

**collaborative learning** or **cooperative learning**: An instructional approach in which students of varying abilities and interests work together in small groups to solve a problem, complete a project, or achieve a common goal.

—*North Central Regional Educational Laboratory Glossary of Education Terms and Acronyms*

## **Cooperative Learning: A Process for Effective Inclusion**

By Bruce Saddler

With the increasing inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education classroom, the diversity of abilities has never been greater. To be successful in this challenging environment, teachers must use research-proven techniques to improve educational outcomes for all students.

One such practice is cooperative learning (CL). CL is a powerful instructional technique that employs small, heterogeneous groups of students working together for a common purpose or goal and who explicitly help one another acquire and evaluate learning. CL is an effective medium to teach academic skills, while promoting positive student interactions and enhanced attitudes toward learning.

### **Cooperative Learning in Practice**

A young fourth-grade teacher named Mr. Neram had learned about cooperative learning in his teacher preparation program. He knew that when students work cooperatively, their language becomes more inclusive and assistive toward one another, behavioral problems are reduced, and they become more involved in one another's learning and achievement (Gillies and Ashman 2000). When Neram finally had his own class, he quickly moved to include cooperative activities. He laid critical groundwork by being involved before, during, and after the cooperative learning experience through planning, monitoring, and evaluating.

### **Planning**

Neram used a cooperative arrangement during a unit on American colonies. He decided to extend their learning by having cooperative teams create products depicting different aspects of the colonist's lives. Though his class had a wide range of ability

levels, including students with learning disabilities and students who were academically gifted, he knew that CL would help provide all of them with a rich learning experience.

He provided a brief rationale for using cooperative learning and clearly stated his expectations. Figure 1 provides an example of expectations that improve cooperation. Next, he discussed how students' words to one another might help or hurt cooperation and collaboration. He then asked the students for examples of words that could be used to encourage people to help one another. After a list was created, he modeled how the students could talk respectfully to one another by using these words and how to communicate ideas without being overly noisy or discourteous. He had the students role-play to portray what to do when the inevitable disagreement surfaced between team members (Johnson and Johnson 1999).

### **Figure 1: Expectations That Improve Cooperation**

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- Each group should produce a single product.
- Each group member will be considerate of his or her group mates.
- Each group member will help other group members understand the material.
- Each group member will stay in his or her group.
- Each group member will seek help from his or her group mates.
- Each group member will show his or her support for the final product by signing the cover page.

Adapted from Johnson (1988).

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Neram placed his students into heterogeneous groups based on his knowledge of their academic and social skill levels, personality, motivation to cooperate, communication ability, and gender. He then took two steps to ensure that everyone actively participated. First, he assigned specific roles/responsibilities within the teams such as timekeeper, recorder, and reporter so students could share equitably in the work and equally contribute to the experience. He explained that anyone in the group might be a helper or a helpee regardless of the assigned role. He suggested that a helpee would be anyone who needed help during the group process and that students must recognize when

they need help and how to ask for it. He further explained that anyone who is a helper should assist others by responding to questions with respect and patience.

Second, he introduced a rubric to ensure student achievement and participation accountability (Figure 2). He explained that the rubric should be used by students to evaluate team member contributions and their own participation and learning.

**Figure 2: Group Self-Evaluation Form**

**How Did We Do?**

**My name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Directions:** Circle the number that tells how you feel about the question, then provide any comments you want me to read.

**Did everyone play a part today?**

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Maybe	Agree	Strongly Agree

**Did everyone listen to one another?**

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Maybe	Agree	Strongly Agree

**Did everyone work well together?**

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Maybe	Agree	Strongly Agree

**Did everyone say something nice to another person?**

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Maybe	Agree	Strongly Agree

**When you did not agree on something, did you settle it without the teacher?**

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Maybe	Agree	Strongly Agree

**How much did you learn today?**

1	2	3	4	5
Nothing		A little		Very Much

**How much did you enjoy working with your group?**

1	2	3	4	5
Not at All		A little		Very Much

**Comments:**

The rubric was displayed on the overhead, and each question was discussed to fully inform students about the specific performance indicators to be measured (Kagan 1992). He then modeled completing the rubric and suggested comments that might be helpful to record.

### **Monitoring**

Cooperative learning situations are most effective when teachers closely monitor group work and provide quality feedback without overly interfering in the process. He believed that students would more likely remain on task and increase their productivity if he moved throughout the room to listen to their reasoning. He occasionally asked questions or provided supportive comments while observing their work. He also praised students who were actively collaborating and gave a thumbs-up to those using quiet voices.

### **Evaluating**

At the conclusion of the project, Neram realized that he should measure the participation, cooperation, and learning of the individuals in each group. He used the rubric to evaluate the CL session by prompting each student to complete the form. The rubric also allowed the students to assess their own and their group members' participation. If a negative comment about a student's participation was noted, Neram met with the student to discuss the situation.

He ensured that each member was responsible for his or her part of the group's project. For example, the group focusing on famous people living in the Williamsburg colony assigned each member one person to research. The group then combined the individual reports into a single, cohesive product representing all of their contributions. Having definitive parts for each student allowed Neram to assign individual grades.

Neram also provided his students with an opportunity to share their work with others through classroom publications or presentations. He believed that by sharing their work with the entire class, the groups had a forum to demonstrate what they had learned

and could highlight the accomplishments of their group. The sharing also enhanced the learning of their classmates.

### **Conclusion**

Teacher involvement before, during, and after a group-work experience, allows cooperative learning to be a highly effective technique within inclusive classroom environments. Through comprehensive planning, monitoring, and evaluating, CL can be educationally and socially rewarding for you and your students.

### **References**

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