Assessing Citizenship and Character Using Co-operative Learning

John Myers

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Learning to be an ethical, active citizen in our pluralistic society, like many important goals of schooling, is difficult to assess. Traditional measures tell us nothing about whether learners will actually behave ethically or apply informed reasoning and thinking in their lives as parents, partners, friends, or citizens. I have no doubt that some of the great villains of history could pass a citizenship quiz. Standardized tests can't measure the really hard learning outcomes like teamwork, initiative, courage, integrity, and responsibility.

So we need to find ways to observe students acting in ways consistent with the goals of citizenship and character education. Here co-operative learning can play a key role.

What Co-operative Learning Is, and Is Not:
Simply having students arranged in a group around a table does not mean that they will co-operate. Co-operative learning is a form of group work which is structured so people learn from each other. There are many versions of this teaching model but they share the following elements.

Positive Interdependence

1. Interdependence is structured to foster cooperation within the groups. Students need to have a reason for working together. Group tasks are cooperative when they structure positive interdependence among group members: a "sink or swim together" feeling and commitment to the group goal. Such a disposition is vital for successful teams, whether in sports, drama, business, hospital operating rooms or in academic pursuits.

2. Group goals are best achieved when every group member fulfills his or her role and contributes to the effort and product. In team sports, it is often the "role player," rather than the superstar, whose efforts result in the best performances by the team. Strategies in which individual as well as group efforts are recognized, such as individual quizzes based on the work done in a group or self-evaluation of one's efforts while working on a group task, also promote individual accountability.

3. Cooperative groups are not students sitting beside each other doing their own thing. Students in small groups must interact in a meaningful way, usually through purposeful talk.

Indicators of Sound Thinking

- perseverance
- flexibility
- careful review
- listening with understanding and empathy
- curiosity
- tolerating ambiguity
- thinking interdependently
- remaining open to continuous learning

Individual Responsibility and Accountability

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Math educator Marilyn Burns (1981) has used the following rules to promote responsibility among group members:

a. You are responsible for your work and behaviour.

b. You must be willing to help any group member who asks.

c. You may ask for help from the teacher only when everyone in your group has the same question.

Rule c implies that students will develop more independence, leaving you free to help those who really need you. Don't worry, you'll not be rendered obsolete by your students!

Student-student Interaction

5. Cooperative groups are not students sitting beside each other doing their own thing. Students in small groups must interact in a meaningful way, usually through purposeful talk.

Suitable Tasks

6. Tasks in which you want purposeful talk are best done when students work together in small groups. These include tasks involving:

- a variety of abilities
- exploratory talk
- checking for understanding
- problem-solving and/or decision-making
- review of previously encountered ideas or material
- reflecting on the learning

Other important conditions shared by many cooperative approaches include:

- the frequent use of heterogeneous groups so that different interests, backgrounds,
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Experiments promoting democratic values in school and beyond (Myers, 1993/94).

Now that we have defined the “what” and the “why” of co-operative learning, let’s look at the how. One way to look at the how is by observing students working in co-operatively structured groups.

What kinds of behaviors might we look for that correspond to the goals of citizenship and character education?

Observing Habits of Mind
One approach is to determine what sound thinking for character or citizenship looks like when we see it. Some of us argue that “intelligent behaviours” are “habits of mind”; a repertoire of mindful strategies we use when faced with problems or decisions. In such situations, however difficult it might be, each of us would do well to ask ourselves: “What is the most intelligent thing I can do right now?”

For example, in this world of email correspondence many of us are introduced to that time unit called the onesecond. The “onesecond” is the amount of time it takes us realize that we said the wrong thing after we pressed the send button. A habit of mind we should cultivate in these situations is one of decreased impulsiveness.

Do we blurt out answers and make many corrections in our written, oral, and email responses or do we pause before answering, make sure we understand the situation or task and consider the responses of others in building arguments? Decreased impulsiveness can lead to fewer avoidable conflicts due to misunderstanding and miscommunication.

Here are some other indicators of sound thinking for citizenship and character using these habits of mind (from Costa & Kallick, 2000; Myers et al., 1996).

Perseverance
Do students give up or back up and use a different strategy if the first one did not work?

Flexible Thinking
Do students use the same approaches for different problems or do they use and weigh the merits of alternative strategies, consider the approaches of others, and deal with more than one classification system simultaneously?

In the area of non-academic outcomes important in citizenship and character education, co-operative group approaches seem to have universally positive effects. For example, in a Toronto study Grade 5 and 6 classes composed of recent European and West Indian immigrants and Anglo-Canadians learned social studies using a co-operative technique called Jigsaw II. In addition to greater achievement and time-on-task for students in the treatment groups, more cross-ethnic friendships were established. The growth in such friendships, both close and casual, lasted after the treatment was concluded according to a follow-up ten weeks later (Zeigler, 1981).

The roots of cooperative learning stem from these non-academic goals. From efforts to integrate different populations in schools, and the teaching and practice of group behaviours so that students are prepared to work together, reflecting on the process and product of the group activity so that students learn from their efforts and improve performance in future, group tasks in which many students are working simultaneously.

ROOTS OF COOPERATIVE LEARNING
Whenever we interact with others, our behaviour is changed for better or worse. Co-operative learning researchers are interested in promoting the “better.” The research base for co-operative learning is among the most impressive for any educational innovation. Nearly 1,000 studies going back more than a century have demonstrated the power of co-operative learning to promote academic achievement, especially when group goals and individual accountability are at the forefront.

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or body language? Can they recognize the point of view taken by another person through paraphrase and an accurate expression of another person's feelings, emotions and perspectives?

Curiosity
Do students show interest in the problem or topic? Do they want to explore further? Do they view the world with wonderment and awe or do they shut themselves off from being passionate about the world around them?

Tolerating Ambiguity
Not all problems have easy, quick, or clear solutions. Some issues may always exist and what constitute the "best" answers may change over time. Can students avoid making permanent and potentially poor decisions for solving temporary problems?

Thinking Interdependently
Do students actively listen to and consider other approaches to the problem or do they ignore the contributions of others?

Remaining Open to Continuous Learning
Can students avoid complacency and constantly strive for improvement in intellectual work as athletes and artists do in their fields?

Observing these Habits of Mind and tracking their growth is a lifelong task, as are sound character and citizenship.

REFERENCES


John Myers is a curriculum instructor at OISE/UT on secondment from the Toronto District School Board. His Models of Teaching course introduces many preservice students to aspects of instructional intelligence by helping them to develop an artful blend of teaching strategies. He has taught Grade 3 through adult in schools and educational faculties in Ontario and British Columbia. His current interests include classroom assessment and cooperative learning.

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