

Where's All the Teamwork Gone? A Qualitative Analysis of Cooperation between Members of Two Interdisciplinary Teams

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Abstract

This study explored cooperation between members of two interdisciplinary teams of educators within the agricultural field in a northeastern state. A researcher-developed instrument was used to explore individual perceptions regarding interdisciplinary cooperation. Using qualitative methods, the researchers intended to bring to light the thoughts, feelings and perceptions of educators regarding both the benefits and successes they had encountered, as well as the barriers they had come across during their cooperative experiences. Results indicated several areas of overlap for the disciplines. Recognized advantages included programmatic improvement, time saved, workload reduction and an increase in available resources. Barriers mentioned include time constraints, lack of awareness combined with perceived programmatic differences, and the lack of relationships and networks across disciplines. Suggestions include further research on the subject of cooperation, as well as possible combined in-service training sessions, encouraging the development of relationships through pre-service means (i.e., a combined undergraduate course) and administrator education.

Introduction and Theoretical Framework

They are the classic issues of our time – shrinking resources but ever-increasing demands; more work but the same time in which to do it; added constituents but fewer individuals willing to lead. As educators, many of these pressures are even greater particularly when discussing the issue of shrinking resources. Ultimately the need is to become more efficient. So, how can we develop future leaders while handling these persevering dilemmas, and be effective and efficient at the same time? When working to develop leaders for the 21st century it is important to

encourage skillful communication while promoting cooperation and understanding (Watt, 2003).

Cooperation can assist us in becoming more efficient. By definition, cooperation is to act or work with others; even more salient for this discussion, to associate with others for mutual benefit. The need for cooperation is apparent across many arenas. This is even more evident within the educational arena. According to Fauske (2002), cooperation is necessary for attracting resources in education. In another study, researchers found that through the use of factors such as information sharing, team building, and assigned tasks, the amount of cooperation and resource sharing amongst teachers significantly increased (Whent, 1994). Even cooperative education partnerships between industries and universities are becoming increasingly common in response to fundamental challenges within both sectors (Breen & Hing, 2001). Clearly, engaging in cooperative relationships has its advantages, not the least of which is the ability for those involved to be more efficient and effective.

Using classic theory as a foundation, we begin by looking to Triandis (1977) to illustrate our position on cooperative behavior. As Triandis notes, through identifying specific individual motivations you can then make inferences regarding that individual's behavior or use personal motivations to predict behavior. Even further, by recognizing the salience of the relationship between behavior and motivation, you can identify why individuals form cooperative associations as well as why they do not, thus ultimately addressing a lack of cooperation within specific situations.

However, understanding individual motivation and behavior is not enough to fully explain the dynamics behind cooperation. For this we turn to Deutsch's Theory of Cooperation (1949). Cooperation is defined as a social concept, one that may be limited by a lack of cooperative knowledge or the motives of the involved individuals. Successful, continuing cooperation depends upon two factors – effectiveness and efficiency – and ultimately the satisfaction (or perceived success) of those involved. Visually, this seminal work illustrates cooperation and competition along a continuum. Cooperation is placed at one end of the continuum, individualism is in the middle, and competition resides at the opposite end. While both cooperation and competition are needed within society, with increased cooperation greater synergy can be developed between disciplines.

But how do we encourage cooperation when historically the foundation of these two teams is based upon competition? The answer is “co-opetition,” or establishing mutually beneficial partnerships with other actors in the system. Co-opetition comes to us from the business and management field. It is used to describe “a business situation in which independent parties co-operate with one another and co-ordinate their activities, thereby collaborating to achieve mutual

goals, but at the same time compete with each other as well as with other firms” (Zineldin, 2004, p. 780). Co-opetition, therefore, implies that organizations that traditionally interact in rivalry due to conflicting interests can at the same time cooperate due to common interests. Ultimately, the greater goal is to create mutually advantageous exchanges and added value.

Yet, in many cases cooperation still appears to be the exception to the rule rather than the norm. According to a preliminary study of similar teams in Florida, Grage, Ricketts, and Place (2004) uncovered a noted lack of interdisciplinary cooperation. Upon further examination, researchers found slightly more interdisciplinary cooperation occurring between these two groups than originally thought, but with a lot of room to cultivate additional cooperative experiences (Ricketts & Place, 2005). In spite of this, cooperation among these entities is imperative. Working together allows for the expansion of opportunities for youth leadership development as well as for educators (both in formal and non-formal situations) to work more efficiently and effectively.

More holistically, thinking of competition and cooperation in a collective definition is considered by many researchers to be important for future viability (Breen & Hing, 2001; Gilbert, Jr., 1998; Hartwig, 1998; Kenworthy, 1996; Zineldin, 2004). Primary advantages of co-opetition are the sharing of knowledge, the pooling of competencies, increased incentives to take considerable risks, and in the end, the prospect of healthy competition on a level playing field (Zineldin, 2004). For those of us who embrace the communal goal of developing tomorrow’s leaders it is time we used our resources and relationships more cooperatively.

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this study was to characterize the current environment surrounding cooperation between two interdisciplinary teams of educators within the agriculture sector in a Northeast state. More specifically, this research was intended to bring to light the thoughts, feelings, and perceptions of educators regarding their cooperative experiences. Therefore, the guiding research questions for this qualitative study were:

R1: What kinds of benefits or successes have you encountered when cooperating?

R2: Can you think of any specific barriers or problems in the cooperation process?

Methodology

This study used qualitative methods to gather and interpret data. Research subjects were chosen purposefully in order to maximize the potential of finding the issues that occur in the context under study (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993). Names of participants were chosen from a list provided by the College of Agricultural Sciences office of Human Resources. Understanding that within naturalistic inquiry there is no concrete rule for sample size and that the key is to look more for rich information than volume (Erlandson, et al., 1993), this study focused on 88 non-formal educators and 83 classroom educators currently employed in a northeast state.

The researchers used unobtrusive measures to gather data. Berg (2001) describes unobtrusive measures of data collection as the examination of human traces. By using these types of measures researchers are able to collect data that might otherwise be too difficult to obtain for a variety of reasons. In the case of this study the unobtrusive measures to collect data (instrumentation) occurred in the form of narrative statements provided by the educators specifically related to their experiences with cooperation. These types of records, similar to journals, provide a look into how individuals make sense of their own world, how they define themselves and their surroundings, allow for self-disclosure, and in this case about how willing they are to cooperate with a member of a competing team.

Data was analyzed using content analysis within the qualitative research frame. Fraenkel and Wallen (1999) describe content analysis as a way for researchers to study human behavior through communication. Patton (2002) describes content analysis as a way that researchers take a large quantity of information and then ascertain the central themes or ideas. In addition, content analysis must be done so consistently, that researchers or the general public can look at the same material and receive the same messages (Berg, 2001). By carefully reading the material to determine the emerging themes and using the constant comparative method, the researchers were able to integrate data (the statements) and theory/experience (cooperation/co-opetition) using joint coding (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In the case of this study, the researchers evaluated the statements independently to discern the common themes. Once themes were identified, three independent researchers familiar with the population, but not the particular study, were enlisted to do the same in order to ensure consistency with the content analysis and to help establish trustworthiness (peer debriefing). No less than five individuals have reviewed the categories and the statements of support to ensure that the claims made by the researchers are sound.

Within qualitative research it is important to also discuss the techniques employed as a part of the methodology of the study to establish trustworthiness. In this case,

the researchers established credibility through triangulation, peer debriefing, and reflexive journaling. Peer debriefing meetings occurred throughout the study, and each time, memos were prepared for the peer debriefing team. An audit trail and journaling were used to establish dependability and confirmability. The researchers used purposive sampling to establish transferability. However, within qualitative research the findings of a study cannot be removed from the overall social context under study. The examples of statements provided will allow readers to draw their own decisions on the transferability of the findings to their own social construction (Hodder, 1994).

Findings

In this study, there were several distinctly emerging themes found throughout the content analysis process. Results will be presented by research objective first, advantages to cooperation and second, barriers to cooperation.

Improved programmatic offerings are the first advantage to cooperation between these two teams. Among all of those individuals participating in the study, many provided positive examples of programmatic improvement including an increase in participation, improved communication/greater information flow, and new ideas.

- Our association with [the other program] has increased both club and classroom enrollments and offers unique opportunities to students. (CE 64, B1)
- Improved cooperation benefits the youth in both programs by communicating information to them more clearly. (NE 1, B1)
- Working together has allowed the opportunity reach more youth through programming and fresh ideas to use in each different organization. (NE 20, B1)
- Contests/events can be larger and have greater depth. (CE 54, B2)

Shared workload for events was a second common theme. All individuals who reported advantages to cooperating reported this issue including stress relief, less work for one person, and shared success and failure.

- It's a stress relief to have a co-worker when fair season arises. (NE 7, B2)
- It is a win-win situation. We save money and time and they are great to work with. (NE 8, B1)
- Greater number of accomplishments. You have someone to share success and failure with. (NE 38, B2)
- More involvement means more shoulders to spread the workload. (CE 57, B2)

- Better job is done when we're together than I can do myself. (CE 43, B1)

A final theme of advantages to cooperation is an increase in the amount and types of resources available to both groups when cooperation happens. Several individuals reported an increase in personnel, expertise, and materials when cooperation occurred.

- [Other program] teachers have an easier time acquiring classroom space for pesticide and other types of programs. (NE 11, B1)
- More adults are available to help and support both programs when we work together. (NE, 32, B2)
- Increased awareness of curriculum on my part AND increased awareness of local [other program] programs on their part...we've become advocates and partners. (NE 33, B1)
- Expertise in areas where I am not strong makes my programs better. (CE 22, B1)
- The bank of available information is increased when one cooperates. (CE 52, B1)

While both groups could clearly articulate advantages to cooperation, they were equally astute in communicating the distinct challenges to cooperation between the two groups. Among the barriers to cooperating are time constraints, lack of knowledge or awareness of the other group, programmatic differences, and resources.

Constraints on time were the most common theme among those described as barriers. Time to initiate contact, to formulate action plans or strategies, and workload are all mentioned as inhibitors to educators and teachers coming together.

- Work load consumes much of my time leaving little extra to pursue other activities. (NE 10, P1)
- No one seems to have the time to initiate more contact, joint programming. (NE 28, P1)
- Time...it needs to happen mostly during school time because I don't get paid extra to do things outside school. (CE 11, P1)
- My perception is that [other program] teachers work September-May and are not interested in helping with [my program] activities over the summer months. During the school year, the [other program] teachers seem to be interested in a 7 a.m. – 3 p.m. M-F schedule—no nights or weekends which is when my programming happens. (NE 27, P1)

A lack of awareness in reference to programming as well as on a personal level was a second barrier to cooperation. Both groups discussed not knowing their counterpart and being generally unaware of programmatic content.

- No formal process has been used to bring [the two groups] together. It would be great to have leadership at the state level to encourage this cooperation. (NE 24, P1)
- I have not had interactions with [counterparts] for several years due to administrative changes and have not pursued the matter. (CE 8, P1)
- Lack of [program] awareness and face to face contacts with one another; we don't know each other. (NE 29, P1)
- Extension agents have never introduced themselves or stopped to visit, or participated in advisory committee meetings. (CE 25, P1)

Programmatic differences also emerged as barriers to cooperation between the two groups. Both groups discussed that, at times, there is no clear connection between programmatic areas, and thusly no outreach being done to cooperate.

- I am not aware of any [other program] teachers dealing with childcare, financial, or food stamp nutrition issues in my county. (NE 4, P2)
- Our county agent is trained as an agricultural production specialist. I teach horticulture, our paths just don't cross. (CE 17, P2)

The final barrier to cooperation was the theme of inequitable resources. Each group described elements like contact hours, administrative pressures (positive or negative), and peer influences as all contributing to a lack of cooperation between the two groups.

- They have their kids for 9 months. They can interact with individuals. I have so many responsibilities I'm not afforded time to work so individually with [my program's members]. (NE 1, P1)
- [Other program] feels that they need to compete with [my program] for members. (NE 11, P1)
- Influences of adult generation of [other program] teachers; newer, younger teachers are open to cooperation. (NE 26, P2)
- The administration at the school where [other program] is conducted in this county is not open to cooperation. (NE 23, P1)

Conclusions and Discussion

These two teams of educators identified both advantages and barriers to their cooperation. This study sheds light, not only on those perceptions, but also on a concrete direction for taking future steps to reduce barriers and maintain and

enhance advantages. While these recommendations pertain directly to these two groups, the transferability of the recommendations can be broadly applied to a variety of interdisciplinary situations. Student affairs, academic departmental work groups, community groups, and other entities (and not just those within agriculture) could all benefit from these kinds of recommendations and should seek to find the applicability to their specific situations.

Both sets of educators acknowledge that when cooperation does happen programmatic improvements are realized. Increased participation in activities and greater information flow were both mentioned as specific examples. These successes should be clearly communicated to both administrative bodies, but also to their peer groups so that templates can be developed from these positive working partnerships. At yearly updates, workshops, and in-services those in partnerships where programming is currently being enhanced should be provided a format to share their experiences and encouraged to do so by including their counterparts.

Time saved and workload reduction through cooperation is a second advantage that those individuals who cooperate experience. In today's world where regardless of your profession you are asked to do more with less, administrators, managers, and leaders should encourage cooperation if out of necessity if little else. In case like this where teams are in competition but cooperation is also necessary, incentives to cooperate should be implemented on both sides of the aisle in order to facilitate coming together.

Increases in the available resources would be best encouraged by positive peer pressure and the sharing of positive experiences by those individuals currently engaged in those types of activities. In the same way that cooperating brings about increased participation numbers, increases in resources would be best served, not by policy, but by the willingness of others to demonstrate positive experiences and examples of success.

To address the barriers to cooperation, a broad look is necessary to consider not only these educators, but the system under which they work. The citing of time constraints as a barrier to cooperating, but the admission that time is saved by those who do, demonstrates the double-edged sword that exists in this paradigm. Administrators need to be educated, in equal measure to their subordinates, on the possibilities that exist for those individuals who come together. They should also be encouraged to think more broadly in terms of staff release time, participation incentives, and rewards for those individuals who demonstrate positive community partnerships or collaborations.

The lack of awareness, and yet the perception of programmatic differences, is the second double-edged sword of cooperation barriers. One of the study respondents

said it best, noting that there should be encouragement from administrators and managers to come together and find ways to work together to the benefit of both teams. In this case, the researchers recommend an in-service training that brings together new hires from both sides. This training should address not only the programmatic basics of each group, but also offer ideas and incentives to find new ways of collaborating. For example, where there is a new classroom teacher and new consumer science non-formal educator in a county, they might be able to cooperate on a nutrition program wherein older youth may be involved in teaching younger children about the importance of a healthy diet and where food products come from. Making the connections, even loosely, where there might not have been even a thin thread before is the only way to begin to forge the gap between the two groups.

Finally, to address the stigma of inequitable resources, education is the key, followed by healthy doses of positive peer pressure. While it is true that some minds will not be changed and some partnerships are not the most successful, it is only through a consistent message that success can occur, that these two groups will begin to turn the tide away from an environment of hostility and separation to one of harmony and civility.

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Biography

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