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# How to Observe Cooperative Learning Classrooms

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*Administrators who bring knowledge of various teaching styles to their classroom observations support teachers in expanding their repertoire of effective teaching practices.*

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Oh, it's time for the principal to conduct a formal observation of my classroom. Let's see — what lesson do I have that will follow those steps?

Such thoughts often permeate the thinking of teachers contemplating an administrator's imminent formal classroom observation. A prime reason for this is that a directed-teaching model was widely used during the 1980s to train administrators to conduct effective classroom observations; now evaluators look for the elements of effective instruction — a model that includes prescribed steps in each lesson (Juska 1991). It is time that administrators increase their observational skills beyond the directed-teaching model and incorporate other styles of teaching into their formative observation methods. Administrators need a repertoire of observational skills that will encourage teachers to use varying styles of teaching for improving instruction.

Cooperative learning is one teaching style that today's administrators must know. Research reveals that it improves students' academic achievement and social skills, and that it is a popular style with students.

This article provides a framework for administrators to use when observing teachers who use cooperative learning in their classrooms. It presents a brief outline of popular models to acquaint administrators with their titles, developers, and major program characteristics (see fig. 1). The administrator can prepare for the observation using a set of suggested "discussion leads" for a preobservation conference. A set of explicit questions serves as a guide for an administrator to review before observation and to use in preparing feedback to teachers.

## Cooperative Learning Programs

Numerous program designs for cooperative learning exist that can be used in various subject areas and different types of classrooms. The literature is replete with acronyms (STAD, TGT, TAI, CIRC) and special learning methods (Jigsaw, Jigsaw II, Learning Together, Group Investigation). Administrators should not be discouraged by the multiplicity of designs for cooperative learning. Figure 1 outlines popular cooperative learning models by title (including acronyms), authors, and a brief description of program characteristics. Two major

purposes for cooperative learning programs — to improve student achievement and to increase social skills of students — are reflected in these programs. Robert Slavin and his colleagues (1984, 1986, 1990) at Johns Hopkins University develop programs that focus on cooperative learning that improves student achievement. David Johnson and Roger Johnson (1987, 1989, 1991), two brothers who share research interests, focus on techniques to improve students' social skills.

## Preparing for Classroom Observation

Administrators who plan to observe a lesson in a cooperative learning classroom will benefit from a preconference with the teacher, which is an opportunity for the teacher and administrator to become "instructional colleagues." A preconference allows the teacher to share information about instruction and student learning and the administrator to gain additional knowledge about the classroom and identify a focus for the observation.

During the preconference, the administrator can learn the basic elements of the cooperative learning model the teacher is using and the point the students are at in their cooperative learning tasks. If, for instance, the teacher is using Cooperative Integrated Reading and Composition (CIRC), the administrator can expect to see the teacher direct some small-group instruction while other pairs of students work independently on their assignments.

The administrator also discusses with the teacher the development of the cooperative learning lesson.

Suggested discussion leads include:

• Which cooperative learning model are you using? Why did you select this model?

• How did you form your groups?

• What objectives, time lines, and directions did the groups receive?

• What have you observed about group-processing roles of individual students? About academic achievement of individual students and groups?

• What task will the groups be engaged in during this observation?

• How will individual and group evaluation (academic and social skills) take place?

• Would you like me to observe a cooperative learning lesson at the beginning of a new lesson/project?

• Would it be helpful to observe the final lesson for this objective(s) to see the culmination of the group work?

• What would you like to be the focus of this observation?

• How can I best help you in this process?

### The Observation of Cooperative Learning Instruction

The questions below provide a reference for determining the focus of the observation and for deciding what kind of feedback to give the teacher. Items are listed in the categories below:

#### Classroom Organization

*Group size/composition.* Does the group size match the cooperative learning model that the teacher is using, or is the size appropriate to the assigned task? Is group composition heterogeneous?

*Room arrangement/materials.* Are desks and chairs arranged so that all

group members can see and hear one another? Is there adequate space for each group? Are materials for the lesson appropriate, available, and easily accessible? Do they promote cooperative learning activity?

#### Classroom Management

*Clear guidelines established.* Does the teacher establish clear guidelines

that facilitate positive interdependence and promote group harmony? Is it clear everyone should contribute, help, listen with care to others, encourage others to participate, and ask for help or clarification?

*Administrative procedures.* Does the teacher establish and consistently enforce a set of rules and procedures

FIGURE 1

### PROGRAM CHARACTERISTICS OF POPULAR COOPERATIVE LEARNING MODELS

#### Student Teams Achievement Divisions (STAD) (Slavin 1986)

- Four-member, heterogeneous learning teams; designed for well-defined objectives.
- Direct instruction by teacher followed by work in student teams for mastery.
- Individual student quiz scores, then summed for team scores.

#### Teams-Games-Tournament (TGT) (DeVries and Slavin 1978)

- Like STAD but replaces quizzes with weekly, three-person "tournament tables."
- Teams matched against others of similar ability.
- Student teams regrouped each week based on individual performance.

#### Team Assisted Individualization (TAI) (Slavin et al. 1984)

- Four-member, heterogeneous teams for math, grades 3-6.
- Teacher instructs homogeneous students from all groups; students go back to teams to work.
- Team members work on individual units at their skill level but help each other.
- Individual unit tests taken without team help; weekly team awards.

#### Cooperative Integrated Reading and Composition (CIRC) (Stevens et al. 1987)

- Four-member, upper elementary teams; two members have same ability level.
- Teacher instructs pairs of similar ability (reading, writing, and language arts).
- Team scores based on individual scores.

#### Jigsaw (Aronson et al. 1978)

- Six-member, heterogeneous teams, grades 3-6.
- Each team member learns assignment by becoming "expert" with members of other teams.
- Team members return to groups as "experts" and teach one another.

#### Jigsaw II (Slavin 1986)

- Four- to five-member teams.
- Students learn common material but become "expert" on subtopic, meet with "experts" on other teams; return to original team to teach material.
- Individual student quizzes with team results based on improvement.

#### Learning Together (Johnson and Johnson 1987)

- Four- to five-member, heterogeneous groups, grades 2-6.
- Total class instruction by teacher; student groups work on assignments.
- One final product for team score.

#### Group Investigation (Sharan and Sharan 1980, 1989)

- Two- to six-member student groups.
- Groups choose topic and then assign individual tasks.
- Groups make presentations to entire class, receive group award.

that govern the handling of routine administrative procedures, student oral participation, and movement during different types of activities?

*Transitions.* Do smooth transitions occur, and do they culminate in students being ready to begin and finish work on their assigned task(s)?

*Use of time.* Does the teacher promptly start relevant administrative procedures such as roll call and begin instruction or provide directions for group work? Does the teacher keep students/groups actively involved in appropriate instructional tasks during the whole lesson?

#### **Presentation of Content**

*Motivation.* Does the teacher identify for students the importance and usefulness of the objective outlined at the beginning of the lesson? (This may occur in cooperative brainstorming, group discussions, or as part of instructional input offered by the teacher or students.) Do students discover what the topic is about, why it is interesting to them, and what they already know about the topic? Do students/groups demonstrate a high level of motivation and enthusiasm for the assigned task and in accomplishing group goals?

*Input/modeling/review.* Do the students (or teacher) provide input, when necessary, and encourage group members to use similar strategies? Are instructional examples provided by teacher, textbook, instructional media, and students? Do students discuss ideas in language familiar to their peers? Does the teacher explain relevant material and skills to the class, or do students offer explanations that relate lesson objectives to their knowledge and experiences? Do student groups use a variety of skills, such as reasoning, hypothesizing,

predicting, and intuitive thinking? Do students check one another for understanding of concepts and skills and provide review, when necessary?

#### **Group Facilitation**

*Cohesiveness.* Do students show mutual respect for those of other races, ethnic origins, and social classes? Are students encouraged to work productively in their groups and reinforce (praise, reward) students who engage in appropriate behavior? Are students aware that they play a unique role on the team and that the team could not succeed without them? Do students "coat tail," or is each member of the learning team actively involved in the assigned task? Can students resolve conflicts constructively?

*Clear role expectations.* Are roles such as reader, recorder, calculator, checker, reporter, time-keeper, and materials handler or skill roles such as encourager of participation, praiser, and checker for understanding assigned during group work?

*Accountability.* Are students held accountable for individual learning through testing, individual work, or structuring activities so that each student is responsible for a specific part of the group product? Is the group accountable for its work and for the achievement of each member of the group? Does the cooperative learning experience focus the classroom reward system on helping others learn? Does the collaborative, rather than competitive mode, dominate?

#### **Monitoring**

*Intervening.* Does the teacher monitor group progress and intervene when serious problems hamper group or individual learning? Does intervention, if necessary, assist groups

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in solving their problems, rather than "taking on the problem" for them?

*Notes progress/problems.* Does the teacher circulate, making note of individual/group accomplishments, how progress is being made toward goal attainment, and how problems are being resolved? Does the teacher provide task assistance by clarifying, reteaching, or elaborating?

*Reteach/discussion.* Does the teacher use notes from monitoring and student/group input to identify areas that need reteaching or further discussion? If problems or incorrect answers are discovered, does the teacher use this opportunity to reteach or discuss the correct answer or solution with the group? If problems occur in group interaction or work process, does the teacher review and reteach the social skills necessary to increase group cohesiveness and effectiveness?

#### **Lesson Summary**

*Process/product effectiveness.* At the conclusion of the group activity/project, do the students and teacher

evaluate the progress made by the group (social and academic) and evaluate learnings (products/outcomes) from the student work?

### Becoming Colleagues

Administrators who conference with teachers, understand the instructional model they are using, and determine how cooperative learning functions in classrooms become teachers' instructional colleagues. By becoming familiar with the differences between a teacher-directed lesson and a cooperative learning lesson, they recognize teacher monitoring, teacher intervening, student group work, and student interaction as essential

elements in the cooperative learning process, and they can provide genuine feedback to teachers about their classrooms. And teachers who recognize that administrators are interested in and knowledgeable about their instructional methods can use more diverse and more effective teaching practices during classroom observations.

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*Author's note:* Graduate students in clinical supervision classes at Wichita State University worked in cooperative groups on this project and contributed to the content of the article.

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