The Roles of Teachers in Implementing Educational Innovation

The Case of Implementing Cooperative Learning in Vietnam

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Abstract

Since the late 1990s there has been a top-down movement to reform teaching and learning approaches in Vietnam. An important component of this reform is to change the traditional teaching and learning approach into cooperative learning. However, cooperative learning has failed to make its impact on the current teaching and learning approach. This paper examines one of the most important constraints on the implementation of cooperative learning in Vietnam, namely, perceptions of Vietnamese teachers toward the roles and responsibilities of teachers in class. It argues that many principles of cooperative learning are in serious conflict with traditional perceptions of Vietnamese teachers regarding the nature of teaching and learning. Therefore, policymakers and educators need to take cautious steps when implementing such radical approaches in Vietnamese educational settings. If they want to obtain support from teachers, they cannot merely borrow the original version of the innovation. Rather, they need to take various modifications into consideration.

Keywords: Assumptions, Approach, Values, Principles, Cooperative learning

1. Introduction

Entering the 21st century, under the impact of global forces Vietnam is facing a range of political, social, economic, technological and educational changes. It is widely accepted that the shift from a central economy to a mixed system with both socialist and market sectors since the late 1990s has required the Vietnamese education system to carry out remarkable changes. Today, people require that education and training must not only be able to equip students with new scientific and cultural knowledge but also develop their reasoning thought, creative abilities and team work skills.

These requirements have pushed Vietnamese educational authorities to change their perceptions about teaching and learning philosophies. They have admitted that traditional teaching and learning approach, with its emphasis on individual, achievement and transmission of information, has become inadequate in supporting the development of students' thinking and learning skills in today's global society (Phan, 2001). Instead, they believe that radical teaching and learning philosophies which enable students to become actively involved in their learning processes have provided students with more opportunities to develop important knowledge and skills for today's labour market. Therefore, Western teaching and learning approaches such as student-centred learning, team work, and especially cooperative learning have been increasingly adopted and applied in Vietnamese higher education institutions. The increasing adoption of such approaches come from a belief among Vietnamese educational authorities that borrowing modern (Western) philosophies and practices would mean taking advantage of the forerunners, making a huge leap by skipping the painfully long research stage (Walker & Dimmock, 2002).

However, so-called global imports have led to a situation in which many Western philosophies do not suit the local context in terms of both cultural values and infrastructure conditions, leading to rejections from different levels. In the case of cooperative learning, although this approach has been proved to be able to equip students with essential elements for work places of today and the future (Adams & Hamm, 1990; Johnson et al., 1994), it consists of many principles and values which completely contrast with those in Vietnam such as class size, teaching resources and especially local assumptions about the nature of teaching and learning. As a result, the goals of a recent educational reform as changing teaching and learning approach at Vietnamese higher institutions from the teacher-centred to cooperative learning have almost failed. And the dominant approach to learning of Vietnamese students so far is still teacher-centred.

It is necessary, therefore, that investigations need to be conducted into mismatching values and principles of cooperative learning and Vietnamese culture so that Vietnamese policymakers and educators can take cautious steps when applying this radical approach to the local educational settings. It is sure that there are a host of local cultural constraints on the implemen-

tation of cooperative learning in Vietnam. Within the scope of this paper, the author only attempts to examine perceptions of the respective roles and responsibilities of Vietnamese teachers as one of the constraints against cooperative learning. The paper will argue that cooperative learning has failed to replace the traditional teaching and learning approach at Vietnamese higher education institutions partly because Vietnamese teachers are not happy to transfer their roles as a knowledge transmitter to a learning facilitator as cooperative learning requires.

2. Cooperative learning and the roles of teachers in cooperative learning class

Cooperative learning tends to be more carefully structured and delineated than most other forms of small group learning. Grounded in theory, research and practice, it is a well-documented philosophy of classroom instruction encompassing many different strategies. Cooperative learning has been defined differently by different researchers. For example, Johnson and Johnson (2001:1) define cooperative learning as the "instructional use of small groups so that students' work together to maximize their own and each other's learning". On the other hand Sharan (1994:336) defines it as "a group-centred and student-centred approach to classroom teaching and learning", whilst Slavin (1987:116) refers to the term as a set of "instructional methods in which students are encouraged or required to work together on academic tasks". Presseisen (1992:1) also defines it as "an instructional approach that integrates social skills objectives with academic content objectives in education".

So far, researchers have not agreed with each other to work out an official definition of this term. Therefore, in essence, we can simply understand that cooperative learning is referred to any variety of teaching methods in which students work in small groups to help one another learn academic content. In cooperative classrooms students are expected to help each other, discuss and debate with each other, assess each other's current knowledge, and fill any gaps in each other's understanding. Cooperative learning often replaces individual seatwork, individual study, and individual practice but not direct instruction by the teacher. When properly organized, students in cooperative groups make sure that everyone in the group has mastered the concepts being taught (Slavin, 1995).

Cooperative learning has been proved to be more effective instructional method over competitive and individualistic approaches (Johnson et al., 2000). Specifically, cooperative learners have been demonstrated to benefit students from achieving better academic outcomes (Cohen & Lotan, 1995; Foley & O'Donnell, 2002; Slavin & Madden, 1999; Slavin, 1996), developing critical thinking skills (Brandon & Hollingshead, 1999), developing creative thinking ability (Johnson et al., 1994; Qin et al., 1995; Siegler, 1998) and enhancing social skills such as communication, presentation, problem-solving, leadership, delegation and organization in students (Cheng & Warren, 2000). Also, cooperative learning helps accelerate students' social-interpersonal developments and to, thereby, solve teachers' instructional problems as well (Sharan, 1980; Slavin, 1980).

However, there is a notice that cooperative learning only benefits students when cooperative learning strategies are held properly. Otherwise, they would decrease students' academic achievement (Slavin, 1996). To organize a proper cooperative learning strategy, according to Johnson and Johnson (1975), who are considered the most well known proponents of cooperative learning (Good & Brophy, 2000; Natasi & Clements, 1991; Stipek, 2002), the instructor needs to involve these five essential elements in his/her cooperative activities:

(1) Positive interdependence: This means all members of a learning group need to contribute to each other's learning. The whole group needs to recognize that their goals can only be attained when the goals of all members in the group are also attained (Johnson et al., 1993). Consequently, in order to reach their common goal, every member needs to learn the materials and help other members to understand the materials too. Johnson et al. (1984) characterize this phenomenon as "we sink or swim together".

(2) Individual accountability: This condition emphasizes that although learning activities rely on cooperative efforts, individuals are ultimately responsible for their own learning and cannot "coast" on group achievement (Cottell & Mills, 1992:98). If individual accountability is not assessed regularly, "social loafing" may occur meaning only a few members of the group are actually working on the task, the rest of the group contribute a little effort without being noticed (Latane et al., 1979). Therefore, it is important to assess the group according to the individual learning of each member so as to structure individual accountability for maximum effect of cooperative learning (Manning & Lucking, 1991).

(3) Face-to-face promotive interaction: This practice must take place so that students can do verbal interchanges such as talking aloud, challenging one another's points of view. Such physical environment is important to create situated settings for students to exchange their ideas, so promote their learning. By scheduling meetings appropriately, the working process of the group is also assessed regularly.

(4) Interpersonal and small group skills: These skills are very important since they help reduce interpersonal conflicts and facilitate interaction (Cohen, 1994a). Students need to be taught these skills if the group wants to succeed. Simply placing unskilled students into a group does not help students communicate more effectively.

(5) Group processing: Students do also have to keep an eye on clarifying and improving the effectiveness of members' contributions to the collaborative efforts to achieve their group's goals. Students can assess what their group has done well and what they should improve on via group processing.

Once these five elements are organized properly, cooperative learning will change the roles of the teacher remarkably. Power will be shifted from the authority figure of the instructor to the students themselves, who then become actively involved in their own learning and in the learning processes of their peers. In informal terms, the teacher becomes not the "sage on the stage", but "the guide on the side" (Johnson et al., 1994). Hassard (1990:ix) models the teacher's roles in a student-centred learning approach like cooperative learning as follows:

[It] requires a conscious shift of perspective on the part of the teacher, away from authoritarian and toward coordination of cooperative actions and the facilitation of instruction. Teachers who have incorporated this philosophy into their classrooms orchestrate the students' activities and are masters in securing and creating well-designed, team-oriented tasks.

As such, the teacher is now just a technique assistant rather than a knowledge transmitter. Main tasks for that the teacher needs to be responsible before and after a cooperative lesson can be summarized as: structuring the existing curricula cooperatively and construct the cooperative learning lessons to meet the students unique requirements (Johnson & Johnson, 2004); training students' cooperative skills so that they know how to interact effectively (Tang, 1996); monitoring the cooperative process by constantly observing the groups (Johnson & Johnson, 1990); listening to students as they explain their views to one another and find out how well they understand the topic and instructions (Thomas, 2005); detecting students' major concepts and strategies (Johnson et al., 1994); assess student's contribution to his or her group; provide feedback to groups and individual student; help groups to avoid redundant efforts; and make sure each member is responsible for their group's outcome (Johnson et al., 1994).

These tasks assume that instead of lecturing the lesson from the beginning to the end, the teacher only needs to present to students main points of the lesson, then lets students work in their groups. The teacher only intervenes when students need clarification in instructions, or when the teacher feels the need to question about group's answers, or to praise students for creative idea or good use of social skills (Johnson et al., 1994; Lotan, 2004). However, the teacher needs to involve in the lesson appropriately in order to engage students in learning actively.

A comparison between the roles of the teacher in a cooperative class and a traditional class can be made in Table 1.

In sum, what has been presented above emphasizes that once teachers accept to apply cooperative learning to their classes, they have to 'scarify' their authoritarian positions. And in reality, many teachers are not willing and happy to accept their new roles as only a learning facilitator. They may still adopt this approach but do not perform their assistant roles properly. As a result, students need to follow a never-changing approach of teacher-centred lecturing. The next section will discuss traditional assumptions about the nature of teaching and learning in Vietnam. This discussion aims to explain why it is too hard for Vietnamese teachers to change their way of working in class.

3. Traditional assumptions about teaching and learning

For Vietnamese, due to more than a thousand years of Chinese influence, the Confucian philosophy is very much alive and sets a powerful interpersonal norm for daily behaviours, attitudes, and practices demanding reflection, modernization, persistence, humility, obedience to superiors, and stoic response to pain (Park, 2000). Consequently, Vietnamese students share a common Confucian heritage and are commonly referred to as Confucian Heritage Culture (CHC) students (Lee, 1999).

For Confucius, a good sample of teachers must be shaped in the maxim that "to give students a bowl of water, the teacher must have a full bucket of water to dispense" (Hu, 2002:98). Therefore, teachers need to select knowledge from authoritative sources such as books and classics as they are considered the main sources enriching people's knowledge. Once teachers obtain enough knowledge, they only need to interpret, analyse and elaborate on these points for students. As a result, CHC students only need to receive knowledge from teachers as a truth rather than try to think independently, contradict teachers' knowledge and draw their own conclusions (Ruby & Ladd, 1999: Bradley & Bradley, 1984). Because individuality and uniqueness are relatively unimportant, individual interpretations of content are relatively unimportant and, as such, discouraged (Pratt, 1992), so students find it unnecessary to source alternative knowledge regarding a particular topic. Therefore, the focus of teaching is not on how students can create and construct knowledge, but on how extant authoritative knowledge can be transmitted and internalized in a most effective and efficient way (Brick, 1991; Jin & Cortazzi, 1995). These perceptions challenge the principle in cooperative learning which only allows the teachers to intervene when students need clarification in instructions, or when the teacher thinks that students have not understood their points.

Second, according to Hofstede and Hofstede (2005), Vietnam is one of the CHC nations scoring high on the Power Distance Index (Malaysia scores highest with 104; China: 80; Singapore: 74; Vietnam: 70; Hong Kong: 68; Korea: 60; Taiwan: 58 and Japan: 54). It is generally asserted that nations with such high score on power distance place greater emphasis on hierarchical relationships. Different from teacher-equal-student teachings of Socrates, who is thought to be the father of Western philosophy, Confucius's teachings teach learners to respect and obey authority figures (Confucius, 1947) – in the educational realm it means that students should obey and listen to teachers. Teachers in CHC nations are not only teachers but also models of correct behaviour. Teacher is ranked just below the King and above the father: the King-the Teacher-the Father (McSwinney, 1995). Students should respect teachers not only when they are at school, but in their whole life

(Kennedy, 2002; Scollon & Scollon, 1995). Therefore, there is a saying in Korea: 'One does not dare to step on a teacher's shadow'. Teachers are considered to be a *guru* who is supposed to satisfy learners in the search for the *truth* (in knowledge) and *virtues* (in life) (Phuong-Mai et al., 2006).

Such respects make it difficult for Vietnamese teachers and students to accept any pedagogical practice that tends to put teachers on a par with their students and detracts from teacher authority. In particular, it is against Vietnamese expectations to adopt a pedagogy that may put teachers at the risk of losing face. As such, the principles of cooperative learning that allow students to begin developing their knowledge with the students themselves, then exchange information within the group to get collective knowledge which may exceed the knowledge of their teacher, and finally can be able to bring the teacher's knowledge into question seem unrealistic. It seems really hard for Vietnamese teachers to lower their role from a 'king' to a facilitator who moves from group to group to observe and motivate learning.

Third, it is also the exclusive roles of the teacher in delivering knowledge creating a situation in which Vietnamese students are not familiar with questioning, evaluating, and generating knowledge. They accept teachers as definitive knowledge source and adopt themselves as passive listeners in the class. They believe that truth is not found primarily in the self, but in exemplars [teachers] (Confucius, 1947). For a long time, students have been taught to "master the content, through diligence and patience, without questioning or challenging what is presented" (Pratt, 1992:315). Therefore, debates and discussions are not paid attention. Teachers can involve these activities in their lesson just for changing the learning environment, but not for increasing students' knowledge or skills. Consequently, Vietnamese students do not have much chance to practice their speaking skills in front of the public, so they may feel scared of public presentations and discussions which are strongly emphasized in cooperative lessons. Moreover, since these students are not well equipped with communicative skills, they may fail to discuss with their peers in cooperative groups.

Last but not least, since teachers believe that they master a profound body of knowledge. Therefore, it is assumed that they have exclusive rights and responsibilities to evaluate students' progress. They tend to be suspicious of peer evaluation, as they believe that peers are not qualified to correct others' work (Jones, 1995). Given these expectations, peer evaluations which is one of the principles helping bring about an active cooperative learning environment (Persons, 1998) seems impossible to be implemented in Vietnamese classes.

These assumptions about the nature of teaching and learning have been deeply imbedded in the mentality of both Vietnamese teachers and students. Therefore, they are not easy to be removed. To prove this argument, the author uses some statistics of a survey conducted by Nguyen (2005) to show how Vietnamese teachers use their teaching approaches, and how much attention they pay to teaching improvement. This survey used 50 teachers at the HoChiMinh University in Vietnam as participants. These teachers were asked to complete questionnaires including both closed and open questions about the frequency of teaching methods they use in their class and their attention to teaching innovations. Since the results presented in Table 2 and Table 3 were obtained from only a small number of teachers at a university, they do not generalize the national situation. However, they at least give us some information about how teachers work and how they support educational innovations.

Table 2 shows that the most frequent teaching approach applied by the teachers is lecturing and asking questions. The teachers are also interested in approaches which combine both lecturing and allowing students to discuss in groups. However, group works only account for a small portion of time during a lesson. Two last approaches which give the teachers the only right to talk and students need to listen and take notes have been seriously criticised, but still exist.

After obtaining these results, Nguyen also collected data for a further question about how the teachers support a student-centred approach. The findings reported that 19.7 per cent of the teachers gave their strongly support, 36.8 per cent support, 34.2 per cent no answer, 6.2 per cent support a little and 3.0 per cent no support. As such, a half of the teachers have positive thinking about a more radical teaching approach, and the other half have neutral and negative thinking about such innovation. This implies that educational policymakers must be careful with their innovations. It would be very hard for them to implement their innovations successfully if teachers are unwilling to support their changes. Therefore, whatever changes they want to carry out in Vietnam, they need to take modifications into consideration so that teachers do not have to change their roles and responsibilities drastically, then they may support.

4. Conclusion

The discussion above shows that cooperative learning and Vietnamese traditional assumptions about the roles of the teacher do not match in several respects. They consist of various opposing philosophies about the nature of teaching and learning. Their conflicts, in essence, can be described as student-centeredness vs. teacher-centeredness. It would be hard to sweep away the traditional learning approach to implant cooperative learning if teachers do not change their positions in teaching. Therefore, it is dangerous for policymakers and educators when implementing western innovations without investigating these issues. Coleman (1996:11) warns that "innovations which are intended to facilitate learning may be so disturbing for those affected by them – so threatening to their belief system – that hostility is aroused and learning becomes impossible". However, it does not mean that it is impossible to implement cooperative learning in the context of Vietnam. In fact, cooperative learning has many other practices suitable to the Vietnamese collective culture and social behaviours of

students. Therefore, it certainly makes sense to try to modify cooperative learning activities in a way which does not require teachers to completely change their roles but still pull students to work together. Future research should investigate this issue more. And in fact, this issue is a part of a PhD thesis which the author is working on at the University of Queensland, Australia.

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Table 1. The roles of teachers in cooperative learning and traditional class

Cooperative learning	Traditional learning
Select and divide the lesson for group work	Follow the course profile
Train students cooperative skills	Ignore teamwork skills
Arrange the classroom and assigning roles	Try to keep students in their own seats
Observe and intervene	Ignores group functioning
Play more sophisticated instructional role like asking higher-order questions, extending the group's thinking on its activities	Provide detailed instruction
Being "the guide on the side"	Being "the sage on the stage"
Being facilitator of learning	Being transmitter of information /authoritarianism
Assess student's contribution	none
Provide feedback to groups and analyse group effectiveness	none

Table 2. The frequency of various teaching approaches applied at the HoChiMinh University

Names of approaches	Always	Usually	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	Ranking
Teacher lectures and asks students questions individually	18.7	46.7	32.0	2.7		1
Teacher lectures and students discuss to answer questions	16.0	36.7	25.3	18.7	1.3	2
Teacher lectures (a half) and students work in groups (a half)	16.0	20.0	42.7	9.3	12.0	3
Teacher reads and students write		4.2	19.4	45.8	30.6	4
Teacher lectures only			10.9	4.7	84.4	5

Source: Statistics about the frequency of various teaching approaches (Nguyen, 2005:17)