



# The Role of Cooperative Learning in the Teaching of Community and Developmental Subjects: The Case of Teaching History at Secondary School Level

Maxwell Constantine Chando Musingafi<sup>1\*</sup> --- Shillah Rugonye<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Zimbabwe Open University, Department of Development Studies, Masvingo Regional Campus, 68 Hellet Street, Masvingo Zimbabwe

<sup>2</sup>Zimbabwe Open University, Department of Counselling, Mashonaland East Regional Campus Marondera Zimbabwe

## Abstract

In this conceptual paper we argue the case for cooperative learning. Generally teachers have the option of structuring lessons competitively, individualistically, or cooperatively. Students can compete to see who is best, or work individualistically toward a goal without paying attention to other students, or work cooperatively with a vested interest in each other's learning as well as their own. From our experience as teachers and lecturers in the humanities, we observe that, of the three interaction patterns, competition is presently the most dominant. In most cases, the world over, students view schooling as a competitive enterprise where one tries to out-compete other students. Cooperation among students (celebrating each other's successes; encouraging each other to do homework; learning to work together regardless of their ethnic backgrounds), is still rare. In this paper we therefore examine the role and effectiveness of cooperative learning in the teaching of History at secondary school level showing both its strengths and drawbacks. We start by defining selected important concepts in the paper before making an exposition of cooperative learning and its effectiveness in the teaching of History at secondary school level.

**Keywords:** Cooperative learning, Teaching, History, Students, Secondary school.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/)  
Asian Online Journal Publishing Group

## Contents

1. Introduction .....	58
2. Statement of Motivation.....	58
3. Purpose of the Paper .....	58
4. Theoretical Framework .....	58
5. The Argument for Cooperative Learning .....	58
6. Benefits of Cooperative Learning in History .....	59
7. Drawbacks of Cooperative Learning in the Teaching of History .....	60
8. Conclusion.....	60
References .....	61
Bibliography.....	61

## **1. Introduction**

As observed by Keraro *et al.* (2007), the teaching approach that a teacher adopts is a strong factor that influences students' motivation to learn. Generally, teachers have three options of structuring lessons: they may structure their lesson competitively, individualistically, or cooperatively. Hence they motivate learners differently. It has been, however, argued that since society is highly competitive, learners must be educated to succeed in a "survival for the fittest" world. Hence competition is presently the most dominant approach to teaching and learning. The danger with competition is that it creates winners and losers, thereby instilling a feeling of 'them-us' within students. Students are thus competitively divided along competitive and individualistic lines. Yet knowledge is a social construction for it is socially constructed in collaborative groups (Alexpoulou and Driver, 1996; Bianchin, 1997; Kelly and Green, 1998). This paper, thus argues the case for cooperative learning in the teaching of History at secondary school level showing both its strengths and drawbacks. The paper starts by briefly exploring the concept of competitive learning and other important concepts in the paper before making an exposition of cooperative learning and its effectiveness in the teaching of History at secondary school level.

## **2. Statement of Motivation**

From our experience as teachers and lecturers at high school, college and university level we observe that teaching is highly dominated by the competitive approach to teaching and learning. We also note with concern that this dominant approach to teaching and learning creates a few winners and countless losers. Yet there is a better approach to teaching and learning in form of cooperative learning. Cooperative learning with its constructivist approach to teaching and learning argues the case for students working together in their endeavours to solve their learning problems. We understand that this approach promotes innovation and creativity if properly administered in a social setting. It is this conflicting situation between practice in the classroom and the desired situation that triggers us into researching and writing this paper. The paper thus explores the value of cooperative learning, not only in the school setting, but in the total human universe.

## **3. Purpose of the Paper**

This paper sought to investigate the usefulness of cooperative learning as compared to traditional competitive approaches to learning. The paper argues the case for cooperative learning in teaching and learning, using History at secondary school as case study.

## **4. Theoretical Framework**

In this paper we are guided by the constructivist theory of learning as our conceptual framework. The theory is built on the belief that an effective teacher is nothing more than simply a facilitator. As a facilitator a teacher creates an environment in which learners organise meaning on a personal level. We believe that a teaching strategy that involves students actively is more likely to lead to socio-economic creativity and meaningful learning. This cannot be achieved through conventional approaches to learning.

## **5. The Argument for Cooperative Learning**

Competitive learning is an interpersonal, competitive learning situation characterised by negative goal interdependence where, when one person wins, the others lose (Roger and Johnson, 1994). Individualistic learning situations are those situations where students are independent of one another and are working towards criteria where their success depends on their own performance in relation to established criteria. The success or failure of other students does not affect their score (Ibid). Cooperative learning is defined as involving the structuring of small groups so that students work together to maximize their own and each other's learning (Ibid). Felder and Brent (2007) say the term refers to students working in teams on an assignment or project under conditions in which certain criteria are satisfied, including that the team members be held individually accountable for the complete content of the assignment or project. Thus in a cooperative learning situation, interaction is characterized by positive goal interdependence with individual accountability. Positive goal interdependence requires acceptance by a group that they sink or swim together (Roger and Johnson, 1994).

Cooperative Learning is one of the appropriate teaching techniques which lead to less anxiety and increase students' self-awareness from their learning procedure (Powell and Enright, 1990). Cooperative Learning offers a pleasant learning situation for all students, competition is amended as friendship, the spirit of cooperation and participation is reinforced, and all students are entitled to be thoughtful and creative (Keramati, 2001). In this technique students are gathered within small, peculiar groups in which they work together to reach their objectives and are responsible for their learning (Johnson and Johnson, 1994). In fact cooperative learning is organised and managed group work in which students work cooperatively in small groups to achieve academic as well as affective and social goals. In hundreds of studies, cooperative learning has been associated with gains in such variables as achievement, interpersonal skills, and attitudes toward school, self, and others (Sharan, 1980; Johnson and Johnson, 1989; Slavin, 1990; Cohen, 1994). Beyond these overall gains, research also suggests that cooperative learning may lead to gains in thinking skills (Johnson and Johnson, 1990; Qin *et al.*, 1995). Therefore, as a classroom organisation and instructional method, cooperative learning merits serious consideration for use in History lessons.

Cooperative learning is designed in such a way that it actively involve students in the learning process. This, in most cases, may not possible in a lecture format. Its foundations are therefore founded in constructivist epistemology. Cooperative learning is thus a process that requires knowledge to be discovered by students and transformed into concepts to which the students can relate. The discovered knowledge is then reconstructed and expanded through new learning experiences. All the learning is thus experienced through dialogue among students in a social setting. Cooperative learning employs various learning activities so as to improve students' understanding of concepts and new ideas by using a structured approach involving a series of steps. According to Kagan (1994), this

requires students to create, analyse and apply concepts in their everyday life experiences. In cooperative learning both the individual and the social setting are active dynamics in the learning process as students attempt to imitate real-life learning. In fact, by combining teamwork and individual accountability, students work towards acquiring both knowledge and social skills. Cooperative learning is therefore a teaching strategy which allows students to work together in small groups with individuals of various talents, abilities and backgrounds to accomplish a common goal. Every member is responsible for learning the material and also for helping the other members of the team learn. Students have to work until all members successfully understand and complete the assignment. Thus creating an atmosphere of achievement (Panitz, 1996). It is argued that this process results in a deeper understanding of the material and more potential to retain the material.

According to Roger and Johnson (1994), there is a difference between simply having students work in a group and structuring groups of students to work cooperatively. Students who sit at the same table where they do their own individual work, but free to talk with each other as they work, cannot be said to be in a cooperative group as there is no positive interdependence. This scenario could best be described as individualistic learning with talking. For this kind of setting to turn into a cooperative learning situation, there is need for an accepted common goal on which the group is rewarded for its efforts. If a group of students has been assigned to do a report, but only one student does all the work and the others go along for a free ride, it is not a cooperative group. A cooperative group has a sense of individual accountability that means that all students need to know the material or spell well for the whole group to be successful. Putting students into groups does not necessarily gain a cooperative relationship; it has to be structured and managed by the teacher (Roger and Johnson, 1994).

According to Adams and Hamm (1990) a cooperative learning lesson often begins with some direct instruction where the teacher presents new material. Next comes cooperative group work. During this group work, students have to take observable roles so as to help them feel responsible for participating and learning. The role of the teacher is to monitor cooperative groups to ensure that students are learning and functioning smoothly. Thus the key to cooperative learning is team spirit which is stressed with students learning how to learn by participation with their peers (Kagan, 1994).

According to Jacobs *et al.* (1997), teachers who use cooperative learning have learning objectives that are academic, affective and social. They argue that in this scenario, students are encouraged not to think only of their own learning but of their group members as well. As such, cooperation becomes a theme, not just a teaching technique (Jacobs, 1997). Further, cooperation features throughout the school like in teachers cooperating with one another and letting their students know about this collaboration (Jacobs *et al.*, 1997).

In cooperative learning classes, communication is structured very differently. For the reason that students learn in collaboration in cooperative learning, they consequently engage in extensive verbal negotiations with their peers. Their cooperative group provides them with a more intimate setting that permits direct and unmediated communication (Shachar and Sharan, 1994). It is believed that such a context is key to students engaging in real discussion and wrestling with ideas. It is thus argued that in this setting, students are be given opportunities to stretch and extend their thinking.

## **6. Benefits of Cooperative Learning in History**

Above all, History is an interactive subject about life, especially life as influenced by human beings. As such History can simply be seen as nothing else but reality. The best teacher of reality is experience. This is what cooperative learning offers to History students. Panitz (1996) came up with over 50 benefits from the use of cooperative learning. These benefits can be categorised social, psychological, academic and assessment categories.

Cooperative learning promotes social interactions; thus students of History benefit in a number of ways from the social perspective. By having the students explain their historical reasoning and conclusions, cooperative learning helps develop oral communication skills. Because of the social interaction among students, cooperative learning is not only used to help students empathize with the people that lived on earth before them, but also to model the appropriate social behaviours necessary for employment situations. By following the appropriate structuring for cooperative learning, students are able to develop and practice skills that will be needed to function in both their communities and the workplace. As already alluded to above, these skills include: leadership, decision-making, trust building, communication and conflict-management.

It has also been found that the cooperative learning environment develops a social support system for students. In a History lesson setup this would not only refer to other students, the History teacher, administrators, other school staff and parents but also those who lived long back become integral parts of the learning process supplying multiple opportunities for support to the students (Kessler and McCleod, 1985). Students also get psychological benefits from cooperative learning. Johnson and Johnson (1989) claim, "cooperative learning experiences promote more positive attitudes" toward learning and instruction than other teaching methodologies. This would mean students develop positive attitudes towards History as a subject. Also, for the reason that students play an active role in the learning process in cooperative learning, their satisfaction with the learning experience is likely to be enhanced.

Cooperative learning has been found to help in the development of interpersonal relationships among students (Kessler and McCleod, 1985). These authors argue that the opportunity to discuss their ideas in smaller groups and receive constructive feedback on those ideas in cooperative groups helps to build student self-esteem. In lectures, individual students are simply called upon to respond to a question in front of the class without having much time to think about their answers. Cooperative learning makes students feel secure and protected as solutions come from the group rather than from the individual. Any mistakes that are likely to occur in conclusions are corrected within the group before they are presented to the class.

Students also tend to be inspired by instructors who take the time to plan History activities which promote an encouraging environment (Janke, 1980). It has also been argued that receiving encouragement in a cooperative and supportive setting from both the instructor and peers helps to develop higher self-efficacy. As a result of higher self-

efficacy, student grades tend to increase; thus, cooperative learning methods provide several academic benefits for History students.

According to [Johnson and Johnson \(1990\)](#), several studies have shown that students taught by cooperative methods learn and retain significantly more information than students taught by other methods. It is argued that requiring students to verbalise their ideas to the group helps them to develop more clear concepts. As such the thought process becomes fully embedded in the students' memory. Cooperative group discussions lead to more frequent summarisation as the students are constantly explaining and elaborating their line of thought. This in turn validates and strengthens thoughts (*Ibid*). Students also benefit from cooperative learning academically in the sense that there is more of a potential for success when students work in groups. Individuals tend to give up when they get stuck, whereas a group of students is more likely to find a way to keep going (*Ibid*). It is also important to note that cooperative learning calls for self-management from students as they must not only come prepared with completed assignments but they must also understand the material which they have compiled. As a result, a more complete understanding of the historical material is developed.

Cooperative learning has been found to be of great benefit to both students and their teachers. It provides instant feedback to the students and teachers. This is so for the effectiveness of each class can be observed. As teachers move around the classroom and observe each group interacting and explaining their theories, they are able to detect misconceptions early enough to correct them. Only a few minutes of observation during each class session can provide helpful insight into students' abilities and growth. Cooperative teaching methods also utilise a variety of assessments. According to [Johnson and Johnson \(1990\)](#), grades are not dependent solely on tests and individual assignments which only allow for right or wrong responses, leaving no room for reflection and discussion of error or misconceptions. With cooperative learning, History teachers can use more authentic assessments such as observation, peer assessment and writing reflections.

## **7. Drawbacks of Cooperative Learning in the Teaching of History**

History teachers who are unfamiliar with cooperative learning are likely to face a number of challenges, some of which include loss of control of their classroom, being unsure of the techniques used or possibly even think that it is too time consuming. It is also believed that to avoid drawbacks of cooperative teaching it is important to recognize what has been said against it. Many researchers have proved that cooperative elements alone do not ensure maximal productivity from a learning group; there has to be both cooperation and conflict ([Johnson and Johnson, 1991](#)). Group work practices have been criticized as being ineffective because many problems like conflicts of ideas, disagreements, misunderstanding and free riders can be found during the processes of the strategy.

As put forward by [Johnson and Johnson \(1990\)](#), it has been viewed that when students interact conflicts among their ideas, conclusions, theories, information, views, opinions and preferences are obvious. Furthermore, when cooperative groups fail, there is the tendency to fix blame on others and the weaker group members become the scapegoat. This is likely to result in unwarranted misunderstandings. It has also to be noted that cooperative learning is not a panacea to all learning situation problems. There are some cases where pupils, even in small groups, tend to be silent participants and depend on the thinking of other students.

As already seen above cooperative learning is a structured approach that requires instructor support and guidance. In order for cooperative learning to be utilized in the classroom, history teachers must receive training to be proficient in implementing the techniques. Without proper training history teachers may resist using cooperative learning techniques in their classroom because they are afraid they may lose control of their teaching routine. Teachers may have a difficult time giving up their control of the content that is being covered ([Panitz, 1996](#)). These teachers have been accustomed to presenting the curriculum to the students and thus they are unable to give students the freedom to learn on their own. Showing their expertise in History is important for some teachers. Giving up the opportunity to show off this expertise may deter them from using cooperative learning in their classrooms. Also, if students are expected to explore on their own, then they may have questions that the teacher cannot answer. Both of these possibilities may cause a teacher to lose confidence in her/his teaching abilities. History teachers can still be experts, but they will be using their knowledge as a facilitator rather than a giver of information.

Depending on the age level, History students may resist using cooperative learning in their classrooms. The lecture method does not require much interaction and participation from and among them as students. In fact, they can get as much or as little from the class as they like. Being required to work in a group may ruffle a few feathers with the students because now they are being asked to participate and contribute to their learning. In addition, they are also asked to learn new concepts and taught how to work in a group. They may not be accustomed to working in a group, and therefore, may be unsure of the dynamics involved in group work.

Since cooperative learning is centred on group work, History students may be concerned that other members of their group are going to bring their grades down. This is most likely when students are grouped by mixed ability, requiring higher ability students to guide lower ability students. Note that deciding how groups should be formed is an important part of the cooperative learning planning process. Mixed ability grouping allows for all group members to be involved, though the type of involvement differs. Advanced students can teach struggling students, but concerns arise about advanced students doing all the work and struggling students not being motivated to be involved at all. There are also concerns that gifted students are held back by the lower ability students in their group. If students are grouped with others of the same ability level, then the lower ability group may feel frustrated and unmotivated to try. Also when cooperative groups fail, there is the tendency to fix blame on others and the weaker group members become the scapegoat. Therefore, misunderstanding might rise up. There are still some cases where pupils, even in small groups, tend to be silent participants and depend on the thinking of other students.

## **8. Conclusion**

It is thus concluded that cooperative learning is very useful and very effective in teaching History depending on the expertise of the teacher and orientation of the students. The most important requirement for an effectively

structured cooperative History lesson is that students believe that they sink or swim together. Within cooperative learning situations, students have two responsibilities: learn the assigned historical material, and ensure that all members of the group learn the assigned material. This has been found to promote positive interdependence. Positive interdependence exists when History students perceive that they are linked with group mates in such a way that they cannot succeed unless their group mates do (and vice versa) and/or that they must coordinate their efforts with the efforts of their group mates to complete a task. The argument is that positive interdependence promotes a situation in which students see that their work benefits group mates and their group mates' work benefits them; and work together in small groups to maximize the learning of all members by sharing their resources to provide mutual support and encouragement and to celebrate their joint success. Like any other teaching methods, cooperative learning has its own peculiar weaknesses but these can be effectively handled with proper orientation and expertise.

## References

- Adams, D.N. and M.E. Hamm, 1990. Cooperative learning - critical thinking and collaboration across the curriculum. Springfield, IL: Charles C Thomas.
- Alexpoulou, E. and R. Driver, 1996. Small-group discussion in physics: Peer interaction modes in pairs and fours. *Journal of Research in Science Teaching*, 33(10): 1099-1114.
- Bianchin, J.A., 1997. Where knowledge construction, equity, and context intersect: Student learning of science in small groups. *Journal of Research in Science Teaching*, 34(10): 1039- 1065.
- Cohen, E.G., 1994. Restructuring the classroom: Conditions for productive small groups. *Review of Educational Research*, 64(1): 1-35.
- Felder, R.M. and R. Brent, 2007. Cooperative learning. In P.A. Mabrouk (Ed). *Active learning: Models from the analytical sciences*. ACS symposium series 970. Washington, DC: American Chemical Society. pp: 34–53.
- Jacobs, G.M., 1997. Cooperative learning or just grouping students: The difference makes a difference. Paper Presented at the RELC Seminar, Singapore.
- Jacobs, G.M., C. Lee and M. Ng, 1997. Co-operative learning in the thinking classroom: Research and theoretical perspectives. Paper Presented at the International Conference on Thinking, Singapore.
- Janke, R., 1980. Computational errors of mentally-retarded students. *Psychology in the Schools*, 17(2): 30 - 32.
- Johnson, D.W. and R.T. Johnson, 1989. Cooperation and competition: Theory and research. Edina, MN: Interaction Book Company.
- Johnson, D.W. and R.T. Johnson, 1990. Cooperative learning and achievement. In S. Sharan (Ed.), *Cooperative learning: Theory and research*. New York: Praeger. pp: 23-37.
- Johnson, D.W. and R.T. Johnson, 1991. Learning together and alone: Cooperative, competitive, and individualistic. 3rd Edn., Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Johnson, D.W. and R.T. Johnson, 1994. Learning together and alone. 4th Edn., Needham Heights, MA: Allyn and Bacon.
- Kagan, S., 1994. Cooperative learning. San Juan Capistrano, CA: Kagan Cooperative Learning.
- Kelly, G.J. and J. Green, 1998. The social nature of knowing: Towards a social cultural perspective on conceptual change and knowledge construction. In B. Guzzetti & C. Hynd (Eds.), *Perspective on conceptual change: Multiple ways to understand knowing and learning in a complex world*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum. pp: 145-181.
- Keramati, M.R., 2001. Competition or companionship. *Journal of Psychology and Educational Sciences*, 31(2): 139-155.
- Keraro, F.N., S.W. Wachanga and W. Orora, 2007. Effects of cooperative concept mapping teaching approach on secondary school student's motivation in biology in Gucha district, Kenya. *International Journal of Science and Mathematics Education*, 5(1): 111 – 124.
- Kessler, R. and J. McCleod, 1985. Social support and mental health in community samples. In Cohen and Syme (Eds.), *Social support and health*. New York: Academic Press.
- Panitz, T., 1996. A definition of collaborative vs. Cooperative learning. Available from <http://www.londonmet.ac.uk/deliberations/collaborative-learning/panitz-paper.cfm> [Accessed January 28, 2014].
- Powell, T.J. and S.J. Enright, 1990. Anxiety and stress management. London: Routledge.
- Qin, Z., D.W. Johnson and R.T. Johnson, 1995. Cooperative versus competitive efforts and problem solving. *Review of Educational Research*, 65(2): 129-143.
- Roger, T. and D.W. Johnson, 1994. An overview of cooperative learning. In J. Thousand, A. Villa and A. Nevin (eds), *Creativity and collaborative learning*. Baltimore: Brookes Press.
- Shachar, H. and S. Sharan, 1994. Talking, relating and achieving: Effects of cooperative learning and whole-class instruction. *Cognition and Instruction*, 12(4): 313-353.
- Sharan, S., 1980. Cooperative learning in small groups: Recent methods and effects on achievement, attitudes and ethnic relations. *Review of Educational Research*, 50(2): 241-271.
- Slavin, R.E., 1990. Cooperative learning: Theory, research, and practice. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

## Bibliography

- Bershon, B.L., 1992. Cooperative problem solving: A link to inner speech. In Hertz- Lazarowitz (Ed.) *Interaction in cooperative learning*. New York: Cambridge Press. pp: 36 - 48.
- Johnson, D.W. and R.T. Johnson, 1987. Learning together and alone: Cooperative, competitive, and individualistic. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Johnson, D.W., R.T. Johnson and E.J. Holubec, 1986. *Circles of learning: Cooperation in the classroom*. Edina, MN: Interaction Book Company.