



This paper is taken from

*The Experience of Citizenship
Proceedings of the sixth Conference of the Children's
Identity and Citizenship in Europe Thematic Network*

London: CiCe 2004

edited by Alistair Ross, published in London by CiCe, ISBN 1 85377 378 6

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Monsen, L. (2004) Co-operative learning in Oppland County: an experience in transforming curriculum demands to the classroom level, in Ross, A. (ed) The Experience of Citizenship. London: CiCe, pp 465 - 470

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This paper does not necessarily represent the views of the CiCe Network.



This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained herein.

Acknowledgements:

This is taken from the book that is a collection of papers given at the annual CiCe Conference indicated. The CiCe Steering Group and the editor would like to thank

- All those who contributed to the Conference
- Cass Mitchell-Riddle, head of the CiCe Coordination Unit
- London Metropolitan University, for financial and other support for the programme, conference and publication

The SOCRATES programme and the personnel of the Department of Education and Culture of the European Commission for their support and encouragement.

Co-operative learning in Oppland County: an experience in transforming curriculum demands to the classroom level

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The decision to adopt co-operative learning

In the spring 2000 the county director of education in Oppland County decided that co-operative learning (CL) was to be a common strategy used in the educational change of all high schools in the county. The decision was reached after agreement with school principals, and after both teachers and pupils had had the opportunity of becoming familiar with this learning strategy and giving it their support. The county administration gained the necessary political support, and in the autumn 2000 the decision was made to implement a number of measures on the county and school level.

Why adopt co-operative learning (CL)?

When CL was chosen as a strategy for educational change in Oppland County, there was a significant amount of consultation, the collection of experience and local trials. The substantial amount of research that had highlighted the positive effects CL has had for learning, motivation, sense of well-being and health was an important resource to convince those who have been sceptical. A question was more or less explicitly posed: How can we not use it when all the research shows such positive results? The most important reason remained that co-operative learning, both as a method and set of values, was well-suited and useful in the face of the challenges presented by the reform. The most important thing was to find something, which the teachers wanted and experienced as useful. We were well aware that if we were unsuccessful in securing the participation of the teachers, then the final results would be worthless. It was therefore important in the final round of decision making that teachers and pupils, who participated in the workshop to test CL, expressed the view that it was a good method and that they were willing to use it in future (Monsen 1999).

At the same time, there was an awareness that in order to succeed in the county there had to be a considerable mobilisation of resources, as well as find an approach suited to the most important group, teachers. As already noted it is a demanding and long-term task, to change the practice of teachers. It must be kept in mind that teachers in Norway possess an individualist tradition. Moreover, in high schools in Oppland County their average age is 50 years.

Course activity

The main activity in the CL project has been the holding of courses for teachers and principals. Instructors from Durham county (Canada) carried out the first courses in CL. On two occasions we have had workshops with the Canadians on Norwegian soil, and

our tutorial group, like the principals, have been to Durham to attend courses and visit schools. Contact with abroad has been of great significance, both because it has involved courses of high quality and because it has given us documentation of experiences and effects from a different reality.

The first courses were of an introductory character and for key groups, tutors and principals. They consisted of practical exercises and some theory. Most weight has been placed upon exercises; doing it rather than hearing about it. When the exercises have been completed, there is an opportunity for reflections with colleagues on the application of CL activities in their own subjects and the opportunity to receive some extra theoretical knowledge.

CL courses in special topics have been held. As the beginning of the school year, a regional course was held, for all the schools in the county. The topic was the use of CL, so as to let pupils know each other and build a positive class environment. At the same time, this was a first introduction into CL as a method for new pupils. A month later there was a corresponding regional course in CL for both pupils and teachers, with the intention of developing pupil skills in pupil participation. CL methods were used to make the pupils in groups formulate learning goals, ways of study and forms of evaluation. Participants in both of the courses recommended that they should be repeated next year, and that a set of standard should be devised.

Courses have been arranged on a county and school level for pupil representatives. It was regarded as important that they were given the opportunity to experience CL and exert an influence in how it was to be used as a learning strategy in the classroom. The principals have also been a priority group for CL courses, and a consequence has been that all conferences and meetings for these principals in Oppland County have in the last two years been organised according to CL principles. This is also the case with most of the other meetings organised for teachers in Oppland County.

Experiences with co-operative learning

Methodology used in the collection of experiences

My central contribution to the project has been connected with providing documentation and ensuring the systematic collection of data on experiences. The goals behind the documentation and the collection of data on experiences have been a) to assist in the circulation of experiences about classroom practice with CL throughout schools in the county, b) contribute to the building up of a data base on CL, which can be accessible to all teachers in the county, c) inform the central committee for education in the county municipality about the project's results in relation to policy goals, d) move towards a research based analysis of the CL-project as a strategy for change in relation to national goals stated in Reform-94 (Kvalsund 1999).

At the end of the school year 2002 a questionnaire have been distributed to the schools, and both teachers and pupils have completed it. The analysis of their replies have provided the foundation for a more conclusive summary of the two years of experience with CL, and what it has led to in terms of methodological and educational renewal in the learning environments of the many hundreds of classrooms in Oppland County.

Some glimpses from co-operative learning in practice

The tutoring group's role

In the strategy to follow up the reform of the content in the R94 through CL, the tutoring group is assigned a central role. The six ordinary members of the tutoring group have, as already noted, responsibility for following up in 3-4 schools. The tutoring group has meetings with the project leader on a monthly basis, while the meetings with the key groups in the schools are somewhat more frequent and they have held courses for teacher colleagues and the teacher of specific subjects in several of the schools. It can be mentioned for example, that courses have been held between spring 2001 and spring 2002, covering the following subjects and their teachers: electronics and mechanics, languages, mathematics, the natural sciences, Norwegian. Course evaluation has been in all respects positive and the tutoring group has had many inquiries from the teachers of different subjects who wanted courses. The key to success seems to be that the courses are tailored to the specific subject, so that teachers of the respective subjects receive instruction in the use of methods, which they can take back and use in their own classrooms. Some told how they had previously attended courses on CL, where the practical exercises had more of the character, 'how to get to know the pupil', with only limited value with respect to the specific subject they taught. Now, they felt that they had participated in courses, where they have learnt how CL can make a direct contribution in their subject and that it might increase the pupil's interest in the subject.

The positive evaluations from these courses in specific subject areas show that teachers want to learn about new methods in their subjects. They show a willingness to subject-specific/educational development with their expertise in a subject as their foundation. (Zahorik 1996). It appears that CL, with many practical exercises, and where the different subjects experience a methodological renewal, possesses great potential for subject-specific/educational renewal. Tutors are able to give accounts of a certain scepticism, in part resistance among some groups of teachers, and some of the key groups have encountered so much resistance that they proceed quite carefully, so as not to provoke their colleagues too much. The total picture at this point in time, nevertheless, appears to be that most of the schools in the county have teachers who use CL in their classes, and there exists a desire for more courses in most schools and in most subjects. Tutors experience that their services are in demand and that the county's allocated resource is more than exploited.

The key group's role

The key groups are, as suggested, to be a collegial support for the teachers in the first phase, when the CL methodology is introduced in the individual schools. Our impression so far is that the key groups at almost all the schools in the county are active, but that there are large differences in the amount of activity and how engaged the key groups have been in tutoring and following up their colleagues. At some schools there appears to be a significant hesitation when it comes to tutoring colleagues. When the traditional view is that the individual teacher is professional and that help from a colleague indicates the opposite, then it is clear that to is not easy to establish a tutorial relationship with colleagues, and particularly if the colleague teaches a different subject to the tutor. The key groups on their own would hardly have been able to implement CL to the extent, which has been the case in schools throughout the county. A combination of courses held for principals/heads of departments and following up from the regional tutoring group, who have held courses for teacher colleagues and teachers in different subject groups, have made it possible for the key groups to follow up and further communicate the ideas and impulses the individual teacher has received from the courses. Some key groups have recounted how a collegial atmosphere has developed in some schools, where the discussion and exchange of ideas about CL forms a natural part of the co-operation around a subject. Tutors are able to tell of schools, where much of this kind of informal collegial exchange of views and ideas on how CL can be used in the different subjects takes place.

The challenge faced by both the key groups and the tutoring group is, how groups of teachers, who have expressed scepticism towards CL because of it is too time demanding, can be included in the extended collegial community where new methodological approaches, such as CL can be an important topic of discussion (see Appelbaum 1998). We see from reading the interviews with teachers that most of them are hesitant when it comes to involving themselves in what teachers are doing with a background in another subject. To overcome this, the tutoring group has discussed how the key group can contribute to the development of a common platform for all the subjects in a school. At some schools this is not considered to be a problem because they have a tradition of development work, but schools without such experience and traditions will regard themselves as based upon groups of subjects, even though the new departmental structure attempts to change this pattern. Experiences from the courses held for the subjects indicate that there also exist openings for CL among groups of teachers who are sceptical to CL, under the condition that those responsible for courses possess legitimacy in the respective subject e.g. in the case of mathematics a competent mathematician held the course. She appeared to be successful in convincing her colleagues that the methods of CL could be usefully exploited in the teaching of mathematics. This group of mathematicians can be allies for the key groups in their respective schools, and some key groups have explored this possibility of drawing sceptical colleagues into the extended collegial community on methodological development (see Joyce *et al.* 1999).

Co-operative learning in the classroom

All the attempts described in the sections above have had a common focus, that as many teachers as possible are using CL in their classes. In this section, we shall communicate some of the impressions from pupils and teachers about how they experience this new methodology and how it has exerted an influence upon the learning environment in the classes.

Our main finding is that all who have been interviewed have experienced CL as a positive contribution to teaching and learning in the classroom. All recount of their positive experiences of using the different exercises in the classroom and that this has strengthened motivation and the desire to learn. Pupils in particular, highlight how they have become more aware of the importance of methodological variation and they find it hard to understand why some teachers continue as before with a teaching role based upon the transmission of knowledge, where they are active and the pupil remains passive (Molander 1997). They have even take this up with these teachers, receiving only defensive answers: in this subject there is so much to get through, that we can't use time on such time consuming exercises, or that my subject requires the methodology, which we are now using. Pupils note that in CL, when they are put in groups of four, they all participate and take responsibility for a common result. They assert furthermore, that solving problems in a specific subject together, gives them a number of ideas about how the problem/task can be understood and how it can be solved. As an example, they mention that the use of an idea map is an effective method in the repetition of what they have learnt and assists in clarifying the level before beginning a new topic. When this idea map forms one of several of the exercises they have greater opportunities of working with the content of the subject. In their own opinion, they remember the material better themselves and they can use it in more creative ways, such as by making thought provoking illustrations in their idea map (and we saw several examples of these on the walls of several of the classrooms we visited).

When the pupils were requested to make a summary of the advantages of CL, one of the pupil groups proposed three points: 1) Learnt to co-operate with everybody, 2) learnt to be responsible for their own opinions, 3) become more clever in explaining to others what they meant. A second group added two moments, 4) more variation – not as boring, and, 5) receiving help and support from fellow pupils (Bruffee 1999).

The teachers we met also believed that CL was an important methodological new winning in their teaching. Not in the least, they regarded this methodology as a possibility for gaining contact with pupils who had difficulty in following and concentrating in 'normal' teaching, either because they were little motivated in the particular subject, or because some of the pupils had problems maintaining attention on a topic over a longer period of time. If it is called concentration difficulties, referring to pupils with a great need that 'something happens' the whole time, or the 'post-modern' pupil, then these teachers said that it was difficult to reach these pupils through traditional teaching methods. They experienced that these pupils became more engaged,

that they learnt more and they were less bored when CL methodology was used in the classroom. Nevertheless, they came with a small warning: They had themselves experienced that too much use of this methodology could lead to reactions among some of the more motivated students, who began to feel that they weren't getting a systematic enough introduction and training in the particular subject. In periods when several successive teachers teaching the same class used partly the same exercises in CL, this could lead to protest from the pupils. Here, as elsewhere, it is important that a certain amount of co-ordination takes place between the teachers (Berger 2000).

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