

# Let's Collaborate about Cooperative Learning

Sarah Renslow

**Abstract:** Cooperative learning is a useful strategy to employ in the classroom. By working with small groups students are able to collaborate with one another and achieve academic and social benefits. This paper will discuss details and benefits on cooperative learning, struggles teachers face with cooperative learning and how to solve them, what makes it successful, and finally it will provide the reader with some ideas on cooperative learning methods and how to include them in their curriculum.

Cooperative learning doesn't always come easy to students. When put into groups students may be quiet and only work together when an issue about their assignment arises. Roger and Johnson (1992) call this individualistic learning with talking, a negative result of a teacher's attempt at cooperative learning. There is a difference between having students work in groups and having students work cooperatively, so, teachers need students to learn together instead of simply sitting together. Emmer and Gerwels (2002) explain that cooperative learning is an "alternative to competitive or individualistic classroom activities" (p.76). With cooperative learning, the classroom becomes a multi-group structure. The teacher becomes less of an information transmitter and more of a discussion transmitter. Cooperative learning can be seen in many different forms, but the most common one is seen when small groups of students are put together and directed to complete a task. If done correctly, cooperative learning is a benefit to overall student achievement.

It can be hard for teachers to create a cooperative learning environment that'll benefit students because of the complexity of the components involved in cooperative learning. Many students have developed into passive listeners due to previous teachers that talk at the class instead of with the class. Gillies and Boyle (2010) discuss teacher's reflections on the issues of cooperative learning. With students rarely engaging in discussions and activities, Gillies and

Boyle say that many issues arise when teachers try new cooperative learning methods. These issues may include maintaining classroom control, demanding curriculums, and personal commitment. Ten teachers were interviewed on their opinions of cooperative learning and many agreed that implementation was difficult because of time restraints, over socialization, and extensive input needed from the teacher. The interviewed teachers also noted that they had troubles with group composition and allocating tasks to students because of different home lives, economic status, race, gender, and achievement levels.

Although many teachers struggle with the challenge of incorporating cooperative learning into their classroom, the ten teachers that were interviewed also agreed that cooperative learning is a positive and effective way to teach students. One teacher stated that their students "were positively engaged and not giving up" (Gillies and Boyle, p.937) while another said "You can see them learning off each other" (Gillies and Boyle, p.935). If a teacher looks deeply into the aspects that make cooperative learning successful such as goal setting and teacher involvement they can create an ideal learning and social environment that will benefit their student's future.

In order to have successful cooperative learning, groups of students need common end goals. Groups participating in cooperative learning need to have "a sense of individual accountability" (Roger and Johnson, p.2). This means that cooperative learning can be successful if the small groups of students feel accountable for each other; they must be willing to work with one another towards a common goal. Roger and Johnson believe that if the small group understands that if one member 'sinks' the rest of the group will sink with him/her. Therefore, if the cooperative group has a common goal to do well on the assignment then all the students should swim their way to that goal together. Together the students must understand each other's motives and agree to

cooperate with one another to receive a successful result.

While working towards a common goal is one way for successful small group learning, Emmer and Gerwels (2002) state additional ideas that can make the cooperative learning environment a successful one. Previous research concluded that group tasks, teacher accountability, interdependence, and student/teacher evaluation are aspects of successful cooperative learning (Emmer & Gerwels). Their study took 18 elementary school teachers and found that feedback, manipulative materials, monitoring, and modification are additional aspects of a successful cooperative learning activity. Cooperative learning involves the students interacting with each other academically. Therefore, in order for the activity to be a positive experience, the children will need some direction in task management which develops into interdependence. If this is not present then the cooperative learning activity has the possibility to get out of hand quickly. Teachers also play a huge role in the student's success. Positive praise and teacher evaluation is another aspect of cooperative learning revealed as helpful. When the teachers take action and circle the room during activities students are more likely to cooperate with one another because they feel like their individual and group actions matter.

Through the study of 18 teachers, Emmer and Gerwels (2002) were not only able to support previous research findings but they were also able to conclude new ideas that made cooperative learning activities successful. One such finding was that "active monitoring and giving feedback allows the teacher to better diagnose problems, redirect group activities, and keep groups involved" (Emmer and Gerwels, p.89). This suggests that teachers cannot lounge around during group time if they want cooperative learning to be a success. Walking around and engaging with their students at all times is necessary in cooperative learning. Secondly, manipulative materials allow the students to get involved at a deeper level. By using their hands students are able to cut, glue, and color while learning cooperatively. This can engage more senses which will make the student learn more efficiently. Finally, the last idea discovered to create

a successful cooperative learning environment is modification. Emmer and Gerwels say that "experienced teachers can and do modify cooperative learning to fit their beliefs, goals, and classroom conditions" (p.89). By slightly altering activities each year the different classroom dynamics will be accounted for, creating affective cooperative learning.

Cooperative learning is one of the most used techniques in classrooms. Johnson, Johnson, and Stanne (2000) say cooperative learning "is clearly based on theory, validated by research, and operationalized into clear procedures" (p.2). The effectiveness of cooperative learning over competitive and individualistic learning has been validated by over 900 research studies (Johnson et. al.). Moreover, cooperative learning should continue to be used because it lets students build off of one another's ideas, develop social skills, gain a positive attitude towards education, and achieve academic success. Roger and Johnson (1992) explain that when students work cooperatively they interact with each other in a positive manner which leads them to have a better perspective of their classmates and become willing to open up on challenging questions/ problems. When these aspects are combined it helps in the achievement of the student as well. Additionally, successful cooperative learning is important to use in class because "learning is a social activity [...] when students discuss and defend their ideas or solutions with teammates; they learn to think problems through, to support their own opinions, and to critically consider the opinions of others before coming to [their own] conclusion" ([successforall.org](http://successforall.org)). People learn in communities, in our case, students learn in the community of a classroom. If teachers promote small group learning then we are promoting learning as a social activity which also makes it more pleasurable, effective, and fun for students.

There is an unthinkable amount of methods to put cooperative learning to use in future classrooms. Johnson et. al (2000) explains that cooperative learning is a generic term that refers to many ways one can conduct and organize their class. The first thing a teacher should do to create a good cooperative learning environment is to set up

his/her classroom to support the strategy. Considering the basis of most cooperative learning activities involves group work teachers will want to set up their class desks in pods. Each pod should have a diverse mix of students so they can discuss and explain countering ideas and get the most out of each activity. Roger and Johnson explain that the amount of students in each group depends on if you want more resources to be available (large), the cooperation level of the group (small if they are less skillful), and the time needed for the activity (small if it's a short period). With pod style desks, however, the teacher will have to be very active within the class in order for the set-up to be beneficial. It's also helpful to re-arrange students' seating assignments every month or so. This way the students get to participate with an ample percentage of their classmates.

After you have set up your classroom to support cooperative learning there are some basic principles on how you should structure the activities you use. Roger and Johnson (1992) lay out a model for cooperative learning that is easy to follow. First teachers must select a lesson. Roger and Johnson explain that most lessons can be adapted to use cooperation but as a teacher you will want to start off your year with one lesson and then build on more throughout the course of the year. The teacher must also provide the needed materials for the task at hand, as mentioned before, manipulative materials work well. Then the teacher must "explain the task and cooperative goal structure to the students" (Roger and Johnson, p.4). When teachers explain these items in detail to the students, the students will have a better group goal and understanding of what they need to do in order to get to that goal. Finally, the last step in the model to structure cooperative learning is monitoring. As described previously, monitoring the class during an activity is a vital component of successful cooperative learning. When monitoring the class the teacher can keep everyone on track and figure out what skills are lacking and what skills are present. This information will also aid the teacher in developing their cooperative activities for the future.

Johnson et. al. (2000) completed a meta-analysis on a variety of cooperative learning

methods and discovered that certain ones are more effective than the rest when incorporating them into the curriculum. The top five methods that they outlined are: 1) learning together, 2) constructive controversy, 3) student-teams achievement division, 4) teams-games-tournaments, and 5) group investigation. Slavin (1980) is a respected author of many cooperative learning articles and describes a couple of the top five methods. Teams-games-tournaments are when teachers divide their class into teams and give them time to study items from a worksheet. Later the teams will compete in a tournament to test their knowledge of the subject matter. Student-teams achievement division is accomplished similarly to teams-games-tournaments, however, instead of tournaments the teacher uses small quizzes to assess the student's knowledge. When using these methods in the curriculum, teachers are more likely to see a successful achievement growth.

Cooperative learning is a subject of open opportunity for many activities. Energetic teambuilding activities (such as name-games) will develop student relationships and are helpful tools to use on the first day of class. When doing team builders students will be forced to break the ice and therefore become more comfortable speaking up in class. After the first day, think-pair-share is one activity in which small groups first think individually about a topic, then share with their group members, and lastly share with the entire class during discussion. Finally, another successful cooperative learning method is literary circles. Reading is a vital part of any classroom so getting students to cooperate in activities/projects based on text will enable them to learn life lessons and achieve academic prosperity.

Today teachers have countless ideas available to them online. By simply typing in "cooperative learning" to Pinterest one can scroll through thousands of visual representations of successful cooperative learning. Therefore, there is no reason teachers should not at least try cooperative learning strategies in class. This cooperative learning strategy is beneficial to student achievement academically and socially. As teachers it is our job to prepare the next generation for what life has in store for them. It'll take hard work and

dedication from our end but the proven benefits from cooperative learning are well worth it. By incorporating cooperative learning into our teaching, with each passing class period we can help our beloved students make steps toward a successful future.

### References

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