Using Cooperative Learning to Prepare Students for Autonomy in Communication Tasks in Business Situations

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Increasingly teachers in the twenty-first century are being asked to not only teach knowledge, but life and work skills. As two teachers of Business Communications at a tertiary institution in Singapore, the authors were primarily interested in motivating students to improve their writing skills and enjoy the whole experience of the writing process. But they also wanted students to develop critical thinking skills, increase their self confidence and learn autonomy and responsibility. Although the course outline was set, the methodology of delivery was flexible. The classrooms were set up to allow students to work in groups when necessary as directed by tutors. We were particularly interested to find out which *method* of group work was best. What activities or combinations of activities were best able to motivate students to progress in writing skills? At the same time, could we also hope they would improve in critical thinking skills, self-confidence and responsibility? Could cooperative learning (CL) be the key to accomplishing these goals?

Literature Review

Since the pivotal work of John Dewey, educators have advocated the efficacy of CL in producing learning results. Research done in the 1920s and 1930s was instrumental in giving rich description of how and why groups work, seeing the group as more than the sum of its parts (Strang, 1946). Successful group work was characterized by: 1) members planning together, 2) individual responsibility, 3) creativity, 4) a minimum of competition and 5) a friendly, cooperative atmosphere (Sullivan as cited in Strang, 1946). In his 1980 review of research, Slavin (1980) reported that "For academic achievement, cooperative learning techniques are no worse than traditional techniques, and in most cases are significantly better" (p. 337). As well, he reported that CL was found to be effective for analysis, judgment, evaluation, feelings of mutual concern, and self-esteem.

By the 1990s, researchers had quite convincingly established the effectiveness of small group learning, as seen in another large-scale review of the literature (Cohen, 1994),

and were becoming more interested in investigating the differences in tasks, as in "What kinds of interaction are necessary for different kinds of outcomes? And what are the task instructions, student preparation and teacher role that foster the desired type of interaction?" (Cohen, 1994, p. 30)

More modern research has delved into group dynamics and its effects on motivation. Dornyei (1997) reported that CL had been shown to be a highly effective mode of instruction, and from a psychological perspective, there were two reasons for this. First was the unique group dynamics: three to six students, intense cooperation, and rewarding group rather than individual achievement. Second was the motivational process and outcomes which include heightened self-esteem, self-efficacy, and confidence on the part of students. Dornyei points out that both cooperative and collaborative learning share these traits. Oxford (1997), on the other hand, draws distinctions among cooperative learning, collaborative learning, and interaction. She argues that each has its own characteristics. Cooperative learning is more structured and prescriptivist, whereas collaborative learning is theoretically situated in social constructivism. Interaction is a more general term that promotes communication among students.

Another type of group learning, problem-based learning (Feletti & Bond, 2001; Savery & Duffy, 1995), uses groups in a collaborative way to solve problems based on a constructivist framework. The 'case' approach is one type of problem-based learning, and it grew out of a medical school model that was based on authentic and challenging problems which encourage alternative views and reflection. The extension to general classrooms of this type of learning—whether it is called cooperative, collaborative or task-based learning—demands a change in classroom practice (Brody & Davidson, 1998; Cohen, 1994). Ill-conceived tasks, unclear instructions, and confusion about the roles of teacher, facilitator, and the group in general can undermine the success of students' efforts. In particular, Brody and Davidson's research shows that the teacher herself must embrace beliefs and attitudes towards the locus of control, authority, conceptions of decision-making, and the nature of knowledge that may be contrary to experience. They suggest that "certain models of cooperative learning may represent such great departures from teachers' beliefs that they are likely to be categorically rejected by these same teachers" (p. 45).

Even if teachers can embrace visions of change, they cannot always guarantee that students will. When teachers present what they consider to be a well-developed task, students also need to rise to the challenge of collaborative/cooperative learning. Students in their classroom behavior will not necessarily conform to textbook definitions of what should happen in groups (Chen, 2004). One related issue lies in the cultural context. As cooperative learning is a Western invention, what are the issues when attempting to implement this methodology in cultures where groups have not been used in classrooms? Studies in Lebanon with EFL learners showed that both children and teens who used

cooperative learning techniques showed similar results as those in Western settings (Ghaith, 2002; Ghaith & Yaghi, 1998). In a study of Singaporean students' attitudes towards CL versus whole-class methods, CL was clearly preferred although no conclusions about progress in learning were attempted (Lee, Ng, & Phang, 2002). Although many see Confucian heritage culture students as being able to use cooperative learning because of the group focus of Confucian culture, exception has been taken to this view by some researchers (Nguyen, Terlow, & Pilot, 2005). Others (Wachob, 2000) maintain that cultural attitudes are not one vision that explains all. Students in a Hong Kong pilot study (Sachs, Candlin, Rose, & Shum, 2003) showed that students were engaged and motivated while working in cooperative groups, and they perhaps could have done more if their teachers had been well-trained, as suggested by Brody and Davidson (1998). Singaporean students, though they may be imbued with Confucian heritage culture values, are certainly ones who also embrace Western values to some extent.

It appears from this review of the literature that CL has been shown to be effective under certain conditions. Within our own classes, we had been using CL and regularly employed group work in various forms. Thus, our students were familiar with it. However, we wanted to know which method of CL our students thought was best. Hence, our research questions were:

1. Which type of group involvement is seen by students as the best method for preparing them to write business documents on their own?
   - Simple group discussion
   - Group cooperative writing with peer group feedback
   - Group discussion prior to group debate
   - Group discussion with individual writing followed by individual peer feedback
2. Do students value the experience of working with peers through CL tasks in general, and specifically through peer review?
3. Do students develop critical thinking skills, increase their self-confidence, and learn responsibility by using cooperative learning techniques?

Method

Participants and Research Context

There were 127 participants in this study who were second-year students of both genders and were enrolled in a business school at a university in Singapore. The class was typically large, with almost 600 students each semester, and was called "Business and Managerial Communications." The class was designed to give all business and accountancy students knowledge and skills in writing business letters, memos, and reports

as well as giving formal and informal presentations. In order to measure the improvement in students' writing skills, the course included a pre- and post-writing task.

The class used a locally written textbook (Wong, Connor, & Murfett, 2004), which focused on theoretical concerns about business communication and included four business communication cases, all with a local flavor. The four cases were to be covered by the tutors, but no specific methodology was delineated. Therefore, in an attempt to make the most out of class time, to motivate students to develop critical thinking skills, increase self-confidence, and learn responsibility, using groups—specifically cooperative learning—seemed the best way to proceed. Students needed to be interested in the task (the cases) to be motivated. They needed to be accountable so that every student learned. Real work such as letters, memos, and presentations were the end products and the groups were small enough for all to participate.

The participants were a sample of seven tutorial groups taught by the authors. The number of students in each group ranged from 15 to 20, with an average of 18 per tutorial group. The students met twice a week for two hours during the approximately 14 weeks of the semester.

Organizing the Classroom

The classroom was prepared by organizing all students into four teams of four to five students each. The students sat in four groups and were encouraged to think of themselves as a team as all projects were based on these groups. As the semester progressed, students were assigned activities that they did as a team. Gradually, this team undertook to give peer/team feedback on presentations and written work. Students initially stayed within the team, but as the semester progressed, the teams became mixed as students went to other teams to give presentations and participate in discussions.

To focus attention on how to use the cases, the students read the chapter in their textbook (Wong, Connor, & Murfett, 2004) about teamwork and discussed within their teams some questions designed by the authors. By reading and discussing the concepts of how to work in teams, possible conflicts, and what makes good teams work, the students reviewed what they knew and internalized the importance of this to their participation in this course. It was pointed out to the students that 10% of their overall grade was for class participation and group work.

Learning Feedback

Feedback techniques were discussed and modeled. Examples of good points to comment on, how to phrase negative criticism and how to structure feedback were demonstrated by the authors within the first two or three weeks. The concept of sensitivity to affective factors that may cause students to withdraw from the group and be passive participants was discussed. However, it was pointed out that effusive praise for a poor or

mediocre performance was not an effective use of feedback. The model used was to: 1) offer praise for areas done well, 2) offer suggestions in a helpful and tactful way for areas that could be improved, and 3) end on a high note. Feedback was initially undertaken by the tutor offering some general points for the entire class, without mentioning students by name. Then feedback from within the team was practiced. This was to give skills practice to both givers and receivers of feedback. After students gained confidence in giving and receiving feedback, teams were assigned to offer critiques of other teams' work, both oral and written. This way, negative feedback could be offered from team to team, not individual to individual, until students felt more confident and sure in their assessments. Using this method, skills were built up, from whispered critique to a trusted teammate, through more open team to team critique, to a more assured, confident and tactful individual feedback.

Assessing Work

An assessment instrument was used to judge the appropriateness, completeness and quality of written work. The writing checklist (see Appendix) was devised by the authors as a method not only of preparing, writing, and checking work, but also as an instrument for feedback. Based on this list, students could decide if they had included all needed elements and also how well they had completed the task. By referring to the assignments, the textbook and other assigned readings, students learned to judge the quality of their own and peers' work.

Casework and Group Interaction Patterns

The course was built around four communications cases (Wong, Connor, & Murfett, 2004, Clark & Ho, 2004). These cases consisted of a text describing the situation and introducing characters and a series of communication tasks, both oral and written. Pre- and post-writing assessment tasks were also built around a case. The cases increased in complexity from first to last, in both the complexity of the situation and the audience addressed. Students were assigned to undertake the task in a variety of groupings and in a variety of situations. The writing tasks were done in five different group interaction situations as described briefly below.

Situation #1—Pre- and Post-writing Tests

The students logged onto the course website at a prearranged time for a window of about 48 hours. Prior to attending class, students read the pretest case and completed the written task by themselves during the first week of the course. The post-writing assessment was given at the very end of the course and closely resembled the first task, both in method of assignment and completion. The pretest was marked by the tutors as a benchmark for each student.

Situation #2—Quadra

The students were assigned the case to read before they came to class. In class they discussed the task in their respective teams. The students did the task individually as homework. The task was to persuade the manager of a local car company to change the terms of a contract to buy a new car, since the latest promotion, implemented shortly after the contract was signed, was not in the customer's favor.

Situation #3— Singsongster.com

This case concerned the issue of intellectual property rights and music posted on the Web (Clark & Ho, 2004). This is a very topical subject matter and not well defined in law, and these tasks were persuasive ones. Two teams took one persuasive task and two teams took another. They discussed the case and then wrote the task as a group. The respective letters were traded with a team that had done the other task and were then critiqued by the other team, using the writing checklist and other class materials. After the teams completed the critique, the two teams met for a final session, where each team presented its critique of the other teams' tasks. The team being critiqued was encouraged to defend and explain its letter.

Situation #4—Faber Audio

This was a complex case of deciding whether an employee should be retained or fired after being convicted of abusing her maid. As the situation in the case was a complex one, no clear answer could be given. The students discussed the case in teams, and then divided into two viewpoints, for or against retaining the employee. The students were then given time to prepare some more formal statements of their view and then a semi-formal debate was held. Prepared statements were made by each side, and then an open rebuttal session was held, open to any student to argue a point or answer a question for his or her side. Students then chose to write a memo arguing for their own viewpoint, drawing upon arguments they had heard in class.

Situation #5—PacRim Bank

This case involved a hacking incident at a bank. The written tasks involved public relations, damage control, and issues of apology and accepting blame. The students discussed the case in class in light of some specific outside readings. At the next class meeting, the students were given one hour to write one of two tasks by themselves in class. Students were equally divided between the two tasks. Then each task group of eight to ten students met to discuss the criteria of a good response for the other task. Students who did the first task were paired with one person who did the second task. These dyads exchanged papers and critiqued the letter based on the discussed criteria. Comments and rebuttals, similar to the feedback session for Situation #3, were carried out in a one-to-one peer situation.

Data Collection

To answer our research questions, we devised a short questionnaire that we administered to all of the participants (see Table 1). The questions were open-ended to allow all participants to express their opinions freely. The questionnaire was answered by students from all 7 tutorial groups, for a total of 116 out of a possible 127 students.

Findings

Responses to the first question on the questionnaire (Which situation best prepared you to write the assigned task?) showed that 50% of students preferred Situation #4, the Faber case, which involved debate followed by individual writing (see Table 2). The least preferred situation was Situation #1 for which there was no group work and no peer feedback.

A sample of some of the reasons given for choosing Situation #4 as the most helpful were: "We take different perspectives," "Debate allows us a rich exchange of ideas that prepares us to write either task," "It enabled us to get a full picture of the case," "Everyone was actively involved," "It triggered thought processes and creativity," "It helps organize thinking," and "we think critically."

Situation #2 was also useful for some students who said: "The task requirements are better understood after discussion," "The group discussion helped to generate ideas." "By writing it individually, I am better able to express ideas in my own style," "Because you get the benefits from a group discussion such as extra ideas, criticisms and yet reap the efficiency of individual work."

Table 1

End of Semester Questionnaire

1. Which situation best prepared you to write the assigned task? Why?

2. Which was the most difficult? Why?

3. Which method did you enjoy most? Why?

4. Do you find peer review helpful? Why?

5. What have you learned about the effects of group discussion and teacher/peer feedback on writing?

Table 2

Question 1—Which Situation Best Prepared You to Write the Assigned Task?

Situation	1 (pre/post)	2 (Quadra)	3 (Singsongster)	4 (Faber)	5 (PacRim)
Number	2	25	26	58	5
Percentage	1.7%	21.5%	22.4%	50%	4.3%

Situation #3, like #2 and #4, used group discussion before writing the task. Comments from students include the following: "Group discussion facilitates understanding," "Group discussion exceptionally useful," and "It made one think more in-depth about the case."

Responses to the second question on the questionnaire (Which was the most difficult?) showed that Situation #1 (no group discussion) with 42.2% and Situation #5 (individual writing and peer feedback) with 40.5% were judged the most difficult (See Table 3).

The responses to question #2 showed that students had difficulty with situations that asked students to write without any prior group discussion, that is Situations #1 and #5. Reasons for the difficulty in Situation #1 included: "It did not allow me to tap on others frame of thinking," "Only own ideas," "Because of the absence of group discussion," "Group discussion helps to provide additional points," "I have absolutely no idea how to write the pretest."

Situation #5 was stressful for many who cited the short time frame. Here is a sample of what they said: "Time constraints, stressful," "No time to think over points," "Time constraints and minimal class discussion on the case prior to writing task," "Least preparation," "No input from classmates," "Tremendous stress," "Have no idea what to write since we do not have the discussion."

Table 3

Question 2—Which Situation Was the Most Difficult?

Situation	1 (pre/post)	2 (Quadra)	3 (Singsongster)	4 (Faber)	5 (PacRim)
Number	49	3	13	4	47
Percentage	42.2%	2.5%	11.2%	3.4%	40.5%

Situation #3 was difficult for only a few students who found writing as a group to be unsatisfactory. Here is what some said: "It is difficult to write an essay in a group" and "Writing task as a group is difficult. It is impossible to divide the task into parts."

The responses to the third question on the questionnaire (Which method did you enjoy most?) showed that Situation #4 (debate, then individual writing) with 70.1% was by far the most enjoyed (See Table 4).

Question #3 on the questionnaire perhaps related more to motivation and its importance in learning than preparing students to write a task. The overwhelmingly favorite situation was #4, the debate. Here is a sample of student responses: "fun," "quite exciting," "more spontaneous," "keeps brain moving," "stimulating for the mind," "inject life in class," and "I love debates." Many found the debate particularly useful for its demand of argumentation as these comments show: "It was highly participative and I felt free to put my points forward," "It is challenging to debate for a position that you initially don't agree with," "It is a better way to learn," and "The debate allows me to see the different arguments from different perspectives, which aids in the writing later."

Responses to the fourth question on the questionnaire (Do you find peer review helpful?) showed that an overwhelming percentage of participants (85.3%) found it useful (see Table 5). "No" answers comprised 6.9% and "no clear cut answer" totaled 7.8% of the participants.

Question 4 revealed the helpfulness of peer review with an overwhelmingly positive response. Some comments were: "The exchange of ideas (peer review) makes learning fun," "We can learn our mistakes from fellow classmates who will be our working partners when we enter the workplace," "It is hard to openly criticize tactfully," "Students are more approachable than the tutor." "I also like it when people improve due to my own feedback," "We cannot always rely on the teacher to correct us," and "I now look at my own writing with a more critical stance."

Table 4
*Question 3—Which Method Did You Enjoy Most?**

Situation	1 (pre/post)	2 (Quadra)	3 (Singsongster)	4 (Faber)	5 (PacRim)
Number	2	14	13	80	5
Percentage	1.8%	12.3%	11.4%	70.1%	4.4%

114 students answered this question with a choice of situation. One student did not answer and one student chose Situations 2, 3 and 4.

Table 5
Question 4—Do You Find Peer Review Helpful?

Answer	Yes	No	Yes/no or not a clear-cut answer
Number	99	8	9
Percentage	85.3%	6.9%	7.8%

Question 5 on the questionnaire was an opportunity for students to put into their own words what they obtained from CL activities. Some representative responses were: "Group discussion enhances your thinking," "Cooperative learning aids the flowing of creative juices," "More ideas generated, more creativity in group discussion," "Group discussion improves the quality of the work," "Learning from others' strengths," "It is a better way of improving our writing skills," "I also learned to listen and accept other people's view rather than just my own," and "It is an effective way of learning."

Discussion

In answer to Research Question #1, which type of group involvement did the students see as the best method of preparation, the students showed their preference for group discussion coupled with debate. The active nature of the debate was appealing and fun. They seemed to understand that the interest and motivation generated by the stimulation and excitement of debate caused them to put more energy into the task. They appreciated the challenge and they spoke of the enjoyment of working in the group. This heightened awareness of themselves as learners who have been encouraged to exchange ideas and fight for space for their creativity is clear.

As well, the difficult tasks were seen as those where they had no opportunity to consult with the group and where they were required to write on their own. After having the chance to discuss with their peers the pros and cons, the style and tone, one student summed up why it was difficult to write on his/her own, "have no idea what to write since we do not have the discussion." This comment speaks volumes on the benefits of peer stimulation and support in the writing process.

The act of enjoyment of a classroom activity is a sign of motivation. Finding the right vehicle to motivate students may be one of the most difficult jobs teachers face, but also the most rewarding as students then create their own momentum. Thus, the debate, which 70% chose as the most enjoyable, can be seen not just as the most fun, but as the one that motivated them the most. As one student noted, the arguments from different perspectives "aids in writing later." This is a definite endorsement for using cooperative group work with writing tasks.

Students' responses on the questionnaire certainly pointed to the cooperative learning group as a motivating factor in writing. Their responses to the question about which situation prepared them to write the assigned task were first of all, the debate, (Situation 4) and then the other two situations that used group discussion prior to writing, Situation 2 and 3. Almost 95% of the students chose a situation that used group discussion before writing as opposed to the two situations that did not. As well, their written responses showed that they appreciated the mix of ideas. The synergy that flows from verbal exchange was acknowledged as motivating in writing. Although it appears that we cannot prove the link between increased writing ability and group work, the students have shown overwhelmingly their preference for this kind of preparation.

Research Question #2 asked whether students value the experience of working with peers through CL tasks in general, and specifically through peer review. It was obvious that students found peer review helpful although not always easy. The ability to critique tactfully was also seen as a work place skill and the knowledge of how to do it, and to practice it, was valuable. Our students realize the value of being sensitive, using polite and inoffensive language and thus this has enhanced their self-confidence and responsibility.

In Research Question #3 we also wanted to know if students could learn to be more critical, increase their self-confidence, and increase their autonomy and responsibility. There is no definitive answer to this question that could be obtained from this research project. Data from the questionnaires were incomplete as not all students responded to the question of 'why' and thus no detailed analysis could be done. However, there are many indications that students did progress in these areas, as evidenced by their remarks about self-discovery, self-critique, and increase in confidence.

Conclusions and Further Research

This small-scale research shows that students preferred situations that used group discussion (cooperative learning) as a springboard for individual writing. From our research, it appears that CL does work to motivate students to write on their own. We need to keep in mind that the design of an activity is important and it should incorporate an element of fun to keep students engaged.

It does appear from this research that if we want students to gain autonomy, we need to help them gain confidence in writing. Through group discussions, students learn by getting more ideas through brainstorming; the group process helps them to think of various dimensions to solving a problem. This is a kind of modeling of how to think of more ideas by looking at various aspects which they can transfer to themselves when they brainstorm on their own. They will then be able to categorize ideas, delete what is not relevant, retain what will advance ideas, and sequence steps that will lead to more persuasive arguments. The process is crucial to the development of critical thinking, leading students to become more confident writers working on their own.

Further research could include pursuing this method within various cultural settings to see if this methodology works with other kinds of students, especially in places where CL is a new method. Also useful would be extensive qualitative analysis of students' answers as to why they think group discussion is so helpful to them. More detailed questionnaires, focus groups or in-depth interviews might give a more complete picture of what elements of CL are crucial or most valuable for students.

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Appendix
Writing Checklist

Before you write:

1. What is the objective (task) of writing this message?

2. Have you done an audience analysis?

    - What is the context?

3. What choice of channel have you made?

4. Have you looked at the format of your text?

    - Should it be a memo

    - or letter

    - or an email?

5. What strategy have you used?

    - What information do you need to include?

6. Should you use a logical or emotional appeal as a persuasion strategy?

7. How is your message organized?

    - Is the purpose up front or delayed?

As you write:

1. How is the subject line phrased?

2. What strategy have you used in your introduction?

    - Do you need a buffer or attention getter?

3. Is there an advance organizer?

4. Is there a need for headings?

5. What sort of headings have you used?

    - Are they parallel?

    - Are they talking headings?

6. Have you looked at benefits for the reader?

7. Have you looked at reader objections?

8. If you make claims, have you given adequate support for your claims?

9. Is there a cordial close?

    - Is there a call for action?

After you write:

1. Have you looked at the tone of your message?

   - Is it positive?

2. Is your message 'you' oriented'?

3. Is the message coherent?

   - Are there transition markers?

   - What other devices have you used to enhance coherence?

4. Have you edited your work for grammatical and spelling errors?

5. If you are giving recommendations, have you looked at your modal verbs to check if you have used appropriate ones?

6. Have you checked the verb tenses for consistency and correctness?