Cooperative Learning
by David A. Dockterman, Ed. D.

Cooperative learning is great. I'm completely sold. The research shows that fast learners don't suffer in mixed-ability groups and that slow learners really gain. In addition, teamwork is often at or near the top of the corporate training agenda. To be competitive in this tough global marketplace, businesses find they must train workers how to work together to solve problems. That's a pretty powerful incentive for schools to place high priority on group problem solving. If we want to prepare our kids for the workplace, we should teach them how to work cooperatively. The world is a social place; it's not surprising that the ability to communicate with one another constructively is so important.

But there's more. Work by folks like Robert Slavin at Johns Hopkins, Spencer Kagan at the University of California, and David and Roger Johnson at the University of Minnesota suggests that cooperative learning does much more than teach students how to work in groups. The process of learning cooperatively actually improves the acquisition and retention of content and skills throughout the curriculum. In short, kids may learn better when they learn cooperatively.

That shouldn't shock anyone. When you are forced to articulate your ideas and knowledge to another person or a group, you have to process the information in a new way. Think about your own experiences as a teacher preparing to teach material that is new to you. You not only have to learn the material yourself, you must strive to understand how others will learn it as well. You must organize and reorganize to an extent well beyond what you would do as an independent learner. This process can be a very potent learning mechanism.

Loaded with all this enthusiasm, I attended a session at an Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development conference several years ago to listen to some of the leaders in cooperative learning. And what did these collaborative learning gurus do? They lectured about how we learn more and better when we learn cooperatively. As I sat in the audience watching slides and overheads pass before my eyes, I became increasingly frustrated. If the speakers were so convinced of the value of cooperative learning, why weren't they doing it now? After all, they had all this evidence showing how great it is.

I questioned the experts after the session.

"Why don't you practice what you preach?"

"Well, we had a lot of information to cover in a short amount of time."

Just like school...
There are a number of morals to this short story. None of them is that cooperative learning is too hard or a bad idea. But no pedagogy, including cooperative learning, is right all the time. Even the most ardent cooperative learning enthusiasts recognize that sometimes you need to stand up in front of your class and do some frontal teaching, if only to lay the groundwork for the cooperative experience to follow.

**There Is No One Right Way to Teach**

So here is one moral: It’s silly to look for the holy grail of pedagogy. You won’t find it. There is no one right way to teach all kids all the time. Cooperative learning may be fantastic, but it’s not the one and only way to teach kids. Rather, teachers should work to add cooperative learning strategies to their array of classroom teaching methods and strive to apply those strategies appropriately as they proceed through their curricula.

**It Is Difficult**

And here’s another moral: Cooperative learning is difficult. First of all, it’s a bit scary. Putting your students into small groups and telling them to talk to one another while you’re on the other side of the room risks serious disruption. The noise level in your class can rise significantly. What if neighboring teachers complain? What if a group strays off task and the principal walks in at that moment? Wouldn’t it be safer simply to stand in front of the entire class and lead them all down a directed path together? Safer? In some ways, yes. More managed? Likely. A better education? Probably not.

**It’s More Than Kids in Groups**

It can work, but there is a learning curve to climb, both for you and your students. Which brings me to my third moral: Cooperative learning involves a lot more than simply sticking kids in groups. Schools have been doing group work for a long time. I remember forging semi-self-selected groups when I was a student in junior high math class. The teacher would write the assignment on the chalkboard. I would complete the work. My groupmates would then copy my answers. Cooperative learning at its best? Not exactly. As a teacher I fell into the group trap myself.

I let kids form their own teams for the most part. That kept the loud kids happy and the quiet kids left out. Then I’d give a team of four an assignment on Egypt: “You report on the pharaohs; you do ancient religions; you do the pyramids; and you do daily life. And don’t forget to make some sample foods of ancient Egypt.” The four groupmates would then head off on their own to complete their individual reports. At the end of the assignment, they would pile their results together and dump them on my desk. Again, their experience was hardly cooperative.
The Key Is Interdependence

The key to successful cooperative learning is interdependence. The members of the group must need each other and have a stake in each person's understanding and success. Creating this type of cooperative environment in your classroom is not at all easy, and few teachers (and few students) have had any experience doing it.

Even some of the “cooperative learning” techniques offered by its supporters can easily dissolve when both teachers and students are confused about their roles. For example, a beginning cooperative learning strategy is to divide your class into small groups of four. Each member of the group should take a number from 1 to 4. Assign some questions to the class (whatever is appropriate for what you’re teaching). Then randomly pick a number from 1 to 4, and that person from each group will be the one to present the answer to the question. Everyone in the group gets the same grade. In essence, this organization creates an incentive for the group to make sure that every one of its members knows the answers to the questions. They are forced to share ideas and information. It sounds cooperative. Interdependence, however, can quickly shift to dependency if, as so often happens in group work, the “smart” kid does all the work and then simply gives the answers to his or her teammates. That’s just the way it worked in my junior high math class.

For many of these techniques to work, the kids must be prepared and willing to accept a variety of leadership and facilitator roles. Not surprisingly, they need to be liberated from some rather restrictive patterns of traditional schooling. This booklet offers some techniques for how to structure cooperative learning experiences in your classroom, using concrete examples. Hopefully these examples will spark your own ideas about how to weave this fantastic approach into your own teaching repertoire.

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