The Controversy over Group Rewards in Cooperative Classrooms

While the debate over the value of extrinsic rewards persists, teachers can follow a few guidelines now to help them use extrinsic rewards appropriately, while building intrinsic interest into their curriculums.

Academic controversy can be constructive and useful when the parties involved conduct a dialogue with the goal of understanding each other and arriving at a synthesis that takes all points of view into consideration. This requires listening carefully to each other's arguments and looking for their strengths rather than their weaknesses (as in a debate), the value of their insights, and the purposes they are trying to achieve. The recent exchange between Alfie Kohn and Robert Slavin concerning the use of group rewards in cooperative learning, published in the February issue of Educational Leadership (Kohn 1991a and 1991b, and Slavin 1991a and 1991b), represents only the first stage in this process.

A constructive controversy around this topic has been going on in the pages of Cooperative Learning magazine (Kohn 1990a, Slavin 1990, Schaps 1990) for several months, culminating last July in a roundtable session at the convention of the International Association for the Study of Cooperation in Education (IASCE) in Baltimore. A summary of that session was published in the December 1990 issue of Cooperative Learning (Graves 1990).

My purpose here is to carry that discussion another step forward, to discuss its applications for practitioners.

**Polar Positions**

Slavin and Kohn represent polar positions on the issue of group rewards. Slavin is concerned with increasing student achievement, and he believes the only demonstrably effective cooperative learning strategies are those that use group rewards based on the individual achievement of each group member (Slavin 1989, 1990, 1991a, 1991b). Kohn is concerned with fostering love of learning among students, and he believes that external rewards should never be used because they will undermine students' intrinsic motivation to learn (Kohn 1990a, 1990b, 1991a, 1991b).

From his reading of the research (much of which he has conducted himself), Slavin sees little evidence that achievement gains through cooperative learning are possible without the use of group rewards, although he acknowledges a few important exceptions, most notably Sharan's use of Group Investigation (Slavin 1989 and 1991a). In the roundtable last July, the Child Development Project and the program of "complex instruction" at Stanford were cited as additional examples (Graves 1990). In both cases, educators have made deliberate efforts to foster intrinsic motivation among students to work hard and to help their teammates, by using appealing curriculum materials, by establishing student norms for achievement and for helping others achieve, and by teaching students the appropriate skills to achieve those norms. This process is difficult and costly, however, and the research evidence for its success is still weak.

To bolster his arguments against the use of group rewards, Kohn cites a body of research evidence showing that extrinsic rewards undermine intrinsic motivation (Kohn 1990a, 1991a, 1991b). Unfortunately, this evidence is mixed and subject to alternative interpretations.

The "social rewards" of working cooperatively probably enhance intrinsic motivation, and are among the great advantages of using cooperative learning strategies.
Three Questions to Guide Practice

Obviously these issues need to be settled. In the meantime, however, the business of schooling must go on, and classroom teachers need the best guidance we can give based on available evidence and practical experience. Accordingly, we will consider three questions that broaden this debate concerning the use of extrinsic rewards in the classroom:

1. Are there forms of group rewards that minimize possible negative effects on intrinsic motivation?
2. Under what conditions will reliance on intrinsic motivation be most likely to achieve our academic goals?
3. Under what conditions may extrinsic group rewards continue to be necessary and useful?

Minimizing negative effects. Extrinsic rewards appear to have their most damaging effects on intrinsic motivation under two conditions:

1. When students would be willing to engage in the activities without the use of these rewards;
2. When the rewards may be seen by students as an attempt to manipulate and control their behavior.

Extrinsic rewards appear to have their least damaging effect on intrinsic motivation (and may actually enhance it) under the following conditions:

1. When the tasks are ones students would be unwilling to do on their own;
2. When the rewards are largely symbolic in form, serving more to communicate to students how well they are doing and their teachers' pride in their accomplishments, than as "payment" for their performance;
3. When the rewards are social rather than tangible;
4. When they are unanticipated.

A number of practical recommendations for the classroom follow from these observations. As Slavin correctly points out, however, the vast majority of tasks we expect students to perform are not ones they would be motivated to do on their own. When students are unmotivated and the tasks are routine, some forms of group rewards may be helpful.

When extrinsic incentives seem necessary, try using symbolic rewards such as certificates of group achievement, stars, and smiley stickers, which communicate your pleasure in and appreciation of your students' efforts, rather than tangible rewards, such as small gifts and treats, which are more likely to become the focus of their attention.

Avoid the appearance of manipulation. Behavior modification is a powerful psychological tool and there are classroom situations so chaotic that its use may be justified to create sufficient order for learning to occur. But try to involve students as much as possible in setting their own goals and reward them for achieving these. Encouraging students to pursue their own goals is a form of social reward likely to increase their intrinsic motivation to learn.

Most students find the pleasure of working together in cooperative groups a reward in itself. The "social rewards" of working cooperatively probably enhance intrinsic motivation, and are among the great advantages of using cooperative learning strategies. Many teachers find that after awhile students no longer seem to need the group certificates and other external incentives that induced them to work together effectively. Kohn is skeptical that students can be weaned away from extrinsic rewards once these have been used. But the practical experience of many teachers suggests it is really quite easy. In fact, it may be more difficult to wean students away from routinely using these rewards even when they are no longer necessary.

Finally, unanticipated rewards, whether simply in the form of teacher recognition, a class party, or free time at the end of the day for pure fun after the class has worked hard and effectively, are powerful tools for enhancing student motivation.

Using intrinsic rewards. Group rewards do serve to motivate students to undertake routine academic tasks, such as basic skills acquisition. Increasingly, however, educators are urging discovery and problem solving approaches in science and math, whole language learning, and simulations and role plays in social studies. With these approaches, basic skills are acquired in context, while students undertake engaging activities. Clearly, we need to make our lessons as intrinsically interesting as possible and be alert for whether their inherent fascination is sufficient to motivate our students. A continuing need for extrinsic rewards may serve as a useful indicator that our curriculum requires further examination in this regard.

Slavin (1991b) is justly concerned that in group situations the more able students may do most of the work or simply share answers with their teammates. Group rewards based on the individual achievement of each group member is one way to ensure that able students take the trouble to help their teammates really learn and not just complete their group project or worksheet. Such rewards may also serve to "give permission" to students to ask for help when they need it, since otherwise they might let down their teammates.

Without group rewards, we would need to find some other means to accomplish these goals. Fostering internalized norms for high quality academic performance and helping others is a slow and difficult task, but this behavior should transfer to other situations where group rewards are not provided. The Child Development Project (Solomon 1990) and the Stanford Program for Complex Instruction (Cohen 1986) provide models for how to proceed.

Teaching students the skills to help each other effectively is also necessary—and something that Slavin's Student Team Learning approach (Slavin 1989) does not include. Good helping behavior is not automatic; it needs to be defined, modeled, and practiced. But it is a skill that will particularly benefit and challenge the more able students—and it is one they would not be likely to acquire in special programs for the gifted.

Conditions that call for extrinsic rewards. All our efforts to improve our curriculums may still leave us with a large portion of school activities students may be reluctant to engage in without some form of extrinsic reward. This is true for most adult jobs;
why should we expect school to be different? The use of cooperative
learning groups, with small, largely
symbolic certificates of group achieve-
ment based on the individual achieve-
ment of each group member, will usu-
ally increase student scores on stan-
ardized tests; and these learning
teams can make the effort more fun.
When improved test scores are our
goal, we now have a proven means to
attain them.

But many of us aspire to much more
for our students. Slavin's Student
Team Learning strategies are ideal for
non-contextual basic skills acquisition.
They are not ideally suited for whole
language learning, mathematics prob-
lem solving, and the development of
higher-order thinking skills in science
and social studies. Other cooperative
learning strategies are available for
these purposes, however, such as
Group Investigation (S. Sharan 1990,
Y. Sharan 1990) and jigsaw modifica-
tions developed mainly by Australian
and Canadian educators that involve
groups in synthesizing and applying
the information their members teach
each other (Clarke et al., 1990; Kagan
1985, Reid et al. 1989). Research con-
ducted by Shlomo Sharan and his col-
leagues (Sharan and Shachar 1988)
with Group Investigation, in which
they carefully measured higher-order
thinking skills, verbal fluency, and
other rich intellectual outcomes, am-
ply demonstrates the effectiveness
of this approach. There is almost no formal
research on achievement outcomes
from the variety of other cooperative/
collaborative learning strategies avail-
able, but teachers almost universally re-
port their students are thinking more
deply as a result of their use. These
informal observations, though unre-
ported in the research journals, should
not be ignored—they probably carry
more weight with teachers than formal
research findings.

A Shared Vision

Many of the differences between
Slavin and Kohn are a matter of where
they stand along a pragmatic/idealistic
continuum. Both share a vision of
what education should be: not simply
the acquisition of knowledge, but the
development of intellectual curiosity,
creativity, and problem-solving skills.
By systematically using group rewards
based on the individual achievement
of each group member, Slavin has
developed and refined cooperative
learning strategies that work success-
fully for the vast majority of learning
tasks he finds teachers giving their
students. Kohn fears that this very suc-
cess may detract from our efforts to
develop a richer and intrinsically mo-
tivating curriculum and to expect
more from our students than good test
scores. The contrast between Kohn's
and Slavin's approaches sharpens our
awareness of the implications of our
instructional practices and helps us to
make our choices more consciously.
By focusing on the variety of forms
that group rewards can take and the
conditions under which these may ap-
propriately be used, however, we can
move the debate forward to address
the complexities of daily practice.

In addition to Kohn and Slavin, four
other leaders in the field participated:
Elizabeth Cohen, Professor of Education
and Sociology at Stanford University and
author of Designing Groupwork (1986);
Spencer Kagan, known for his “structural
approach to cooperative learning and au-
thor of Cooperative Learning Resources for
Teachers (1985); Dee Dishon, well-known
consultant and staff developer and co-
author (with Pat Wilson O'Leary) of A
Guidebook for Cooperative Learning
(1984); and Daniel Solomon, Director
of Cooperative Learning Resources for
Teachers (1985). All these contributors
are active in research, writing, and staff
development and have an ongoing inter-
est in the field of cooperative learning.

References

Clarke, J., R. Wideman, and S. Eadie.
(1990). Together We Learn. Toronto:
Prentice-Hall.
New York: Teachers College Press.
Guidebook for Cooperative Learning.
Holmes Beach, Fla.: Learning Publica-
tions, Inc.
Appropriate or Desirable in a Coopera-
tive Classroom?" Cooperative Learning
11, 2: 15-17.
Resources for Teachers. Riverside, Calif.: Uni-
versity of California.
Kohn, A. (1990a). "Effects of Rewards on
Prosocial Behavior." Cooperative Learning
Kohn, A. (1990b). The Brighter Side of
Human Nature: Altruism and Empathy
Versus Cooperative Learning." Educa-
tional Leadership 48, 5: 83-87.
Kohn, A. (1991b). "Don't Spoil the Promise
of Cooperative Learning." Educational
Leadership 48, 5: 93-94.
Lepper, M. (1988). "Motivational Consider-
aton in the Study of Instruction." Cog-
nition and Instruction 5, 4: 289-309.
Small Group Learning in the Classroom.
Scarborough, Western Australia: Chalk-
face Press.
Cooperative Learning, 10, 4: 17-18.
Sharan, Y. (1990). Group Investigation:
Theoretical Foundations." In Perspec-
tives on Small Group Learning, edited by
M. Brubacher, R. Payne, and K. Rick-
ett. Oakville, Ontario: Rubicon Publishing
Co.
Sharan, S., and H. Shachar. (1988). Lan-
guage and Learning in the Cooperative
Classroom. New York: Springer-Verlag.
Expanding Cooperative Learning." In
Perspectives on Small Group Learning,
edited by M. Brubacher, R. Payne, and K.
Rickett. Oakville, Ontario: Rubicon Publish-
ing Co.
Theory, Research, and Practice. Engle-
Cooperative Learning, 10, 4: 17.
on Cooperative Learning." Educational
Leadership 48, 5: 71-82.
Groupwork Work." Educational Leadership
48, 5: 89-91.
ing and the Child Development Project." 
Cooperative Learning 10, 3: 18-19.

Copyright © 1991 by Ted Graves.

Ted Graves is an educational consultant,
staff developer, and former professor at the
University of California, Los Angeles. He
and Nancy Graves are Executive Editors of
Cooperative Learning magazine and long-
time members of the Executive Board of
the International Association for the Study
of Cooperation in Education (IASCE),
which sponsors its publication. They can
be reached at IASCE, Box 11582, Santa
Cruz, CA 95061-1582.