The Future of Cooperative Learning

In a time of accelerated and massive change, when conventional resources are quickly being depleted, cooperative effort is needed to navigate the “rapids of change.”

ABSTRACT

The only thing that will redeem mankind is cooperation. Bertrand Russell

Cooperative Learning is one of the best researched fields of classroom based practice in the world. Teachers and researchers across several continents know it works, when used well. However, Cooperative Learning has always been about far more than a set of classroom strategies. The principles inherent in the field are the very ones needed for humankind to adapt and survive into the future. As practitioners, we are not necessarily teaching students the broader implications, and implementation of these principles and practices. My contention is that many aspects of our culture are still heavily dependent on adversarial and competitive paradigms of operation. This is not only challenging for those who have learned, and lived, using cooperative learning strategies, but it also an ongoing detriment to our societal health. This discussion paper takes lessons learned about cooperation, collaboration and competition, beyond the classroom, into higher education, corporate and community fields, and explores how to integrate them at a systems level. As cooperative learning practitioners we need to accept we have a responsibility which extends well beyond the classroom, and to ask ourselves some deep questions about our collective educational purpose.

INTRODUCTION

What would the world look like if cooperation was the primary societal driver? This is the question that we, as practitioners, need to ask ourselves every day. In Australia just recently, we have experienced an outpouring of cooperation on a scale previously unseen, where tens of thousands of people took it upon themselves to simply turn up and work together collaboratively with perfect strangers, to clean up the mess left by the devastating floods in Queensland. The ‘mud army’ made news around the world, for a short time, until the media cycles moved on. In Victoria, similarly, the ‘sandbag army’ is (at the time of writing) following a relentless, massive ‘moving inland sea’, cooperating unstintingly to protect the homes of strangers against nature’s wrath. Stories of personal heroism and altruism are shared daily by those touched by Australia’s 2011 disaster which has deluged an area equivalent to France, Germany and the United Kingdom combined.

"A good community will not be invented, discovered or “just grow.” It must be forged from the purpose and quality of the lives of the people living in it.” Arthur Morgan

The first question is why did they do it? Because cooperation is a natural instinct, integral to the human condition. Micro-organisms flourished initially because of their capacity to cooperate. Cooperation has formed the basis of indigenous societies for thousands of years. Their very survival depended on it, as has the survival of the people devastated by the floods.

The community also acted because interdependence, connectedness and cooperation are key elements of natural systems. These people collaborated in highly creative ways, using a combination of face-to-face interaction and technology-based social networking, in an environment of trust and innovation, to achieve some semblance of ‘normality,’ or homeostasis, for those who had lost everything. They did so
because psychologically they knew it was the ‘right’ thing to do, and it formed the basis of their behavioural values. People needed help, they responded. Some used their own resources to drive and fly thousands of kilometres to assist, bringing everything from buckets, brooms and gumboots, to truckloads of food, to give away. The collaborative approach to using technology cooperatively, and for altruistic purposes, also saw lost families found, lost pets reunited with their families and resources made instantly available immediately the request was put out. This technology also provided for coordination of the thousands of volunteers who made themselves available to help.

They also did it because they were asked to. The Premier of Queensland, Anna Bligh showed remarkable leadership in encouraging people to work together to help each other, and in choosing to not publicise any anti-social behaviour. Bligh’s behaviour demonstrated clearly the importance of effective leadership in promoting cooperation and its ability to empower similar values in others. Abraham Maslow once stated that ‘people live in a very structured world and adapt themselves to the structure’. In this instance, the structure that was provided through the coordinated and collaborative endeavours of government, defence forces, business and community ensured that the intent of positive collaboration was maintained, and the initial chaos was quickly organised into cooperative endeavour.

Finally, they also did it because of that elusive character trait referred to as the ‘Aussie mateship spirit’, a peculiar trait of Australian society which appears in abundance during crises and is best characterised as ‘working together to help neighbours and strangers out of a big problem that is not of their making.’ It is possible that at some time in the future a genetic basis may be found for promoting cooperative or competitive behaviour. Research currently being undertaken by organisations such as the Hominoid Psychology Research Group, in collaboration with the Wolfgang Koehler Primate Research Center, and the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology, are seeking explanations for the divergence in behaviour between Bonobos (collaborative, attentive, sensitive) and Chimpanzees (aggressive, competitive, violent) which may have possible repercussions for future investigations into human genetics.

A second, and more vexing question is why are many people so good in a crisis, yet our society reverts to more selfish and competitive pursuits as soon as the news cycles move on. Do we forget? Do we need constant reminding? Does consumerism foster competition rather than cooperation? Do people need a reason to do good work, and a focus for their energies which builds positive social capital, rather than anti-social behaviour? Do we need leadership which encourages people to make discerning decisions about when it appropriate to be cooperative, competitive and individualistic? Do we understand the evolutionary, psychological and physiological bases of cooperation and competition? How does all of this impact on how we teach and learn? Are we even asking the right questions?

These are issues which were first raised for me back in the early 1980’s, when I first discovered Cooperative Learning as a field of research that supported my own views of teaching and learning. Prior to that, my classroom pedagogy did not have a label. Such questions have subsequently led to a professional career which has sought to explore the interfaces with other areas, in a constant search to expand the concepts of Cooperative Learning to their outer limits.

WHY COOPERATIVE LEARNING

Cooperative learning is one of three forms of learning – individual, competitive and cooperative, which we each try to balance as teachers. For many years the argument has been that intra-personal competition provides challenges for students to achieve their personal best, while inter-personal competition leads to aggression and negativity.

My contention is that, instead of looking at the question of balance, we need to reframe the question to ask ourselves how cooperative learning and competitive learning impact on an individual’s development, their ability to build community, and their capacity to make pro-social future decisions.
We need to understand why some purportedly cooperative people are so competitive, and why some competitive people are so aggressive. We also need to invite and encourage researchers to delve deeper into where the bases of cooperation and competition come from and how they have evolved over human history, and what this means for the future of humankind.

Dr Perry W. Buffington, Ph.D wrote in his 1986 thesis *Competition vs. Cooperation* that ‘scientists have repeatedly verified (that cooperation is more effective than competition) in hundreds of studies since the late 1800s. Yet big business, the educational system, the health-care community, and most parents continue to encourage competition, almost totally neglecting the power of cooperation. None of these groups realizes that unabated competition may be costing billions of dollars in sales and overall decreases in human achievement. Furthermore, researchers have shown that too much competition may cause poor health. Yet we continue to hold the cherished belief that competition (not cooperation), to paraphrase Sigmund Freud, “is the royal road to success.” If in fact competition brings out the “beast” in us, then research demonstrates that cooperation surely brings out the “best” in us. This finding has been held in virtually every occupation, skill, or behavior tested. For instance, scientists who consider themselves cooperative tend to have more published articles than their competitive colleagues. Cooperative businesspeople have higher salaries. From elementary grades to college, cooperative students have higher grade point averages. Personnel directors who work together have fewer job vacancies to fill. And, not surprisingly, cooperation increases creativity.’

Dr. David W. Johnson and Dr. Roger T. Johnson, professors at the University of Minnesota and codirectors of the Cooperative Learning Center, collected in excess of 500 research papers, on which Buffington’s paper was based, add that education and psychology had been at odds on the issue for years. Roger Johnson explains, “If we are to teach people to be cooperative, then education and psychology must work together. You see, a typical classroom teacher is taught to keep students quiet and apart, indirectly fostering competition. Yet ... people learn best when they work cooperatively with each other. Children who experience this type of learning at an early age carry it with them as they mature.” David Johnson adds, “More students feel good about themselves as learners when they cooperate. Their self-esteem goes up, they have a better sense of community, belonging, and acceptance. One can also extrapolate this finding to any setting.” The work of the Johnson’s was expanded and progressed by a plethora of researchers including Robert Slavin, Neil Davidson, Shlomo Sharan, Yael Sharan, Celeste Brody, and many others who have each added particular perspectives to the field too numerous to expound in this brief paper.

If we are to propose, and indeed claim, that cooperation is the basis of a healthy society, we need to understand that there are a range of interpretations of the word ‘cooperation’ which may lead to differences in the implementation. We also need to further explore how Cooperative Learning integrates with other fields of research and interest to form a comprehensive pedagogy, and a way to influence systemic change..........

Go to website to read remainder of this paper : http://julieboydeducation.com/2011/02/11/the-future-of-cooperative-learning/

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Julie is a published multimedia author and has written extensive digital curriculum for use with the Australian National Curriculum and International Baccalaureate. Julie has also received awards for her contributions including Telstra Entrepreneur of the Year, Australian Businesswomen’s Hall of Fame inductee, and other National Awards for Innovation.

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