

Linking Cooperative Learning with Philosophy

Abstract

In this paper the possible moral and social benefits of students engaging in structured cooperative learning are investigated. Kant's categorical imperative is put forward as the ideal of morality, and a link between the teaching of cooperative learning and the realization of the categorical imperative is suggested.

Résumé

Dans cet article, l'auteur étudie les avantages moraux et sociaux dont bénéficient les étudiants qui font de l'apprentissage coopératif structuré. L'impératif catégorique de Kant est avancé comme l'idéal de la moralité et l'auteur suggère un lien entre l'enseignement de l'apprentissage coopératif et la réalisation de l'impératif catégorique.

In recent years much attention has been given to the benefits of having students in classrooms work and learn in structured, cooperative groups, rather than or as well as in the traditional competitive, individualistic mode. Results in terms of achievement have been inconclusive, with some studies finding increased achievement for lower students or for minority students, and a few studies finding increased achievement for all students. Other studies have not found achievement gains, but almost all studies have found students to have increased self-esteem and increased tolerance and respect for others.

The purpose of this paper is not to review those studies. Stallings and Stipek (1986) offer a good review of achievement results to 1986. The focus here is not on achievement, though this is a worthy topic which clearly needs continued study, but it offers an examination of possible benefits in terms of students' relationships with others, benefits in the so-called affective domain. Stallings and Stipek conclude their review with the suggestion that:

Perhaps the most important outcomes of these cooperative experiences are in the affective domain, for example, mutual concern, friendships with students of other races, liking school and perceiving peer support. The effects of these outcomes may be found in a more productive work life and more socially responsible adults. (p.749-750)

Lickona (1980) cites Kohlberg's investigations of children and adolescents in different parts of the world in terms of Kohlberg's stages of moral development. Kohlberg found that American orphanages produced children in the lowest stages, and Israeli kibbutzim produced children in the highest stages of moral development, according to his theory. Children spend considerable time with each other in both these settings, so why is there such disparity in moral development? Kohlberg says that in the orphanages there was

. . . very little communication and role-taking between staff adults and children. Relations among the children themselves were fragmentary, with very little communication and no stimulation or supervision of peer interaction by the staff...In contrast, children in the kibbutz engaged in intense peer interaction supervised by a group leader who was concerned with bringing the young people into the kibbutz community as active dedicated participants. Discussing, reasoning, communicating feelings, and making group decisions were central everyday activities. (Kohlberg, cited in Lickona, 1980, p.141)

Clearly the kinds of affective gains mentioned by Stallings and Stipek happen because students are placed in structured cooperative settings where they have clear goals and frequent feedback and encouragement from teachers. Just lumping people together does not make them cooperate. Children need structured opportunities to develop ways of communicating, sharing, compromising.

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the possible moral and social benefits of students working cooperatively in school by linking cooperative work with ideas from the philosophical writings of Immanuel Kant, whose analysis of ethics transformed moral philosophy two hundred years ago and has not yet been equalled. The author hopes this examination will offer a slightly different angle from which to view cooperative learning, and make a modest contribution to the building of a philosophic base for this movement in education.

Why are moral and social benefits grouped together? Because it is assumed that society will be improved (in the sense of becoming a more just

and happy system for more people to live and work in) if people are more moral in their beliefs and their behavior. The term “more moral” is to be interpreted as acting more often in accordance with the fundamental moral principle that Kant called the “categorical imperative” (Walsh, 1967). This principle says, in effect, that all persons should be accorded dignity and respect. Specifically, it states that people should be treated as ends in themselves, and never as means. Let us look more closely at this idea.

There are, for Kant, two kinds of imperatives. One kind he calls hypothetical. These take the form “If. . . then”, the “then” stating a means to satisfy the desire stated by the “if”. If you want to get an A, then you must work hard. If you want to lose weight, then exercise. If you want some ice cream, then go to the freezer. The “end” is the satisfaction of the desire. Categorical imperatives, however, have no conditions attached. They take the form, “You should do this!”, or simply, “Do this!” The only way such an unconditional imperative can be justified is by some ultimate governing principle, and this Kant called the categorical imperative. That people should be treated as ends and never as means does not need to be explained or justified, because it is the basis for all moral action.

To treat people as means would be to treat them as means to one’s own ends. This could involve using, abusing, or ignoring people if those actions would help one attain one’s own personal desires.

A rational being is constrained by reason not to bend others to his own purposes, not to enslave, abuse or exploit them, but always to recognize that they contain within themselves the justification of their own existence, and a right to their autonomy. (Scruton, 1984, p.153)

While it may sometimes be difficult to see how best to apply this fundamental moral principle in specific situations, it is clearly a sound basis on which to build a moral way of life. How are we to inculcate this principle in students? By lecturing to them on its importance? Certainly this approach has its place. By studying biographies and fictional accounts in which people act according to this principle? Clearly such study would be valuable. But these academic approaches cannot take the place of actual practice in working and interacting with others. We would like students to treat each other with dignity and respect on the playground at recess, but this is a difficult situation to monitor and supervise. The ideal moral workshop is a structured classroom setting where students work together to accomplish tasks, solve problems, and reach decisions. Here a skilful teacher can monitor students’ interactions and engage them in discussion about ways to reach compromise, about why it is important to listen to and help one another, and about ways to deal with conflict.

Now, it may be said, and rightly so, that some cooperative learning activities (Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec, 1988) do set up situations whereby students treat each other as means. If bonus marks are to be assigned to a whole group based on the achievement of all group members, then an individual will help other group members with their work, not for altruistic reasons, but to ensure that one will get those bonus marks. If a teacher says that s/he will test one student from each group at random and assign that person's test mark to the whole group, a student will work very hard to make sure the weaker members of the group know the material, because s/he wants a good mark. This is Johnson and Johnson's notion of "positive interdependence" whereby group members "sink or swim together". After years of being schooled in a competitive environment, many students find it difficult to work with others, preferring to put all their energy into their own achievement. Setting up situations in which students have to help each other so that they can achieve good marks themselves is a necessary step in motivating them to work in groups. If cooperative work is persisted in, and if the teacher is able to structure the lessons so that they are enjoyable and stimulating, then the door is open for moving more into the realm of helping another person just because s/he needs help. Many students will already, during cooperative group work, have experienced the quiet, unexpected joy of this kind of helping, not even helping because it feels good, because that, too, can become a kind of self-gratification, but recognizing and responding to another human being, with no strings attached. This part of cooperative learning is often called "social skills" but it is much more profound than that title conveys. It involves students in what Martin Buber (1970) called, not "I - it", but "I - Thou" relationships with each other.

"Positive interdependence" and "social skills" can be seen to complement the explicit teaching of morality. Students' experiences of helping, sharing, listening, reaching compromise and working together toward a goal will make rules, stories, and lectures on morality (some of which might otherwise travel quickly in one proverbial ear and out the other) personal and concrete. Hypothetical imperatives ("If I help this student, we will both get a better mark"), acted upon because of the structure of the cooperative lesson, are a building block in the realization of the categorical imperative.

Can students take such experiences into their interactions outside of school, and into their lives as adults? We expect students to take other ways of thinking and behaving, such as critical thinking, out of school and into their futures. If we give them the opportunities to learn them well, many will do so. Treating others as ends and not as means is a way of thinking and behaving, but more fundamentally, it a way of being. It is a way of being that needs to underlie the actions of the future ecologists, economists, and educators whom we hope can save our world. It may be that the world can only be saved, not by earth-sweeping mega-actions of the powerful, but by the relentless accumulation of small, authentic, human interactions.

Another idea that originated with Kant is that as we learn we form schemata in our minds, categories of understanding which enable us to understand and deal with new information. If we were better able to help students form a mental schema for how to relate to one another that was based on the categorical imperative, then chance meetings, whether in business, in politics, in school or in the family, would be more likely to engender honesty and compassion. Louis Pasteur (1981) once said, in another context, that "Chance favors the prepared mind". In a way, most of our encounters with others are chance ones, in that we do not know what each will say or what will grow out of the interaction. Our words and actions are often spontaneous reactions. It seems likely that we can, through the skillful use of cooperative learning, prepare students' minds to meet those chances from a position of moral preparedness. Can we afford to do otherwise?

REFERENCES

- Buber, M. (1970). *I and thou*. Walter Kaufmann (Trans.). New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.
- Johnson, D., Johnson, R., & Holubec, E.J. (1988). *Advanced cooperative learning*. Edina, MN: Interaction Book Co.
- Lickona, T. (1980). Beyond justice: A curriculum for cooperation. In D.B. Cochrane & M. Manly-Casimir (Ed.), *Development of moral reasoning: Practical approaches*. New York: Praeger Publishing.
- Pasteur, L. (1981, August). Quoted in *The Sciences*.
- Scruton, R. (1984). *A short history of modern philosophy*. London: Ark Paperbacks.
- Stallings, J., & Stipek, D. (1986). Research on early childhood and elementary school teaching programs. In Merlin C. Wittrock (Ed.), *Handbook of research on teaching*, 3rd Edition. New York: MacMillan.
- Walsh, W.H. (1967). Immanuel Kant. In Paul Edwards (Ed.), *The encyclopedia of philosophy*. New York: MacMillan.

Deborah Court is an assistant professor of social studies education at the University of Victoria. Her research interests include cooperative learning, critical thinking, and the investigation of teachers' values and beliefs.

Deborah Court est professeur adjoint d'enseignement des sciences sociales à l'Université de Victoria. Elle s'intéresse à l'apprentissage coopératif, à la pensée critique et à l'étude des valeurs et des croyances des enseignants.