



Research Spotlight on Cooperative Learning

NEA Reviews of the Research on Best Practices in Education

by NEA staff researchers

Found In: teaching strategies

Learning can be structured in three ways:

- Competitive learning - students work against each other.
- Individual learning - students work alone.
- Cooperative learning - students work together to accomplish shared learning goals.

While all three structures should be used, cooperation should play the dominant role in any classroom.

What Is Cooperative Learning?

In their overview of the topic, Kennesaw State University defines cooperative learning as a teaching strategy where small teams, each with students of different levels of ability, use a variety of learning activities to improve their understanding of a subject. Each member of the team is not only responsible for learning what is taught but also for helping teammates learn. Since students work through the assignment until all group members successfully understand and complete it, this teaching strategy creates an atmosphere of achievement. Kennesaw State University, Georgia.

Benefits of Cooperative Learning

Why use cooperative learning? Research by Johnson & Johnson (1989) indicates that cooperation, compared with competitive and individualistic efforts, typically results in (a) higher achievement and greater productivity, (b) more caring, supportive, and committed relationships, and (c) greater psychological, health, social competence, and self-esteem.

Overuse of Cooperative Learning

Opponents of cooperative learning often point to problems related to vague objectives and poor expectations for accountability. Randall (1999) who has taught elementary, high school, and college level students, cautions against abuse and overuse of cooperative learning. She says that making members of the group responsible for each other's learning can place too great a burden on some students and that cooperative learning encourages only lower level thinking and ignores the strategies necessary for the inclusion of critical or higher level thinking.

Cooperative Learning Engages Active Learning

Perhaps the most compelling argument for cooperative learning is that it actively engages students in learning. Each student has an opportunity to contribute in a small group and is more apt to claim ownership of the material.

Here are the references for this article and additional links to articles on cooperative learning:

- Johnson, D. W., & Johnson, R. T. (1989). *Cooperation and competition: Theory and research*. Edina, Minn. : Interaction Book Company.
 - Randall, V. "Cooperative Learning: Abused and Overused?" *The Education Digest* 65, no. 2 (October, 1999): 29-32.
 - **Roles and Social Interaction** - Essay about cooperative learning as a structured instructional strategy that emphasizes active learning through interpersonal interaction, where students act as partners with the teacher and each other. By Trudi Joubert, University of Pretoria, South Africa.
 - **Classroom Compass: Cooperative Learning** (1998) - Includes an overview of cooperative learning, successful models, and a related reading list. Southwest Educational Development Laboratory.
 - **The Jigsaw Classroom** - This site provides an overview of the jigsaw method for cooperative learning in the classroom. Social Psychology Network Web site.
-