Chapter 18

Cooperative Learning and Student Mentors in a Hybrid Teacher Preparation Program

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, professors employed cooperative learning techniques that included assigned student mentors to assist students in their learning, assignments, and final project. The students enrolled in this weekend hybrid program are usually considered to be alternative university students. About 25% of the students in the program would be considered to be standard university students in age and living circumstances. The results indicated that the leadership roles of the student mentors made the process complex and rewarding. In spite of the issues associated with diverse students, the majority of whom work, with a significant percentage who are married and have families of their own, and the issues of distance and difficulty of getting to class, most students felt positively about their experiences and achieved well in the process.

INTRODUCTION

From our experiences, in spite of new tendencies in educational reform, much of higher education in Romania still utilizes a model of teaching and learning that is centered either on the teacher, the curriculum, or both. Students are rarely asked to actively engage in practice and development of skills during the...
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theoretical courses, happening more frequently during the practical/seminar activities. In higher education, the system of instruction is more focused on whole class teaching methods, as well as traditional assessment strategies (e.g. standard assessments). The need to interact with other people is part of the nature in human beings (Vygotsky & Cole, 1978), but is often disregarded by a significant number of higher education instructors. The development of positive social skills in our students remains an ideal rather than a reality because the focus of assessments is still student regurgitation of information and less on supporting the process of learning (Wagner, 2014). According to people like Wagner, we cannot truly say that efficient and effective student-to-student and student–to-teacher interactions are priorities in higher education. One of the consequences is that our students, who are also pre-service teachers, do not have enough opportunities to practice social skills (Sousa, 2017). This means our future teachers will most likely not have the knowledge or skills to help their students gain these important critical thinking, problem solving, communication, and/or other social skills necessary for success as adults (Wagner, 2014; Dweck, 2016; Caine & Caine, 2011; Ravitch, 2010; Fitzgerald & Laurian, 2013, Laurian-Fitzgerald, Popa, & Fitzgerald, 2015). According to Dulamă (2002), an optimum learning community means, “Students respect a code of rules owned by their community; it means to have needs, purposes and common values; it means to decide together.” (p. 12). Looking at education as a community implies that people work collaboratively for the good of all of its members. Johnson and Johnson (2015) believe most of the skills needed for life can only be gained through ongoing positive cooperative practices. They believe teachers should specifically and strategically identify, justify, teach, practice, and refine these essential concepts and skills with their students. Students have to work with each other in cooperative and engaged groups orchestrated by motivated and professionally trained educators. The study included in this chapter is an attempt to develop and implement cooperative groups in a hybrid weekend program for pre-service students/teachers. This is a complicated process, and this project is just one of many that could be used to accomplish the same goals.

BACKGROUND

Cooperative Learning

The literature gives various definitions for cooperative learning:

- “Cooperative learning means using a teaching method that utilizes small group of students so they can work together so that each of them improve her/his own performances and contributes to the group’s achievements” (s.n.) (Johnson & Johnson & Holubec, 1994, p.3).
- “Cooperative learning refers to a set of instructional strategies that include the cooperative interaction between student and student in relation to the teaching material and as an integrated part of the learning process” (Kagan, 1994, p. 4.1).
- “Cooperative learning refers to a variety of teaching methods in which the students work in small groups in order to help each other learn the content. In cooperative classes the students are expected to help each other, talk to each other, verify the level of knowledge and fill in for each other the gaps in understanding” (Slavin, 1995, pg. 2).
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