
RALPH WALDO EMERSON'S EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHY AS A FOUNDATION FOR COOPERATIVE LEARNING

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Ralph Waldo Emerson once claimed, “We are shut up in schools and college recitation rooms for ten or fifteen years, and come out at last with a belly full of words and do not know a thing. The things taught in schools and colleges are not an education, but the means of an education” (Schank 2004). Many parents, teachers, and citizens generally believe that education should be individualistic, that students should not be required to listen to lectures during every class, and that teachers should respect the individual needs of all children. These ideas are at the heart of Ralph Waldo Emerson’s educational philosophy. He believed that students should walk away from classes having internalized subject-matter in a

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deep, existential way, not just having memorized information. Emerson argued that there should be a “mutual delight” in learning, and that “feeding the human mind is not to be fulfilled by any mechanical or military method” (Emerson 2004). Based on Emerson’s ideas, it is safe to say that he would have thoroughly agreed with the teaching method of cooperative learning, which gives students an opportunity to learn not only from their teachers, but from themselves and their fellow students as well.

Emerson’s ideas shifted from time to time. As such, he has been criticized and often not considered a strong or consistent influence in the field of education. However, the authors of this paper will argue that Emerson’s views on education are both steadfast and particularly relevant to education today. This paper will, specifically, discuss Emerson’s views on educational philosophy and then connect these views to the contemporary practice of cooperative learning, demonstrating the relevance of these views in relation to today’s classrooms.

Cooperative learning requires creative teaching. It also allows students to take leadership roles within their groups, a skill that transcends individual classrooms and begins to shape students for a life of democratic citizenship. Emerson notes, “One burns to tell the new fact, the other burns to hear it” (Emerson 2004). He believed that all students are inherently interested in seeking truth and knowledge as they pursue their God-given potential. Students are not, however, innately “interested in drilling; they are irritable, uncertain, explosive, and solitary” (Emerson 2004). Therefore, Emerson believes that teachers should be patient, curious about their students’ innate desires, and persistent about searching for ways to engage all students. Emerson wants to ensure that student learning is not solely confined to classrooms, but is reflected in reality as well. A closer look at Emerson’s views on educational philosophy demonstrates how he promoted a philosophy of curriculum and teaching that is largely in keeping with the practice of cooperative learning. A closer look at Emerson’s educational philosophy and its relationship to cooperative learning is appropriate at this time in American educational history not only because Emerson’s beliefs are interesting in and of themselves, but also because re-connecting with Emerson’s ideas can be helpful as we battle the extreme testing culture that currently dominates curriculum and teaching.

EMERSON ON EDUCATION

Emerson suggested that teachers should not only impart information to students, but that they should provide a learning environment that is conducive to creativity and fostering the individual interests of students. “He

cannot indulge his genius, he cannot delight in personal creations with young friends, when his eye is always on the clock, and twenty classes are to be dealt with before his day is done" (Emerson 2004). Emerson realized that teaching should be engaging not only for children, but for teachers as well. A key point that Emerson makes is that if students are not interested in the subject-matter being taught, they will not pay attention. The logical point that follows is that if students are not interested in the subject-matter being taught, they will have much more difficulty paying attention during class.

One of the most influential works by Emerson regarding his educational beliefs can be found in his address entitled "The American Scholar." He delivered the address as a Phi Beta Kappa lecture in 1837. In the lecture, Emerson outlines what he believes are the three main components of an ideal education: nature, books, and action (Ferguson 1971). Emerson was a believer in these three things—both within society as a whole and as they manifest themselves in individual classrooms. He argued that nature, books, and action, are the foundation for any good curriculum. Speaking specifically of books, Emerson further claimed that, "Books are the best type of influence of the past" and that "The theory of books is noble" (Ferguson 1971). Emerson equates nature with knowledge by stating, "So much of nature as he is ignorant of, so much of his own mind does he not yet possess." Books, furthermore, are the "best type of influence of the past," and perhaps the primary source of truth, according to Emerson. He also explains, however, that books alone are no good unless they inspire action. A true scholar craves the ability to act, and "grudges every opportunity of action past by, as a loss of power" (Ferguson 1971). In other words, nature, books, and action are intimately related throughout Emerson's views on curriculum and teaching. His work also integrates intellect and ethics. His views that intellect and morality must be integrated further molded his educational philosophies because he argued that strengthening both are essential if society is to thrive.

Because of this belief, Emerson challenged his generation to embrace his vision of the American scholar's civic responsibility to provide the cultural leadership needed by America. He was especially insistent that America needed strong leadership because it was a new nation, because democratic republics require that all citizens be well-educated, and because he wanted America to serve as a moral exemplar for other nations around the globe. According to Emerson, the American scholar can no longer think partially, as a man following a task delegated by a society of which he is a victim, but as leading a life in which thinking is of the essence, as a man who strives for wholeness and independent thought (Cavell 2003). Emerson further believed that defining the role of the

American scholar was work worth doing because fundamental principles of citizenship, nationhood, and culture are embedded in the way the vocation of all teacher-scholars must be conceived (Armstrong 2002). According to Emerson, education is the key to creating a society that thrives, primarily because education is how we impact the future through the cultivation of morally-minded citizens.

In addition, Emerson advocated for more freedom in education. He specifically advocated greater freedom with regard to school rules, teaching methods, and curriculum. Emerson was strongly against the teaching methods of his time. He wanted learners to be active participants in classroom activities, but this is not what he found in the majority of classrooms. Because he saw many classrooms in which students were not active, he thought many students were not taught the critical thinking skills they need later in life. Instead, they were taught nothing but academic subjects that emphasized recitation and memorization. In Emerson's view, this practice allowed for little, if any, critical thinking or lessons based on the individual interests of students. Emerson was not against guidance and direction, but he believed that the severe school discipline of the time prevented teachers from providing the love, understanding, and proper teaching that he believed should be the foundation of good curriculum and teaching. To Emerson, without these changes, America's schools and teachers would fail to accommodate the free spirit of inquiry which he deemed necessary for proper learning and democratic participation (Fitzgerald 1957).

EMERSON AND COOPERATIVE LEARNING

Cooperative learning exists as a tool for keeping students focused, involving them actively in peer group activities, and allowing each student to be responsible for his or her own learning. Unlike self-directed inquiry, students who work in cooperative learning groups gradually take responsibility for each other's learning (Borich 2004). Although cooperative learning was not a common teaching method used in classrooms during Emerson's time, it is a tool that he would have supported because it seeks to engage students actively in their tasks. In fact, Emerson believed that no formal, well-regulated system of learning or curriculum alone could enable an individual to become a self-reliant, moral, and socially-conscious scholar. Such a scholar is the product of a formal education, supplemented by the time needed to allow growth and maturity of thoughts. Emerson would have supported the idea that the best way to supplement formal education is to use cooperative learning.

According to Emerson, we all receive an education that gives us two remarkable capacities: a capacity to feel hope in the activities of others, and a capacity for communication with others (Lynn 1994). The formal education of Emerson's time, however, did little to create this ideal type of education because many classrooms consisted of quiet and obedient students, a situation that was not conducive to fostering communication between students or between students and teachers. Therefore, it would have been difficult for any "capacity for communication with others" to be either practiced or learned. Cooperative learning opens up many new opportunities for students to learn how to communicate effectively with people who have interests different from them, a skill that Emerson believes is crucial to the fabric of any democratic culture.

Most educators have recognized for many years that students need to be actively engaged with the material they are studying. Research from cognitive psychology indicates that active engagement promotes deeper levels of processing and learning because it creates stronger connections. The use of examples that relate to students and the practice of asking students to develop their own examples of ways to create meaning between students' life experiences and the curriculum (McGlynn 2005). Cooperative learning succeeds at achieving many of these goals. Emerson recognized these benefits long before contemporary psychologists found evidence that supports this type of teaching.

One of the dangers that Emerson considered a result of bad education was a man who became a "parrot of another man's thinking" (Ferguson 1971). Cooperative learning is one approach to avoiding this dreadful development. When students have the opportunity to work together and solve problems using their own ideas and their own ability to reason, they learn to think for themselves and not just regurgitate what has been forced on them. The idea behind learning-centered teaching, which was advocated by Emerson and is embedded in cooperative learning, attests to the importance of empowering students, helping them to build on what they already know, and enabling them to organize what they know (McGlynn 2005).

Emerson believes that students reach their educational potential only through what is called "engaged learning." The central tenet of Emerson's vision of the "American scholar" is the belief that students should not imitate the lifeless learning of European books. Instead, they should look to their true spirit and nature. He believed that encouraging students to dive into their innermost thoughts and feelings allows budding scholars to find insights, emotions, and inspirations that are universally true and that Emerson believed should be recognized by society (Armstrong 2002). Without peer interaction and classroom communication, these insights would remain hidden forever.

Furthermore, Emerson argues, “To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men—that is genius” (Atkinson 2000). Emerson thought that education should contribute to developing the innate ability that all students have not only to think on their own, but to have the courage to believe in what they have to say and express it clearly. An essential ingredient of cooperative learning is each learner’s desire to contribute to the task performance of fellow group members (Borich 2004). Cooperative learning provides students with an environment that enables them to develop as leaders who have confidence and who inspire others with their sense of individual and societal responsibility.

In Emerson’s popular essay “Self Reliance,” he states, “There is a time in every man’s education when he arrives at the conviction that envy is ignorance; that imitation is suicide; that he must take himself for better, for worse, as his portion; that though the wide of the universe is full of good, no kernel of nourishing corn can come to him but through his toil bestowed on that plot of ground which is given to him to till.... Whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist” (Atkinson 2000). With these words, it is obvious that Emerson was adamant that students should learn to avoid jealousy as well as to discover their identity. It is important to note, however, that he also suggests that jealousy is primarily a result of ignorance. The only solution to a state of ignorance is an education. With proper education, students will be able to create their own ideas, spark their own interests, and, in so doing, become more productive members of society. Broadly speaking, student-centered discussions in the classroom, much like that of cooperative learning, help students develop intellectually and socially (Hale and City 2006). One characteristic unique to cooperative learning is that not only are groups assigned specialized tasks, but individuals are also assigned specialized roles to perform within their groups (Borich 2004). Fulfilling these roles allows students to learn responsibility and to be accountable for their own learning.

Understanding that Emerson argued that what he calls “Self Reliance” is the true value of an education is key to understanding his philosophies about education in general. He believed that with education comes individuality, and with individuality comes the ability to question people in power. The power to question those who are in power, moreover, serves to improve society. Individuality and intelligence become the keys to successful democratic living.

Emerson then states, “Man is timid and apologetic; he is no longer upright; he dares not say, ‘I think,’ ‘I am,’ but quotes some saint or sage” (Atkinson 2000). Once again, Emerson stresses the importance of confidence and individuality. He is encouraging students and society as a whole to take a stand, not simply to believe everything that is repeated by

others. Cooperative learning once again is helpful in developing all of these attributes that Emerson believes are crucial to democratic societies. Learning to take a stand and be confident are important characteristics of young minds, especially those who expect to be good democratic citizens. The ability to fulfill a leadership role, take pride in their own ideas, work with their peers, and develop their own identities through constant peer interaction is priceless in the eyes of Emerson. All of these are possible through cooperative learning methods.

Emerson argues that liberal education should have the goal of improving human relationships throughout American culture. He seeks to convey the depth and the mystery of this relatedness in ways that reach beyond the reductive frameworks of psychology and ideology. He seeks to avoid the two extremes of doctrine and dogma. One way to acknowledge the common ground that exists between these two extremes, Emerson suggests, is by practicing the art of reception in our encounters with others (Lynn 1994). The reception of another's ideas, especially when we disagree with them, is a central focus of cooperative learning. Also, this learned tolerance and acceptance of other people's opinions is something that is not only key to a harmonious classroom, but it also can be key to the creation of a more harmonious society. It is not only important that students learn and accept their own views, but it is just as important that they know how to respect the views of their counterparts.

EMERSON AND TRANSCENDENTALISM

Emerson subscribed to Transcendentalism, which was a powerful nineteenth century movement in philosophy and literature. The basis of Transcendentalist thinking is the idea of a metaphysical correspondence between nature and spirit, as expressed chiefly by Emerson (Buell 1973). Transcendentalism began to flourish in the 1830s, 1840s, and 1850s primarily due to the influence of Emerson, Thoreau, Amos Bronson Alcott, and others who agreed with their ideas. Transcendentalists believed the soul of each individual is identical with the soul of the world. They also believed that individual souls contain all of what is found in the soul of the world. Moreover, Transcendentalists suggest a distinction between reason and understanding. The concept of a higher Reason is the heart of what came to be called Transcendentalism. Specifically, Transcendentalists subscribed to the idea that, in addition to understanding or capacity for empirical reasoning, man has a higher mental faculty which enables him to perceive spiritual truth intuitively. This idea of innate Reason was referred to with different terms, but the idea was the same. Some referred

to it as “Spirit,” others “Mind,” and still others referred to it as the “Soul” (Buell 1973).

Emerson believed that all humans seek the good, and that any corruption is to be blamed on society (Atkinson 2000). This view is quite similar to the Romantic philosophy expressed by French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau in his famous educational novel, *Emile*. Emerson grounded his convictions on education in the idea that educators should seek to improve the lives and minds of students not only academically, but socially, morally, and spiritually as well. In this respect, Emerson offers views on curriculum and teaching that are quite at odds to the prevailing views that dominate educational policy-making today (Palmer 2007).

The spirit of the Transcendentalist movement is best understood by taking a literary approach toward what the Transcendentalists had to say about the issues that preoccupied them. Their way of looking at those issues is poetic rather than analytical. They also attached great value to creativity and self expression (Buell 1973). Like Emerson, other Transcendentalists felt that projecting one’s own opinion and finding the courage to be a non-conformist was an ideal for which all humans should strive.

Other members of the Transcendentalist movement included such noted writers as Henry David Thoreau, Margaret Fuller, Elizabeth Palmer Peabody, Amos Bronson Alcott, Orestes Brownson, and Jones Very. Ideas about learning and growing not only intellectually but also morally and spiritually are at the heart of American Transcendentalism (Atkinson 2000). Emerson’s lifelong passions were both supported and influenced by the Transcendentalist movement.

EMERSON’S SIGNIFICANCE

Modern education appears to be both similar to and quite different from the ideas that Emerson advocated. Cooperative learning is used in many schools, but often to ends that Emerson would find quite unacceptable. For example, Emerson would not support the use of cooperative learning merely to produce higher test scores. The primary purpose of cooperative learning, to Emerson, is to create democratic citizens who understand how to appreciate the diverse opinions that are always found in a democratic state.

Our educational institutions are far from perfect, and we will never reach a utopian state. Our schools have, however, come a long way. With smaller classroom sizes, special education programs, No Child Left Behind laws, and increased teacher responsibility and school

accountability, our teachers and schools now focus more on the learning needs of all students. More and more teachers are learning that direct instruction has its place, but cooperative learning and creative student-centered activities have a role to play as well. New methods and teaching strategies are constantly implemented and introduced. Cooperative learning is among these new possibilities.

At the same time, however, because schools are so driven by test scores today, students often experience a ubiquitous sense of loss, which causes the curriculum to seem irrelevant to their individual lives. Emerson's existentialism could serve as a useful antidote to our current situation. Emerson was deeply concerned about the loss of self (Saito 2005). The sense of loss pervading today's education can seem overwhelming and all-consuming. It also stretches beyond students to teachers as well, many of whom feel as though they no longer have any influence over the curriculum they teach or the teaching methods they use. From an Emersonian perspective, however, our current situation does not only signify loss in terms of self, but also loss in terms of critical thinking ability. Moreover, an overemphasis on test score production also can lead to a loss of academic freedom, which can squelch the classroom spark that is needed to maintain curiosity and interest-seeking on the part of both students and teachers. Students long for an existential connection to the curriculum, and Emerson's philosophy is a powerful force that can re-emphasize this point at this particular time in educational history.

Although new methods and strategies are often implemented, it is still hard to find a balance that will provide students with the skills they need to score well on standardized tests, maintain their focus and interest, strengthen their critical thinking skills, and provide them with the tools they need to be productive members of society. All of these issues were important to Emerson. He was passionate about the type of education society was providing to children and about the type of society that will exist as a result. For these and other reasons, he was a proponent not only of academic freedom, but of moral education as well (Saito 2005).

Studies on cooperative learning indicate a strong impact on student achievement as well as increased motivation and improved social interactions with adults and peers. To make the strategy most effective, teachers often group students heterogeneously, which can eliminate competition among groups. Furthermore, studies show that teachers who implement cooperative learning in their classrooms engage in more one-on-one interactions with their students than teachers who implement group work only. Teachers who use cooperative learning also ask more open-ended questions, engage in more mediated-learning behaviors, and experience more verbal interaction with their students (Gillies 2006).

Therefore, the incorporation of cooperative learning not only increases student performance, but it seems to be a practical approach to restoring the balance that is needed today. This effect of balancing academic knowledge with cooperative learning can maintain student interest and teach the skills needed to create increasingly responsible, tolerable, and prepared leaders for tomorrow. Emerson would be pleased to see teachers using cooperative learning in this way, so long as the deeper ideals that he advocated throughout his life were never sacrificed.

CONCLUSION

At first glance, Ralph Waldo Emerson might seem like an unlikely candidate for helping us to think about what we can learn from others, in the classroom or elsewhere. He is best remembered, after all, as an advocate of the self against the claims of society. However, Emerson believed that education is a lifelong practice of discovering or receiving relations that attach us to one to another and to the world. This practice helps us to develop self-knowledge and self-transformation (Lynn 1994). In this way, Emerson is often misunderstood. Although he did focus on the self, he recognizes that the improvement of each individual eventually leads to the improvement of society as a whole.

Emerson did not envision a path of American education such as we have today. He envisioned a path that would have been a radical break with the past, one that was just as radical as America's newly created political system (Bickman 1998). Nonetheless, it is probable that Emerson would be happy with many aspects of contemporary schools compared with those of his day. It is also likely that he would make further criticisms regarding student discipline and moral education.

Our task as educators involves far more than teaching academic subjects, which are an important part of the curriculum, but should not be regarded as the entire curriculum. We also need to teach students how to become effective learners by guiding them to hone their academic skills and become successful citizens (McGlynn 2005). This balancing of academic and civic goals is a constant matter of debate, however, as additional standards are imposed, less academic freedom is allowed, and a steady number of teachers are expected to accept the idea that teaching toward a test is the center of their instructional universe.

Emerson believed that human beings should learn to think on their own, rather than solely acquire the craft of imitation or conformity by repeating the speech of their teachers. A liberating education, to Emerson, gives students the ability to challenge those in power when necessary. Cooperative learning and a continued use of creative teaching methods

are keys to the kind of true student achievement that motivated Emerson's writing on education. Without this realization, the revelation of one's own ideas or leadership qualities will remain nothing more than a dream. Emerson believed that the core of a liberal education was for students to learn the process of thinking for themselves. Through peer interaction and well-planned cooperative learning activities, students can be developed into the kind of citizens who possess the self-reliant souls that Emerson envisioned.

Emerson's goals are the same for all students—to foster academic, moral, and social success (McGlynn 2005). These were the goals in the late nineteenth century when Emerson wrote his own purposes of education, and they continue to be persuasive goals today. The methods used to achieve these ends, however, are becoming more numerous at the same time that achieving them has become more difficult. Year after year, schools, states, and the nation as a whole are experimenting with new techniques and new types of training for teachers in order to achieve the oft-stated goal of success for all students. Unless this shift in emphasis expands to include an increase in critical thinking, moral education, and civic responsibility, Emerson's hope for the future of American education—and indeed American democracy in general—will be unsatisfied, meaning his legacy will be incomplete.

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Ralph Waldo Emerson's Educational Philosophy as a Foundation for Cooperative Learning. Williamson, Amy; Null, J. Wesley. American Educational History Journal , v35 n2 p381-392 2008. This article takes a closer look at Ralph Waldo Emerson's educational philosophy and its relationship to cooperative learning. Emerson believed that human beings should learn to think on their own, rather than solely acquire the craft of imitation or conformity by repeating the speech of their teachers. A liberating education, to Emerson, gives students the ability to challenge those in power when necessary. Ralph Waldo Emerson was an American essayist, philosopher and a successful poet. Read this brief biography to find more on his life.Â Once Emerson too worked as a schoolmaster for several years, he went to Harvard Divinity School. He was ordained as junior pastor at Boston's Second Church on January 11, 1829 and was given an initial salary of \$1,200 a year. During this time, he also held other responsibilities like a chaplain to the Massachusetts legislature, and a member of the Boston school committee.Â In the March of 1837, Emerson gave a series of lectures on "The Philosophy of History" at Boston's Masonic Temple. This marked the beginning of his serious career as a lecturer.