

Competitive vs. Cooperative Learning Formats

Put these kids into groups?! You've got to be kidding. Madness will ensue! They're not ready to work together.

That's the conundrum, isn't it? They are not able, at present, to work productively in groups, but how can they become proficient unless they practice it?

Cooperative Learning practices help to bridge the gap.

Competitive Learning

No interaction between pupils
Not accountable to others
Responsible only to self
Homogeneous grouping, if any
One student serves as leader
Social skills assumed or ignored

Cooperative Learning

Active interaction with others
Accountable to others
Responsible to the group
Heterogeneous grouping
Positive interdependency
Social skills taught directly

Implementing Cooperative Learning

Cooperative learning is more than merely having students sit together, helping the others do their work. Directing students who finish their work early to assist others isn't a form of cooperative learning either. Neither is assigning a group of students to "work together" UNLESS you assure that all will contribute their fair share to the product.

A true cooperative learning experience requires that a number of criteria be met. They are:

- Division of labor among students in the group
- Face-to-face interaction between students
- Assignment of specific roles and duties to students
- Group processing of a task
- Positive interdependence in which students all need to do their assigned duties in order for the task to be completed
- Individual accountability for completing one's own assigned duties

- The development of social skills as a result of cooperative interaction
- Provision of group rewards by the teacher

The introduction of "learning teams" into the classroom is an effective method for increasing the number of students willing to make an effort to learn in school. The teams usually work together on long-term assignments, although sometimes students remain together in duos, triads or quadrants for the entire day. In these groups, each individual is responsible for assuring that the other team members learn the assigned material. Those who understand the lesson/material are responsible for teaching it to the others. Groups progress to a new unit of study when all members of the group have mastered the lesson.

Group members are also responsible for the behavior of all members. If a team member displays inappropriate behavior, it is the duty of fellow members to remind that student to 'check' him/herself. The members attempt to refocus the misbehaving student by offering help and suggestions.

Initially, temporary grouping can help students to grasp the concept of long-term learning teams, and practice responsibilities while the teacher sharpens his/her skills and receives feedback from the students regarding how to improve assignments.

Steps for setting up group learning experiences:

Before Implementation

1. Develop a positive classroom environment. Devise ways for students to become acquainted early in the year. Have them work on a mural, newsletter, play or other project. Model and encourage polite, respectful behavior toward others. Reward students for such social skills as helping others, giving and accepting praise, compromise, etc.
2. Previous to organizing collaborative groups and assigning academic tasks, develop a cooperative climate and esprit de corp in the classroom. This can be accomplished by engaging students in fun team-building activities in which they support each other in a team effort to achieve non-academic or easily achieved academic goals. These activities might take the form of non-competitive, active games such as those described in the books like the one titled [Play Fair](#).
3. Consider upcoming academic tasks and determine the number of students who will be assigned to each group. The size of the group will depend on the students' ability to interact well with others. Two to six students usually comprise a group.

If students are new to cooperative learning, assign two or three individuals to a group. Increase the size of teams as the students become familiar with the procedures and practices. Although homogeneous grouping or random assignment to groups is sometimes used, the students should usually be on a range of levels, mixed by intellectual ability or achievement level. One novel way to form groups is to have students pick a puzzle piece out of a hat/box. Inside that container are several 3 or 4 piece puzzles. Students match up their pieces to see who will be in the group with them. Too random? Hand out sheets of paper with directions/material on it, and a puzzle piece attached. While appearing to be a random selection to the students, you have determined which kids will come together into a particular group.

The teacher may also choose to consider interests or abilities in certain subject areas,

personality, race, gender, or other factors when teaming students with each other. Perhaps the groups will choose names for themselves or decide to be referred to merely by number.

4. Decide how long the groups will work together. It may range from one task, to one curriculum unit, to one semester, to a whole year. Most often the teacher will vary the composition of groups every month or two so that each student has a chance to work with a large number of classmates during the term or year.
5. Determine the academic and behavioral/interpersonal objectives for the task.
6. Plan the arrangement of the room for the upcoming group-oriented tasks. Arrange group seating so that students will be close enough to each other to share materials and ideas. Be sure to leave yourself a clear access lane to each group.
7. Prepare materials for distribution to the group. Indicate on the materials that students are to work together. Avoid work activities that don't really encourage (or require) students to actively collaborate in a group. When student are working on independent tasks, simply clustered at tables, a revision is necessary.
8. Determine roles for group members. In addition to cooperating and "brainstorming" with others, each group member should be assigned a duty to perform during the project. For example, the positions of "starter" (first person to use the materials; supervises any assembly of materials), "encourager/taskmaster" (motivates others to work their hardest and contribute to the discussion), "reader" (responsible for seeing that all members begin with the same information and understand the nature of the task; reads print instructions and reviews record sheets aloud to the group), "praiser" (reinforces the responses of others), "researcher/getter" (locates and obtains needed materials and information; returns materials after use; in charge of inventory), "summarizer/reporter" (periodically explains what has occurred and later presents group findings to the entire class), "recorder" (writes down all important data, decisions, contributions, accomplishments, etc.; writes results on the board when sharing with the entire class), "understanding coach" (makes sure that everyone understands what has occurred to this point), and "checker" (assures that all have completed their task and looks for errors in data, writing, etc.) might be appropriate to the assignment. The teacher may have to explain and demonstrate/practice these roles previous to and during projects. Our junior scholars need to know what the roles actually look and feel like in order to play each role well, and re-direct their teammates when necessary in order to ensure productive performance.

Implementation

9. Explain what will occur. Explain the rules which include; contributing to the team effort; listening to teammates; helping other team members; and asking the teacher for help only if it is a question of everyone in the group. Previous to this, you should have devised a way to eliminate groans and complaints from high achievers and socially popular students who may not approve of the composition of their group. Arrange students into teams at tables or where desks have been pushed together.

10. Present and clearly explain the assignment that will probably take several class periods to complete. (e.g.. Make a collage of items that start with the letter "M"; Plan and act out a play demonstrating how Thomas Jefferson might react if he were to be brought through time to see the United States as it exists today; Using an unabridged dictionary, make a list of words which can't be rhymed with other words etc.) Emphasize that positive interaction and cooperation will

result in a group reward, and that meeting a set standard of performance beyond expectations will result in bonus points. Perhaps those points can be awarded frequently during the activity to motivate further cooperation.

Cooperative interaction can be more fully assured by giving only one copy of materials to each group, or by assigning each student one part of the materials with each part being needed for completion. Consider allowing groups that finish early to assist slower groups. This helpful support of other teams can be promoted through the understanding that if all groups reach a preset level, more bonus points will be given. The evaluation standard should be criterion referenced (judged against a certain standard reflecting degree of learning).

11. Avoid the temptation to "lead" the groups. Your role has changed from transmitter of knowledge to mediator of thinking. Praising and encouraging the less academically skilled team members is still indicated however.

12. Monitor and assist as needed. Move among the groups to assure that they are actively engaged in their roles and following designated procedures (unless free-form creativity is desired). Do not answer student questions unless the group members are unable to resolve the issue by themselves. Intervene as necessary to promote positive interdependence among group members. Frequently reinforce positive group interaction.

13. Evaluate each group's performance/product. Grades might be assigned based upon the average performance of the group (thus promoting positive interdependence) or the effort/quality of performance of individual members in the execution of their duties. In many cases, each group decides how it will demonstrate what has been learned. Each group's work is judged on its own merit rather than in comparison with the outcomes of other groups. If inter-group competition is involved, perhaps the winning ***and*** most improved teams will receive a prize. Recognition might also be given to groups that were the quietest, quickest, neatest, most creative, etc.

After Implementation

14. Have the learning groups assess how well they worked together and discuss how they can improve their functioning and performance.

Summary

Cooperative learning is gaining popularity for a number of reasons. Evidence indicates that it raises achievement, promotes positive self concept, and raises regard for others. It appears to be especially useful for students from racial minority and low socio-economic groups who have not excelled to the same degree as middle income majority-culture pupils in the traditional competitive classroom. The performance of these previously less successful groups tends to rise in cooperative groups, majority culture students seem to achieve just as well as with the individually-oriented style of instruction and learning, often better. Cooperative learning may also help to lessen the fatalistic attitude toward schooling that is often found among students from minority groups and those who have experienced repeated failure in the schools. When these students notice the value of their input and effort, a more internal locus of control and belief in one's ability is fostered. Social and work skills are imbedded.

Implementing full-scale cooperative learning is not a simple task. Teachers may wish to start with periodic lessons or units and build from there. The effort expended is probably well spent as "...what we know about effective instruction indicates that cooperative learning should be used when we want students to learn more, like school better, like each other better, and learn more effective social skills."

Activities and Discussion Questions

1. Locate and read books on the use of cooperative learning such as William Glasser's Control Theory in the Classroom (1986, New York: Perennial Library Press) or Roger Johnson's Circles of Learning (1985, available from the Cooperative Learning Center of the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN).
2. Locate books on cooperative games as a way to build esprit de corp and promote the concept of cooperation in a fun format.
3. Join with a few other teachers who wish to learn more about cooperative learning. Form your own learning teams and give yourself the assignment of helping all members figure out how to most effectively use cooperative learning in their classrooms.
4. Decide whether cooperative or competitive learning methods would be best for the activities or areas of study below.
 - Painting a picture
 - Multiplication drills
 - South American geography
 - Simulated journey to the moon
 - Oriental architecture
 - Computer use
 - Baking bread
5. Think of material or concepts which are to be learned by your classes during the upcoming weeks or months. For which of these would cooperative learning best serve your purposes? For which of these would competitive practices work best in promoting learning among the greatest number of students?
6. Suppose you wish to have your students produce a class newsletter. What groups might you might form and what would be the duties of each? What duties or roles might be assigned to members of the groups?

7. Consider the following statement and discuss with others how the concerns voiced within might be addressed.

" One of the rationales of grouping children up in the classroom is that each child has some particular strength and that will be brought out by the wide variety of tasks that are assigned to the group. In this way, the thinking goes, students who are good at one skill can be a leader in that area, while another child, who has different strengths, will take over in a different area. A favorite example given is the child whose basic skills are very low but who draws very well. So the teacher enthusiastically groups her with one of the higher level students, knowing that she can contribute to the group via her artistic skills. She has something to offer the group that perhaps the others don't have, and it allows her to shine even in an academic project. It sounds great, but a few questions nag. Like, what if she doesn't always want to be the group artist? What if her drawing is a very personal thing to her and it embarrasses her to have it made public? In my training I have been told by many teachers that they always pair up the weakest student in the class with the strongest. In this way, the teacher can tap the resource of the strong students and use them to help teach their fellow classmates within the classroom community. I think that this is perhaps the problem that I have the greatest difficulty with. Why should the so-called quicker students be obliged to teach their fellow students all the time? Do they have a choice in the matter? I know many people who, in their school days, whizzed through their work, and then were able to do all sorts of extra reading and projects on their own. Is there something wrong with that? Many of these students, as well as the children I have observed in my own classrooms, were not quick in just one area, but had strong skills in almost all areas. They were the kids who were 'good at school'. If they were going to do a group project, they wanted to pair up with kids who were on a similar level, which in my assessment, was because on some level they understood that they would be stimulated by each other. I think it's a mistake to think that a child who shows strong academic and/or leadership qualities wants to be in that situation all the time. Sometimes they want a break. And sometimes, they may want to coast. And sometimes they want to work alone. I find myself returning again and again to this notion of balance. When we stick to one model inflexibly, many personal needs are likely to go unmet."

References

The cooperative learning center at the University of Minnesota. www.cooplearn.org

The jigsaw classroom. www.jigsaw.org