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Cooperative Debate Can Provoke Multiperspectivity

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This article recommends the Cooperative Debate technique as a means of encouraging students and others to view the world from a multitude of perspectives. Most debates are competitive. Cooperative debates contrast with traditional competitive debates as cooperative debates emphasize fostering understanding rather than winning a debate contest. This article discusses a flexible, eight-step procedure for the Cooperative Debate technique. In this procedure, each person presents two or three different perspectives on the topic being discussed. Cooperative Debate also includes consideration of how debaters and their audience might seek to implement their views. In this article, Social Interdependence Theory and Piagetian Theory provide insights into the workings of Cooperative Debate.

Keywords: *competition, cooperation, cooperative learning, debate, multiperspectivity, Piagetian Theory, Social Interdependence Theory*

Introduction

When considering the development and airing of more than one perspective, debates are one type of activity that comes to mind. For example, many schools have debate teams, and politicians sometimes hold debates to display their perspectives for citizens to better choose for whom to vote. Debates can arouse interest and spark thinking among both debaters and audiences, as people often find the conflict of ideas to be engaging and mentally stimulating.

The debates mentioned above are competitive debates in which the school teams or political parties/candidates attempt to defeat the people on the other side of the debates. One side wins and the other loses. Furthermore, each side in the competition presents only one perspective. For political parties, that perspective may be long- and deeply-held, whereas in school debates, students may be assigned – rather than being able to choose - the perspective they are to argue for during the competition. Either way, neither side publicly changes their perspective during the debate, even if, in reality, they find their opponents' perspective to be persuasive.

The purpose of the current article is to explain a cooperative, rather than a competitive, mode of debate, one that encourages each participant to develop and present a case for at least two, and perhaps three, perspectives on the same issue.

Previous scholars have referred to this cooperative mode of debate as Academic Controversy (Johnson et al., 1996), Creative Controversy (Johnson & Johnson, 1995), Structured Controversy (D'Eon & Proctor, 2001), and Cooperative Debate (Lim et al., 2023). The present article uses the term Cooperative Debate, as it seems to be the most transparent name. This article explains the steps in Cooperative Debate, along with possible variations. Afterward, subsequent sections of the article explain theories underlying the use of Cooperative Debate and multiperspectivity are explored.

How To Perform Cooperative Debate

Cooperative Debate is a cooperative learning technique normally consisting of eight steps. However, practitioners (e.g., teachers and workshop organizers, as well as participants, e.g., students and workshop members) can make variations of these eight steps based on varied contexts and the ideas – both planned and spontaneous – of the debate facilitators.

Step 1 – Forming Groups

Approximately four participants form one group, which then divides into pairs. Debate facilitators should consider heterogeneity within these groups of two and four, such that each group's membership is a microcosm of the mix of characteristics present among the larger body of people who form the class or the workshop. These characteristics might, for example, include age, social class, gender identity, ethnicity, level of prior knowledge on the topic to be debated, and level of debating skills (such as skills with language or presentation software).

Step 2 - Preparing to Present

Chance decides which position on the topic each pair within each foursome will initially support, rather than group members selecting their position themselves. For instance, perhaps the debate topic is whether, to reduce humans' carbon footprint, the government should tax meat in order to reduce consumption of food from animals raised for human food. One pair in each foursome will argue in favor of such a tax, while the other pair must argue against the tax. Debate participants can have a role in choosing the overall topic, but not their initial side on that topic.

To think deeply on the debate topic and to present well, participants need time and resources. Debate facilitators can play a key role here. Also, pairs who initially take the same perspective can meet to share resources and ideas. Preparation should include deciding each pair member presenting which points, with the objective of each person

having roughly equal talking time in Step 3. Furthermore, graphic organizers, such as mind maps, and notes, as well as rehearsal time, can improve the flow of the presentations in Step 3.

Step 3 – Initial Presentations

Each of the four group members has the same fixed amount of time to present their pair's assigned perspective. The other pair can be timekeepers as well as taking notes in preparation for the rebuttals that take place in Step 4. After everyone does their Step 3 initial presentations, each pair meets to develop rebuttal points and to allocate them among the members of the pair.

Step 4 – Rebuttal

Each member of the foursome has a turn to rebut points raised by the other pair during Step 3. After everyone takes their turn, open discussion takes place, where participants utilize the cooperative skill of disagreeing politely. Use of the skill depends on language and culture; however, some ideas include:

a. asking questions to better understand what others said
b. paraphrasing what the other pair said and checking that the other pair finds the paraphrase to be accurate, before disagreeing
c. finding points of agreement among the two perspectives
d. using phrases such as, "you may be right, but please consider a different perspective."

Step 5, 6, & 7 – Reverse Perspectives; Repeat Steps 2, 3, & 4

The pairs in each foursome swap perspectives. For instance, the pair who initially argued for a tax on meat in order to reduce greenhouse gas emissions now argue against such a tax and vice-versa. Of course, any debate topic can generate many more than two perspectives, as will be discussed in Step 8.

Debate participants may worry that when the two pairs switch sides, it will be boring to debate the same topic with the same people. In response, D'Eon and Proctor (2001) proposed that pairs could switch foursomes and debate with another twosome who had not heard the earlier arguments in their foursome.

Step 8 – Each Person Chooses Their Own Perspective

In the earlier steps of Cooperative Debate, participants randomly selected their positions. However, in Step 8, each participant works alone to formulate their own view on the topic. This individual view can be one of the two assigned perspectives, but it can also be a third view. For instance, on the topic of a meat tax, possible third perspectives include banning or rationing meat, subsidizing alternative protein foods, such as fish fingers made from soybeans, eliminating government financial support for the meat industry, or developing education programs to encourage people to, at least partially, move away from meat.

The foursomes discuss each other's individual views on the topic and attempt to reach a consensus, but the dialog that takes place is the key, regardless of whether the group reaches a consensus. Additionally, groups can generate ideas for what can be done to actually implement their perspectives. In other words, Cooperative Debate need not be confined to *talking* about topics; debaters can subsequently move on to *doing* something

about the topic. An example of doing related to the topic of whether to tax meat could be for people opposed to taxing meat to instead take action to combat climate change by switching from private transport to public transport. After the groups of four have discussed their individual views, whether or not they reach consensus, a group member may be chosen at random to share their group's discussion, either with another group or with the entire class, all the workshop participants, etc.

Theoretical Underpinnings of Cooperative Debate

Social Interdependence Theory

Cooperative Debate was developed based on Social Interdependence Theory (Deutsch, 1949; Johnson & Johnson, 2009; Lewin, 1948). Two of the principles that Johnson and Johnson (2009) derived from that theory are positive interdependence and individual accountability. Positive interdependence represents a feeling among a small or large group of people that their outcomes are positively correlated. In other words, what benefits one group member benefits all group members, and anything detrimental to one group member hinders all. While positive interdependence focuses on mutually beneficial group outcomes, individual accountability concentrates on each member doing their fair share to achieve such beneficial outcomes for the group.

Traditional competitive debates promote positive interdependence among the members of each group, but negative interdependence – the feeling that the outcomes of others are negatively correlated with our own outcomes - likely develops between groups, with each group trying to beat the other. Therefore, the likelihood of sharing between groups decreases. Furthermore, the purpose of traditional debates lies in winning, not in deepening one's own and others' understanding of the topic or in using that deepened understanding to work together post-debate on solutions developed during the debate. In contrast, Step 8 of Cooperative Debate highlights that the class, workshop, etc. constitutes a group of groups who use debate as a tool to "put their heads together" to learn about the world and then perhaps attempt to make the world a better place. Lim et al. (2023) called this the principle of cooperation as a value and discussed it in terms of how cooperative learning could empower students and others to work toward the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (Jacobs et al., 2023).

Individual accountability is the other principle mentioned earlier that was derived from Social Interdependence Theory. As stated above, individual accountability encourages every group member to feel an obligation to do what they can to help the group obtain its goals; goals might include better understanding of a topic, improved language skills, enhanced group interaction abilities, and solutions for the problems embodied in the debate topic. Cooperative Debate facilitates individual accountability by building in times in which each person should share ideas with groupmates. For instance, in Steps 3 and 6, each person has a designated time to present their pair's designated perspective on the topic under discussion. Also, in Step 8, everyone has a turn to contribute their own personal perspective on the topic. Hopefully, they will also consider taking action to implement their perspective, even if their group of four or the entire assemblage does not share the same perspective.

Piagetian Insights on Perspective Taking

Piaget developed a theory of cognitive development (Byrnes, 2008; Piaget, 1976). [As a side

note, in addition to his theoretical contributions to education, Piaget also led an institution dedicated to fostering global peace and harmony through education (Marchand, 2012).] The current section of the present article highlights possible Piagetian insights into the development of perspective taking and seeks to relate these insights to the use of Cooperative Debate. It should be noted that controversy exists among educators as to at what age children have the cognitive capacity to see other perspectives and whether educational practices can impact children's cognitive development. This controversy lies beyond the scope of the present article. Instead, the article's treatment of the work of Piagetians is restricted to how perspective-taking ability might be built, focusing on two concepts: decentration and disequilibration.

Decentration

In decentration, children's points of view in a situation go through a process, where they no longer center their thinking on one characteristic or viewpoint of a situation. Rather, they are able to attend to multiple characteristics (Mounoud, 1996). Below are two famous studies of decentration: the Conservation of Liquids Task and the Three Mountains Task.

The Conservation of Liquids Task. The Conservation of Liquids Task is a tool that Piaget (1965) used to measure children's ability to decenter. This task, as illustrated in Figure 1, involves the following steps (Elkind, 1961; Orpet et al., 1976). First, researchers present children with a glass of colored water alongside an empty glass of similar shape and size. The children then fill the empty glass with water until both glasses contain roughly the same amount of liquid. As they do the task, most children compare the height of the liquid's surface in the two glasses to attempt to attain equality. After confirming with the children that the liquid in both glasses is in the same quantity, the researchers replace the original glass with a taller, thinner one and transfer the water. Children who cannot decenter focus only on the height of the water and think that the tall, thin glass contains more water. In contrast, children who have developed decentration do not focus only on the height of the liquid in the glass; they appreciate that other factors also can be important. These children consider both the height and base area size of the glasses, recognizing that the amount of water remains unchanged. Moreover, rather than only focusing on the current view of the surface level, children who can decenter consider potential actions that could alter the amount of water.

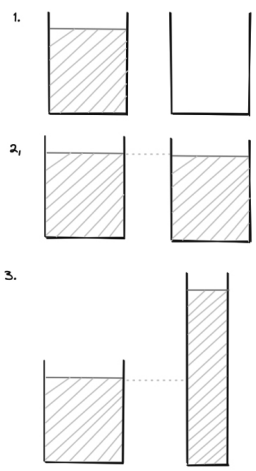

Figure 1: *The Conservation of Liquids Task (own editing)*

Three Mountains Task. Another famous Piagetian task to measure decentration is the Three Mountains Task, as illustrated in Figure 2. The Three Mountains Task is designed to test children's ability to move away from centering only on themselves and their own current perspective. Instead, children who decenter are able to incorporate others' perspectives into their thinking (Piaget & Inhelder, 1956). When children decenter, they understand that others may have different thoughts and perceptions from theirs (Feldman, 1992).

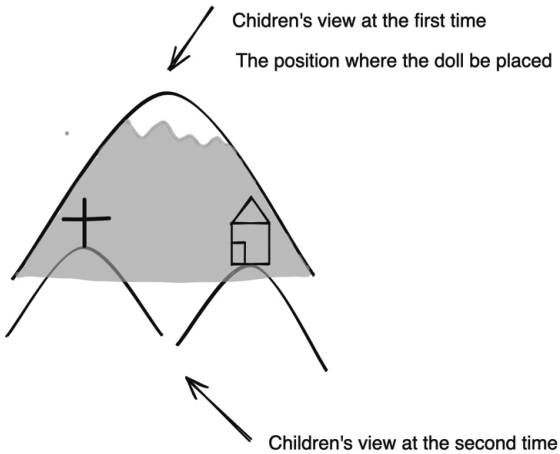

Figure 2: *The Three Mountains Task (own editing)*

In a simplified version of the Three Mountains Task, research participants view a model showing three mountains. They have the opportunity to walk around and view the model from different perspectives. Then, the researchers introduce a doll, and participants say what the doll sees from where the doll sits. If children do not decenter, they cannot put themselves in the place of the doll. In contrast, people who can decenter describe the scenery from the doll's perspective, thereby demonstrating an understanding of multiple perspectives.

Disequilibration

Schemas are mental frameworks that people use to understand their environment and to process new information and perspectives (Widmayer, 2004). Disequilibration can occur when individuals encounter new information or perspectives that do not fit into their existing schemas (Bormanaki & Khoshhal, 2017). Assimilation involves integrating new information into existing schemas (Hanfstingl et al., 2021). For instance, if people's schema defines birds as any flying creature, encountering bats (mammals who can fly) may lead them to classify the bats as birds. On the other hand, accommodation requires people adjusting their schema to incorporate new understandings and perspectives (Yang, 2010). Returning to the bat example, after learning that what they were seeing were bats, mammals who can fly, people need to accommodate, i.e., to change their schema to include that not all flying creatures are birds, thereby better matching their schema to external reality.

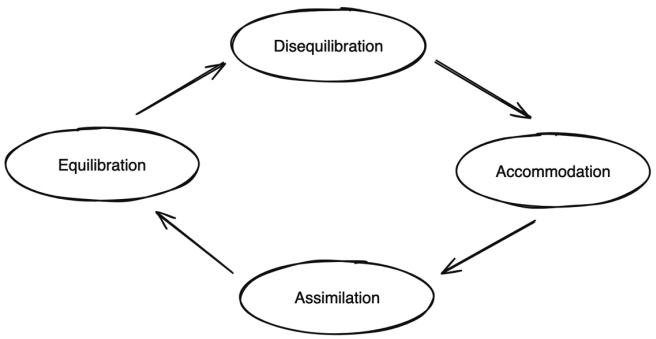

Figure 3: *The Process of Equilibration (own editing)*

Figure 3 provides a visual representation of the equilibration process. Assuming the debate topic is whether the government should impose taxes on meat due to its exacerbation of global warming, if people view cheap meat as more important than climate change, they are likely to oppose a tax on meat, even in the face of information about the meat / climate change link. In other words, disequilibrium will not take place, and they will not accommodate, i.e., they will continue to oppose taxes on meat.

While disequilibrium may cause uncomfortable feelings, it motivates people to search for solutions, for equilibrium, thereby promoting thinking and interaction with other people and other information sources (Woolfolk, 2016). Participants are more likely to encounter disequilibrium during cooperative debates, rather than during traditional debates, because whereas in traditional debates, each person holds only one perspective, in cooperative debates, each person represents at least two different perspectives.

Conclusion

The current article recommends the cooperative learning technique sometimes called Cooperative Debate as a means of encouraging people to develop, consider, and perhaps take action on behalf of a variety of perspectives on a topic. Cooperative Debate also seeks to provide a safe space for the exploration of perspectives, because, as discussed in regard to the cooperative skills named in Step 4, Cooperative Debate promotes an atmosphere in which people feel comfortable expressing their views, even if those views are not those of the majority of fellow participants. In contrast, in traditional debates, debaters sometimes use sarcasm and other forms of negative input (Jerome & Algarra, 2005).

Cooperative Debate also fits well with well-known taxonomies of educational objectives. For example, the taxonomy developed in the 1950s by Bloom and colleagues and slightly revised in this century (Krathwohl, 2002) involves six types of cognition, all of which are essential: knowing, understanding, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and evaluating. Where Cooperative Debates shine can be seen as they encourage types of higher order thinking: application, analysis, evaluation, and creation. Similarly, SOLO (Structure of the Observed Learning Outcome) (Biggs & Collis, 2014) synchs with Cooperative Debate in that both urge learners to progress beyond surface understanding to relational understanding (seeing phenomena as integrated wholes) and extended abstract understanding (being able to take newfound comprehension and apply it to different contexts).

Although formal use of all the eight steps in Cooperative Debate, as the technique is done in school and workshop settings, may not be appropriate in many non-academic

settings due to time and other constraints, tactics from the technique can be applied in a wide range of circumstances. For instance, if family members cannot agree on whether to volunteer with Charity A or Charity B, they can take turns advocating for each of the charities, or an advocate for Charity A can attempt to paraphrase the arguments that another family member has made in support of Charity B. Alternatively, family members can raise the possibility of volunteering for yet another charity, neither A or B.

Overall, this article provides practical guidance on how to implement multiple-perspective learning using the Cooperative Debate. Additionally, the article explores the theoretical foundations of cooperative debate, drawing on two influential theories to illustrate how this approach can encourage an active exchange of diverse viewpoints among participants. By understanding Cooperative Debate these theoretical frameworks, educators and workshop facilitators will enhance their ability to foster deeper engagement and multiperspective thinking ability, as well as increasing the likelihood that debates will lead participants to act on their learning.

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