

The Nature and Character Traits of Teachers Who Use Cooperative Learning Extensively in Their Classes

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Abstract. The article deals with the research on the nature of cooperative teachers. The research was done to find out the personality and/or character traits of teachers who use cooperative learning extensively in their classes. The reason for doing this was the real situation experienced in teacher in-service education that not all the teachers getting familiar with cooperative learning method would use it in their classes. So the research question was raised whether a teacher's personality helped to determine if she/he would use cooperative learning in the class. The data were collected through the online discussion in Internet. The conclusions are based on the analysis of the responses of 153 educators from more than 25 different world countries. The discussion leads to the conclusions that personality plays a role – along with other factors such as culture and past experience. Besides, cooperative teachers have a high level of personal confidence and a high level of confidence in their students' abilities, and they are inclined to take risks, as well as, tolerate "chaos".

Introduction

The term *cooperative learning* is not a new term in Latvia. It has become a hot topic in the education of Latvia during these past four years. Teachers in primary, elementary, secondary and higher schools have been experimenting with cooperative learning groups, seeing if their students will learn more, better, faster and enjoy their learning process.

Cooperative learning is taking place when students:

- learn they can count on their classmates' help when they need it;
- listen before their own contribution;
- celebrate their accomplishments;
- view their peers as important and valuable sources of knowledge.

Theoretical background

What is the teacher's business in cooperative learning? There are various opinions and also misconceptions concerning the teacher's role in the process of the cooperative learning.

Speaking about the misconceptions – it is sometimes considered that teachers do nothing while students are learning cooperatively; they take no responsibility in students' learning; the life is easier for them; they are relaxing by making their students work.

Many authors (Bennett, (1991); Cohen, (1994); Johnson, (1993)) as well as the author of this paper believe that a cooperative teacher is responsible for at least four phases in both planning and implementing cooperative learning in lessons (Table 1).

Table 1. The phases in planning and implementing cooperative learning

No.	Phase	Things to do
1.	Planning phase before the lesson	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • determine academic and social objectives • decide about the appropriate group size • assign the students to groups • create the appropriate roles • arrange the room • prepare the materials • decide about the evaluation
2.	At the beginning of the lesson	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • set the stage • describe the tasks (explain the academic task and specify desired social behaviour) • explain the criteria for success • move students into groups • assign their roles
3.	Working process during the lesson	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • monitor students' interaction • intervene when it's necessary (to provide task assistance, teach collaborative skills, analyse the situation, help to solve the conflict, etc.)
4.	Reflection at the end of the lesson or after the lesson	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • evaluate the academic work • process the social skills

Cohen (1994: 39) notes that cooperative learning changes a teacher's role dramatically:

"No longer are you a direct supervisor of students, responsible for insuring that they do their work exactly as you direct. No longer is it your responsibility to watch for every mistake and correct it on the spot. Instead, authority is

delegated to students and to groups of students. They are in charge of insuring that the job gets done, and that classmates get the help they need. They are empowered to make mistakes, to find out what went wrong, and what might be done about it".

Organising cooperative learning the teacher is not anymore giving the information, instead he or she is organising the acquisition of the information. This new way of things

makes the teacher develop new skills, attitudes and fulfil different roles (Figure 1.).

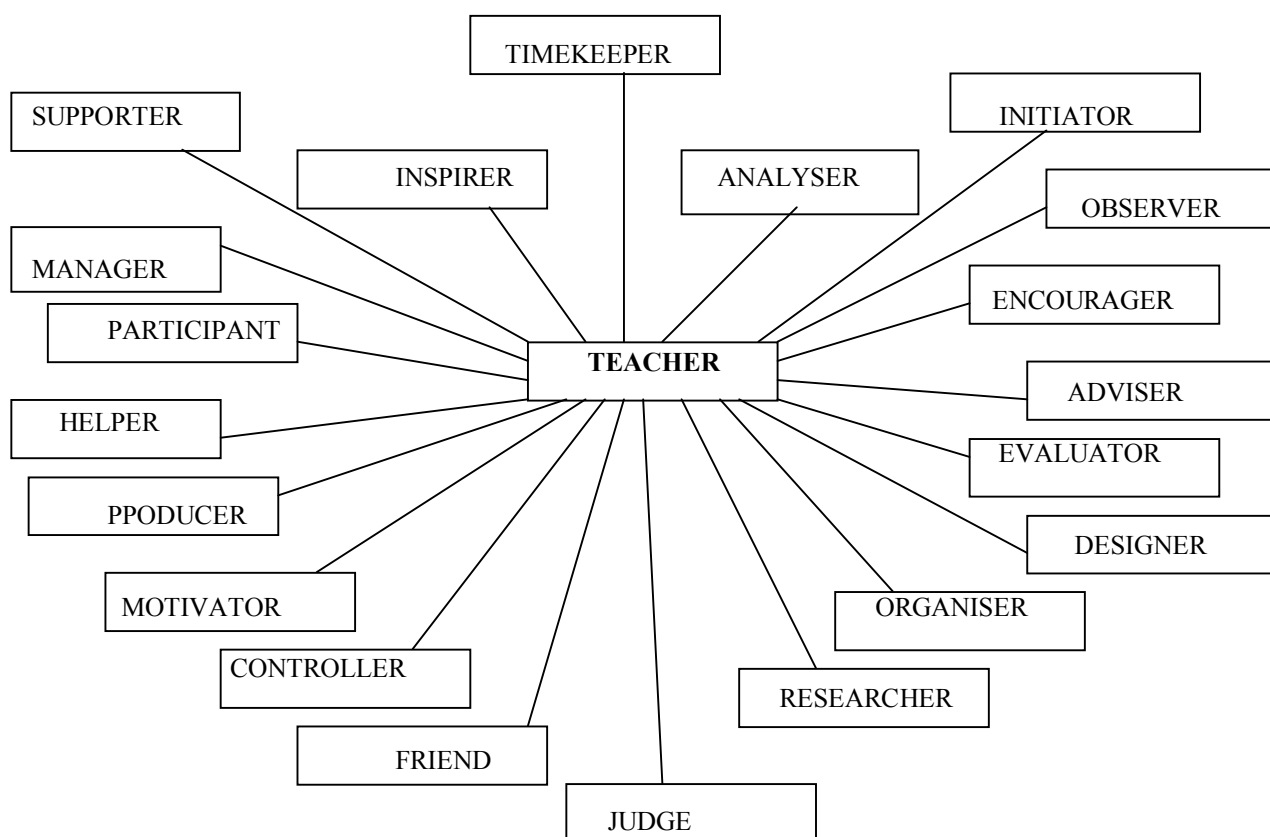


Fig.1. The roles of teachers.

Methods

There are several considerations to be taken into account when choosing research methodology and the methods of data gathering. When it comes to the research in the social world, we find two different traditions. One is labelled as positivistic, natural science based, hypothetico-deductive, quantitative or even simply “scientific”; the other as interpretative, ethnographic or qualitative. Taking into account that theories and concepts tend to arise from enquiry, the interpretative approach was chosen for the research. As there are many individuals, there are multiple versions of reality. People differ depending on their social class, gender, nationality, abilities, learning styles, etc. There are also seemingly objective factors, like the same social norms for the people living in the same country. When it comes to the individual, the above-mentioned factors become subjective because the individual’s beliefs, opinions and attitudes shape them. The underlying assumption of this research is to find out the knowledge of people’s perspectives and their interpretation of reality.

As a strategy for receiving knowledge an employing questionnaire with the descriptive purpose survey was chosen. In this case an open-ended question “what are the personality and/or character traits of teachers who use cooperative learning extensively in their classes?” was put on the discussion line in the Internet on September 15th, 1998. It lasted till the end of the month and the sample

consisted of 153 responders from more than 25 countries in the world. The question was constructed in order to describe the cooperative teacher. The aim of the question was to foster the discussion and reflection on the responses and questions of other participants. The interpretation of the thoughts was supposed to motivate and encourage the teachers to use cooperative learning in their classes.

Results and discussion

The discussion mainly focused around the following terms: *extroverted and introverted personalities, confidence, risk-taking and chaos*. It should be noted that the online discussion-raised also many other interesting and topical questions, like “what do you think about the appropriateness of cooperative learning for different types of learners and teachers? Maybe cooperative learners enjoy upsetting things? Are they more reformers rather than conformers, etc.?” However, in this article the main concern will be the question about the character traits and personalities of the teachers who use cooperative learning in their classes extensively.

The responses of the educators show the differences in opinions whether cooperative teachers are extroverted or introverted personalities. 60% of respondents consider cooperative teachers generally *extroverted* with outgoing personalities who enjoy talking to their students during class and learning as much as they can about students. They

enjoy working in-groups themselves, in committee meetings and community groups versus chairperson.

Maurine Harrison (3) agrees that teachers who use cooperative learning strategies the most extensively tend to be quite extraverted, outgoing, process teachers. Elizabeth Bergman (3) states that even teachers who don't use cooperative learning tend to be extroverted, though. In fact, many teachers who love to talk to their students and have that extroverted personality tend to talk too much at their students:

"It is a combination of teachers' enthusiasm for their students and subject and a desire to teach in a manner that creates independent thinkers and problem solvers that motivates teachers to use cooperative learning".

Other respondents share the opinion that cooperative learning might be liked by *introverts* too except they might not interact with their groups as much. They might especially like planning the course and being the invisible hand – "the behind the scenes orchestrate." Introverts may prefer interacting with others one-on-one rather than in large groups, but that does not necessarily mean they do not enjoy collaborative learning, either as a student or as a teacher. And in many cases teachers who use cooperative learning are introverts, though people around and especially students would certainly not guess it.

Annette Gourgey (3) is an introverted person:

"In my case, perhaps one reason I like it is because I don't like to be the only person in the class who does all the talking".

However, Robert Cohen (3) bets that cooperative learning works better with those teachers who are extroverted and learn better in-groups themselves:

"Personally, other than being an introvert and having a preference for working by myself, I think I have the qualities of cooperative teacher. I suspect that my own preference for individual work is why I have found it difficult to use cooperative learning successfully in my classes".

So, there is no one personality type attracted to cooperative learning. Different personality types may be attracted to cooperative learning, but use it in different cooperative lesson stages and unique ways. Although most people think cooperative teachers are generally extroverted with outgoing personalities, the idea of cooperative learning appeals equally to both introverts and extroverts. It is evident that personality plays a role along with other factors such as culture and past experience.

The next most discussed point was *confidence* that should be looked upon as self-confidence of the teacher and confidence in students. Giving up control is important, and yet - what sort of control? Cooperative learning teachers help students become researchers and, therefore, give up the control that comes with being the "expert" and purveyor of information. They have to give up traditional order in the class to create small learning environments. This means, though, that they must become excellent managers, and it takes a lot of work to control this setting. Cooperative teachers have high level of *personal confidence*, and they see their role as facilitator of learning

versus expert transmitting their knowledge to the student. On the other hand, it might be stated that cooperative teachers have a high level of *confidence in their students' abilities*. Therefore, they are willing to give up some control of the class by sharing decision making with the students.

Ted Panitz (3) stresses delegating responsibility for learning to their students:

"They do this in part by creating interactive procedures that encourage students to work together in and out of class".

So, cooperative teachers see that every student has something to contribute. Finally, they foster students' research and problem-solving skills on an individual level.

Considerable amount of respondents (37 educators) discussed *risk-taking* as an important character trait of cooperative teachers. Barb Gentry (3) considers it certainly important:

"During the initial stages of introducing cooperating learning as a first-time experience, there will be failures and test scores may initially be lower. The learning process never ends and one does not give up, but simply changes gears and proceeds".

Suzu Hill (3) shares her thoughts on cooperative learning:

"I have always thought that those who are afraid to take risks are those who are insecure either personally or professionally. But this doesn't mean that I like cooperative learning. I've tried various methods over the years and haven't found it to be any better than a good open discussion".

Keeping in mind those different tasks cooperative teachers have to fulfil and unexpected situations during the cooperative learning lessons, it might be concluded that cooperative learning teachers are inclined to take risks in class by trying new approaches that stimulate student-student-teacher interactions. Ted Panitz (3) is convinced that

"cooperative classes by their nature provide opportunities to try new procedures because of the variety of class activities used throughout the semester. It is quite natural to ask students who are already working in-groups to try a new technique. If it works keep it, if it doesn't then do not repeat it. New techniques which do not work in specific situations are not viewed as failures".

Also the different teacher's roles require much risk-taking. At the same time risk-taking is closely linked with *chaos* that is always considered as something inappropriate in traditional classroom. In cooperative lesson some chaos is tolerated and even encouraged. Cooperative teachers often deal with a lot of stuff spontaneously, whatever comes up in the group.

Caroline Norris (3) agrees that cooperative learning requires a toleration of "chaos" that does not come easily to the traditional personality:

"I think I possess all the qualities you attribute to the cooperative learning personality - I'm outgoing, learn enormously from my students, love my subject area with a real passion and have a great confidence in my own skills and knowledge - but it's taken me a l-o-n-g time to realise

that a noisy, disputatious classroom can be simultaneously a place of true educational activity”.

The rest of the cooperative teacher’s personality features mentioned during the online are summed up in table 2.

Table 2. Cooperative teacher’s personality features

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • low need for power distance • low need for domination • low need for aggression • low need for orderliness (leaving room for chaos) • low need for control • low need for certainty • low need for containment • low need for scarcity • low need for stability 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • high need for autonomy • high need for introspection • high need for flexibility • high need for good listening skills • high need for belief in cooperative learning • high need for conflict resolution skills • high need for self-deprecating humour • high need for positive view of change • high need for intuitivity • high need for patience
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Conclusions

The online discussions lead to the following conclusions:

- personality plays a role – along with other factors such as culture and past experience,
- cooperative teachers have a high level of personal confidence and a high level of confidence in their students’ abilities,
- cooperative teachers are inclined to take risks
- they can tolerate “chaos”.

It should be added that the cooperative teacher has great *respect for the students and their differences*. Students need to be comfortable with one another and the teacher in order to risk letting someone know that they do not understand or that they did not get the “right” answer. A good cooperative teacher is able to build that non-threatening environment where cooperation or collaboration does not lead to embarrassment.

Also, the cooperative work has to be challenging so that the individual members of the group do not easily do it – in this case they have no need to work together. This means that the teacher has to spend more time preparing for cooperative classes. *Patience* is a very necessary characteristic as well.

Besides, the cooperative teacher must be a really *good listener*. As one listens to group discussions, there is much information to be learned about where misunderstandings lie and also about areas that need to be re-taught or at least

presented differently. Classroom assessment and feedback getting techniques are also helpful for the cooperative teacher.

Another characteristic might be the ability to add a little *humour* to the class. Cooperative learning works best in a relaxed, non-threatening environment and sometimes a little humour will go a long way in enabling students to relax.

Finally, the cooperative teacher is *caring*.

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Mokymāši bendradarbiaujant pamokose taikančīu mokytojų asmenybės pagrindiniai bruožai

Santrauka

Straipsnyje aptariama mokytojų, plačiai taikančių mokymāši bendradarbiaujant pamokose, asmenybė. Straipsnio autorė, plačiai išanalizavusi 153 respondentų iš 25 šalių atsakymus į internete pateiktus klausimus, bando nustatyti, ar mokymāši bendradarbiaujant taikymas pamokose priklauso nuo mokytojo asmenybės. Pateiktų atsakymų analizė patvirtino prielaidą, kad mokytojo asmenybė turi didelę įtaką mokymāši bendradarbiaujant parinkimui, tačiau ne mažiau svarbūs esti tokie faktoriai, kaip kultūra bei patirtis. Atlikto tyrimo rezultatai rodo, kad mokymāši bendradarbiaujant remkasi savimi pasitikintys, mėgstantys rizikuoti bei toleruojantys kūrybinį šurmulį klasėje pedagogai. Straipsnyje analizuojami mokymāši bendradarbiaujant planavimo bei įgyvendinimo etapai, mokytojo vaidmuo bei funkcijos juose.

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