

Teaching Social Skills: A View from the Classroom

Laura Carson and Sharon Hoyle

After cooperative learning training, I (Laura Carson) entered fall semester with high goals for using cooperative groups in my high school home economics classroom. I was determined to reap full advantage of the benefits by beginning early in the year, so I targeted the third day of Career Investigation class for my first cooperative lesson.

When the day arrived, I explained to my 29 students that they would be working in groups to teach each other vocabulary, using the social skills *encouraging* and *checking for understanding*. I also explained why those skills were important when working with others. As a class, we brainstormed and listed examples of what the skills would look and sound like in a group. Then I explained my role as observer, assigned students to groups, and anxiously awaited what I knew would be a successful and enjoyable experience for both the students and me.

However, as I monitored the groups, I quickly became frustrated. In several groups I saw students who weren't helping each other but who were merely trading their vocabulary lists. Other groups were interacting but not using the social skills. As the end of class drew near, I announced that we would spend the rest of the period discussing the use of the social skills. When I asked students what they had done to encourage each other or check for understanding, I got either no response or direct quotes from the examples on our list. As I had been unable to observe any use of the social skills, when I gave the students my feedback, many groups received observation sheets with nothing on them. We were all discouraged.

On reflection, I realized that I had expected my students to go too far too fast, without knowing *how* to work together. Most of my students had probably gone years without having to work with others. I also realized that I had given my students too many new things to focus on at once. They were not accustomed to sitting and working together, being responsible for teaching each other, or consciously practicing social skills, and I had asked them to do all of these—while concentrating on learning new content. No wonder we were all feeling disheartened.

I resolved to start again and ease my class into working in groups and practicing social skills. I planned frequent brief group activities without assigning social skills, to allow students to acclimate themselves to working and sitting together. I decided to keep students in the same groups for a while so they could get to know each other, and I assigned familiar tasks such as memorizing or completing worksheets to minimize the number of new skills being practiced at one time.

Two weeks later I reintroduced the concept of social skills. I decided to start with one skill—*encouraging*—instead of two. We again brainstormed reasons to use *encouraging*, along with what it would sound and look like. I paired the skill with a familiar task to allow students to focus on the use of the social skill. This time there was definite improvement in the amount of *encouraging* I observed in the groups, and yet a number of individuals still did not use the skill. I struggled to determine what was needed to fill the gap.

I concluded that some students still needed better models of the skill to relate to; listing examples of *encouraging* was not enough for them. So, over the next two weeks, I planned different ways to model the skill. On one day I asked two students who I knew were displaying the skill to role-play an assignment with me in which we demonstrated acceptable ways to encourage each other. On another day, students went through a "dry run" to practice the skill. For five minutes they sat with their groups and took turns saying encouraging phrases while displaying encouraging actions. There was no task involved. For a few of my students, it was the first time I had seen or heard any evidence of the skill.

When we returned to completing tasks, I altered my method of recording students' use of social skills during group work. Instead of recording words and actions used as a group, I began listing them for each individual. As an incentive for all, I began to offer a reward to groups in which I was able to observe each individual use at least two encouraging words and two encouraging actions. With this, I began to hear students encouraging each other to encourage! At last success was ours.

Laura Carson and Sharon Hoyle are Mastery Learning Specialists, Keystone Project, Fort Worth Independent School District, 3320 W. Cantey, Fort Worth, TX 76109.

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Using Bonus Points

Many teachers want to use a structured program to teach students the interpersonal and small-group skills they need. Such a program will give students the opportunity to earn bonus points for their groups by using targeted cooperative skills. We have found that students, even socially isolated and withdrawn ones, learn more social skills and engage in them more frequently when the group is given bonus points for their doing so (Lew et al. 1986a, 1986b). Bonus points can be accumulated for academic credit or for special rewards, such as free time or minutes listening to one's own choice of music. We recommend the following procedure:

1. Identify, define, and teach a social skill you want students to use in working cooperatively with one another. This skill becomes a target for mastery. Skills include staying with the group, using quiet voices, giving direction to the group's work, encouraging participation, explaining answers, relating present learning to past learning, criticizing ideas without criticizing people, asking probing questions, and requesting further rationale (Johnson et al. 1988).

2. Use group points and group rewards to increase the use of the cooperative skill:

- a. Each time a student engages in the targeted skill, the student's group receives a point.

- b. Points may be awarded only for positive behavior.

- c. Points are added and never taken away. All points are permanently earned.

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