COOPERATIVE EDUCATION IN AN ADULT ENVIRONMENT

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Abstract
The aviation, engineering, medicine, and law are just fourth of the many very complex fields of study, which require mastery of a great amount of information. This paper will examine the role of cooperative learning as it applies to adult learning. For example, aviation is a very dynamic profession that requires a great deal of preparation on the part of students who choose to become professional pilots in the field. This requires the student to acquire a vast knowledge of technical data, procedural information, knowledge and social skills pertaining. Everything a student must learn and master over the course of study so as to be successful in his or her chosen field, regardless of the vocation, may seem overwhelming. The technique of cooperative learning is the means by which this mountain of information may be overcome and achieve accordingly.

Keywords: Cooperative, education, adult, learning

Introduction
Cooperative education or cooperative learning (CL) as it implies, is a technique of learning that many perceive as being preferred over competitive situations. The concept is that of “divided we fall, united we stand” or “we swim together or we think together” (Johnson, Johnson, and Smith, 1991). Colleges and universities, along with other adult education establishments, need to encourage a change from the concept that learning is an individualistic and competitive endeavour. By learning together, students will learn more in a shorter amount of time while developing social skills and teamwork, two team-building talents that will make them successful later in life.
A student, adults are “a different breed”. Many may have little or no interest in returning to school after graduation, whether from high school, basic training, trade school, college, or graduate school. Then there are the “professional students” who never stop learning and hesitate to leave school for whatever reasons my occurred.

Adults who become aware they are in need of further education usually had an idea or plan to what they require in the way of additional knowledge and training. According to Knowles (1990), adult learning is “a process of active inquiry, not passive reception.” In other words, adults are gong to out the knowledge they need or in which they have an interest. They can be demanding and know what they should be getting for their educational Money, whether they or their company are paying the tuition bill. Many approach additional education or training with a sense of excitement while others might experience anxiety or dread.

Adult cooperative learning
Returning to school, having the nerve to get involved in a training course at work, or making the decision to begin graduate school may take a lot of personal courage on the part of some adults. There are many factors involved in making such a decision. Something that may help an adult with the decision is the knowledge that he or she is not alone when it comes to the fears and misgivings they are experiencing regarding “going back to school again”. While there are those who fear a return to school, there are students who are very excited about going back to school for further study. Each of these groups of adult students can benefit from one another; those who are anxious about returning to school can find encouragement form the more confident while the latter group can learn compassion from the former.

Through concepts of cooperative learning, adults can enhance their knowledge and skills in a shorter time than while working individually. By sharing their workload and disseminating information more quickly, adult students may realize their goals more readily and thoroughly (Johnson, et al, 1991).
Adult learning and cooperative education are two terms or “buzzwords” in use lately in the field of education. Educators refer to adult education in context of graduate education, continuing education, on-the-job training, and in other ways which may or may not incorporate cooperative learning techniques.

Cooperative learning is an educational idea that is rather old. This technique, referenced since Biblical times, has not been used much in the last two centuries. This is however, changing. Cooperative education is important in terms of dealing with higher levels of learning, and in particular, adult education. Cooperative education is a learning style useful for every level of education from kindergarten through graduate studies. It is however, of particular importance regarding adult learning. Many universities, colleges, schools, and businesses are realizing the merit of this teaching and learning technique. This is particularly true regarding older students.

The difference between adult and child students
One main difference between philosophies of pedagogy and andragogy is that in the former, learning is forced upon young learners. In the latter, older learners are deciding what they would like to learn and therefore, are self-directed in attaining their own educational goals.

Unlike children in various learning situations in school systems throughout the nation, adults typically hold fairly well-developed ideas as to what they believe they know, what they have actually learned, and the knowledge they must or desire to acquire. Another major difference between adults and children is their direction and motivation. “When adults teach and earn in one another’s company, they find themselves engaging in a challenge passionate and creative activity.” (Brookfield, 1986). This engagement in creative activity alone, if you will, and a motivation powerful is enough to compel adults to seek a higher level of learning in general.

While children’s minds are comparable to blank hard drives in a computer, an adult’s “disk space” may be limited or compromised by other factors. These concerns may include professional employment, bills, spousal concerns, and children’s needs for attention. According to Knowles 91980), young adults (18 to 30 years of age) are concerned with establishing themselves in their careers and starting families. Regarding personal development, he points out this group is working to improve their writing abilities, reading comprehension, and speaking skills. They are also working toward continuing their general education.

The educational interests and goals of the middle-aged adult (to age 65) include improving job skills, changing careers, and learning leadership techniques. Older adults are accomplishing their educational goals while engaged in helping teenagers grow into adulthood and supporting aging parents (Knowles, 1980). For both the young adult and those in middle age, there are obstacles to overcome in returning to the classroom or starting another training or learning endeavor.

Consequently, it may take some effort to persuade an adult student to return to the classroom for a structured or formal course of study. Even with incentives such as the promise of higher pay or not only to themselves but also to others within their particular group. In accomplishing the end goal in any course of study, by working together students can learn and comprehend more in a relatively shorter time. Essentially, this is the concept of working together we succeed, divided we fail. The bottom line is that cooperative learning is the concept of teamwork applied within a practical educational setting. It also brings forth the idea that in order to accomplish a set of goals, by depending on and working with others, students will attain their goals much more quickly and effectively than by working alone.

According to Johnson, et al (1991), there are five basic elements that must be included within the context of cooperative learning. These elements are:
1. Positive interdependence
2. Face-to-face interaction
3. Individual accountability
4. Development of social skills and
5. Group processing.

The idea of positive interdependence comes more easily to older students who are less competitive
by nature. They have already made their way through the business or “real” worlds. They are established and a goal-oriented through teamwork rather than individual accomplishment. In creating positive interdependence, the instructor assigns a task that the students must accomplish together. This task is typically one that has many parts and each student within the group will then become responsible for his or her portion of the project. The students will agree on what must be accomplished, how it will be done, and who will be responsible for certain tasks. By this method, they will come to depend on and trust one another. In so doing, they lighten their individual workloads.

An additional aspect of cooperative learning is that of promotive interaction (Johnson, Johnson and Smith, 1991). Promotive interaction is the concept that students are going to work at helping gone another through the course of study. This is the idea, particularly when dealing with adult students, that there is strength through unity. By helping each other, rather than competing against one another, students will be able to study more material quickly and more thoroughly.

Another regard to cooperative learning is that of accountability. Each student’s performance is assessed and known to the other members of the group. With adults, particularly those who have been out in the workforce and are returning to an educational setting on their own, performance is typically not an issue. These students tend to get the job done on their own.

The fourth aspect of cooperative learning, development of social skills, is as important as any other areas. These are the skills that are necessary for students to be effective leaders and followers (depending on the situation) in the accomplishment of any goal. In other words, it is the ability for individuals to get along, to be able to work together.

The last aspect of cooperative learning as described by Johnson, et al. (1991), is that of group processing. Throughout the period of learning, the student group maintains its identity as a unit and continues to develop and use the social skills necessary for further growth.

**When have adult students learned enough?**

The answer to this question is essentially, they have learned enough when they tell you so. In the realm of adult learning, evaluating students is something a few facilitators find unsettling. Many teachers, instructors, or facilitators feel the evaluation process is contrary to what they are trying to accomplish in their teaching (Dean, 1994).

There are some instances in which evaluation is not only appropriate, but also necessary. It is also just as appropriate in other contexts, that evaluation may not be needed.

In his book, Designing Instruction for Adult Learners, Dean (1994) points out there are five reasons for evaluation. Three of these areas include enhancing the student’s self-awareness and self-confidence, and developing better communication skills. The final two areas are helping the student determine future learning goals and finally, there is question of credentials.

In his work, Dean identifies seven areas for evaluation. He identified those areas as:

1. Learner’s reactions to the learning experience;
2. Information
3. Problem-solving skills;
4. Psychomotor skills;
5. Affective factors such as attitudes, values, and feelings;
6. Personal growth and development, and
7. Changes in the organization or community

In some areas of learning, testing the learner may be inappropriate, such as in cases where learners are involved in courses strictly for their own enjoyment. For many, the evaluation process can be a very detrimental factor either as a learner or a facilitator.

**Helping adult students learn**

In her doctoral thesis in 1992, Dr. Regina Studwell identifies nine teaching principles important in the education of adult students. The first areas of this list include knowing the students, relating their experience to the learning, and relating theory to actual practice. Beyond that, instructors must provide an atmosphere for learning and different formats as well as techniques for learning. For the students, there must be feedback, assistance in
finding resources, and maintenance of contact other than academically. In many cases, relating to adult students is of paramount importance regarding the success or failure of the student. The facilitator rather than teacher, instructor, or professor, is central to student’s attaining “a state of self-actualization or to become fully functioning persons”, according to Brookfield (1986).

Brookfield goes on to point out that those engaged in teaching adults need to have genuine concern for their students, they must be experts in their fields, and must be able to relate theory to practice. Additionally, personality plays an important role. The facilitator must be confident in manner and provide a positive environment to enhance learning. He or she must also be open to the ideas of the students as well as being capable of taking students beyond the objectives of the course.

Brookfield (1986) also points out that facilitators are individuals who are involved in helping others to learn, instead of working as “didactic instructors who know all the answers.” Brookfield goes on to cite Tough (1979) when describing the four characteristics shared by facilitators. These include being warm and caring people; having a respect for the learner’s self-direction; regarding learners as their equals; and being open-minded.

Conclusion
From the look of things and essentially, these are the characteristics to which many aspire at a glance. These refer to the facilitators by any name, the teacher, the instructor, the professor, or the trainer it does not matter. Whatever label you choose, the job is the same that is helping others learn in a better way. And as trite as it might sound, it boils down to treating others, as you would like to be treated as well.

Through the process of helping others learn the instructor of course, also learns. And as facilitators or teachers or professors grow older, it becomes a question of teaching an old dog a new trick. This is very possible from all indication. Yet and indeed, that is what it is all about learning. Learning as adults, learning as teachers and as students, is just a way by which is referred to helping one another to learn in a better way.

References


