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Reviewed work(s):
Published by: Taylor & Francis, Ltd.
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/1477127
Accessed: 28/01/2012 12:00

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Communication: Cooperation or Negotiation?

Communication is more than exchanging messages or getting one's point across. It is the process by which all the pieces of the living world find their relationships to the other pieces to form larger wholes and to enable the living world to grow, adapt, and survive. In this article I explore the matter of sharing communication in groups, which I refer to as cooperation. Cooperation is different from the process involved when two individuals exchange messages, an interaction I refer to as negotiation.

When two or more people come together and interact, a third entity emerges: a relationship. One must necessarily communicate with (relate to) both another person and with the relationship. A married person relates not only to a spouse but to the higher-order entity, the relationship. In school a student relates not only to individuals but to the class as an entity with its own characteristics and demands. While we are fairly explicit about the rules (politeness, use of language) for interpersonal communication, we tend to behave as though groups are only collections of individuals and that cooperation is achieved through negotiation. We do not recognize that the higher-order group-shared communication which I call cooperation requires a different set of rules and has a different purpose or function. Rather, we invoke the processes appropriate for interpersonal communication and thus rarely become a truly cooperating, sharing group, which requires a quite different communication process.

Many of our societal problems reflect an inability to cooperate: the increase in family breakups; feelings of interpersonal alienation, as reported by the counseling professions; low productivity in industry, etc. Few of us willingly serve on committees, particularly, I think, the management boards of "cooperatives."

All of these, in my opinion, have the same underlying communication confusion: The cooperating group (marriage, family, committee) is seen as a collection of individuals. Yet the processes for communicating between individuals are inappropriate for group cooperation. For example, when children in a classroom see themselves as individuals, they interact and talk to each other as individuals. When the teacher calls for focus and silence, they need to behave as a class, but confusion results if the communication requirements of individual and group cooperation are unclear. When we talk of undisciplined classes, alienation, or lack of communication in marriages or between nations, what we are really talking about is inappropriate communication.

The Part-Whole Relationship

Our planet is a ball in space with a thin film of life forms. To survive, the life forms must come into balance with each other. The observation that this shifting process has succeeded for millions of years and that none of the life forms (other than human) have had to think about it implies that this
ongoing communication process works and is an innate characteristic of all life. The only life form causing serious problems for the planet at the moment is the one form that is capable of thinking about it—the human being.

We, and all of nature, can be seen as organized on a hierarchy of contexts or levels of organization. We are both individual units of creation and cooperating parts of larger units of creation. However, our persistent focus on the individual has obscured the higher level processes of communication or relationship. While we often say, glibly, "the whole is greater than the sum of the parts," this part-whole relationship requires some clarification in order to distinguish the process of negotiation from that of cooperation.

Varieties of molecules are organized (by communication processes we call bonding) into cell parts and cells. Diverse cells, with individual capacities, are organized into organs. Individual organs are assembled into whole organisms. For all this to work (and every schoolchild knows it does work) there must be a continuous flow of appropriate information across all the parts and each part must have the individual capacity and flexibility required for the whole to work. They must cooperate.

If each part (cell, organ, organism, society), with an eye to its own individuality, consciously negotiated its relation to the other parts, the process would quickly break down and the result would be endless argument, discussion, competition, disagreement. Even if this negotiation process could supplant cooperation, it would require endless rules, laws, frequent imbalances, and shaky agreements. At best, the process would be unpredictable, dangerous, and clumsy. A natural world designed this way could hardly have survived.

It has long been understood in cybernetics (Ashby, 1964) that higher order functions in both man and machine require a "requisite variety" of parts. Society, to function as a whole entity, requires varieties of individuals. A collection of skilled pitchers would not make the best ball team. No machine could be constructed of identical parts.

The first point that emerges from this observation is that group cooperation does not suppress individuality, but rather depends on varied individual competencies (Mead & Byers, 1968). The second point is that cooperation is not only a function of individual differences but of the organization of those differences.

In our society education is explicitly concerned with the organization of competence within individuals; we are far less aware of the need for organization among individuals. The two levels of organization are different but they are not contradictory. We have usually imposed organization by hierarchical authority: dominant fathers, management directives, symphony conductors, military leadership, etc.

Eastern philosophy points out that the five fingers of a hand are individual and can function individually but that, when they cooperate, they are a hand. Furthermore, any of these wholes—an organism, a clock, a hand, or a society—performs functions that are higher-order, more complex than the parts alone can manage.

From the study of evolution we discover that the development of life on the planet (or the epigenesis of any unit of life) has proceeded by the progressive organization of individual parts into larger wholes, and that each whole in this progression performs a function of increased (transcendent) complexity. Life began with simple organisms with a few simple responses (to light, moisture, temperature, etc.) and evolved into complex humans with a capacity to travel in outer space and think about God. At each level of advance, the organization and function of the whole transcended that of the lower levels of organization. In a sense the story of evolution is the story of progressively transcending limitations. Even individuality is a limitation in the larger frame.

When we look at "how nature works" from a communication epistemology, we can bring our thinking and practices into harmony with the larger processes of life and its organization without tripping over confusions about religion, authority, conformity, individualism, discipline, responsibility, morality, etc. We tend to think of love as something one person does to another instead of recognizing it as a shared state; and we tend to see morality as the right-wrong of an individual's behavior instead of a responsibility to the larger group. However, nature has a design which supersedes our intellectual fashions (Bateson, 1979).

**Individuality vs. Cooperation**

In order to understand more clearly the distinction between individuality and cooperation, imagine you are playing table tennis. If you are playing a game and the object is to win, you try to hit each ball so that it cannot be returned by your opponent. Your individual skill is directed toward creating an imbalance, a dominance.
But suppose you agree to "volley" (i.e., to keep the ball in motion) as long as possible. Now your goal shifts from individual play to cooperative play, from creating imbalance to maintaining a good balance, from taking advantage of your opponent to compensating for her/his less skillful plays. The purpose or function shifts from success for an individual to success for the pair. That is, the second purpose or goal is on a higher (transcendent) level of organization than the first.

Now imagine that you have the musical score of a quartet and four appropriate players. If the players recorded their parts alone and the four recorded parts were played simultaneously, the result would be confusion, not music. But the same four players could, in each other's presence, shift from individual playing to cooperative playing and the overall goal would shift from individual skill to a higher order, more complex, transcendent goal—music. No less individual skill is required, but the organization is different.

All this is also true in team sport. Bill Russell of the Boston Celtics has written about this in Second Wind.

Every so often a Celtic game would heat up so that it became more than a physical or even a mental game, and would be magical. . . . When it happened, I could feel my play rise to a new level. . . . It would surround not only me and the other Celtics but also the players on the other team and even the referees. . . .

At that special level, all sorts of odd things happened. The game would be in a white heat of competition, and yet somehow I wouldn't feel competitive. . . . The game would move so quickly that every fake, cut, and pass would be surprising, yet nothing could surprise me. It was almost as if we were playing in slow motion.

My premonitions would be consistently correct, and I always felt then that I not only knew all the Celtics by heart but also all the opposing players, and that they all knew me. . . . These were moments when I had chills pulsing up and down my spine. (Brain/Mind Bulletin, 1982, p.2)

In our society we blur the distinctions between individuality and this kind of potential cooperation. We see the team perform as a unit and then become preoccupied with who made the most points. We listen to a musical group and critically take it apart in terms of individual skills. Orchestras become known for their conductors and many orchestral performances include soloists. History, which is the flow of humanity's interwined doings on the planet, is written as though individuals moved it along. Science, an emerging jigsaw puzzle with many contributors, is reported in terms of discoveries of individuals. Our children are encouraged to play on teams (for team experience?) but we talk mostly of who made the most points or "saved the game." Groups too often become forums for displaying individual skills. Even conversation at many American dinner tables is an occasion for children to display their personal wares rather than to experience family unity through respectful discussion.

Cooperation, then, is individualism organized at a higher level of complexity to achieve higher level outcomes. (I do not mean to imply that "higher level outcomes" are better. This is a value-free matter. A lynch mob is also an example of "higher level" cooperation.)

We are beginning to see this sense of cooperation emerging in the business world where some companies create effective project teams and otherwise competent executives are sometimes dismissed because they do not work well "on the team." Naisbitt (1982) reports a general business trend away from "top-down" lines of authority and toward lateral information flow through (cooperating) networks.

In The Classroom¹

When individuals are the focus of concern or instruction, the required information can come from a coach or teacher. They can be told how to do this or that—the flow of information, or communication, is from one person to another. But when the focus of concern is group cooperation, the information flows among (is shared by) group members. A teacher can tell a solo musician how to play a note, but in chamber music the individual musicians must fit their parts to the others. They are no longer directed by a teacher but by their sensitivity to the group's music, of which they are a part.

Another analogy: One cannot be instructed to "be spontaneous." Instruction comes from the outside, while spontaneity is a response from the inside. Similarly, while one can teach negotiation, one cannot instruct people how to cooperate.

We use the word teach for two distinctly different communication processes. One of these
processes is logical and lineal: If you do A, B, and C correctly, D will result. If you follow the logical steps or directions, you can make a cake, calculate the answer to a math problem, or grow a plant from a seed. In each case the information reaches the student from the outside—in the form of a recipe, teacher’s explanation, or written directions.

If however, we want to “teach” someone to swim, drive a car, or ride a bicycle, another matter is involved. We can teach persons to start the engine in a car, let up the clutch to get it moving, or turn the wheel to go around a corner, but this is hardly “driving” since, in traffic, they must add information from the environment in which they are now participating. We can teach them a series of operations but only the larger entity (themselves plus traffic) can “teach” the larger skill. The same is true with swimming or riding a bicycle. We can only teach individual components of the skill, not the larger skill itself. Because the larger skill is a matter of implementing the components in a larger context, we have to “learn by doing.” Swimming (or bicycle riding) is not a logical procedure. It is a continuously corrected relation to a larger whole or environment of which one is now a part.

It follows, then, that teaching these higher order skills (interactive involvements) requires two successive steps and that the information flow (the communication arrangements) in each step is different. In the first step the information goes from A to B. In the second step the information is continuously shared (so that corrections can be continuously made) by all members of the participating group. Outside information may be only distraction.

We can reduce this to a fairly simple paradigm that will apply to all these interactive involvements such as swimming, bicycle riding, driving in traffic, playing chamber music, or cooperating:

- First, the individuals learn the elements or component skills from directions (teachers) of some kind.
- Second, the learners are placed in situations in which, eventually, they will (inadvertently) experience the higher level involvement. This is likely to happen only fleetingly at first. But the experience is qualitatively different and is implicitly self-reinforcing.
- Third, the teacher can, if necessary, help the learners be explicit about their accomplishment. Sometimes children do not recognize when they have “done it.” Sometimes a class doesn’t recognize its own moments of true cooperation.
- Fourth, the teacher now necessarily moves to a new position in the communication linkage or pattern; from teaching specific skills or maneuvers to helping the students increase their sensitivity to the other components of the network and their relation to them. Now the two communication positions of the teacher are in a delicate balance. On the one hand, the teacher promotes sensitivity to the shared information and, on the other, offers new information from the outside as required for new exigencies. The good sport team coach is an effective manager of this two-level process.

How do we enable a group of children to experience cooperation? As an anthropologist I would look first at those societies where cooperation is particularly valued and where we can expect traditional practices to support this. At the top of the list is the practice in Asia and elsewhere of reciting in unison—a practice which went out of educational fashion as our focus on the individual grew.

Reciting in unison—in particular, reciting a dramatic poem with movement and gestures—may be useful for several reasons. First, it can be undertaken before everyone knows the words and gestures, since the performance will move ahead even if only one child remembers correctly at any one moment. As the words are repeated the children learn from each other and each contributes to keeping it going. Children who can’t remember a line or word are not singled out for not knowing. Also we are discovering that learning takes place in the whole body, and that movement supports learning.

Margaret Mead often said that happiness is knowing that one is in the right place at the right time doing the right thing in the right way (personal communication). Recitation is a context in which a child can experience the good feeling that comes from being a cooperating group member without the risk of exposing one’s deficiencies, and is a useful experience to have early in life. Teachers might also, for their own and the class’s discovery, try an experiment. How long does it take everyone in the class to learn a poem when they do it individually? How long does it take when they learn a poem together in unison-recitation fashion? Group support can facilitate learning.

Variations on this can, of course, be invented. Recitations (or marching, dancing, counting games, or exercises) can have alternating or serial parts that require any degree of interdependent complexity. One teacher gives each of her second graders a percussion instrument (blocks, drum, triangle, etc.) and has them count to 100. One instrument
must sound on each number divisible by two, another sounds on numbers divisible by three, another on fours, and another on sixes, etc. This can be as simple or as complex as a teacher wants to make it and can include stepping, speaking, or playing.

The advantages, pedagogically, include the experience of complex cooperation, of complex but repeating rhythms, of involving multiple modalities (counting, playing, moving, speaking, keeping track of intervals), and learning the multiplication tables through the same multiple modalities. Teachers may be surprised to discover how much complexity young children can manage when it is in the self-reinforcing frame of group cooperation.

Math problems can be given to small groups instead of individuals. Spelling bees can ask a small group, rather than individuals, to remember the correct spelling. Many games, physical or mental, require genuine cooperation instead of individual competition. A teacher can create the context for these cooperating processes but cannot direct them.

Competition is exciting, and can be set up between cooperating groups. For example, in the game of tug-of-war each person contributes, without evaluation, to the team—in competition with another cooperating team. Tug-of-war can be seen as a simple prototype for anonymous individual contribution to a cooperating team in a larger competitive frame. By contrast, most team sports are inappropriate for experiencing cooperation since they are contexts for individual performance—the good players shine and the poor ones reveal their ineptitude.

Another possibility for competition with cooperation are three-legged races, and even five-, seven-, or ten-legged races. If the training for this proceeds slowly and is, in the beginning, paced with a drum to synchronize the steps, the players can learn to get their “information” from the persons on either side, to achieve the synchrony and precision of a chorus line. The ten-legged line, like medieval rowers, can pace themselves by a vocal accompaniment so that the running step-beat is felt through the legs, seen through the eyes, and heard through the ears. This can be made more complex by introducing a skip component and, of course, x-legged teams could compete.

Ritual, around the world, is a form of reinforcing group unity among participants. As we have moved toward emphasizing individuality, we have discarded much ritual, associating it with religious practice. We have taken ritual to be in contradiction to individualism when, in fact, it is not. Once upon a time in American schools the transcendent context, education, was reinforced by uniforms, pledges of allegiance, prayers, addressing teachers formally, standing when teachers entered a room, etc. Perhaps we overemphasized conformity and the authority-submission contrast. But in throwing out everything which smacked of submission or conformity we eroded or confused the concepts of authority and its cousin, responsibility.

Drama is not unlike ritual (and is perhaps more acceptable in today’s world) in that it requires an interweaving of parts and two levels of organization. We usually think of drama in terms of roles and their performance. But for the purpose of experiencing “the state of cooperation,” I am not as concerned with the roles as with the actor-audience communication contrast. Even with small children the group experience of “we are acting” is the unifying principle. There is a parallel here with the chamber musicians who, on one level, are playing notes and, on another, are making music. In the drama I have in mind, one (individual) level of interest is the role performance. But the higher level goal is the unself-conscious experience of sharing the “we are acting” state which is in distinct contrast to the communication arrangements among individuals.

The individual and the cooperating group are not two extremes of some continuum in which we try to find a working middle. Rather, they are two adjacent-level contexts in which all life lives. It is not a matter of finding a middle ground. Both forms of human relation are facts of life and require recognition in our education enterprise.

As one form of reinforcing the experience of cooperation, of group, of unity, I suggest participation in ritual, the sharing of precise behavior by a group. If religion and patriotism are inappropriate content themes, we can invent rituals around plays, poetry, counting and rhythms, movement games, etc. One must grow up having the experience of solving a problem individually and of cooperating in a group. Being only an individual would be quite lonely.

To provide the kind of cooperation experience I am suggesting, a few necessary rules can be followed: (a) no individual’s competence or lack of it is held up for evaluation; (b) multi-modal (multi-sensory) experiences are provided, since in groups the information flows through all channels (redundancy, it is sometimes called) and different people are more tuned to some senses or channels than
others; and (c) the goal of the enterprise (x-legged running, keeping the counting going) is clear to all the participants and the participants make it work; discipline comes from within the group.

Conclusion

Perhaps a few caveats are necessary. I am not suggesting that classroom teaching should favor group involvement, only include it. I am suggesting the possibility of experiencing cooperation—the power of unity in a group, the satisfaction and "high" of being a necessary part of a larger whole, the meaning of a shared, transcendent goal. Most of all, perhaps, my message is that negotiation and cooperation are distinctly different, even though we move back and forth between them continuously. Both are required for life and survival.

Notes

1. I am not, myself, a classroom teacher nor am I competent at curriculum design. I am offering ideas and communication arrangements which can be transformed into specific classroom activities by teachers who understand the underlying process. In my research I have observed many groups and published detailed analyses of some (Mead & Byers, 1968). Some of the suggestions have come from observations in Rudolf Steiner (Waldorf) schools where class "form" (cooperation) is an explicit pedagogical goal. (The Waldorf schools, which follow the pedagogy described by Rudolf Steiner, began in Germany in 1919. There are, as of September 1983, 229 schools worldwide, 57 in North America, and 30 training institutes. A description of the pedagogy can be found in Piening & Lyons, 1979).

References