

Student Perceptions of Engagement via Cooperative Discussion Groups

Colby Gregg
The Ohio State University
Gregg.186@osu.edu

Amanda Bowling
Assistant Professor
The Ohio State University
Bowling.175@osu.edu

Department of Agricultural Communication, Education, and Leadership
200 Agricultural Administration Building
2120 Fyffe Road, Columbus, OH 43210
(614)292-6909

Introduction

After a complete restructuring of the Agricultural Education curriculum at a large Midwestern university, there was a noted shift in the content of courses to purposively intertwine pedagogy, content, and philosophy across all courses as opposed to the previous strategy of dividing these topics into individual courses. To accommodate this, instructors began to explore options to emphasize the role of discussion in developing personal philosophies.

The most traditional method of discussion found in the classroom, Whole Class Discussion (WCD), is a teaching method which can encourage students to think critically, reflect on their beliefs and practices (Wade, 1994) and actively engage in course content (Dancer & Kamvounias, 2005). Further, students feel they learned more and enjoy sharing their ideas when they participate in WCD (Wade, 1994). Despite these effects, barriers to WCD exist - including students fears of their ideas being unworthy, facing criticism, or not being provided ample time to gather their thoughts (Wade, 1994). Additionally, students may or may not participate in WCD due to course coordination, student efficacy, student personality and preference, course climate, and the course instructor (Rocca, 2010).

An alternative teaching method, cooperative learning, or the use of small groups to meet a common learning goal, has been shown to have positive effects in students, including an increase in efforts to achieve and students' psychological health (Johnson et al., 1998). Other research has shown cooperative learning to positively impact student motivation (Fernandez-Rio et al. 2017; Tombak & Altun, 2016) and produce more equal participation (Lange et al., 2016). To reap the benefits of WCD while seeking to mitigate some of the barriers, elements of cooperative learning groups were used to emphasize and facilitate discussions on course philosophic topics via Cooperative Discussion Groups (CDGs), rather than WCD.

How It Works

This teaching strategy was implemented in a course that heavily focused on experiential learning and youth development. On the first day of class, 28 students were randomly assigned to seven groups of four on the first day, keeping in line with recommendations from Johnson et al. (1998). These groups were then structured with four group roles that were rotated between members every three weeks. Among these roles were the moderator, who led the group and initiated discussions, the recorder, who took notes, the reporter, who provided edits and submitted notes to the online portal, and the discussion delegate, who was responsible for representing the group and sharing their thoughts to the whole class. Regardless of their role, it was a clear expectation that all group members were to participate in all group discussions and work within their group to complete activities. The CDGs accounted for just over 20% of the student's final grade and consisted of twelve assignment submissions (10 pts each), peer reviews (20 pts total), and self-reviews (10 points). Student reviews occurred at the end of every three-week cycle when the roles were rotated between students. At the conclusion of the course, a case study was conducted to determine student perceptions of the use of CDGs. Students were asked to complete journal reflection prompts that, once analyzed, resulted in five themes.

Results to Date

The first theme was the overall success of the discussion groups. Students relayed how at the beginning of the semester they did not feel comfortable with the groups – feeling like they would just be “another group project.” However, across all responses, student comfort and confidence grew over the semester. Most students felt it helped their understanding of the

material, although some conflicting thoughts did arise with student concerns of time to complete the activities. The second theme, collaboration through designated roles, illustrated the students' success with their group members within the four defined roles. Within this was a subtheme of collaboration; students felt they were able to debate in a safe place with a decreased sense of judgement. The second subtheme was that of group roles. Students felt the roles guided expectations, distributed work evenly, and most appreciated the role rotations over the semester.

The third theme was the understanding of course material. Students felt that the CDGs allowed them to dive deeper into content, bounce ideas off one another, and build on those ideas as a collaborative group. Within this theme we found two subthemes. The first of belief development, was illustrated by students feeling empowered to develop their own ideas on course content implementation as opposed to "just being told how to do it." The second subtheme rose around major course assignments as students felt that the group prompts and activities helped with the individual assignments. There were some contradictory thoughts for this subtheme including that sometimes students felt as if they were not learning because they were focused on what to say next, juggling the social factors that come with group discussion.

The fourth theme consisted of students comparing CDGs and WCD. Students felt that the CDGs worked better and were less intimidating than WCD, which lead to comfort in voicing their thoughts, receiving feedback, and asking questions. Students found that discussion was much more efficient within CDGs, especially when they started class sessions sitting together. They also felt they had more of a voice compared to WCD. On par with thinking of these teaching methods, the fifth theme was using CDGs within the context of Ag Ed and Pre-service teachers. Students felt that the CDGs helped them see the different experiences of their peers from their high school agricultural education programs, helped build connections for future networking, and prompting them to think how they could use CDGs in their future classrooms.

Future Plans/Advice to Others

Addressing the concern of time from the first theme, it should be thoroughly considered how and when you use CDGs. When implementing these groups, especially in shorter class periods, practices like instructing groups to sit together at the beginning of class, providing specific time lengths for activities, and reminders of time remaining for these activities will benefit students as they work. Another strategy for planning CDG learning activities is that case studies in the course had a much better reception by students when completed in CDGs as opposed to WCD. This shows that some learning activities already used in the classroom have potential to work better within CDGs. In implementing this strategy, future approaches should seek to use CDGs with specific student-centered teaching methods like case studies, as well as working to address the limitation of time on days when groups are expected to work together.

Costs/Resources Needed

There are no costs associated with this teaching method, but the following pieces should be established by the instructor before incorporating CDGs: 1) how groups will be established, 2) group roles and responsibilities, 3) expectations of students, 4) how CDGs will be assessed, 5) rotation schedule for group roles, 6) procedures for transitioning into and out of groups in class, 7) activities to be completed by students within CDGs, and 8) an estimate of the time needed for these activities.

References

- Dancer, D., & Kamvounias, P. (2005). Student involvement in assessment: A project designed to assess class participation fairly and reliably. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 30(4), 445-454.
- Fernandez-Rio, J., Sanz, N., Fernandez-Cando, J., & Santos, L. (2017). Impact of a sustained Cooperative Learning intervention on student motivation. *Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy*, 22(1), 89-105.
- Johnson, D. W., Johnson, R. T., & Smith, K. A. (1998). *Active learning: Cooperation in the college classroom*. Interaction Book Company.
- Lange, C., Costley, J., & Lock Han, S. (2016). Informal cooperative learning in small groups: The effect of scaffolding on participation. *Issues in Educational Research*, 26(2), 260-279.
- Rocca, K. A. (2010). Student participation in the college classroom: An extended multidisciplinary literature review. *Communication Education*, 59(2), 185-213.
- Tombak, B., & Altun, S. (2016). The Effect of Cooperative Learning: University Example. *Eurasian Journal of Educational Research*, 64, 173-196.
- Wade, R. C. (1994). Teacher education students' views on class discussion: Implications for fostering critical reflection. *Teaching and teacher education*, 10(2), 231-243.