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Cooperative Learning: Building Strong Teams for International Service-Learning Projects

George Jacobs and Vilma D’Rozario

Introduction

Cooperative learning and service-learning both encourage students to reach out beyond themselves for the benefit of all. Cooperative learning is a teaching methodology that offers “principles and techniques for helping students work together more effectively” (Jacobs, Power and Loh, 2002, p. ix). Service-learning seeks to involve students in service to others at the same time that students learn important insights, skills and knowledge in line with the curriculum of their educational institution (Eyler and Giles, 1999).

This paper opens with a description of a service-learning project in Sikkim in which NIE (National Institute of Education, Singapore) students participated. Following that, the fit between cooperative learning and service-learning is discussed. Finally, a few implications for Singapore teachers are suggested.

Service-Learning and Cooperative Learning in Action: The Case of NIE Students in Sikkim

In June 2003, two NIE-SIF (Singapore International Foundation) Youth Expedition Project teams embarked on an unforgettable adventure—to work with the children, teachers and community of East Sikkim. Below is a description of what our goals were, who we were, how we worked together and what we achieved.

Our tasks were to:

1. Work with children and teachers of a privately run village school—teaching the children, sharing curriculum ideas with the teachers, upgrading infrastructure, setting up learning corners, expanding library resources and introducing IT hardware and software.
2. Upgrade the infrastructure of a home for children of low income families, particularly to provide funds for the building of a multi-purpose hall, painting of the home and refurbishing the dormitories, setting up a library corner and introducing IT hardware and software.

Our group of 42 trainee teachers and one lecturer-advisor was a heterogeneous bunch—10 men and 33 women, who came from eight different programmes at NIE. We also benefited from the participation of two teacher-participants from a local primary school. We decided to put together the project teams based on the cooperative learning principle that heterogeneous groups are preferable in most cases. Each project team comprised a diverse group based on gender, ethnicity, age and religious beliefs. Coming from diverse backgrounds, we were able to bring our backgrounds and experiences to the group as resources. For example, on Culture Day celebrated at the school at Chongey, East Sikkim, our group wore Chinese, Malay and Indian national costumes, danced ethnic dances and cooked a food fiesta of Singaporean food—a fusion meal of Chinese, Malay, Indian and Western fare. Learning about the Sikkimese cultures from the kids and teachers was rewarding as was sharing with them the cultures of Singapore. Diversity was celebrated.

A first major activity for the Singapore contingent was pre-expedition team-building 5 months before embarking on the expedition proper. We did this at an eco-camp in Mawai, Johor, where we had to live in basic conditions. During this overnight camping experience, we divided randomly into groups and came up with group rules and expectations for the expedition. Groups also took part in an obstacles course, where we had to work together to surmount obstacles, and had to build a raft out of drums and ropes and launch the raft on the water together—literally putting the “We sink or swim together” philosophy of cooperative learning to the test. A highlight of the experience was the campfire where each group had to present a music or dance item. At the overnight camp, the two project

teams were formed and time was provided for each team to decide on their team name and to start expedition planning in sub-groups.

The cooperative learning principle of positive interdependence was at the heart of this expedition. All participants had a common goal, that of working with the kids, teachers and community in East Sikkim. After the first bonding exercise in Mawai, the teams got together to work on programme planning and fund-raising. The group raised funds by selling ethnic merchandise and project tee-shirts at bazaars, washing cars, and organizing a fund-raiser at the Hard Rock Café. The fund-raisers and the 6 months of collaboration on various tasks served to bond members of each project team together. Teams learnt collaborative skills along the way.

During the expedition itself, positive interdependence was crucial and encouraged. Big events at the school, such as Fun and Sports Day (a day of games led by trainees where all kids of the school were involved), Culture Day (a day of sharing of cultures between the Sikkimese kids and teachers with the Singaporean trainee teachers) and the Food Fiesta (where the Singaporean teachers cooked for the Sikkimese kids and teachers) were opportunities where everyone had to pitch in and help, each bringing to the group their own expertise, energy, enthusiasm, patience and perseverance. Strong bonds were built within each project team. Strong bonds were also built with the children and with the Sikkimese teachers.

Group autonomy, that is, group members depending on each other rather than authority figures, was encouraged. Each team was led by trainee teachers. Team leaders and facilitators were trained by the Singapore International Foundation. The lecturer-in-charge played an advisor-mentor role. Each team sub-group had specific responsibilities, for example, logistics, or social-cultural activities, and were given the opportunity to decide on how to accomplish their special responsibilities. Simultaneous interaction, that is, many people participating at the same time, rather than one at a time as called on by the teacher, was inevitable as there was much to do and this required everyone to be actively involved in some task or another, all working towards a common goal. Equal participation among the groups was encouraged and because all were committed, each felt the need to be individually accountable to their groupmates and to the overall project.

Expedition take-aways were positive. Participants truly implemented the principal of making cooperation a value to be lived and studied. Besides the forging of friendships within and between groups, expedition participants learnt that it is important to be happy with what little one may have and that each had talents to share. They felt happy to be appreciated and were happy to contribute in some way to the experiences of others.

Linking Cooperative Learning and Service-Learning

After the concrete example from Sikkim of the combination of cooperative learning and service-learning, let us look more abstractly at six ways that cooperative learning and service-learning link to one another:

1. Service-learning fits with the cooperative learning principle of heterogeneous grouping, because in service-learning students help and try to learn from people in different circumstances than themselves. Thus, the same spirit of strength via diversity applies. In cooperative learning, students benefit by working with fellow students different from themselves. In service-learning, students benefit when their project leads them to collaborate with people outside their school who are different from themselves.
2. Cooperative learning emphasizes building students' collaborative skills. As we saw in the Sikkim project, such skills are also vital in service-learning, where students need to work effectively with fellow students as well as with people in the communities they serve.
3. As students venture outside the classroom, even to other countries, in their service-learning projects, they are taking major steps away from a teacher-centric form of learning in which students' every action is done in response to teacher commands. Instead, in line with the cooperative learning principle of group autonomy, students come to rely on their groupmates for mutual support, with their teachers sometimes in the background.
4. Service-learning shares common characteristics with other learning formats. Cognitive psychology tells us that learning takes place best when students are actively engaged in thinking about and doing the tasks at hand (Webb, Farivar and Mastergeorge, 2002). In line with this insight from cognitive psychology, three cooperative learning principles in particular help facilitate greater student activity. Simultaneous interaction (Kagan, 1994) does so by allowing many students to take an active role

in the exchange of ideas at the same time, rather than one student at a time being called on by the teacher. Equal participation seeks to ensure that these participating students will not always be the same more talkative ones. Finally, individual accountability puts pressure, cushioned by group support, on students to utilize the participation opportunities provided. In this way, cooperative learning, a generic methodology applicable to all types of students and content areas, can increase the effectiveness of service-learning endeavours.

5. Positive interdependence (Johnson and Johnson, 1999) lies at the heart of cooperative learning and was essential to the success of the Sikkim project. Service-learning allows students to live the idea that in this world in which we are connected in myriad ways to our fellow humans and the other organisms with whom we share the planet, we all benefit by helping one another. Service-learning, thus, supplies real substance to this appreciation of global positive interdependence. All too often, education about various global issues results in nothing more than additional hot air expelled (figuratively worsening global warming) and more trees chopped down for paper (literally worsening deforestation). In other words, global topics receive “academic” treatment in the negative sense of that term. In contrast, service-learning allows students to put their concern for others into action.
6. In this way, service-learning invigorates cooperative learning. Although the cooperative learning principle of *cooperation as a value* moves from the “how” of teaching methodology to address the “what” of students’ studies, values are meaningless if they do not translate into behaviours. Furthermore, behaviours can reinforce values. Here, we see most clearly the interface of cooperative learning and service-learning.

Discussion

This paper has presented the argument that service-learning and cooperative learning fit well together and that the combination of the two strengthens each. The paper began with an account of a service-learning project in which NIE teacher-trainees collaborated with people in Sikkim. The actualization of cooperative learning principles helped increase the project’s level of success. Then, connections between cooperative learning and service-learning were explored on a more abstract level.

The authors of this paper believe that two cooperative learning principles deserve to be highlighted whether students are involved in service-learning thousands of kilometres from home or in simple cooperative learning tasks in their own classroom. These two cooperative learning principles are *positive interdependence* and *cooperation as a value*. Positive interdependence promotes a realization that students are linked in a win-win manner not only with their groupmates, but also with the rest of the planet, human and non-human. Cooperation as a value encourages students to ponder and practice this realization.

However, this emphasis on the commonality of interest we share with others, whether they be seated next to us in the same classroom or on the other side of the same planet, can be dismissed as ignoring the apparent dog-eat-dog, look-out-for-#1 nature of present-day interactions that take place among humans and between humans and other of the planet's creatures. For this reason, both cooperative learning and service-learning are criticized for not preparing students for the cold, calculating, nice-guys-finish-last world of hard knocks, which they will face upon graduation.

To reply to this criticism, while not denying the competition and selfish individualism that abound in the now, service-learning and cooperative learning hope to encourage students to prepare themselves and others for a better future. As Gandhi said in rejecting a worldview based on negative interdependence (You swim, I sink; I swim, you sink): "*An eye for an eye leaves the whole world blind.*" By encouraging students to work together with their fellow students to help and learn with people beyond the school walls, cooperative learning and service-learning attempt to guide students to *see* a path towards that better future.

Implications

The Sikkim Service-Learning project illustrates a number of cooperative learning approaches in action. For instance:

- Forming groups in which students are mixed on one or more of a number of variables (including gender, ethnicity, social class, religion, personality, age, language proficiency and diligence) can have a number of benefits, such as encouraging peer tutoring, providing a variety of

perspectives, helping students come to know and like others different from themselves and fostering appreciation of the value of diversity.

- In order for students to work together effectively with others they need collaborative skills. These include:
 - asking for and giving reasons;
 - disagreeing politely and responding politely to disagreement;
 - encouraging others to participate and responding to encouragement to participate.
- Positive interdependence is a crucial cooperative learning principle. It exists among members of a group when they feel that what helps one member of the group helps the other members and that what hurts one member of the group hurts the other members. It is important, therefore, for students to share common learning goals.
- Cooperation as a value takes the feeling of “All for one, one for all” and expands it beyond the small classroom group to encompass the whole class, the whole school, on and on, bringing increasingly greater numbers of people and other beings into students’ circle of ones with whom to cooperate. Rather than cooperation being only a way to learn, that is, the *how* of learning, cooperation also becomes part of the content to be learned, that is, the *what* of learning.

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