

# Learning and Enhancing Soft Skills through Co-operative Learning

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**Abstract**— Co-operative learning (CL) is a teaching approach that can encourage student learning in the form of group work with specific mission and outcome. This paper compares the 20<sup>th</sup> century classroom environment with changes that are required in 21<sup>st</sup> classroom, among which, is the needs of highly diverse individuals being able to work collaboratively with others. The CL approach can provide positive working in-group environment. In addition, it serves as a platform to develop social and soft skills among the students, especially in communicating, teamwork, listening, focus and presentation. This paper also describes the advantages of CL and how it can be incorporated in classroom teaching.

**Keywords**—co-operative learning; soft skills enhancement

## I. INTRODUCTION

Students' engagement is important to ensure successful learning process takes place in the classroom. Stimulating students can be done by applying various methods of teaching, and cooperative learning (CL, henceforth) can be a good suggestion. However, the modern world has witnessed the emergence of liberalization, globalization and privatization that drive students to compete, rather than searching for opportunities in collective works. Focusing on competition has given birth to an individualistic environment where the "I" is of supreme importance. The Malay proverbs that once suggest "*berat sama dipikul, ringan sama dijinjing*" (sharing the burden together) and "*hati gajah sama dilapah, hati kuman sama dicicah*" (sharing whatever we have in abundance or in scarcity) have been replaced by the "life is a race" principle.

Individualistic attitude can limit social skills development. An attempt to compare the society's educational goals throughout the ages by [1], suggests the knowledge age requires students to use communication and social networking tools to contribute time and resources to both local and global causes. It is expected that individuals born between 1981 and 2010 are exposed to highly diverse environment [1]. There will be no limit to search for new career and career development, as the world is open for them with the right

skills, talent and knowledge. The conventional practice of the 20<sup>th</sup> century classroom and 21<sup>st</sup> century classroom are compared to highlight this. This is shown in Table 1.

TABLE I. DIFFERENCES BETWEEN 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY CLASSROOMS AND 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY CLASSROOM [2]

20 <sup>th</sup> Century Classroom	21 <sup>st</sup> Century Classroom
Time-based	Outcome-based
Focus: memorization of discrete facts	Focus: what students know, can do and like after all the details are forgotten.
Lesson focuses on the lower level of Bloom's Taxonomy – knowledge, comprehension and application.	Learning is designed on upper levels of Blooms' – synthesis, analysis and evaluation (and include lower levels as curriculum is designed down from the top)
Textbook-driven	Research-driven
Passive Learning	Active learning
Learners work in isolation – classroom within 4 walls	Learners work collaboratively with classmates and others around the world – the Global Classroom
Teacher-centred: teacher is centre of attention and provider of information	Student-centered: teacher is facilitator/coach
Little to no student freedom	Great deal of student freedom

“Discipline problems” – educators do not trust students and vice versa. No student motivation.	No “discipline problems” – students and teachers have mutually respectful relationship as co-learners; students are highly motivated.
Fragmented curriculum	Integrated and Interdisciplinary curriculum
Grades averaged	Grades based on what was learned
Low expectations	High expectations – “if it isn’t good, it isn’t done”. We expect and ensure that all students succeed in learning at high levels. Some may go higher – we get out of their way to let them do that.
Teacher is judge. No one else sees student work.	Self, peer and other assessments. Public audience, authentic assessments.
Curriculum/school is irrelevant and meaningless to the students.	Curriculum is connected to students’ interests, experiences, talents and the real world.
Print is the primary vehicle of learning and assessment.	Performances, projects and multiple forms of media are used for learning and assessment.
Diversity in students is ignored.	Curriculum and instruction address student diversity.
Literacy is the 3 R’s – reading, writing and math.	Multiple literacy’s of the 21 <sup>st</sup> century – aligned to living and working in a globalized new millennium
Factory model, based upon the needs of employers for the Industrial Age of the 19 <sup>th</sup> century. Scientific management.	Global model, based upon the needs of a globalized, high-tech society.

The CL approach can provide positive working in-group environment. In addition, it serves as a platform to develop social and soft skills among the students, especially in communicating, teamwork, listening, focus and presentation.

Such comparison shows that conventional teaching approaches less encourage students to participate actively in the classroom setting. Students need space and opportunities to express and practice their social skills. Requesting students to present in front of the class is time consuming (if everyone needs to present and be present). Students’ focus is questionable when they need to hear long hours’ presentations. Thus, this paper presents the advantages of CL and suggests how this approach can be incorporated in classroom teaching and learning.

## II. CO-OPERATIVE LEARNING AND ITS ADVANTAGES

Co-operative learning is referred to as a teaching method that needs students from various cooperation skills in a small group to achieve the same target or vision [3]. In CL, students work together in small groups to help one another learn academic content. The involvement in CL is a strong predictor of a student’s academic performance, find a significant relationship between degree to which grades are important to a student and students’ active participation in CL [4]. [5] puts forward the five basic elements in CL as 1) dependability on each other positively, 2) directs communication within the group members, 3) individual accountability on self-learning, 4) co-operative skills, and 5) group processing. CL encourages students to interact actively and positively in groups. Generally, constructive comments by peers in CL stress on producing a democratic and critical-thinking community for their own development. CL also stresses on active learning and problem-solving skills. The outcome of this CL’s philosophy application will create an ideal community.

The students will have two responsibilities which are learning and understanding. These elements are needed for group work, and all group members must understand the elements. Both responsibilities are identified as positive dependability. These components exist when a student in a certain group realizes that he or she will not succeed if the other group members are not successful as he or she is. All group members need to combine their effort in order to complete a particular task [6]. Effort from each group member is needed and without it, success will not be achieved. This means that there is no passenger in the group. In addition, the face-to-face interaction characteristic between the members of a particular group is very important in order to improve the relationship between the group members and to enhance social competence. This interaction dependency is characterized by individuals who co-operate with one another effectively and efficiently through sources exchange such as information and materials that are mostly needed.

In CL, the practice of interpersonal skill is important. To achieve the group’s goal, students should trust and believe each group member, communicate effectively and without any doubt, accept and support each other and solve conflicts constructively [6], [7]. Interpersonal skills and small group understanding do not come naturally when needed. Students must be taught about social skills for a high quality cooperation and to motivate themselves to use it in a productive cooperative group.

There are many advantages of CL. [8],[9],[10] outline some of these advantages as:

i. *providing opportunities for higher order thinking as opposed to passive listening*

CL learning reinforces listening to others and giving opportunity for immediate feedback and adjustment of thought. Students talking to each other will provide input and also activate active listening process. They often have to assess the thoughts/ideas of peers, determine whether they “fit” their own, whether they disagree, or partially agree. Students have an opportunity to speak their ideas/thoughts for better formulation. Some often say, “I didn’t think of that” or “That’s a different point.”

ii. *promoting greater student-faculty and student-student interaction*

Students assist each other in understanding material/content. This may even help students to broaden their perspectives on certain issues or problems. Instructors have an opportunity to move from group to group, listen and, if appropriate, add comments. For some students, this is the only personalization with an instructor that ever occurs. Instructors may answer questions that might never be asked without the closer interaction. Problems or misunderstandings can quickly and quietly be handled.

iii. *increasing student retention and limiting anxiety*

Students are not overloaded with information and actually get time to think about, to talk about, and process information. CL improves interaction and “talk” (Vygotskian Constructivism) information. Time for “talking” and/or “writing” is needed to help students make sense of what they hear before attempting to “take in” even more information.

iv. *permitting opportunities to connect the content to real life*

Students are often hesitant to speak up and offer opinions, especially in very large classes. In CL, students can provide real life examples of the content being discussed in smaller groups, thus, increasing the relevancy of the learning.

v. *building self-esteem in students*

Students help each other as discussion occurs. Students are more likely to respond to the whole class after discussing thoughts with a partner or small group. Responses may be more carefully conceived as they try responding with each other. Students may even discover that they understand the information because they must articulate the content to one another. Greater satisfaction with the learning experience, thus, occurs. Students make personal connections to the content. Enjoyment of learning often leads to greater retention. In other words, interaction often promotes a more positive attitude toward the subject matter or course.

vi. *providing opportunities for improvement of social interaction skills, greater acceptance of others, and a greater sense of “community” in the class - in part by addressing learning style differences*

Students may even begin to create study groups for greater learning. Students who teach or tutor each other learn more about each other and how to better communicate information to others. Students benefit from building group skills by working together. Not everyone will agree; students may learn to cope with those who have differing viewpoints, or recognize that some problems can be very complex and not easily solved with simple responses.

vii. *encouraging alternative forms of assessment.*

Instructors have greater opportunities to observe actual processing of information, seeing the results of group projects or field experiences. The applied projects indicate true knowledge.

viii. *promoting higher levels of achievement, greater depth of thought and improved attendance*

Enjoyment of interaction and relevancy of content tend to encourage students to master the content. The longer a cooperative group exists, the more caring their relationships will tend to be, and the greater the social support they will provide for each other. Additionally, the more committed the members are to each other’s success, the more influence they have over each other. Permanent cooperative-based groups provide the ground in which caring and committed relationships can be created that provide the social support needed to improve attendance, personalize the educational experience, increase achievement, and improve the quality of school life.

ix. *encouraging innovation in both teaching and student involvement.*

Technology is easily incorporated by students and/or lecturers. Students may e-mail each other, join chat rooms, and collaborate on group projects effectively using the technology, rather than meeting face-to-face. Students may present projects, activities, etc. using a variety of approaches rather than the typical paper. They have more freedom to use their own strengths in the final product. Students may determine the form of projects and often work well beyond initial expectations.

### III. INCORPORATING CO-OPERATIVE LEARNING IN THE CLASSROOM

Cooperative learning can be implemented in the classroom during long lecture hours, for example, 3 to 5 hours for one session. This method is very new to students. They have the difficulties to form group and need to arrange table to more convenient setting, thus, take more time to organize.

The instructor, on the other hand, should have 1 to 2 weeks of preparation time to ensure an effective cooperative learning environment, especially, in reading comprehension circle

method. Selection of the topics are suggested based on something that is not totally new to the students, hence, they should have at least some general ideas about the topics. The discussion is to explain in detail and emphasize on critical areas. If new topics are to be used for CL, students should be requested to do their own pre-reading before attending the class.

Students can use the classroom wall to stick their laminated discussion materials which can be prepared by the instructor or themselves. However, using laminated notes have limited usage. They may be used as references and reviewing charts and tables only. Therefore, using mobile white board is preferable where students can use markers to emphasize on important information and show work examples. They will be more active to move their body and use psychomotor skills to tell.

The idea of CL is to provide platform for students to practise their communication, boost up the confident level, the art of working in group, listening, focus and active discussion, share knowledge and many more. Instructors should make students aware that they can depend on each other because everyone has something important to offer. This situation will provide positive environment of interdependence, mutual understanding and harmony. Thus, encouragement and guidance from instructors are essential.

However, there are some setbacks of using the CL method. For example, some students do not prefer working in group, thus, are reluctant to share and co-operate. In addition, some students' presentation skills have not fully developed and matured, hence, may not be a good model for the others. Other setbacks include the students' own learning effort and readiness. Nevertheless, all these can be rectified by consistent control and guidance from the instructor.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has discussed the advantages of CL based on the empirical research and findings. CL can help to develop students' soft and social skills. Most importantly, students are engaged in the learning process in CL. However, preparation, control and active guidance are important in incorporating CL in the classroom and to ensure its success.

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