

Cooperative Learning: Refining the Process

Teachers must give adequate attention to monitoring and teaching social skills if they are to introduce cooperative learning successfully.

“Where’s the teacher?” asked the secretary from the main office as she entered my classroom. She had instinctively looked to the front of the classroom for me. I raised my hand from the midst of four students selecting their own topics for a paper. Cooperative learning had taken me from the center stage of the classroom and made me a facilitator within the learning process.

When I began teaching, methodology in colleges still fostered the teacher/sergeant image. I was sorry to see “day in, day out, low achievers get negative feedback on their academic efforts,” as Slavin observed (1986, p. 8). I was equally depressed that high-achieving students were saying that school was not stimulating or fun. I started asking my students what was missing, what they would change, what they wanted. Universally, they told me that they wanted to be active, to work with others, and to have more control.

William Glasser, in a *Phi Delta Kappan* interview, showed me that everyone is motivated internally by needs for power, freedom, love, and fun (Gough 1987). In a survey, students had told Glasser that their favorite subjects were band, journalism, and physical education; in each of these group activities,

their needs were being met. My students’ needs were not being met; they felt helpless, controlled, and bored. Many performed only for external motivators: parents, college admissions, charismatic teachers.

I believed cooperative learning could give my students more satisfying experiences. By working cooperatively, they would take an active role in their learning; they would work with others toward success; they would enjoy an equal chance for recognition.

So the desks in my room started to have a different orientation: students were facing each other. I waited for the radiant smiles of free, enlightened students to brighten my day, as Slavin had promised. Instead, student jour-

nals about our experience showed negative reactions: “I wouldn’t want to do this again,” and “As long as I pay attention in class so that I’m able to pass with an 80 percent, I don’t bother doing the homework.” I came to realize that I had inadvertently taught my students a damaging lesson: to be dependent on me for their learning.

Preparation and Social Skills

Through my reading, I determined two major flaws in my approach. First, I had not adequately prepared my students for cooperative learning. They had 11 years of independent and competitive lessons to unlearn; they and I both needed to be trained in cooperative methods. Second, I needed to focus on the differences between group work and cooperative work; the latter requires positive interdependence, face-to-face interaction, individual accountability, group processing, and interpersonal skills (Johnson et al. 1984).

Of these components, the most important was the last: interpersonal skills. My students had few social skills for working together. They had been taught repeatedly to keep their eyes on their own papers, not to share homework, and to be responsible for their own grades. I had asked them in one assignment to overcome those

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values and to work together; I had asked for too much, too soon.

My Next Attempt

As I considered my next cooperative venture, I concentrated on start-up procedures. Several authors suggested that social skills had to be taught before the group could function effectively. For example, Smith (1987) suggests teaching students to make eye contact while speaking, to praise others' responses, and to convey disagreement without hostility. Teaching these skills was one step I had omitted from my first try.

This time, I started by grouping my 9th grade English students into writing groups of three, to work with a journal they had already written in the persona of a character from *To Kill a Mockingbird*. I focused on the instructional objective of selecting clues to the character of the persona and on the collaborative goal of accepting another person's ideas about one's work. (Johnson repeatedly states that the collaborative goals must be articulated for the students; they cannot merely be implied in the unit.) To ensure that social skills were being practiced, each group selected a coordinator, whose task was to encourage each member to contribute, and a recorder, whose function was to provide a record of comments for sharing with the entire class.

The results of this lesson were encouraging. The recorders' reports provided a means for identifying and modeling appropriate interactions. The reports showed that my students had begun to develop the interpersonal skills that would ensure the success of future cooperative projects.

Monitoring

The other important factor in cooperative learning that had been weak in my first attempt was monitoring: checking for total team involvement and appropriate social interactions. According to Johnson, frequent monitoring is essential. Most sources I read mentioned the negative effect of sarcasm or put-downs on group dynamics. The difference between "Your idea

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is dumb," and "I don't understand your idea; could you explain it in more detail?" can mean the difference between bonding and dysfunction. Monitoring can be as simple as asking the group to write down two things they did well as a group and one area on which they need to work. Teachers who use oral monitoring should be specific about which behaviors are appropriate and which are not. In addition to oral checks, I had my groups evaluate their group efforts with a grade, which I then included as part of their overall grade. Monitoring can also be done by a student observer or, as several authors suggested, by the team itself.

If persistent problems are identified in the monitoring process, several solutions are available. One is to present the problem to the group as an exercise in problem solving, thereby shifting responsibility to the owner of the problem—the group—and also providing another opportunity to reinforce social skills. Sometimes a problem can be corrected by making one of the group members the monitor for a day. Upon returning to the group the next day, the monitor often has a heightened awareness of the problem and subsequently moves to correct it.

If the problem is a particular group member with whom no one wants to

interact, David Johnson suggested many options to me at a recent workshop. First, select group members for inclusion in his group carefully. If he is shy, select your most supportive students to work with him. If he is hyperactive, select your most assertive. Second, give that student a highly structured role such as recorder. Third, try to "get your foot in the door" by asking him to do only one small task. If that is successful, add one small additional task at a time.

Improved Attitudes

Thanks to cooperative learning, my students are now satisfying some of their needs for freedom and love or at least for fellowship and fun. The most significant improvement I have observed is in their attitude toward learning. When authors suggested that cooperative learning would eliminate control problems and increase on-task time, I had been skeptical. An incident with my Latin I class, however, has convinced me.

This class had been divided into five groups of four, with each member responsible for a different component of the unit. Students had scheduled a Monday when I was to be away at a conference as a group sharing day. When I returned, I learned that my substitute teacher had been half an hour late but that she had found the class busily sharing ideas when she arrived. Obviously, my students were motivated enough to direct their own time with or without an authority.

In the short time that I have been trying cooperative learning units, I

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have felt a huge weight lifted from my pedagogical shoulders. As Popp (1987) says, "The teacher's authority has shifted from being 'in authority' to being 'an authority.'" I no longer feel like a worker trying to "sand, polish, and paint students into educated objects" (Gough 1987), but rather like a facilitator working with people who are discussing a book together; researching a topic together, evaluating a project together—working in the way they will work in the world outside school. □

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