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Cooperative Learning: The First Year

A group of Oklahoma teachers who have learned by experience how to implement cooperative learning offer their advice to other educators.

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A one-day training session with David and Roger Johnson in the summer of 1987 excited and challenged our three classroom teachers who attended. The presentation convinced us that cooperative experiences would be overwhelmingly beneficial to our students. We were ready to dive into cooperative learning.

So we took the plunge, and soon we found ourselves treading water—floundering even—from time to time. Fortunately, we've come a long way since then. We hope this article will help other teachers make a smoother transition to the successful use of a cooperative learning program. We believe three components are vital to success: commitment, pacing, and support.

Vital Components

Commitment. So many times, each of us had jumped on a bandwagon only to face what seemed to be insurmountable difficulties. Then we had given up because of lack of commitment. On our way home from the Johnson and Johnson training session, however, we promised ourselves to use cooperative learning for a minimum of one year—and we took that promise seriously. Our commitment

to the program and to the district has helped us see the cooperative learning project through the rough times.

Pacing the program. The Johnsons told us that it takes teachers two to three years to incorporate cooperative learning fully into their present teaching styles and to use it the recommended 60 percent of the teaching day. Our enthusiasm temporarily blinded us to this fact, however, and we began too quickly. We immediately planned different groups for each subject area and too often neglected the direct teaching of social skills. As a result, our foundations were not well established, and our first year's experiences were more difficult than necessary.

We recommend that teachers start with one lesson in a subject with which they feel comfortable. They should continue in this area until the cooperative process goes smoothly—both socially and academically. Then they can add other subjects as competence develops and add social skills as the need arises. Some teachers may spend considerable time teaching and modeling social skills first. These skills are then firmly in place before the groups begin their academic assignments. Every teacher must internalize cooperative learning, and adapt it to his or her own teaching style. Feeling comfortable and secure takes time, and no two classrooms will be identical.

When introducing students to cooperative learning activities, we first decide on a class name, then on names for each group—quite a lesson in give-and-take! We have learned that lots of modeling must also occur as we move into academic experiences. Younger children in particular must see what they are expected to do.

Support. Just as positive interdependence is vital to a cooperative learning lesson, it is vital for the teachers who use it as well. At first, every day at least one of us was ready to give up. But because there were others with whom to share difficulties and triumphs, we persevered.

Our group started with only three members. It now includes 17 of 19 staff members, all of whom use cooperative learning in some way. Our support group meets monthly, with interested teachers and administrators from across the district in attendance. Today at these meetings, those of us who were involved from the beginning still learn from others. Many of us have developed close friendships, and our commitment is stronger than ever.

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Practical Suggestions

The following suggestions can help any classroom teacher use cooperative learning more easily. Some of these ideas we have discovered through the "learn-by-your-mistake" method. Others we have discovered through books, articles, and newsletters (see, for example, Johnson et al. 1986).

Arrange groups efficiently. We simply leave desks in group clusters all day. Students face the front during instruction or independent activities, then rotate their desks to face each other for group work. If there is too

Photograph by Betty Clanton

This page: *The Park Lane Elementary cooperative learning support group meets monthly to share difficulties as well as successes. Shown here are some of the members (left to right): Marcia Easton and Bobbie Dunham (teachers), Ken Baden (principal), and Judy Stout, Judi Priest, and Claudia Edwards (teachers).*

Opposite page: *When forming cooperative learning groups, teachers of younger students may want to start small—with groups of two.*

much socializing during independent work, some teachers arrange desks so that group members are back to back. Other teachers may prefer students in rows but arrange desks so that group members are easily moved together. Teachers must keep experimenting until they find what works best in their classrooms. The best arrangement may vary from group to group and from year to year.

Determine group size. When in doubt, start small. Remember, the more members in a group the more input, but the more personalities with which to deal. Pairing students may be the easiest way for both teachers and students to begin cooperative learning. Teachers of younger students typically use groups of two, as these children are at a more self-centered stage of development. When there is one real "troublemaker" in the class, pairing him or her with just one other child eliminates excessive distraction. Teachers should experiment with different numbers until they find what works best for them.

The bottom line for inducing students to work cooperatively: a base group must realize that its members will stay together until they can work well together.

Decide how long groups stay together. Our teachers in grades 3–5 have students stay in groups for four to six weeks, depending on the length of the unit studied. This amount of time seems to work well for secondary teachers, also. Kindergarten, transition, and 1st grade teachers often pair students for only one lesson, one day, or one week. A special education teacher reported that her goal was to get the same two students to make it through one short assignment per day for a week. The bottom line for inducing students to work cooperatively: a base group must realize that its members will stay together until they can work well together.

Form new groups. Each time new groups are formed, teachers should provide activities for students to get acquainted. These activities may include trading phone numbers, telling about themselves, discovering similarities and differences, and choosing team names. For most situations, we have found that groups composed of different ability levels work best for students. Nevertheless, even when classes are already arranged according to ability (honors classes, reading groups, learning disabilities), cooperative learning concepts are still viable.

Divide group responsibilities. Putting a different symbol on each desk is a handy way to divide group responsibilities. For instance, teachers can give each student a star of a different color. Today the Red Star reads, the Blue Star writes, and so on. With our primary students, we have each student read and explain only one problem or question on a page rather than the whole page. This system allows the teacher to determine whether each student understands the concept. It also avoids taking the amount of time that slower students may need to struggle through the entire page.

Encourage responsibility. Peer pressure works well for discipline. Teachers can give groups rewards for achieving desired criteria. For example, teachers can make a chart with each group's team name listed. Every group that fulfills expectations—such as working quietly, praising members, bringing back completed homework, and returning office notes—earns a point. Then the teacher gives appropriate rewards for attaining a certain number of points.

Teachers should give teams, rather than individuals, classroom responsibilities: for instance, one group keeps the library organized this week; another group cleans the boards. This system works especially well with elementary children; it allows everyone to contribute rather than just the ones who finish first.

Each team can have a leader for the week. Each member shows his or her work, when completed, to the leader. The leader checks for completion and marks the assignment off by the student's name. This system can reduce the number of late papers and, in elementary classrooms, can even help get names on papers. Next week, a different group member can be the leader, so that everyone shares the responsibility.

Decide when to use cooperative learning. We always use cooperative learning when practicing a new concept, so we can make sure each student has a solid understanding. For instance, when the class is just beginning subtraction with regrouping or algebraic equations, each student must take turns solving the problem aloud, explaining each step. If the student is wrong, the teacher will catch the mistake immediately, rather than later when checking a page of 25 problems worked incorrectly.

Whenever an assignment requires discussion and higher-order thinking skills, cooperative learning is appropriate. It also provides a perfect setting for small-group brainstorming: quiet voices are not lost or shouted down in this situation, and there is less risk in sharing with two or three others than with the whole class. Cooperative learning also lends itself well to art activities, storytelling, and peer editing.

The Sound of Learning

A rise in the noise level of the classroom may pose a serious threat to the use of cooperative learning. Do not let it! "Using quiet voices" is a social skill that teachers should have students work on early and often—and quiet groups should be rewarded appropriately. Remember, monitoring determines the success of cooperative learning. When teachers listen to what is being discussed in groups, rather than to the general noise level, they can assess students' understanding and progress. What we hear during cooperative learning assignments is the sound of children learning—and that is what we are here for.

But it's almost impossible to implement alone. There must be someone with whom to share ideas, successes, and failures. So get a friend and start slowly. Read, share, experiment, and share and share and share!□

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Reference

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