COOPERATIVE LEARNING IN THE CLASSROOM

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The traditional classroom in America places the teacher in the front of the class, lecturing to students about content area subjects. This teacher-directed model does not integrate all students in the learning process. Additionally, schools are falling short in meeting the goals of teaching and promoting social skills and fostering cooperation among students of diverse backgrounds.

Cooperative Learning is a set of instructional procedures that attempts to actively involve all students in the learning process, regardless of ability level, while promoting positive interpersonal relationships and practice of appropriate social skills among students. Cooperative Learning encourages students to interact with one another while attempting to accomplish a specific goal in a content area.

Unlike the traditional classroom, Cooperative Learning rewards students for achievement in two ways. First, students are rewarded by evaluation of their individual effort on assigned tasks. Second, it ensures that other group members have learned the assigned material and completed their designated tasks.

Characteristics of Cooperative Learning

The teacher divides the class into small heterogeneous groups (four to five students). The groups are assigned to complete a specific task. Each member of the group is individually accountable for part of the task, and the nature of the task is such that it cannot be completed unless the group members work together. Therefore, the students must fulfill their obligation to themselves and to their group. The goal of Cooperative Learning is to have students become involved in their own learning as active participants instead of passive observers.

Direct instruction of interpersonal and small group skills is provided during the lesson. Students then practice those skills during their group activity. The students work closely to promote face-to-face interaction. The activities match the goals of the lesson content. Teachers monitor the groups and intervene to help the groups function most effectively.

Benefits of Cooperative Learning

• Increases self-motivation of students. Students are responsible for themselves, as well as their group members.
• Allows for development and practice of high quality critical thinking and language skills because students teach different learning strategies to one another.
• Promotes positive relations among students with diverse abilities, needs, and socio-cultural and linguistic backgrounds; allows special needs students to be assigned roles that utilize their strengths.
• Implements peer coaching. A student who has mastered the material can be paired with another student who needs help. The material is then reinforced for the coaching student and is taught to the coached student.
• Promotes positive attitudes toward content area and school environment, and establishes an environment where academic accomplishments are valued.
• Increases student achievement, particularly when two key elements, group goals and individual accountability, are combined.
• Provides minority-language learners with natural settings in which they can learn meaning from academic content.
• Encourages students to engage in group processing activities in which they discuss the interpersonal skills that influence their effectiveness in working together.
• Teaches and promotes appropriate communication, collaboration, and conflict resolution skills.
• Encourages empathy by giving each student an essential part to play in the academic activity. Students become understanding of their partner’s struggles and conflicts with the activity because they are likely to have the same problems.
• Develops positive self-esteem and mutual respect among students.
• Provides students with the opportunity to evaluate their work as a group member and as an individual.

Concerns Regarding Cooperative Learning
Although it has many benefits, Cooperative Learning can generate several concerns:

• Social loafing: Some students will attempt to allow their partners to do all of the work while still receiving credit for the accomplished tasks. It is important to promote individual accountability when using Cooperative Learning, especially in evaluations.
• Long-term motivation: When there is no longer a group standard to meet, some students may become frustrated or disinterested when completing individual assignments.
• Teacher readiness: Cooperative Learning is a fundamental role change for the teacher. While the role of the instructor is still used, teachers need to work as a facilitator in the classroom and allow the students to actively engage in learning. This requires teachers to relinquish the power of control over to the students, and may be difficult for teachers who have an established pattern of management that keeps them in control at all times.

Implementing Cooperative Learning
There are five main methods for using Cooperative Learning in the classroom. Each method, as well as a sample lesson, is described below.

Jigsaw
This requires that the teacher serve as a facilitator. Each member of the jigsaw group is assigned a piece of information and asked to teach it to the other group members. Measured outcome is a completed project or assignment. The following lesson is designed for a social studies class (grades 5–8), but can be altered to accommodate any content area or any grade level.

• Divide students into groups of five to six.
• Divide the information from the day’s lesson into five to six segments. For example, if the history lesson is about Franklin Roosevelt, divide the information into childhood, marriage to Eleanor, family life, the New Deal programs, World War II, and his stroke and his last days as president.
• Assign each student to learn one segment of information, making sure students only have direct access to their own segment. Give students time to read over their segment at least twice and become familiar with it. There is no need for them to memorize it.
• Form temporary expert groups. One student from each jigsaw group joins other students assigned to the same segment of information. Give students in these expert groups time to discuss the main points of their segment and to rehearse the presentations they will make to their jigsaw group.
• Bring the students back into their jigsaw groups. Ask each student to present their segment to the group. Encourage others in the group to ask questions for clarification.
• Float from group to group, observing the process. If any group is having trouble (e.g., a member is dominating or disruptive), provide feedback and redirect as necessary. Also, be sure the information being taught is accurate and understandable.
• Give a quiz on the material at the end of the session. Quizzes should be graded so that each student receives an individual grade that is affected by the overall group grade. For example, bonus points can be given to the group with the highest overall average on the quiz.

Think-Pair-Share
For this method students individually attempt to answer questions and then discuss their answers with partners. Partners then share with a small group or the entire class. The following lesson is designed for a K–2 class.

• The teacher explains the difference between a need and a want. The teacher should then ask each student to think of one need and one want.
• Divide students into pairs. One student tells his or her partner one thing that he or she wants and one thing that he or she needs. The student should also explain why the item is a need or a want.
• Students then reverse roles, with the listener becoming the speaker.
• Pairs will form teams of four students. Each team is given a poster-size paper and a glue stick. Each student is given two index cards and a magazine. The paper is divided into needs and wants.
• Students will select pictures from magazines to represent their needs and wants. The picture will be
glued onto the index card, and the index card will be glued to the appropriate space on the poster. **Each student is to only touch his or her index card.**

- Once all the groups are finished the teacher will select one person per group to share their poster.

**Student Team Achievement Divisions**

For this method teams remain together for more than just one lesson. Teachers can have teams remain together for a unit, until the next test, or an entire semester. That is, students complete common activities in groups but take individual tests. The team score is based on each student’s improvement over past performance. The following example is for a math class, using this method for an entire semester.

- Divide students into groups of four to five students.
- Each day the teacher provides a whole group instruction lesson explaining a new concept.
- Students then break up into their groups and complete the daily activity.
- The teacher collects the activity at the end of the lesson. All of the students should have the same answers on the activity.
- At the end of the week, students take individual tests on the material learned for the week. Grades are based on the student’s performance as well as the group’s performance.

**Team-Accelerated Instruction**

This method was developed by R. E. Slavin and was specifically designed for use with mathematics in grades 3–6. For this method students receive individualized instruction based on their skill levels. Students then practice their skills in heterogeneous learning teams. Members in the teams may be working on different units. Team members check each other’s work. The teacher may also instruct small groups that are working on the same unit; however, the students then go back to their learning team to practice their skills. A packaged program is available to assist teachers in incorporating this method in the classroom. The program includes 13 different student books and teacher materials to help with planning, teaching, and managing the program (see Charlesbridge School Division in “Resources”).

**Group Investigation**

This method requires the use of higher level processes. Students are responsible for deciding what topic to investigate, what each group member contributes to the investigation, and how to communicate the group results. The following lesson plan is a blueprint of how to implement this method. Suggestions for each step are provided.

- **Organize groups and identify topics:** Teachers can allow students to decide on their partners and what to study or the teacher can assign the groups and topics.
- **Group planning:** Students should determine what to investigate, what resources to use, plan a course of action, and assign members their responsibilities.
- **Implementation:** Students engage in their assigned roles. The teacher must generate ways to keep the students working productively. This may include having the students grade one another on the basis of effort or giving students in each group a checklist to evaluate their accomplishments.
- **Analyzing results and preparing reports:** Students come together and discuss how their results will help them solve their problem. Students then determine how their final report will be presented.
- **Present reports and evaluation:** Students from other groups give feedback on what they experienced from the report. The teacher and the students evaluate the final report based on established criteria.

**Resources**


Focuses on preparing teachers to use Cooperative Learning in their classrooms. Pre-class strategies, Cooperative Learning classroom management, and preparing for special situations and methods to aid groups that are not successful are presented.


Teaches teachers the purpose of Cooperative Learning and provides specific details to successfully use Cooperative Learning in the classroom. Topics include how to form groups, activities for establishing respect in the groups, how to design and assign effective roles for the group members, how to teach social skills, ensuring equal participation and interdependence, and how to evaluate assignments.


Geared for teachers and administrators. Covers the main instructional methods and strategies and provides practical applications of Cooperative Learning in classroom situations. Includes essays
written by the leading researchers in Cooperative Learning, including Spencer Kagan, Robert Slavin, and the Johnson brothers.

Websites
California Department of Education—
www.cde.ca.gov/iasa/cooplrmg2.html
A thorough explanation of Cooperative Learning, along with a reference and resource list.
Charlesbridge School Division—
www.charlesbridge.com/school/tai.htm
Information on using Team-Accelerated Instruction.
The Cooperative Learning Network—
www.sheridan.on.ca/coop_learn/cooplrm.htm
Provides research on Cooperative Learning and allows for interaction of teachers, administrators, and college professors, and provides numerous links to other Cooperative Learning websites.
Cyber Co-Op—
http://204.184.214.251/coop/ecoopmain.html
Cooperative Learning lessons for elementary school, organized by grade and subject area.
Jigsaw Classroom—www.jigsaw.org
Explanations, examples, and suggestions for implementing the Jigsaw method.

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