



## **Active Learning (4) Is Cooperative/Collaborative Learning a Self-Less Pursuit?\***

***Dr. Pandeli M. Glavanis  
Associate Director, Center for Learning and Teaching***

The immediate answer to the question is a very definite and emphatic **NO**. In fact the rest of this short essay will argue that as all forms of social cooperation are based on some type of self-interest thus, cooperative/collaborative learning is also anything but altruistic. Nevertheless, I will also argue that it is precisely because self-interest is embedded in all forms of cooperative/collaborative learning that it enables this style of learning to lead to an interactive and constructivist approach to learning, i.e. active learning. The logic of the argument once again derives from established social theory and in particular the “theory of social cooperation” as exemplified in such classic accounts as “The Prisoner’s Dilemma Game” in which the players are confronted by only two choices: to cooperate or to defect. (McConnell, 2000: 6) The dilemma, of course, is that if both players defect they will both lose whereas if they were to agree to cooperate on some form of agreed upon reciprocity then both will gain.

The application of the above to a learning context, however, immediately raises an insurmountable obstacle which would appear to defy the possibility of ever being able to achieve any form of cooperative/collaborative learning if it is truly based on self-interest and agreed upon reciprocity. It is the essence of a “fair” educational system that all students are treated with equity and thus when given the same piece of work or task they are also evaluated according to the same agreed upon and transparent criteria. Nevertheless, it is practically unheard of that all the students in a class will also receive exactly the same grade. Thus, students irrespective of whether they wish to cooperate and collaborate will also find themselves in a situation where they are made to compete against each other for the high grades. Educational systems and institutions therefore may be seen as constituting the insurmountable obstacle which may prevent cooperative/collaborative learning from gaining recognition as the as the most effective method of achieving active learning.

The above may well be the case, but only if reciprocity and what each student expects to gain from cooperative/collaborative learning is uniform and identical to what every other student in the group also expects to gain. Social reality however is far more complex than that and has shown us that social agents (individuals) extract from social interaction what is appropriate to them and not necessarily what is appropriate to the group as a whole. In other words in a cooperative/collaborative learning situation where the group is expected to solve a problem or complete a project, individual members of the group may also gain other benefits that have little or no relationship to the targeted collective objective. Let me elaborate.

Cooperative/collaborative learning as with any form of social cooperation is essentially a social process where the process itself is by far` the most significant element. The social process however involves a variety of dimensions which in themselves may not lead to the actual solution of the problem at hand, but are critical in establishing social cohesion, “bonding”, social interaction, enjoyment, self-assurance, etc. Thus, the benefits to be derived from cooperative/collaborative

learning (working in a social peer group) far exceed the specific and targeted academic achievements whose attainment brought the group together in the first place. David McConnell exemplifies this when he notes that

*Cooperative learning is process-driven, i.e. those involved engage in a social process and have to pay attention to that process in order for them to achieve their desired end point...There may be group 'products' towards which the learners are working...and there may be individual 'products' which are achieved through people in the group helping each other deal with their own individual learning concerns. (McConnell, 2000: 8)*

It is the very fact that collective forms of social interaction or for that matter cooperative/collaborative learning can generate at one and the same time both group and individual 'products' that makes this method of organizing learning so productive. For it is an approach that enables each and every member of the learning (social) group to derive what s/he needs in addition to the common objective: solving a problem set by the class instructor. It is, of course, these very personal and individual gains that allow for cooperative/collaborative learning to take place in spite of the institutional pressure to compete. For self-interest is satisfied by reference to the plethora of possibilities to be derived from the social and collective process itself and not just from the ultimate grade to be awarded. In this respect educational systems and institutions do not necessarily constitute an obstacle to cooperative/collaborative learning. In fact, it could be argued that it is precisely because educational systems set students in a socially constructed competitive environment that students also seek to compensate by joining what are equally socially constructed cooperative/collaborative arrangements (social learning groups) whether they be formal (initiated by the instructor) or informal (initiated by the students themselves).

The argument presented above, of course, is but an exemplification of the most fundamental debate within the social sciences, i.e. that of agency and structure (individual and social). It is the debate which irrespective of which perspective is adopted highlights the fact that as social beings we all apprehend social reality and thus construct our respective individual cognitive structures via different forms of social interaction. Cooperative/collaborative learning (group work) is but a concrete manifestation of the dialectic of agency and structure which is the key to an understanding of social systems and social dynamics. In this respect, and despite it embodying self-interest, it can be seen as being the most productive form of organizing learning in an educational institution as it reflects social reality.

Thus, it is possible to conclude that cooperative/collaborative learning that relies upon self-interest is significantly more appropriate to achieving active learning for the vast majority of the students than a focus on individual learning which is unfortunately the norm in most educational systems. In fact, it is the focus on a socially constructed paradigm that gives priority to individual learning that can be said to be the cause of most of what ails educational systems including academic dishonesty and superficial (by rote) learning.

## **Sources**

David McConnell (2000) ***Implementing Computer Supported Cooperative Learning***, Kogan Page, London

*Share with us your experiences by contributing to the New Chalk Talk series, or by simply sending comments/suggestions to [aellozy@aucegypt.edu](mailto:aellozy@aucegypt.edu)*

---

\* I should express appreciation to David McConnell whose book quoted here has inspired most of my thinking and approach to cooperative learning. I also want to thank my colleague Maha for reading a draft; the academic jargon-style is my responsibility!!!