
Categories: Peer Learning, Collaborative Learning, Active Learning, Pedagogy

Summary

In this relatively brief article, Cooper examines the structural elements necessary to effective implementation of peer learning. While the research available offers significant proof that peer learning methods lead to “conceptual and procedural gains,” increased engagement and enjoyment, and greater persistence in student, optimal results depend on careful consideration of a number of factors. Most important of these are the instructor’s stance, or role in a peer learning driven course, and the choice of tasks employed to engage students.

According to Cooper, the teacher must play multiple roles within a class in which peer learning plays an important role. First, the instructor must serve as the “developer of an educational program.” To do so effectively, the instructor needs to consider the desired student learning objectives, the students’ abilities in these skills/objectives when they enter the classroom, and the best means of getting them to the point of greater strength or proficiency.

Second, the teacher should serve as “a model of an expert learner.” In peer learning based course, the instructor must not teach content, but also the means or ways of building knowledge. As such, the instructor, through interactions with individual and small groups of students, must offer guidance as to how one considers or thinks about an intellectual task.

Third, the instructor serves as a coordinator of activities. The key aspect of this role is to choose activities appropriate to the type or objective of the learning at hand, and ensure that as a whole, such activities are properly sequenced. Another key function within this area is creating and maintaining a social environment within the classroom conducive to collaborative learning.

The fourth component of effective teaching within a peer learning focused course is the function of the instructor as a “Socratic interlocutor and mentor.” Beyond the obvious shift from lecturer or provider of knowledge to a facilitator of learning, instructors need to employ dialogic structures intended to develop higher order thinking. Thus, teachers must focus not only on open-ended questioning, but also promote discussions that engage issues of evidence, logic, support, and analysis.

The role that the instructor must play is that of evaluator. While this is true in any course, in a class in which peer learning is emphasized evaluation must be more than an end unto itself for determining grades. Rather, the instructor’s role as evaluator should focus on constant assessment of students’ development and level of understanding. In doing so, the purpose is diagnostic. That is to say, the instructor is evaluating in order to measure growth and make “curricular adjustments” as necessary to help students attain greater learning outcomes.

The other main factor determinative of effective employment of peer learning is the instructor’s choices of tasks. There are a broad range of active learning techniques and activities that can be employed to
foster effective peer learning. Whatever tasks or activities the instructor chooses, however, should have certain key characteristics. First, they should involve and engender higher order thinking skills: evaluation, synthesis, interpretation, analysis, comparative perspective, application of knowledge, etc. Further, peer learning tasks should result in some “joint cognitive product.” In other words, students engaged in peer learning should be required to produce work on a non-individual basis. Finally, peer learning tasks should involve negotiation between students and, oftentimes, the delegation of responsibilities and obligations.

Conclusion

To be used properly and effectively, peer learning requires careful consideration and structuring by the instructor. Teachers need to pay close attention not only to the way that they operate and the roles they play, but also to “the physical and social environment” of the classroom. They must also choose appropriate task and activities. Ultimately, the real key to effective peer learning is embracing a shift in focus from “what is being taught to what is being learned.”

Application

From a philosophical perspective, Cooper’s article provides a succinct overview of the proper approach to peer learning. Further, the article presents some specific, though still largely abstract, suggestions as to the attitude/function of the instructor in the peer learning driven course. As such, the article offers some useful introductory guidance to one who is interested in adopting the approach on one level or another.

Citations of Interest


