Selling Cooperative Learning Without Selling It Short

Cooperative learning has the potential
to transform our schools, our communities,
and ultimately our society.

Cooperative learning is being marketed as one of the patent medicines of the '80s and '90s—good for whatever ails the schools. It's the answer to everything from mainstreaming to classroom management, from motivating students to raising standardized test scores.

As early proponents and implementers of cooperative learning, we believe strongly in its potential to transform classrooms, schools, and, ultimately, society, by creating communities of caring and support, which, in turn, engender high levels of achievement in many domains. Working together, communicating, sharing, finding common goals and the common ground—these are central values for us and ones that we believe can be realized in classrooms through cooperative learning. And we are delighted by the attention finally being given to this approach and by the recognition that cooperative learning has tremendous potential.

We are not, however, always happy about the nature of the discourse or the sometimes unreflective enthusiasm with which cooperative learning is advocated. Discussions and debates about cooperative learning often focus around questions like:

• "Which form of cooperative learning is best for raising student achievement?" (with no consideration given to the other outcomes of cooperative learning)

• "What cooperative learning strategies are most effective for classroom management?" (assuming that teacher control of a classroom is normative and desirable)

We must examine how cooperative learning either conflicts with or enhances other classroom values or teacher intentions.

• "How can we compare the relative efficacy of various cooperative learning models using standardized test scores?" (neglecting long-term, qualitative measures of intrinsic learning or critical thinking).[1]

Other, more penetrating questions need to be asked. While cooperative learning has encouraged us to reexamine *one* aspect of our educational system—how students are asked to relate to one another in classrooms—other aspects of classroom practice and schooling have gone largely unquestioned.[2] Thinking about and implementing cooperative learning can provide us a wonderful opportunity: as we think more carefully about the reward structures of classrooms, we can also step back and look at the structures and functions of schooling that we accept as givens. Next let us consider some opportunities for realizing the power of cooperative learning.

Reflecting on Content

Some advocates stress that cooperative learning is a teaching technique that can be used for whatever a teacher would typically teach. True, but this

may be a good time to ask ourselves about the *value* of what we ask students to learn (either competitively or cooperatively). Simply because a lesson is implemented cooperatively does not assure its value. Using cooperative techniques to have students cover the same boring, inconsequential, or biased material or to have them "get through" worksheets with more efficiency doesn't demonstrate the approach's full potential for changing what goes on in schools. Rather, let's use this time of restructuring the *ways* in which we teach to examine *what* we teach as well, weighing carefully the value and relative merit of every aspect of the curriculum.

Making Content and Process Compatible

We can certainly use heterogeneous learning groups to learn about World War I, but why not use such groups to explore the role of competition in causing wars and, alternately, cooperative methods of conflict resolution? When we use the Jigsaw method[3] to learn about famous people (each person learning and teaching about a different person of accomplishment), we can ask students to focus on how these people cooperated with others to make positive contributions or to build a better world. Let's broaden our list of "Who's Famous?" and encourage students to think about *which* famous people we usually talk about and why people of color and women are sometimes excluded from our lists and our learning. Further, we can use cooperative learning to help students learn *about* cooperation,[4] using cooperative teaching strategies to help students understand the things that divide us, that keep us from seeing one another as full human beings, including racism, sexism, and discrimination based on age or physical condition.

Coordinating the Approach with Other Classroom Values

While teachers can start implementing cooperative learning in small bits and pieces, we must also examine how the approach either conflicts with or enhances other classroom values or teacher intentions. For example, using a cooperative group for social studies when that lesson is preceded by the weekly spelling bee and followed by the teacher's choosing the "row of the week" for an award may lead to confusion for students and to limited success for teachers. At a recent cooperative learning workshop, a teacher confessed to one of us that she caught herself yelling at a group of students, "Stop helping each other; we're not doing cooperative learning now!" She reflected, with honest embarrassment, that there was no reason why her students shouldn't help each other most, if not all, of the time.

Teachers also need to be empowered to look at all aspects of their classrooms, rather than just being asked to implement a cooperative learning group for a portion of the day. Because cooperative learning is often packaged and taught as some expert's "nine-step model" to be followed precisely, teachers are not encouraged to think about how the model fits in with the rest of what they do. For example, a key step in many models is "processing," in which students discuss how they functioned as a group and work further on their interpersonal skills. Processing *is* very important, but "processing" should also

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be conceptualized as going beyond the five minutes that follow the lesson. Processing happens in the class all the time, as students learn to trust and respect one another, as they learn to work together, as they gather formal and tacit messages that the ways they relate to one another are important and of interest to the teacher and to the smooth functioning of the class.

Giving Teachers and Students a Voice

If students and teachers can begin to redefine their roles in decision making about the classroom and the school, cooperative learning can become a potent model of empowerment. In some instances, however, teachers who implement the approach are not really empowered but rather are asked to implement models brought in from outside, planned and organized by outside experts, and evaluated by others using standard norm-referenced evaluation tools. An alternative would be to use the principles of cooperative learning to allow teachers to assume major responsibility—and credit—for thinking about what they want to teach and how they want to teach it.

Similarly, in some instances, cooperative learning has been used primarily as a classroom management strategy, as a way to get students to do what teachers want them to do. This is a far cry from sharing more responsibility for learning *with* students, involving them in decisions that affect their lives, including what they want to learn, how they want to organize themselves, and, ultimately, how they should be evaluated. Ideally, cooperative learning can lead to both student and teacher empowerment, can help schools become models of democracy, allowing all participants in the classroom and the school to have a voice in what happens and to learn how to make and implement fair and reasonable choices.

Eliminating Competition

One of the central premises of cooperative learning is that students will understand that by working together

they can be smarter and more powerful than by working alone. What, then, does cooperative learning in teams—with posted awards and prizes—really teach students about the value of cooperation? If we use cooperation only to foster a higher level of competition, then we are sending mixed messages. Do we want to teach students that there are intrinsic values to cooperation, or is it simply another, better way to get ahead of other people? Similarly, when we use rewards and prizes as part of cooperative learning, what do we teach students about the satisfactions of working together? Instead, we could use cooperative learning to model what *inclusive communities* might look like, classroom communities in which everyone helps everyone else, no one is left behind, and satisfaction derives from overcoming obstacles together.

Promoting Cooperative Learning Appropriately

Within the last month, one of us heard both a leading cooperative learning researcher and a prominent teacher educator explain that the approach is easy to sell to teachers because it doesn't make them change that much of what they do. The researcher. explained that teachers still present material (generally in lecture format) and still test students individually—the only thing different is that the *practice* portion of the lesson is done in heterogeneous small groups. Perhaps this makes cooperative learning easy to sell, but it sells short both teachers and the process and potential of cooperative learning.

Instead of assuming that teachers will only "buy into" something that isn't too challenging or different from what they already do, we need to trust that teachers are truly interested in and capable of reflecting about classroom practice and the consistency between their long-term goals and their methods—and encourage that reflectivity. In doing so, we can promote cooperative learning *not* because it is similar to our typical ways of operating, but precisely because it is so *different*. We can engage teachers and

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school districts with the notion that instead of business as usual with cooperative learning added on, we can employ the issues and values raised by cooperative learning to reconsider and change *many* aspects of classroom instruction and organization.

Cooperative learning can help us to re-think much of what goes on in classrooms. What could a focus on cooperation teach us, for example, about how we label and separate students identified "learning disabled" or "gifted"? How compatible is a school's focus on cooperative learning with an equally strong focus on a highly competitive athletic program in which only a few students who excel have continuing and consistent opportunities to participate in sports and physical activity? What is the purpose of grading, and how does one handle evaluation if one is committed to concepts of diversity, heterogeneity, and cooperation? Learning about and implementing cooperative learning can provide schools an opportunity to examine *all* aspects of school policy, philosophy, and practice, making these consistent with a belief in the value and educability of all students and a sense of the mutual responsibility that creates communities.

Cooperating for a Better World

The future of cooperative learning is rich in possibilities. We have not yet come close to a full understanding of what schools built on a model of cooperation might look like and what power they might unleash for students and teachers alike. Let's become critical consumers and critical practitioners, seeing beyond labels—simply calling something "cooperative learning" doesn't make it the best practice. If we use the principles of cooperative learning and the values of cooperation—empowering teachers and students, valuing cooperation as both process and content, and affirming interpersonal relations—we can create schools that are truly cooperative and a society in which people really do work together for shared, equitable goals.□

[1] See, for example, R. Slavin, (Fall 1988), "Cooperation Beats the Competition," *School and Community* LXVV, 1: 16–19.
[2] For an exploration of the extent to which competition colors society, see A. Kohn, (1986), *No Contest: The Case Against Competition* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin).
[3] For an explanation of this technique, see E. Aronson, (1978), *The Jigsaw Classroom* (Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage Publishers).
[4] See N. Schniedewind and E. Davidson, (1987), *Cooperative Learning, Cooperative Lives: A Sourcebook of Learning Activities for Building a Peaceful World* (Dubuque, Iowa: William C. Brown) for specific activities that enable students to learn about cooperation and to make connections between the classroom and broader societal issues.

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