

COOPERATIVE LEARNING ACTIVITIES AND UNDERSTANDING REAL ECONOMY

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Abstract

The main challenge for professors who conduct in-service teacher training for teachers with different backgrounds is to identify a common domain of interest in order to discuss specific issues of teaching a particular subject. In the 2009 course we conducted at the Department for Teacher Training in The Bucharest Academy of Economic Studies we thought that economic processes that affect our daily life could be the connecting factor in a diverse group, especially during recession periods of time when people are more interested than usual in understanding economy and economic public policies.

In spring 2009, the Romanian government started negotiations with the International Monetary Fund for a loan that would help Romania in the crisis, which was discussed a lot in the media and many controversial opinions were expressed by representatives, decision makers and different public personalities. In this context, at our post-university course we conduct a session focused on the IMF. The lesson "What is the International Monetary Fund and What Does It Do?" demonstrated how effective cooperative learning activities are.

Keywords: International Monetary Fund, cooperative learning, IMF supported programs, incentives to learn, expert groups, teaching and learning groups, active learning activities

Introduction

The Post-University Course organized by the Department for Teacher Training of The Bucharest Academy of Economic Studies attracts each year university graduates who want to develop teaching competences. Their background could be very diverse: economic and business studies, visual arts, modern languages, medicine, or mechanics. The main challenge for the professors who conduct the course is to identify a common domain of interest in order to discuss specific issues of teaching a particular subject. Our hypothesis was that economic processes that affect our daily life could be the leant in such a diverse group, especially during

recession periods of time when people are more interested than usual to understand the economy and economic public policies.

In spring 2009, the Romanian government started negotiations with the International Monetary Fund for a loan that would help Romania to cross the crisis. The mass media discussed a lot this issue and many controversial opinions were expressed by representatives, decision makers and different public personalities.

In this context, we conduct a session focused on the IMF in our post-university course. The lesson "What is the International Monetary Fund and What Does It Do?" was selected to be used in order to reach two major objectives: first, for the participants to understand the basic role and functions of the IMF while addressing concepts such as balance of payments, financial crisis, inflation, and poverty, and second, the participants were to participate in the cooperative learning activity demonstrated in the lesson.

The "Expert" Groups

Participants worked in five groups. The lesson calls for members of each group to become "experts" on an IMF-supported program in one of the following five countries: Barbados, Estonia, Korea, Turkey, or Uganda. They received handouts with information about the assigned countries, problems the countries faced, IMF-support programs, and results of IMF interventions in each country. The first task was to read the material, discuss it with their group colleagues, and organize and learn the information they received with the purpose of being able to teach their topic to others. The allocated time for becoming experts on a particular IMF-supported program was 20 minutes. Participants were instructed that after this group learning activity, each of them would form a different group consisting of an expert on each of the five countries. They would teach the new group members about their country and then learn from the others about the four other countries.

The most participatory moments in the activity occurred during the discussions in the groups of experts. The participants' involvement increased as they understood and performed the task. During the group discussions participants' incentives to learn increased as they prepared to teach the others. This preparation required making decisions and taking responsibility for selecting and editing the information they would need in the teaching process. Knowing that they would soon be undertaking the role of teachers provided a clear motivation to learn the material. None of the participants would accept the idea that he or she would not be able to teach the material at a high level of performance. The group discussions focused in part on selecting the most relevant information from the handouts to teach to others, to avoid the tendency to consider all the information on the handouts to be of equal importance.

Another factor which accelerated the learning process was the time. As the 20-minute time limit approached and participants had fewer remaining minutes to become experts on their particular IMF program, more questions arose in the groups. Some participants became impatient waiting for answers and split the groups and discussed mainly in pairs. It was evident that each participant felt the need to review the content and to make sure that nothing important was overlooked or forgotten.

The Teaching and Learning Groups

Moving to groups consisting of members with different country expertise provided the opportunity for everyone to apply their knowledge by teaching others. This teaching opportunity provided a clear rationale for the learning done in the first groups. In the role of teachers, participants frequently re-checked their notes in order to make sure that all important ideas had been presented and thoroughly explained. In this process, they individually reviewed the material and increased their personal knowledge. Participants also learned in the role of students. Individually they knew that they would address the group to demonstrate what they had learned about the IMF program in their country of expertise. This expectation prepared them to listen and to pay attention to the other presenters.

Assessment of the Activity

The announcement that participants would be individually tested at the end of the activity in order to see what they have learned about other countries gave further motivation for them to learn as much as possible. They took notes as the other “teachers” explained about other IMF programs. They asked clarifying questions, and, in the end, reviewed the notes they made. During this process participants learned more and became more confident about their knowledge and capacity to demonstrate what they had learned. The awareness of the test provided a strong incentive to learn.

The ‘test’ had five questions:

1. Which three countries have asked for IMF support?
2. What problems did these countries face?
3. What kind of support did these countries receive from the IMF?
4. What measures did the IMF impose to help the countries solve the problems they faced?
5. What were the results of the IMF supported programs?

The test was designed as a learning activity where participants would have the opportunity to review what they had learned and to direct them to the important ideas that the instructors believed should be learned. The test was administrated orally: the instructor read the questions one at a time and gave the participants time

to write the answers on a sheet of paper. Participants could use their notes to check their answers and ensure that their answers were complete. The instructors encouraged participants to check with their notes to learn more if they did not yet have the level of knowledge they wanted to achieve. Providing enough time to come up with complete answers to more difficult questions such as Question 4 increased the learning outcomes and provided incentives for participants to continue to increase their knowledge.

The test was followed by a discussion emphasizing correct answers to the five questions. The first two questions were not problematic and all participants easily came away with correct answers. Question #3 and Question #4 required discussions. Some of the IMF-supported programs and their consequences had to be explained in detail. After checking the answers to Question #5, it was clear that a longer discussion was necessary focusing on the outcomes of the IMF programs and policies. At this point of the session, the instructor took control of the learning process and suggested explanations regarding the IMF programs and the functions and role of the IMF. The learning process moved to another level under the direction of the instructor.

Learning Methodology

The final step of the activity focused on the learning methodology. Participants were asked to describe the method and to identify strengths and weaknesses. All responses emphasized the power of the methodology in terms of involvement and effectiveness. Participants identified it as a cooperative learning activity. Reflection on the method also provided the opportunity to underline how the teacher can guide, control and correct what students have learned.

One of the most controversial issues about cooperative learning activities in groups of students is that students are taught by their classmates. In the application of this lesson in Romania, the test and especially the discussion at the end of the test where the instructor demonstrates how the teacher takes control of what students learn were designed to address the objections teachers might have regarding the quality of teaching in a cooperative learning lesson. These assessment activities should also increase teachers' confidence in the cooperative learning methodology.

As is generally true in active learning lessons, debriefing the activity with the learners who were involved is essential for learning, for meeting instructional objectives, and for ensuring that the expected outcomes are clear to all. This is why when planning a cooperative learning activity, teachers must be aware that lessons cannot be considered finished until a debriefing discussion is held that reviews the content, the activity, and the intended outcomes of the lesson. Learners must go away from the activity with a clear understanding of the application of the activity to their knowledge and to the learning process.

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