



Friday Focus

Carter County Schools

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Making Cooperative Learning Powerful

Just about everyone loves the idea of cooperative learning. Think of kids working productively and excitedly in groups, everyone getting along and enthusiastically helping one another learn. Think of kids completing great projects together, encouraging one another, and forming friendships. In this ideal scenario, all students are engaged, active, and minds-on. They are learning cooperation itself, an important life skill. Cooperative learning: how pro-social, how liberating—and how does anyone really accomplish this?

Cooperative learning can be wonderful. Students often love working this way. I've heard comments like, "An explanation is easier to understand if it's coming from another kid" or "My teammates ... make sure I understand the work." But for many teachers who've tried it, cooperative learning is a noisy mess rather than a stairway to heaven. It is the "learning" in cooperative learning that is too often left out. But it needn't be. Using these five strategies, teachers can get the greatest benefit possible from cooperative learning and ensure that collaboration enhances learning.

Form Interdependent Teams

An effective cooperative group is not a collection of kids thrown together for a brief activity. It's a team composed of diverse students who care about helping one another learn—and about the success of the team itself. All members must know they can depend on one another for help. It's best if teams are composed of a cross section of the class: high and low achievers, boys and girls, students of different ethnicities. Groups definitely won't have such diversity if students choose their teams, so the teacher should make team assignments.

Set Group Goals

Too often in cooperative learning, students are put into teams and instructed to "help one another." Helping one another is a good thing, but kids will do a lot more of it if they share a team goal. A team goal is a target, product, or indicator that shows a team has done a good job of getting every member to perform at his or her personal best. A team goal could be increasing the average score on a quiz that all students take individually after they help one another prepare, or it could be one overall product with individual components that each team member clearly contributed to. In each case, a teacher both looks at the team average and evaluates the individual products. Teams whose work meets certain criteria are awarded certificates or small privileges. This helps team members see their joint work as achieving something important.

Ensure Individual Accountability

This is the essential element most often left out of cooperative learning—and when it is, teachers lose a lot of cooperative learning's potential. Individual accountability means that to reach the team goal, all team members must master the targeted content or skills. Team success should depend on the hard work—and therefore the learning—of all members.

How can teachers ensure individual accountability? First, make sure the team goal requires the learning and participation of all team members. During lessons, use informal cooperative structures that reinforce the idea of individual accountability. For example, try a strategy like "random reporter" where one student is called at random to respond for the whole group. Finally, it's important that the teacher lets the work be challenging and doesn't step in too early to do the work for students who struggle. Letting students struggle constructively and safely in their teams enables each student to reflect on his or her thinking, compare it with others' ideas, and refine that thinking before sharing it with the class—or on a test.

Teach Communication and Problem Solving Skills

Setting up structures that promote effective cooperative learning is not enough. Team members need to know how to make good use of the opportunity to work with one another; this means they need to learn about, practice, and refine key interpersonal skills. These important skills include: active listening, explaining ideas and opinions, encouraging teammates, and completing tasks. When students know what constitutes great work within their team, and reach that standard, they can be proud of themselves and of any recognition their group receives.

Integrate Cooperative Learning with Other Structures

Cooperative learning should be seen as a key part of each lesson, but not the whole lesson. Effective class lessons might also include teacher instruction, media- or computer-based activities, and individual assessments of various kinds. The best way to use cooperative learning is to replace individual work, which in traditional lesson cycles happens after lessons and before assessments. Individual, isolated practice is boring and ineffective for most students, especially if they struggle. Cooperative learning makes practicing to mastery engaging and social and gives all students "study buddies" to help them when they run into difficulties.

Used properly, cooperative learning is an exciting way for all kids to learn. Research finds that if teachers make the five elements discussed here part of group learning, students learn more, feel more successful, love school, and enjoy the subject they're studying—and like and accept one another (Roseth et al., 2008; Slavin, 2013; Webb, 2008). For outcomes like these, it's worth the effort. (from ASCD.org)

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Upcoming Events

- Feb. 28 Super Saturday for Junior Students
- March 3 ACT
- March 16-20 DEA Testing Window
- March 9 West End Academy
- March 17 East End Academy

Cooperative Learning – More Than Group Work

