COOPERATIVE LEARNING APPROACH IN PRACTICE

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During the last fifty years, educational system around the world has changed drastically. If previously people were concerned with preserving the knowledge in the written form in order to pass it on to the coming generations, nowadays, one can compose an oral or even a video message and communicate it instantly to almost anyone in any corner of the planet. Therefore, teachers were assigned with the creation of new methodologies which would meet the needs of modern society.

Cooperative learning approach, when used regularly and correctly, helps students to master subjects and gain positive results by dividing a learning group into several teams and giving those equivalent goals and educational conditions to fulfil the task. The results of each team rely upon the individual participation of each student, as well as his or her ability to collectively process the information, communicate it and come to conclusions.

The cooperative approach has been designed, introduced and further studied by numerous scientists: Brown & Ciuffetelli Parker (2009) and Siltala (2010), David Johnson and Roger Johnson (Johnson et al., 1994), Robert Slavin (1994, 1995), and Shlomo Sharan and Yael Sharan (Sharan, 1995; Sharan & Sharan, 1994) [1], et cetera. They have coined the five basic key elements of cooperative learning:

- Positive Interdependence (each student, regardless of his or her skill level, is to fully participate in the process of completing the task by assigning sub-roles and correlating the work of better students);
- Face-to-face Promotion Interaction (students discuss the problem together sharing their background knowledge);
- Individual versus Team Accountability (students perform together, but get separate grades for the task and individual assessment of their work);
- Social Skills (the given element includes the development of interpersonal communication skills, such as: effective leadership, decision-making, trust-building, communication, and conflict management);
- Team Processing (the element often discarded for the lack of time and teacher's initiative, which includes giving general appreciation on the way the students coped with the task, as well as suggestions on how to improve their performance next time).

At present, multiple types of techniques and task have been designed to implement the cooperative learning approach in the classroom, numerous textbooks and programs have been compiled in order to help learners achieve different objectives. The most popular techniques are enlisted and described below.

Jigsaw technique – it is generally described as "a remarkably efficient way to learn the new material" and as a successful method of "decreasing racial conflict and increasing positive educational outcome" [2], which is claimed to be first used in Austin, Texas, US by professor of social studies Elliot Aronson, who recalls the situation of racial hostility among his students and the inability of some of them to

mix in with the others and, as a result, take full part in the educational process.

The idea of the technique is to divide the material and students into groups, so that they first listen and discuss their topic only partially in “expert teams”, and then get back to their original “jigsaw team” and share the acquired knowledge on some part of the material, eventually combining the whole topic into one, discussing and presenting it (though, certain variations are possible in organizing the game). The purpose of the activity is to leave no student behind by making each of them responsible for the part of information they are supposed to process and bring back to their original team-members.

The problems with the technique that the teacher has to pay attention to are: the problem of a dominant student (a careful choice of a group leader is needed, though the interests of the whole group reduce the dominance usually); the problem of the slow student (which can be solved by monitoring the work of expert groups); the problem of bright student becoming bored (bright students are sometimes assigned with the teachers role and take the challenge as an interesting one instead of getting bored); the problem of students who have been trained to compete (solved by introducing the game from elementary schools and gradually breaking old habits of the adult learners) [2].

Think-Pair-Share strategy – it is useful in introducing new ideas and topics in the classroom, giving students the opportunity to share their background knowledge before dealing with the details of the topic. Firstly, the students are asked to brainstorm individually over the idea, then to pair up with a colleague and share the lists, and, finally, share the idea with the whole class, in pairs. Another form of the activity is to make students present their concepts in the written form. The strategy is considered to be useful when the cooperative approach is new to the educational environment and beneficial in “positive changes of students’ self-esteem that occur when they listen to one another [3].

Send-A-Problem – is mostly used in material revision and during discussions of solution of specific problems. The class, once again, is divided into teams; each team generates several problematic questions, comes to a conclusion as to its solution and writes the question along with the answer on a sheet of paper. After the decision has been arrived at, the card is passed to the next team, which estimates the problem along with the solution and proves it wrong or right. This is a form of a “round table”, where students learn to come to conclusions collectively, taking each and everyone’s point of view into account [4].

Mind maps – it was popularized by author and consultant, Tony Buzan [5]. The idea of the technique is to replace the common lists and notes made when analyzing the information with a “two-dimensional structure” [5] of tables and descriptions. It helps process large amounts of information by breaking them down into smaller parts and working with them separately and consequently. The map usually contains the main topic bubble in the center with lines connecting it to different aspects of the problem. This includes: brainstorming, summarizing, thinking through complex problems and presenting the results.

The ability to share and communicate the ideas with other individuals is essential in modern society, and cooperative learning approaches are beneficial and

advantageous if used wisely.

References:

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