DELIBERATE SOCIALIZATION FOR GROUP WORK:
A NEED FOR CLOSE ANALYSIS

Ian R. Cornford
University of Technology, Sydney

Abstract: Deliberate training for collaboration and social cohesion in groups still appears to be high on the education reform agenda. Subtle and not so subtle pressures are operating to ensure collaboration and to change attitudes, with these pressures especially evident at university level. From an historical-sociological perspective this paper examines some of the underlying reasons for the push within government circles for vocational educators deliberately to socialize for cooperative learning and work. It provides examples of close social collaboration in Australian society which have been of recent concern from an ethical or legal point of view, and queries whether there is a need for increased emphasis upon processes which have the potential to accentuate the worst features of social cohesion. This paper also examines a range of problems faced by educators in validly assessing learning and performance with group activities. It is concluded that pressures to ensure training for co-operation in learning and work have been encouraged by government authorities without substantial understanding of the issues involved.

Introduction

The technological and economic revolutions coupled with the globalisation of world trade have greatly increased the competition between nations. The governments of many countries have been faced with the need to develop policies to increase levels of skills and work efficiency in order to maintain or regain their former economic power and status. A number of research areas which were previously unfashionable have now become important. For example, transfer of learning has again emerged of major interest because of the economic importance of training for effective transfer (Detterman, 1993), while there has also been considerable interest in social factors in learning, most evident in arguments over situated learning (see Greeno, 1997; Anderson, Reder & Simon, 1997).

Australia is typical of many countries experiencing these forces of change. The Australian federal government over the past decade embarked upon the development of numerous policies designed to increase the levels of skilling and work performance. The best known of these included the Training Reform Agenda, national curricula and competency-based training initiatives. Equally important as policies and program structures have been efforts to change social attitudes and social processes to ensure that quality of work performance and effort is enhanced through
group functioning. Cooperation and team work has been recognized for a long time in the management literature as likely to lead to increased productivity (Shamir, 1990). Logically cooperation is likely to result in greater output than where there is conflict within a group, just as the efforts of many cooperating individuals are likely to produce more than any single individual.

But it was awareness of increasing global competitiveness in the 80s which appears to have intensified the appreciation of group or team efforts. Reich (1987, p. 78) in an article subtitled "The Team As Hero" argued:
"If we are to compete in today's world, we must begin to celebrate collective entrepreneurship, endeavors in which the whole of the effort is greater than the sum of individual contributions. We need to honor our teams more, our aggressive leaders and maverick geniuses less."

There is ample evidence that these arguments have been understood and incorporated into Australian reports. For example the Mayer Report (1992) identified work in teams as a key competency while group cooperation is recognized as of vital importance in the Karpin Report (1995) on management leadership. Collaborative and group efforts have been strongly encouraged in TAFE (see Thwaites, 1997) and in the university sector where there are strong pressures to engage in collaborative research with this pressure exerted through research funding requirements.

This paper critically examines some of the issues relevant to deliberate efforts to engage in social engineering. These include the reasons why collaboration and social cooperation are regarded as desirable from a historical perspective, recent examples of where group or team cooperation has resulted in less than favourable outcomes for society as a whole, and the limits of what is known from relevant research about group cohesion and effective cooperation. It also considers some of the very real practical problems associated with assessment of group work which confront teachers if they employ group assessment tasks.

A Historical Perspective

Until very recently both Japan and Germany have been regarded as exemplary models of economic progress, particularly over the past decade. What has been particularly striking was their ability to rise literally from the ashes of defeat of World War 2 and regain their places as powerhouses of economic performance within the space of less than forty years. Intense cooperative effort with populaces highly motivated to regain former status resulted in the transformation of defeat and economic ruin into highly successful, modern industrialised economies. In this process these cultures characterised strongly by social cohesion and co-operation have come to be perceived as very important for the change in status of each of these countries (Thurow, 1992). Although at present there are economic problems for both these countries, and their record of success is somewhat dented, they still stand out as models for emulation.
Contemporary Japanese and German social ideals promoting cultural identity and social cohesion are seen as very relevant to developing ways to succeed in the intensely competitive economic environment of the last decade of the twentieth century. The intense competition will certainly continue well into the twenty-first century despite some current views which are stressing the advantages of economic cooperation between countries (see Global Competitiveness Report, 1996). Thurow (1992) sees the successful forms of capitalism as practised in Germany and Japan originating from cultural values promoting cultural cohesion. These forms of capitalism are distinctly different from the individualistic forms which characterise the USA, UK and Australia. Thurow (1992, p. 32) states: ".....the essential difference between the two forms of capitalism is their stress on communitarian versus individualistic values as the route to economic success - the 'T' of America or of the United Kingdom versus 'Das Volk' and 'Japan Inc.'". The importance of movement from competitive enterprises to competitive societies is recognised by other writers of importance in the international economic sphere as well (eg, see Garelli, 1995).

As a result of these and similar arguments and analyses, the social cohesion and cooperation found in Japanese and German culture are perceived by very many Australian politicians and business leaders as cultural traits which should be fostered here. It would be surprising if these general concerns for the utilization of group processes in attaining national goals were not reflected in government or quasi-government publications. The Karpin Report (1995) provides one of the clearest indications of the need for more social cohesion and cooperation through the new, essentially post-Fordist paradigm for management which features in the first pages of the executive summary. In this section of the Report the need for much greater cooperation between management and workers, more team work and the need for radically different approaches to the exercising of executive power are clearly spelt out.

There are several other socio-cultural and political reasons why promotion of greater cooperation could be seen as highly desirable by politicians and business leaders. The divisions created by Mabo and Wik judgements and the rise and rise of Pauline Hanson at the expense of the National Party on a racist platform in a multicultural society which, until the present, has promoted pride in diversity, are all reasons why the fostering of social cooperation might be seen as highly desirable by federal governments regardless of political persuasion.

Some Examples of Close Social Cooperation

It would be a mistake to believe that all groups which demonstrate close cooperation and cohesion are providing benefits to society. Criminal groups, for example, are frequently characterised by just those qualities. It is of more concern when groups, which have formal roles within the society and are expected to contribute in quite positive ways, reveal that cohesion and cooperation may be employed to pervert or subvert the roles which they are intended to carry out. Two specific examples will be drawn upon to illustrate this problem: the first relates to the findings of the Wood
Royal Commission into the police force in NSW and the second relates to state-wide literacy testing of NSW Year 7 students to determine the literacy levels of these students who have just entered secondary school.

Commissioner Wood's Report (1997) provides a detailed account of the recent investigation of police corruption in NSW. Drawing upon extensive investigations the Report provides details of a wide range of types of corruption. These include process corruption (perjury, etc.), gratuities and improper association, theft and extortion, fraudulent practices, substance abuse, assaults and abuse of police power, compromise or favourable treatment in prosecutions, drug trafficking, interference with internal investigations, and protection of the drug trade, club and vice operators, and gaming and betting interests. This catalogue of substantial crime is of no real surprise to many in NSW since the NSW police force has had a long history of corruption. Moreover, it is apparent that the findings of the Wood Royal Commission are not unique; similar findings emerged from the Fitzgerald Commission of Inquiry in Queensland in 1987.

The source of this corrupt behaviour, perpetrated upon a citizenry that it was supposed to serve and protect, is identified as the police culture and specifically by Wood (1997, Volume 1, p. 33) as the code of silence which "is an incontrovertible and universal product of police culture". (Wood argues that there are a number of different types of police culture, for example between management and police on the beat, and different specialized segments of the service, hence the culture per se cannot be seen as the origin.) The code of silence is essentially the placing of loyalty to the group over and above the function and purpose that the police force was supposed to serve. Wood, with a practical intent, does not engage too much in substantial sociological or psycho-social analyses, but the development of the code of silence can be related directly and unequivocally to issues of social cooperation and development of group cohesion.

The other example that I have chosen to employ as a cautionary tale relates to the groups involved with the development of the English Literacy and Language Assessment Test (ELLA) in NSW for Year 7 students in secondary schools and those who have made use of the findings of this assessment instrument. The publicity surrounding this test has been carefully handled to disguise the fact that the test is an invalid instrument for assessing the reading, comprehension and writing abilities of Year 7 students. This testing has occurred chiefly in the public system since few private schools chose to become involved with its administration in the first year of use.

The actual ELLA test is severely compromised on a number of accounts, but particularly on the basis of items which are designed at assess literacy and understanding. While major efforts were made to make the format attractive to approximately thirteen year olds through cartoons, line drawings, colour and layouts like those found in many contemporary media forms read by this age group, the test content and setting out are often confusing and read more as an intelligence test than
a genuine attempt to ascertain the levels of literacy of Year 7 students in Part 1 of the test. For example in the first item, "Billy the Punk", the numbering of sequential pages is not immediately obvious and it requires conscious effort to ascertain the sequence. One item, "Computer screen", exhibits social class bias, among other things, with the need for familiarity with specific Internet conventions to read the material which involves a reversal of word order flow to right-left. The "Softball game statistics" item requires specific knowledge of scoring using an oblique stroke through the preceding four separate strokes to be able to answer the questions. Those without specific knowledge of this convention might otherwise interpret it as wiping out an error.

The language level used in a number of test items is of major concern. While it is legitimate to establish the range of abilities, and hence standards, through use of more difficult language in some items, there appear to be far too many difficult items. Of the fifteen test items, at least ten involve often very sophisticated levels of language. A colleague who obliged me by performing the Flesch Readability Formulae tests, a rough guide to level of difficulty, on 3 one hundred word passages, found the results ranging from USA standard grades 8-9 (approximately ages 14-15) to grade college level. There is also a major problem of split attention and the overloading of working memory as reading items and questions were in separate booklets. One would have liked to believe that the work of Sweller (1993) on such problems of over loading working memory would be understood by those working on the construction of such major tests. Apart from the validity of the items in terms of assessing reading ability, there is also strong reason to believe that problems of marking reliability emerged as the time allocated for marking of answers in the written expression sections was substantially underestimated by the contractors.

Anecdotal evidence from markers suggests generally scores were very low in the written expression section of the test. In any case the invalidity of the reading items would have prohibited the establishment of the range of true ability of Year 7 students, hence of standards. Yet miraculously Premier Carr was able to reassure parents via a Sydney Morning Herald article that their children were not falling behind since only 20%, that is one child in five, had low-level literacy skills, with 9% of these singled out for special literacy classes (Raethel, 1997). One edition of School Education News (28/5/97, pp. 6-8), likely to be read by teachers, contained a two page spread which was clearly designed to put a positive spin on the test with reports of enthusiasm of principals and somewhat inaccurate accounts of marking procedures among other things. There clearly has been a considerable cover-up on the inadequate assessment instrument, the marking and interpretation of results, and, additionally, the waste of taxpayer money. Group cooperation and cohesion have been used to save face for those who developed a patently invalid literacy test and underestimated the marking time and costs, and for the public servants in the NSW Department of School Education and politicians who did not adequately understand or monitor the whole project.
There are many other examples of how group cooperation and cohesion can be used for the benefit of the particular group(s) of individuals at the expense of the wider society which the group is morally obliged serve and for which work they are remunerated. However, these two examples provide ample evidence that deliberate training for group cooperation may simply accentuate already present, naturally occurring social tendencies to ensure personal survival or advantage to the detriment of the wider society.

**Empirical Research Findings: The Complexity of Social Engineering**

If efforts to engage in deliberate social engineering for group cooperation are be successful, there needs to be a knowledge based which teachers and group leaders can draw upon and use for guidance. The obvious place to turn is to research on group processes. While there are enormous numbers of publications on group processes in the communications area, the reliable empirical research on effective group processes is somewhat more limited. As Druckman and Bjork (1994) note in their major review, group research frequently has been conducted in laboratory setting and/or with younger children. Consequently there are doubt about the validity of research finding from such studies for adults in natural settings, particularly workplace settings, where the types and complexity of problems encountered in uncontrolled contexts, as well as outputs or products, are likely to be substantially different.

There may be two distinct aspects to group work which are of interest to those managing or teaching/training in the post-compulsory sector. These are learning in groups and work outputs. Work outputs have been of conventional interest to employers, managers and teachers/trainers, but the recent development of concern for fostering the learning organisation means that there is likely to be greater interest in group learning processes for those serious about achieving effective learning organisations. Cooperative learning has been one area that has attracted a great deal of attention over the past decade from those interested in group learning. In fact it appears to be the most systematically researched of any of the teaching/learning strategies. Studies like that of Johnson and Johnson (1989) and Slavin (1990), which analysed numbers of studies to compare cooperative and individualistic efforts on individual achievement, generally have found effect sizes favouring cooperative group work. However, there are substantial numbers of studies which report no differences (see Slavin, 1990). As Druckman and Bjork (1994, p. 90) note: "Unfortunately, the huge number of practitioner-oriented articles about cooperative learning... tend to ignore these findings of no differences."

There are clearly a large number of potential variables which may influence outcomes in cooperative group learning situations. These include aspects of motivation with group or individual rewards and the complexity of motivation, reward types, for example monetary, recognition, etc., and individual differences. These are only now starting to be explored. The issue of individual differences may be a potentially a very complex and difficult one to explore. Cohen (1994), in reviewing research on productive small groups, indicates that problems of status within small groups
working on ill-structures problems needs to be addressed. Also, interestingly, as Druckerman and Bjork (1994) note, to date there appears to be no research into potential long term negative effects of cooperation upon learning, for example dependency on social support for effective learning outcomes.

The distinction between groups and teams is probably one which is relevant for those concerned with learning aspects and productive work outputs. Groups are seen as having less definite structure and connections whereas teams are defined more specifically in terms of collaboration-integration and role differentiation (Hare, 1992). Teams are more likely to maintain consistency over longer periods of time. Druckerman and Bjork (1994) note that research suggests that team variables exert stronger effects on outputs than do member characteristics. However both contextual variables and team building and identification processes need to be taken into account.

Sundstrom, De Meuse and Futrell (1990, p. 122), who are primarily concerned with real-world performance, define performance as the "acceptability of output to customers within or outside the organisation who receive team products, services, information, decisions...". In taking an ecological approach to examining the range of factors which influence team performance, they identify organizational cultures, the physical environment, and delineating factors and processes in group-organization relationships.

Sundstrom et al.'s (1990) work suggests that both external factors and group processes interact in production. In their view the factors external to the group may have more influence upon performance than internal processes. For example, government decisions on taxation policy may negate the efforts of sales promotion team. Similarly, when team performance is dependent upon synchronizing with counterpart units, then the less their performance will be a result of internal processes. For example, a complementary graphics-art department team may be late in producing agreed promotional materials and hence reduce the effectiveness of a marketing team's efforts. Ultimately, however, external factors may well be more influential than the efforts of the team or the organisational culture (Druckman & Bjork, 1994). And clearly there are myriad external factors which can impinge on group or team performance.

There are clearly major gaps in our knowledge about group processes. Research at present has only revealed some of the complexity of the issues and does not provide the kinds of clear-cut guidelines which are desirable. In effect there is a limited, empirically-proven knowledge base to guide teachers and trainers in developing effective group processes. Consequently it is not surprising that there is almost nothing on proven strategies in vital areas like developing adherence to wider moral standards and maintaining loyalties beyond the team or group. Yet the generally vindictive treatment of whistleblowers, who violate team or group norms in attempts to protect the public interest, demonstrates that this is a pressing need (Toohey, 1996). Moral factors may provide the cement which causes groups to be cohesive and
engage in certain productive activities (Shamir, 1990), but the analysis of these issues and how to ensure moral behaviour from groups is just commencing. The Wood Royal Commission Report (1997) in its recommendations designed to avoid corruption in the police service in NSW simply demonstrates the dearth of relevant material.

Overall though, research which considers ecological factors directs attention yet again to the critical impact of the quality of political and management leadership. Bandura (1986) established the importance of modelling upon everyday learning. What is largely still missing is serious analysis of the ways in which business managers and political leaders and their parties affect the general society and group functioning through modelling processes. The availability of these models through television, radio and newspapers ensures that these figures and groups have enormous potential power of influence on account of their perceived status which encourages emulation. Some years ago I drew attention to the problem of poor political leadership in Australia (Cornford, 1993), and unfortunately the quality has not improved since then: if anything in the federal sphere it is demonstrably worse. The Karpin Report (1995), although attacked and even ignored in some quarters, clearly has revealed the poor quality of management and business leadership in this country while later studies, like that of Francis (1997) on the quality of company directors, simply confirm the problems.

Berliner (1996, p.48), citing a 1992 report from McKinsey Global Institute which examined the service economies of several industrialized countries, states: "In no case were the skills of the labor force a factor in the productivity of an industry, while in every case, the behavior of managers was a major factor determining an industry's productivity. So let us look at the behavior of managers because they are the ones that seem to determine much of the productivity of the workforce."

In fact there is a savage irony in the fact that political and business leaders, the two groups who are the least likely to demonstrate socially constructive cooperative behaviour, are the ones who are most enthusiastic about average workers being more cooperative. As has been argued by Thurow (1992) there is a need for Anglo business leaders to change their styles of management and leadership to approximate more closely those processes and strategies employed by business leaders in the relatively more effective Japanese and German forms of capitalism. In essence Thurow sees the Japanese and Germany styles of capitalism far better adapted to the changed circumstances of the last decade of the twentieth century, and what will emerge in the twenty first century, than the Anglo model.

Problems of Group Assessment

Even if teachers accept the need for deliberate socialization for group work there may be considerable problems in converting a slogan into effective practice. For group work to be taken seriously by students there is a need to engage in group assessment.
Whether it is desirable or not students direct energy to learning which will be assessed, and teachers and trainers need to be realistic about this (Elton, 1996). It is probable that since the advent of competency-based training, with teaching firmly structured around clearly defined assessable objectives, students are more inclined only to take seriously learning backed by assessment. There are major problems however in linking group work, whether in terms of cooperative learning or group product output, to assessment. These are both in terms of conceptualisation of valid assessment and using appropriate assessment instruments.

Major, reliable texts by authors held in high regard (eg Ebel & Frisbie, 1991; Linn & Gronlund, 1995) do not contain information on using group assessment tasks. As yet there is no real research evidence about how to measure combined performances of team members as part of the total group project and this is a major problem in developing valid and reliable instruments or methods. Druckerman and Bjork (1994, p. 124) ask pertinently of individual contributions to the group task: "Are they to be combined by using linear (additive or multiplicative) or nonlinear algorithms?" These conceptual issues still await clarification.

It is easy enough to establish the requirement for submission of one project which reflects the efforts of the total group. In effect this may be well received by teachers since it will reduce the number of assignments which need to be marked if each individual student submits an assignment. What becomes impossible to assess validly from such a submitted assignment is the amount of effort which is put in by each student. For example, it is logically conceivable that one student, who is particularly able and well organized, has done all or the bulk of the work. The problem may be resolved by the teacher assigning specific tasks and monitoring the process of the project to ensure that all are carrying out allocated tasks. Yet this intrusion by the teacher surely negates many of the skills which group processes in theory are supposed to develop. These include responsibility for one's own learning and learning about cooperation and negotiation within the group. [See Killen (1996) for reasons for using different types of group work.]

In most tasks there is a need for students to have an understanding of all aspects of the task. Initial training or education surely should aim to develop a range of skills to enable the individual to be flexible and useful in employment. [See Shamir (1990) for coverage of some relevant issues]. This finds expression in the current drive for multiskilling. Later specialisation may develop, but it is probably necessary for individuals to experience a range of activities and skills, both cognitive and performance, before they are in a position to determine where their strengths or weaknesses lie.

If the logic of arguments for determining the knowledge or learning of each individual student in a group or team is accepted, then there surely need to be ways of assessing what each individual has learned. My experience with group work and assessment of projects is that students have the expectation that all students will be assessed on what they have learned in groups and what they contributed. What is the
greatest source of conflict is when some students do not contribute fully, are seen to "bludge" on the efforts of the others yet receive the same grade if a group mark is awarded in which all share.

It is almost impossible to allocate marks according to proven effort on a group project since it is often hard to delineate individual effort and there are likely to be conflicting claims on who contributed what. Group brainstorming is likely to have been involved and thus many may contribute suggestions for changes to an original idea so that it is hard to distinguish the importance of what may seem a minor modification to an original but which may have major influence on the end product. Valid assessment of individual learning requires that each individual student separately submits as assignment which reflects his/her own personal efforts and the results emerging from the cooperation of individuals within the team or group.

Conclusion

To simply believe that fostering group cohesion and cooperation will result in substantially positive outcomes for a society are naïve. The examples advanced of group cooperation serving the ends of the groups rather than the whole society must surely indicate the group cooperation per se does not guarantee greater productivity within the society. Furthermore the limits of what is known from research on the functioning of groups indicates that there does not exist a substantive knowledge base which can surely guide teachers and trainers in fostering group cohesion and cooperation. One may conclude that the pressures for deliberative social engineering are being exerted by political and business leaders in a search for simplistic solutions to social and economic ills with little real knowledge of the complexity of the real issues involved.

The research by Sunderstrom et al (1990) which indicates the importance of ecological factors on group or team performance in fact raises important questions regarding the quality of existing leadership by these two socially powerful groups. Without high quality political and business leadership to provide the right external conditions to contribute to sound group or team efforts individual group or team efforts no matter how good are likely to be severely compromised. The existing political system ensures that political leaders in two political parties display anything but cooperation and do nothing to contribute to cohesion in effective decision making at national or state levels. With such powerful models before us there is little likelihood of the general populace displaying qualities which their betters are unable to display themselves!
References


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