Engaging Senior High School Students Through Competitive Collaboration

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Abstract: This paper aims to describe the impact of competitive collaboration on the engagement of Grade 11 students of Banaba West National High School. It also describes the challenges met, the problems encountered, and the insights gained on the utilization of the strategy. Qualitative methods were employed in this action research as they are useful in collecting attitudinal data. Interview, focus group discussion and participant observation were utilized to collect data. Triangulation was used to improve the credibility of the findings of the study. Results with 39 students show that a balance between competition and collaboration can be achieved, with learning goals as the focus instead of the competition itself. Competitive collaboration can offer a valuable formative tool to educators to enhance student motivation for better learning outcomes. The findings of this action research remain exploratory in nature. More confirmatory studies may be done, preferably quantitative research to further confirm the findings. The holistic approach is used as it allows different methods of data collection. Unlike other researches, competition and collaboration are not presented as mutually exclusive terms but as complementary concepts that educators may use to engage learners.

Keywords: Competition, Collaboration, Classroom Games, Motivation, Coopetition

Introduction

Engaged students are successful learners because they can perform better and help their peers learn more. It is very important then that the teacher knows how to manage the learning state of his or her students. Philp (2007) wrote that for middle school, fifteen minutes is probably the maximum time that most learners can stay in a positive learning state without a change of stimulus. Teachers cannot expect middle school students to stay in a favourable learning state for more than fifteen minutes without intervention. This happens in reality with the senior high school students. From the researcher's observation, students would seem to be bored and sleepy, easily distracted with slight stimulus change, uninterested in the discussions, and worst, frustrated with their difficulty understanding the lessons. Students may be experiencing "learning fatigue" or "academic burnout" as stated in the study of Rahmati (2015). Senior high school students can be stressed out due to the overwhelming pressures of studying and trying to avoid distractions. This poses a challenge for the teacher to help students overcome academic fatigue by minimizing their anxiety and stress while at the same time promoting achievement and a deep understanding of the curriculum. Thus, there is a need to conduct an action research as a way to improve the aforementioned situation. Based on this background, the researcher chooses delivery using competitive collaboration of the Grade 12 senior high school students of Banaba West National High School to ameliorate the problems with student engagement. Engaging activities like collaborative and competitive games are a welcome break from the usual class routine because they are motivating and challenging. They encourage the students to be active in the classroom, entertain them, teach the language naturally, and promote fluency. The findings of the study contribute to a better understanding of how to structure learning using competitive collaboration in the classroom for optimal results. It offers practical suggestions to instructors on how to implement such strategy in their classroom.

Games as Formative Tool

The ongoing challenge of educators is how to best engage students during instruction (Crews, Ducate, Rathel, Heid, & Bishoff, 2011). A considerable body of research from multiple teaching disciplines has reflected on and assessed the benefits of using techniques such as games, multimedia interaction and role-plays. Games can be used in different ways; as a memory retention tool (Devonshire, et. al., 2014), to engage students (Doyle, 2001) and for student achievement (Tokac, 2015). In the past, games were considered as marginal activity filling in odd moments when the teacher and class have nothing better to do. Games should be used at all the stages of the lesson, provided that they are suitable and carefully chosen. (Mubaslat, 2012). Tiagi (1998, as cited in Mungai et al, 2005, p. 3) discusses the key characteristics of well-constructed games. These include having a goal to achieve, a clear set of rules, and a clear time frame for completion. Games can be used primarily as a means of formative assessment. Formative assessment "refers to assessment that is specifically intended to provide feedback on performance to improve and accelerate learning" (Sadler, 1998, as cited in O'Leary Ellis, 2010). Used correctly it can motivate students to actively engage in classroom discussion and to take ownership of their learning outside of the classroom.

Competitive Collaboration in the Classroom

Games are often associated with competition --- a contest where two or more people strive for a goal, usually resulting in a winner and a loser. Hence, it becomes a question whether competition in education is beneficial or not. The study of Cantador, I., and Conde, J.M. (2010) shows that competition in class can be beneficial if it is designed following a number of principles, such as having a symbolic or little value prize, a short duration, and a goal clearly set into the (learning) process instead of into the results. Moreover, Fulu (2007) recognizes several benefits of competitions, such as recognition gain, and higher motivation and self-esteem. However, competition is often associated with potentially harmful games that can

affect students negatively. Heinrich (2014), stands on the middleground of this issue and states that competition affects every student differently it can cause some student anxiety and stress and for other students it motivates them to achieve more. Apart from this controversy, there is a more general agreement that team competition is less harmful for students, and can effectively improve their learning skills. Competition can be good or bad, but a general trend seems to be that when competition is combined with cooperation good results have been reported. (Kristensen, F., Troeng, O., Safavi, M., & Narayanan, P., 2015) Cooperation is an essential principle in student learning. In fact, included in the 21st century skills being developed among Filipino learners are the communication skills which include collaboration and interpersonal skills. One of the pedagogies of the K12 Curriculum that is aimed towards its development is collaborative learning. In this, learning is intimately associated with connection with other human beings-classmates, teachers, peers, family as well as community. Using collaborative strategies, the teaching-learning process becomes interactive and promotes teamwork. Collaboration and competition has often been seen as incompatible, but there is increasing evidence that collaboration and competition are not mutually exclusive. A 2013 article from Concordia University suggests a middleground and says that rather than choosing a purely collaborative classroom or an entirely competitive learning environment. "Given that competitive and cooperative teaching strategies each have their advantages, both could be incorporated into a classroom—provided teachers remain on guard against the pitfalls of each strategy." Muijs, D. and Rumyantseva, N. (2014) studied the phenomenon 'coopetition', a relationship between organizations involving competition in some segments and cooperation in others, and look at the applicability of this concept to education. Results of their case study show that the collaborative network was perceived positively. The concept of coopetition was clearly applicable to this network, with collaboration and competition equally informing college strategies and policies, and many aspects of coopetition theory applying to the network. Competitive collaboration has been done in business companies whereas the competitive energies of employees are being channeled toward an ethos of helping one another. Three design principles are required for this: enabling the provision and visibility of feedback; recognizing those who do it well; and providing incentives for collaborative behavior."

Objectives of the Study
This study is an action research designed to investigate students' experiences of competitive collaboration to present a solution for the teachers' problem with student engagement which affects their learning outcomes. This study was undertaken to identify the perceived impact of competitive collaboration on engagement and participation. It also covered the challenges met and the problems encountered in using the strategy. Moreover, it determined the insights gained as the strategy was utilized in the classroom.

Result and Discussion
The purpose of the results and discussion section is to describe the perceived impact of competitive collaboration to the senior high school students' engagement and participation. It also describes the challenges met, the problems encountered, and the insights gained as the strategy was utilized in the classroom. The layout of the section is by theme and the implications of each result are given. The research question under discussion is provided at the top of each section for clarity purposes.

On the Perceived Impact of Competitive Collaboration on Students' Engagement and Participation
Competitive Collaboration as an Engaging Learning Strategy The students reported that they found competitive and collaborative games to be effectively engaging activities. They found it interesting, fun, and something different from normal classes and lecturing. One student wrote, "I feel happy whenever there are games. Studying is very hard so lessons become more enjoyable when the tasks are less serious. Listening to a lecture is similar to reading something you are not so much interested about. Games give the lessons a twist. Another student stated, "I always look forward for more games. I know I am not intelligent but I feel like I am learning a lot because I enjoy what I do." When compared with other sessions with the group, students' claimed that their engagement levels were much higher during the competition than during other activities. Many students wrote that they always look forward to the subject where the teacher makes use of competitive and collaborative games. A group of students also reported that competition had motivated them to conduct further or advanced research about topics so they are prepared whenever the need arises due to the unpredictability of competitive and collaborative games. Some students though expressed that unpreparedness meant they had to be spontaneous, which added to the creative element. They also felt it added to the quality of the tool as an assessment it is able to truly gauge where the students stands at the time. As one student noted; "We had an activity which made us to recall on the spot everything we knew about what has been tackled. This gave us an equal footing in the competition. "We wanted to win so were greatly motivated to make our output always the best of what we can give. The competition definitely pushed us to our limits." The students felt that having the competition was what pushed them to achieve their level of engagement in the activities. They felt that the external motivation given by the teacher was very important. One statement which was widely supported was "Probably, we would not have gotten so excited about our tasks if there were no incentive (points) involved." The students also felt the incentive accelerated the process as everyone got themselves involved there was a positive atmosphere in the room. One student also commented "Competitions make every member of the group alert and focused on what we are doing." Still, one student commented "Competitions challenge us to think out of the box. It became a rule in our group that if many of us thought of the same idea, we had to think of another because that idea would surely be the same as what other groups were thinking, and we have to be different." Competitive collaboration activities challenge students to become more creative. A group of

students agreed on the answer "Because of the games, we had to work together and be united. It was very important that all of us cooperated in each task, otherwise, we will stay behind other groups." This feedback supports the research of Gordon and Gillespie (2006) by demonstrating an enhancement of the learning experience through competition in certain groups, namely students who have worked together as a team previously and have a shared camaraderie. One student indicated that he likes the discussion and exchange of ideas during collaborative activities. "I like the discussion part because I learn a lot from my classmates. However, if I am alone and I have to answer question all by myself, I'm sure it won't be easy." Working in groups allowed students to exchange ideas. Since students have different ideas, working in groups allowed them to improve their learning. The game is a not just a source of motivation for me. I enjoy playing but I appreciate that I can learn from it too. We learn and have fun at the same time. Another important aspect of the game is the themes. The ideas I get from this are easier to remember, especially vocabulary words. They become useful in other subjects too. Additionally, students felt that the spontaneity of their performance in the competitive tasks gives them the chance to self-assess their own knowledge on the lessons. In other words "I am able to compare and assess my strengths and weaknesses in lieu of others' performance." This finding agrees with Sadler's (Sadler, 1998, as cited in O'Leary Ellis, 2010) findings that formative assessments provides the student with not just external feedback, but also an insight into self-assessment.

On the challenges met and the problems encountered in using the strategy

While the overwhelming majority deemed it a memorable and effective learning experience, a few students could initially see its negative impact on educational value. One student said, "I experienced being too focused on the fun experience that I forgot what has been discussed the day after." Another commented, "We need more time to play games, but we know we had to stop and go on with our lessons. When it happens, we sometimes feel like we want to play the whole time." One student felt that she is more pressured than the others. "I am the group leader and I feel like I am responsible for our group standing. Still, another student who is a member commented. "I sometimes feel stressed when I fall short of ideas or my answers are not good enough because I might become the one to blame our group gets a low score. "There are times when we are too excited, but we can't think of something, then suddenly we have no time, it causes us to panic." Related to this is one response of a scorekeeper. "There was this instance when my classmate from another group nearly had a fight because they thought we were not listing our scores correctly. The thought we cheated." There was also an indication that effective cooperation took place between the participants during the tasks. However, one group experienced difficulties because one member did not cooperating us. His statement illustrates the issue. "One of our groupmates did not cooperate with us. He did not know what to do during the game because he was not listening. Because of that we lost in that "Concentration Game." This illustrates another challenge. Clearly, there has been a violation in the principles of cooperative

learning. Another student from the focus group supported her classmate's comment concerning competitive collaboration. She described her experience in this statement:

I think it depends on who your group members are. If you're groupmates happen to be as confused with the topic as you are, then the more confused you will be. But if you find good members, then you will surely learn a lot. The above statement is an indication that the student had experienced both instances. This suggests that collaborative tasks may let the students experience either positive or negative effect interdependence.

On the insights gained as the strategy was utilized in the classroom

Students felt it would be better if the strategy would be used in other subjects. This agrees with the observation of the researcher that students had high levels of participation and immediate interest in the competition. There was a noted eagerness to begin the session. Motivation levels were considerably higher than in previous sessions when competitive collaboration was not yet being utilized. Students agree on creating more games like classroom versions of television game shows and using them in class can easily bring the excitement to students and stimulate the lively review of course content. And, such activities similarly provide instructors with an informal method to assess students' mastery of challenging topics. It would be wise vary the types of contests employed, as well as the criteria chosen for choosing the winners (e.g., the first correct response; the response with the greatest amount of supporting evidence; the most creative presentation, etc.) Several students also mentioned using the competition not only as formative assessment but also as a summative assessment method such as a presentation to the class. "To extend the fun in class, the teacher can make our group presentations at the end of the lesson part of the competition. This way, we will all have a fair chance of winning. Some groups are better when the games are easier but I feel we are better when it comes to performance." The results of observation data supported the focus group interview results. An analysis of the observation showed several teams of students engaged in serious discussion about what game decision to make. More capable students took the lead to explain the tasks to their peers and solicited their input. The discussion was mostly conducted in English, but occasionally there were some instances of Filipino language.

Conclusions

The present study set out to gain insights into the impact of competitive collaboration on the engagement of senior high school students. In conclusion, the evidence from the interview and focus group discussion was that competitions encourage students to engage and participate in learning. The findings indicated that effective cooperation is characterized by collaborative interdependence; interaction took place between participants in most teams during the completion of tasks. Further, it was found that the students perceived that collaborative competition had a positive impact on their learning outcomes. Overall, students felt that competitive collaboration is an effective strategy because it leads them to positive anxiety or heightened alertness, resulting to

their enhanced engagement during the learning process. Competitive and collaborative classroom games provided them with feedback and an opportunity for self-evaluation in a number of areas, including their creative skills. The evidence of teamwork in their outputs was tangible. Observation of the task being undertaken clearly indicated that the spirits in the room were high and participation levels were above normal for the Grade 12 students. Interestingly, the majority of the students felt that competitive collaboration would also work well in other subjects. Several students also mentioned using the competition as formative assessment but then following it up with a summative assessment method such as a presentation to the class. This concept may warrant further research to assess its applicability. Competition is a valuable behavior. It is a great motivator, and the basis for many accomplishments in the human history. Educators are wise to work with it as it delivers positive results when done well. There is just a need channel the students' competitive energies toward collaborative efforts to drive them. After all, students need to become competitive when they go out into the global arena.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study the following recommendations are made in order to assist educators in getting the most out of the competitive collaboration strategy.

- The members of each group may be provided with guidelines on the principles of group collaboration. It can also be the students themselves who would set the guidelines first before venturing into different tasks. Clarifying the mechanics and expectations of the teachers before each activity will also contribute to a more successful conduct of competitive collaboration tasks.
- The teachers may also emphasize goals or objectives so students would not stay out of focus. Why it is necessary for students to accomplish tasks to enable them to attain objectives must be stressed to the students.
- Students need to understand that cooperation within their teams is a priority over competition against other teams. However, the two ideas may both complement their learning. Competition is useful because it creates an additional ingredient of motivation for them.
- Students must be required to takes turn in leadership and other important roles. This will ensure that all participants are given the opportunity to take an active role in the tasks thereby improving their abilities and skills.
- Competitive collaboration can offer a valuable formative tool to practitioners when trying to enhance motivation and increase participation for better learning outcomes. The teacher may think of more game variations which are always anchored on the competencies that students need acquire. This way, games may be used not only for formative but for summative assessment as well.

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