Perception of Self-Directed Cooperative Learning Among Undergraduate Students in Selected Nigerian Universities

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ABSTRACT

The current emphasis in the promotion of school learning is on the active involvement of the learners in the learning process. Helping students to develop interest in self-directed cooperative learning is considered to be one of the ways to enhance active learning. This study sought to investigate the views of selected undergraduate education students on the value and constraints of cooperative learning. A 20-item questionnaire was administered to a sample of 600 students from six Nigerian Universities. The results show that students agree to the potency of this learning mode to promote teamwork and communication skills, active learning and achievement among others. The students also agree to the constraints of this learning mode and said they would not wish to engage in it. The recommendations made included the need for teacher educators to give greater attention to the teaching of issues related to this learning mode and students to attend to their classes and reading assignments to make them prepared for gainful cooperative learning.

Keywords: cooperative learning; Nigeria; self-directed learning; university undergraduate students

INTRODUCTION

In the traditional classroom of higher institutions of learning, students are generally regarded as passive learners and recipients of educational content. They are often engrossed in scrambling to take lecture roles, these being their primary reading materials. Oshwa (2002) had reported on the eagerness of some undergraduate students to write down virtually every word that comes out of the lecturer’s mouth, even when it is not relevant. According to Oshwa (2002), Obi(2003) and Mai(2005), most African universities are characterized by inadequate books and journals, dearth of reading culture among students, and the tendency of students to rely solely on note taking during lectures. Education content therefore becomes teacher-directed, individualistic and competitive (Rio, 2005). It is important to note that this study is located within the Nigerian socio-cultural and socio-political setting in which the nation is still contending with problems of poverty, democracy,
freedom of speech, and education reforms, all which impinge on upon critical thinking and willingness to challenge accepted wisdom in the schooling process. Thus, the prevailing learning system in Nigeria seems to have turned the students from being eager, questioning, and active learners to passive receivers of perceived wisdom. In addition, the alarming poverty level in Nigeria imposes serious constraints on the students, most of who cannot afford expensive books and other learning materials. As a result, they are forced to depend on the lecturers as the ultimate source of knowledge. This is against the ideals of the educational reforms in most parts of the world including Nigeria, which place emphasis on student-centred learning (Mai, 2005), self-directed learning (Mohaiadin, 2000) and cooperative learning (Chee, 2000), all of which create and promote learner-centred learning opportunities and students’ achievement in the classroom. The focus of this study is, however, on cooperative learning. Cooperative learning was developed from social psychological studies of cooperation and competition in human behaviour (Deutsch, 1949). Since the early 1970s, cooperative learning has been one of the most often implemented and researched instructional movements across various subject matters (Hertz-Lazarowitz & Miller, 1992; Sharan, 1994). Cooperative learning is the antithesis of the expository competitive classroom teaching approach (Blakes, 2000).

The cooperative learning model as an instructional method is all about grouping students into small learning teams and have them work in cooperation with each other to solve a common problem or to perform a task presented by the teacher (Johnson & Johnson, 1989; Johnson & Smith, 1991; Slavin, 1983). It is generally about assigning students to groups of five or so, so that they work together and accomplish a common goal. Each individual is accountable within the group and to show that he or she masters the learning materials. According to Hertz-Lazarowitz (1993), students have to acquire interpersonal and group skills in order to cooperate. Those skills relate to the ability of students to learn together, discuss, share ideas, and prepare as a group to achieve the common goals. One is expected to help and be helped to learn. Students tutor each other, conduct group projects, practice mutual assistance by sharing and exchanging information, and create a collaborative cooperative learning environment (Walkins, 2001).

Self-directed cooperative learning on the other hand refers to a learning strategy, which students adopt by organizing themselves into small learning teams. Such grouping is self-directed, and usually among students in the same course and level of study. A few Nigerian undergraduate education students, especially when preparing for examinations, often use this learning strategy. In this way, students learn content through group activities where they interact with each other, exchanging information and knowledge, and work as a team to achieve individual learning goals. This learning mode is student-centered and encourages students to cooperate and collaborate with each other in achieving their learning outcomes. It also encourages students to foster interpersonal competencies, such as oral communication, active listening, leadership, the ability to examine assumptions, and the ability to tolerate ambiguities and opposing views (Tribe, 1994; Ukadike, 2004). Besides, this learning strategy provides students with a more active approach to learning (Berge, Collins & Dugherty, 2000; Guzkowska & Kent, 1994; Hung & Wong, 2000). The informal nature of this learning mode provides students with relaxed environment to learn from their peers and at a pace that is not strictly regimented (Lyamu, 2006).

Research has shown that group-based cooperative learning mode does not only enhance the achievement of learning outcomes, but also helps students to develop some of the attributes and skills that are highly valued in employment (Tribe, 1994). Research has also indicated that since employers often seek out graduates who have acquired teamwork skills alongside technical competence (Markkanen Ponitta, 2001), encouraging students to engage in cooperative learning becomes necessary as a preparation for future employment.