to recreation. These barriers include: time, finances, opportunity, knowledge, and access. An individual's choices of recreation activities depends on the strength of these barriers. A person with limited knowledge, finances and opportunity will have limited recreation choices.

After the barriers to recreation have been discussed, the students are randomly divided into four groups. Each group has a numerical value for each of the barriers: low numbers equal low time, finances, etc. while high numbers equal high knowledge, time, etc. (see Table 1). The students are then given 5 minutes to review their barrier numbers and answer two questions: 1.) Based on the barriers you observe, what role in society do you play (economic status, job potential)? 2.) According to your role in society, in what recreation activities do you feel you are able to participate? Each of the four groups usually aligns itself with one of the following areas: (a) wealthy members of society; (b) upper level managers; (c) blue collar workers; and (d) people who may be unemployed, disabled, retired or students.

¹This activity was designed by Wayne Freimund, Allison Stringer, and Ben Tholkes in a paper titled, "Equity in leisure services: An experiential approach to a new theory". Prepared for a University of Minnesota course (REC 8320) June 1, 1992.

The equity activity can lead into a discussion of the wants, needs, and values of each group and how public recreation agencies can attempt to design programs for this diverse group. This leads into a discussion of recreational programming based on equality, need, marketing, and demand (Wicks & Crompton, 1986). Each student debates from the perspective of their group and they attempt to explain why they should have greater access to recreation resources.

TABLE 1
Equity Exercise

	Group			
	1	2	3	4
Financial	19	10	4	1
Opportunity	19	16	10	3
Knowledge	17	14	10	5
Time	11	8	4	15
Access	17	10	4	3
Total	83	58	32	27

Notes: Scores indicate both life and leisure situations. A score of 15-20 in any category indicates a high leisure potential in that category. Conversely, a score of 0-5 indicates low leisure potential. Together, the categories add up to give an indication of overall leisure potential, with 100 indicating the highest leisure potential, and 0 indicating the lowest leisure potential possible.

This activity has been used a number of times in a recreation management course and always creates a vocal exchange between the groups. The unemployed/retired groups usually begin to realize how powerless they are to have their voices heard. During a debriefing/reflection stage of this activity, students are urged to share their feelings about how it felt to be in the various groups. The outcome of the activity may lead to a greater understanding of the perspectives of all members of society.

Conclusion

As with any activity used in the college classroom, it is important to monitor the results of the activity. The activities described above are meant to be very flexible and can be changed to fit any course. The outcome of these types of activities needs to be reviewed in order to monitor student learning. Any technique used in the classroom (experiential education, cooperative learning, lecture) can be overused. Before using an activity, it may be helpful to ask the students what types of activities they have experienced in other classes and what was/is their reaction to these activities. If prior activities have been poorly implemented and facilitated, students may be hesitant to participate. This should once again indicate the importance of explaining the five principles of cooperative learning to the students prior to the activities. If the groundwork on selling the concept

of collaboration is not done well, then the reaction to the professor's declaration of a cooperative learning activity is often a collective groan from the class (Phipps & Phipps, 1997).

As in the world outside the classroom, in the classroom, "variety is the spice of life". Use of cooperative learning can add variety to the classroom and keep a course interesting for the students and the faculty.

References

- Brandenburg, J. (1982). A conceptual model of how people adopt recreation activities. Leisure Studies, 1(3), 263-277.
- Dewey, J. (1938). Experience & education. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company.
- Johnson, D.W., & Johnson, R.T. (1989). Cooperation and competition. Edina, MN: Instruction Book Company.
- Johnson, D.W., Johnson, R.T., & Holubec, E.J. (1992). Advanced Cooperative Learning. Edina, MN: Instruction Book Company.
- Johnson, D.W., Johnson, R.T., & Smith, K.A. (1991). Active learning: Cooperation in the college classroom. Edina, MN: Instruction Book Company.
- Millis, B.J. (1991). Fulfilling the promise of the "seven principles" through cooperative learning: An action agenda for the university classroom. Journal on Excellence in College Teaching, 2, 139-144.
- Natasi, B.K., & Clements, D.H. (1991). Research on cooperative learning: Implications for practice. School Psychology Review, 20(1), 110-131.
- Phipps, M.L., & Phipps, C.A. (1997). Groups Bloody Groups. Student workbook. Cullowhee, NC: Western Carolina University.
- Wicks, B.E., & Crompton, J.L. (1986). Citizen and administrator perspectives of equity in the delivery of park services. Leisure Sciences, 28(4), 341-365.