Cooperative Development: A Non-judgmental Approach to Individual Development and Increased Collegiality

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1. INTRODUCTION

Non-judgmental communication can support the effectiveness of a teacher's intrinsically motivated exploration and discovery. It also may increase collegiality among teachers who work together, furthering their potential for future positive influence and change. This paper aims to: (a) introduce Cooperative Development (Edge 1992; 2002) as an inquiry-based approach to teacher development that foregrounds non-judgmental discourse in professional interactions, and (b) invite you, the reader, to consider the prospects of this approach for your personal growth and the effectiveness of your interpersonal engagement.

2. PRINCIPLES AND VALUES

Drawing primarily on the work of Carl Rogers (e.g. 1995; 2004) in psychotherapy, Cooperative Development takes the position that every human being has an inherent drive to flourish.

> Whether one calls it a growth tendency, a drive toward self-actualization, or a forward-moving directional tendency, it is the mainspring of life … It is the urge which is evident in all organic and human life – to expand, extend, become autonomous, develop, mature – the tendency to express and activate all the capacities of the organism, to the extent that such activation enhances the organism or the self. (Rogers 2004: 35)

This drive may be hidden behind multiple psychological barriers, but it is alive awaiting the appropriate circumstances to blossom (Rogers 2004). From the perspective of Cooperative Development, the tendency to expand as a teacher may be encouraged by working with one or more colleagues over a designated period. The approach conceptualizes teacher development as necessarily social and advocates investing in collegial relationships to enhance teachers' capacity building; hence, the term *Cooperative* in Cooperative Development.

The approach is not about a way of teaching but, rather, a way of being a teacher. It establishes teachers as agents of change capable of directing processes of personal and professional growth. The term *Development* in Cooperative Development, therefore, refers

specifically to self-development. Although the approach acknowledges the importance of external models and resources for teaching and teacher education, its focus is on internal growth guided by the individual teacher. In this respect, it recognizes that there is no single right pathway to development, and proposes, instead, that the ideal way is that way which each individual teacher identifies as his or her 'best-next-step' in their journey of professional growth (Edge & Richards 1998). Thus, the approach conceptualizes development as a continuous, life-long process and recognizes teachers as always in a state of becoming.

Cooperative Development values intellectual (e.g. information in books) and experiential (e.g. practice in classrooms) sources of teacher learning and adds a third source: learning through speech. In this process of formulating ideas, articulating thoughts, and expressing emotions, teachers may identify new avenues for their personal and professional transformation. It should be noted, however, that using non-judgmental communication on a regular basis does not question the importance of argument, critique, discussion, and evaluation. It simply questions our need always to be limited to that style of interaction and offers an alternative way forward. Extending our communicative repertoire in this way is itself a kind of self-development.

3. IN SEARCH OF DEVELOPMENT

In Cooperative Development, two colleagues agree to work together for a certain period following specific rules for their communication. Their interaction is based on an existing foundation of trust and a shared commitment to create an open space in which one teacher's ideas can advance in search for a discovery. The two teachers assume roles, one of Speaker and the other of Understander. The Speaker explores a certain idea and tries to push her or his thinking beyond its current state to a higher level of clarity. She or he adopts a non-defensive style of speaking based on the knowledge that the other teacher will not be evaluative. Founded upon a strong collegial relationship, the non-judgmental interaction can nourish the quality of the Speaker's exploratory efforts.

For the Speaker to proceed from exploration to discovery and then to a plan of action, the Understander, in his or her role, must facilitate progress along the lines of the Speaker's professional development goals. The Understander abandons his or her personal opinions, experiences, knowledge, and possible solutions. He or she neither agrees nor disagrees with what the Speaker says and fully respects the Speaker's choice of topic and the ways in which he or she chooses to explore it. The Understander empathizes with the Speaker by placing himself or herself in the Speaker's shoes, so to speak, and by observing the world through his or her eyes. The Understander offers authentic respect and empathy; that is, acceptance is not superficial, it is genuine. There are a number of skills that can strengthen the Understander's role in a Cooperative Development exchange. The following are examples (although these skills do not need be practised in any particular order).

3.1 Attending

Cooperative Development requires active, careful, and deep listening, in which the Understander's attention is completely focused on the Speaker rather than on his or her own thoughts or feelings. Attending is prerequisite to all the other skills, and its quality informs the quality of the entire exchange.

3.2 Reflecting

The Understander processes what the Speaker says and reflects it back to her or him. For example, the Understander might say in response to a statement by the Speaker, «If I am understanding you properly, what you are saying here is» or «Let's recap; the message I am getting is …». The Speaker hears her or his own thoughts again, this time in the words of the Understander, and, if the reflected ideas correspond to the ideas that the Speaker intended to convey, the Speaker proceeds in the knowledge of being well understood. If, however, the reflected ideas are not accurate, the Speaker pauses, explains the inconsistency to the Understander, examines her or his own thoughts, and then offers a revision. In this process, ideas are sharpened and a clearer sense of direction is established. A third possibility is that the Speaker will recognise the accuracy of the Understander's reflection and *in so doing* will see the next step that takes his/her thinking forward.

3.3 Focusing

Once the Speaker has determined the general direction of his or her exploration, the Understander supports the exploratory process by inviting more specific focus. She or he might say, «From what I see, we have two issues here, A & B; would you like to focus on one of these? » The significance of concentrating on one point at a time lies in its power to generate deeper reflection, higher awareness, clearer goals, and more specific plans of action.

3.4 Thematizing

Demonstrating possible links between different ideas as they arise facilitates the Speaker's path to self-development. For example, the Understander may say, «You just mentioned A, and earlier you mentioned B. Are these two ideas at all related?» The Understander offers this possibility but it is always the Speaker's choice to consider it or not.

3.5 Challenging

The Understander may notice contradictions in the Speaker's statements and may point them out. Challenging the Speaker does not originate from the Understander's personal opinion about the Speaker's views but, rather, from an observation derived from actively listening. The Understander's role is limited to offering possibilities so she or he may ask, «Earlier you said how important A is, and now you are very positive about B. Can you tell me how those two fit together» Again, the Speaker chooses whether to consider this possibility and, if s/he does so, it is the Speaker, rather than the Understander, who needs to be satisfied.

3.6 Goal-setting

Cooperative Development is action-oriented activity that advocates teachers' self-motivated positive change. The role of the Understander is to question the Speaker in ways that are intended to evoke the Speaker's clarity or insight. An example of this type of question is, «Based on what you have said in this session, do you see a specific goal for yourself emerging here?» The Speaker then chooses to consider a goal or to defer such consideration until later in the exchange.

3.7 Trialling

When the Speaker has identified a specific goal, the Understander's role is to help him or her to identify the steps that need to be taken to realize that goal. The Understander may ask, «Now that you have identified a goal for yourself, would you like to consider the necessary steps to achieve it?» Although clarity and detail are key at this point, flexibility also is important so that the developed plan of action is realistic and manageable.

3.8 An example

We present here some data from a Cooperative Development session that took place between two teachers at a private language school in Greece. We invite you to read the data in at least two different ways. First, perhaps, notice how the Speaker (a British male) begins with a clear statement of being '*annoyed and frustrated*'. A mere 52 lines of interaction later, the Speaker has recognised a possible weakness in his teaching technique and made a plan of how to correct that weakness. He has also discovered something more basic about his style of teaching that he feels he needs to work on. In addition, he has realised that he could make more use of the national context in which he is working in order to understand better the educational culture that his learners are used to. This is, we suggest, quite an impressive set of discoveries and potential plans of action. You may find these dis-

coveries relatively obvious, but that is not the point. We all begin from where we are at any given time and look for our own next best steps. Finding them oneself makes them more satisfying and more likely to be taken.

Then, please look carefully at the Understander's role and see to what extent you can identify the principles, values and skills that we introduced above. There is, of course, no mechanical, one-to-one match of skills and utterances, but we hope that these data exemplify for you the kind of work that we have been describing. If you would like to read more background on, and analysis of, this session, please see Edge (2003), which is available to download from the website www.cooperative-development.com. There is more information about this site below.

– Speaker: Okay, talking about feeling annoyed and frustrated, I face a problem lately with giving instructions in class. For some reason, the children just don't seem to take any notice. I try to carry out the lesson in English as much as possible, and then when it comes to the, let's say, homework, comes to the point of telling them what to do for homework...

– Understander: Just to get this straight, you mean the Junior classes?

– Speaker: Yes, the problem is worse with A Preliminary and B Preliminary, the first classes.

– Understander: The first classes, yes, and you've got a problem because they don't get the instructions...

– Speaker: Yes, it seems that they don't understand what is said, or they don't listen to what is said — I can't decide what is what.

– Understander: And you say that you speak English to them?

– Speaker: Ah, yes, I try, as much as possible, I could say, to speak in English, though lately, to save time, I suppose I explain their homework in Greek. But even in Greek, if I say, '*Chapter 35*,' as soon as I say that, someone says, '*Chapter 34*?' Or, '*I didn't hear that, say again*!'

– Understander You mean there is a problem here with the class...

– Speaker: Yes, they just don't... however clearly I say it.

– Understander: You mean in Greek? Even in Greek?

– Speaker: Yes, even in Greek they don't, they don't follow. There's something I'm not doing right here, I think. I find this such a waste of time and I end up shouting, '*Can't you understand? Listen*!'

– Understander So, you think it is you who is to blame?

– Speaker: Well, funnily enough, we have another teacher and I wanted to watch, to observe her, and at the end of the lesson she explained in Greek very clearly what the homework was, and from my position at the back of the class I saw the same thing. Immediately she said it, the children said, '*What have we got*?'

– Understander: Did this give you any thoughts? I mean, did it make you think of any other ways to do that?

– Speaker: Mmm, maybe it's a question of classroom management really, that we need to establish some rules, perhaps: '*Right! Now we're going to give the homework instructions, everybody must pay attention!*' Mmmm, or perhaps if I could write it on the board and say, '*This is what you have to do*.' And then, they could, they could follow, they could write it down, they could copy it down, yes, maybe that's a good idea, to stop the confusion caused by the oral explanation of the instructions.

– Understander: So, you think the confusion is caused by the oral explanation of the instructions?

– Speaker: Eh, it certainly is a part, a major part, yeah, I think it is. I think that's right. I need to try it. I do write on the board sometimes, but I'm not consistent. Mmm. Maybe that's the problem, then, I am not consistent about it and they don't know what to expect. Mmm, that could be a discovery the re! (laughs).

– Understander You mean, every time, the same thing...

– Speaker: Yes. OK. So, five minutes before the end of each lesson, they know,

'*Now the teacher is going to tell us the homework so I must pay careful attention*.'

Maybe that's the way they see it. And maybe I could ask how they do it at their regular school, the Greek school, and see if there's anything I could learn from that situation.

4. OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

The combination of non-defensive Speaking and non-judgmental Understanding potentially offers both opportunities and challenges. With respect to its opportunities, first, as a bottom-up approach, Cooperative Development offers teachers the complete ownership of and responsibility for their processes of professional growth. Reflective in nature, the approach presents teachers with the chance to retreat conceptually from their busy daily lives into a sanctuary of undisturbed thinking. This space allows teachers to examine carefully their professional theories and the influences thereon, enabling them to identify their own professional developmental priorities (Attia 2014). In this respect, the approach is noticeably empowering.

Second, Speakers may feel grateful to have the support of a sincere and respectful colleague as they traverse unknown territory and make new discoveries. Understanders may find it rewarding and often enriching to participate in, and make a contribution to, a colleague's worthwhile pursuit of self-development. Because Cooperative Development rests on an existing collegial relationship, regular exchanges over time and the swapping of roles between teachers has been shown to consolidate that relationship (Edge 2002).

Another positive outcome of Cooperative Development is its characteristic of inclusivity. It is not reserved for the experienced or for the novice, but all teachers, regardless of their levels of experience, specialization, nationality, language, or geographical location, are invited to participate. Whether you teach at an international university in a large city, or a local school in a small village, Cooperative Development has something to offer you. Similarly, there is no limit to the range of topics that can be covered in exchanges. Whether your concern is how to incorporate iPads into your reading lessons or how to teach in a classroom of 50 children without electricity, your exploration may benefit by employing Cooperative Development. Finally, the approach is free; there are no subscriptions or equipment necessary, only a committed Speaker and a sincere Understander.

With respect to the challenges, the Speaker might be eager to hear the Understander's viewpoint on a certain matter, particularly given their shared history, but needs to determine that she or he is the only expert on her or his own life and that a self-tailored plan of action could be better than an external advice. Similarly, the Understander may want to contribute to the Speaker's process with certain views but learns intentionally to hold back in order to allow the Speaker to thrive. Inevitably, Cooperative Development can place demands on busy teachers' time, a burden that is particularly onerous when professional development is neither supported nor recognized. Teachers in unsupportive settings who value this approach for continuous professional and personal development will have to find their own ways of incorporating it into their professional lives.

5. COOPERATIVE-DEVELOPMENT.COM

Cooperative Development has expanded from its original medium of face-to-face pairwork to embrace the use of groupwork, audio-recording (Edge 2002), email (EMCD) (Edge 2011) and instant-messenger (IMCD) (Boon 2007). Skype is now also being used, although use of this medium has not yet been written up for publication. A website has recently been created (see www.cooperative-development.com) to facilitate a worldwide expansion of Cooperative Development. As with the other ICT-related developments listed above, the aim is to offer the possibility of individual self-development and the enjoyment of enhanced collegiality to teachers who are geographically or institutionally isolated. The website currently is, and will remain, a work in progress, but it already contains the following resources:

- Videos of **conference presentations** about Cooperative Development, including an **introduction to IMCD**
- Videos of Cooperative Development training workshops
- Videos of **extracts from Cooperative Development exchanges**, including contextualising and explanatory comments
- A step-by-step **introduction to EMCD**
- Lists of (and, where possible, links to) **publications and unpublished dissertations and theses** involving Cooperative Development
- **Training materials** that can be downloaded and used by individuals and groups interested in Cooperative Development

More interactively, there is a **Community** space, to which everyone interested is warmly invited to contribute a profile. The intention here is to enable community members to share their own experiences and contribute to the resources listed above. Perhaps most importantly, however, the community space aims to help its members to identify colleagues with whom they can act as Speakers and Understanders, as required. In this way, we hope to see the website function to facilitate the uptake of Cooperative Development worldwide.

In line with the above aim, we would also like to liberate Cooperative Development from its connection with the English language. The values that support Cooperative Development are not tied to any one language any more than they are tied to a particular nationality, race, or creed. English can and does help us to connect in many ways, but it also excludes in many ways. We hope to see a community develop that is flexible in its use of English, so as to be welcoming to a wide variety of users, open to its multilingual potential, and available to those who feel keen to reach out towards these shared purposes in a different language.

We hope to see you there.

Se hace camino al andar…

6. REFERENCES

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