

GAIN POWER By Giving It Away!

Cooperative Classroom Management

BY JIM ROY

Good leaders follow the maxim that “You gain power by giving it away.” Effective school administrators know that sharing authority increases their influence, rather than diminishes it. But is “sharing authority” and “giving away power” a good idea for teachers, as well? Is it really wise or even possible for teachers to share authority and power with their students? The answer is a resounding YES! Teachers not only can share responsibilities with their students, they *must* do so. One of the great obligations of teaching is empowering students to take responsibility for their actions and their relationships with others. “The object of discipline is the training of the child for self-government. He [or she] should be taught self-reliance and self-control.”¹

Such learning occurs best in a cooperative atmosphere where teacher and students share the responsibility for the success of the classroom. The rediscovery of cooperative learning has confirmed the research of people like David and Roger Johnson of the University of Minnesota. Their prolific research has documented tangible benefits of cooperative learning:

- Higher student achievement,
- Increased critical thinking skills,
- Greater liking for classmates,
- Better attitudes toward subject area,
- Greater collaborative skills,
- Higher self-esteem, and
- A better relationship with teachers.²

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Students aren't the only ones who benefit from such strategies. Teachers who use cooperative instructional formats are finding that these strategies affect them as much or more than their students. One eighth-grade teacher feels that his efforts in cooperative learning have brought about a change. “I've mellowed,” he says. “As I expected the kids to work together and cooperate, I found that my expectations for myself were changing. Cooperative

learning is difficult to pigeon hole during the day. It tends to infiltrate whatever it gets close to. Mostly, it infiltrated me.”

Because of its effect on students and teachers, cooperative learning has created new possibilities that go beyond mere books and assignments. When students work together and teachers model cooperative behaviors, this allows the teacher and students to work as a unified team.

At the heart of every cooperative classroom is the heart of the teacher. As Chick Moorman, director of the Institute for Personal Power, puts it, “We begins with me.”³ Students will cooperate and value others’ opinions to the degree they see their teacher model these behaviors. Young people will accept the vulnerability that comes with trusting group members and open their hearts to learning new social skills if they see their teacher open his or her heart.

Besides immersing themselves in the available books and resource materials, teachers interested in cooperative strategies should enroll in a seminar that offers not only awareness, but foundation skills as well. Such a course will last several days and should be taught by an experienced instructor.⁴

Once the teacher understands cooperative learning, the following strategies can be considered within a cooperative management plan:

- Cooperative Rule Setting
- Town Meetings
- Peer Peacemakers.

Cooperative Rule Setting

Piaget wrote that “[A] rule of constraint remains external to the child’s spirit. . . . Rules due to mutual respect and cooperation, on the contrary, take root inside the child’s mind.”⁵ Thomas Lickona, educator and author of *Teaching Respect and Responsibility: The*

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Fourth and Fifth Rs, explains that “When the teacher and students formulate rules together, rule-making also becomes one of the first acts of cooperation and mutual respect in the development of their moral community.”⁶ Lickona also says that “Participatory rule-making helps students develop an emotional commitment to the rules.”⁷

Nancy Hoyt, third-grade teacher at Foothills Adventist Elementary, in St. Helena, California, began the school year by telling her students that she cared about each of them. She said she expected each of them to care about her and the others in the class. She then asked, “What rules do we need to have in this room that will help that to happen?” Her third graders came

up with the following four rules:

We will help each other.

We will work hard.

We will respect other people and their property.

We will do what we’re asked the first time.

There are many ways to set up a cooperative rule-making session. Some teachers divide their students into groups of four and ask them to brainstorm rules to help the class function better. Other teachers begin by stating rules and values that are important to them, and then ask the students to suggest additional rules.

A seventh-grade teacher draws a large circle on the board and inside it writes the words, “The Ideal Classroom.”

He then asks the class, “What would this classroom be like? How would people act?”

Students can be a help and support when they are included in the classroom-management process. Teachers may worry that students will make rules that he or she doesn’t want, but all rules must be acceptable to the teacher. More important, “the teacher using a participatory approach doesn’t ask what rules they *want*, but rather what rules they need in order to accomplish important classroom goals.”⁸

This strategy is effective at the secondary level as well. Dennis Plubell, principal of Rio Lindo Academy, in Healdsburg, California, says his teachers took the first two days of the school year to establish and review the rules with their students. “Yes, some things are different,” Plubell admits, “but as a staff we were comfortable with what the students came up with, and there was a feeling that we were all in this together. The spirit on campus is great!”

Town Meetings

It is naive to think that once the

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teacher and students have cooperatively set up the rules, everything will go smoothly for the rest of the year. Unanticipated challenges will occur and inappropriate individual or group habits will develop.

When problems arise, teachers are often tempted to take control. They fear that sharing control with students at this point is too risky. However, it is at exactly this point that students have the best opportunity to see how a cooperative meeting works. They can learn to search for alternative solutions, to accept responsibility for the eventual decision. They are empowered through this process. Teachers need not fear a loss of control at this point. As one writer puts it, "Teachers who effectively share control create more controllers."⁹

Teachers who use town meetings point out that students are often harder on themselves than the teacher would have been. Tom Amato, sixth-grade teacher at Foothills Adventist Elemen-

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tary, often begins a town meeting by saying, "I think we need to re-evaluate how things are going in our room." From there he explains his concerns and then invites discussion. In some cases, he initiates a group evaluation of an outstanding success in the classroom and the elements that brought it about.

Tom's classroom has a poster listing positive behaviors. At the top of the

poster, in large letters, are these words: "Be Like Jesus." This principle, combined with town meetings, has created a positive atmosphere in the class.

Town meetings can be scheduled on a regular basis or as needed. In each meeting students should be invited to share their opinions. They need to feel reassured that they will have a say in the final outcome.

Areas that teachers consider non-negotiables should not be included in a town meeting. As teacher and students work together, trust and understanding will develop. More and more areas will be open for discussion. It is a special class, indeed, that can operate at this level of trust, but it is possible and is worth the effort.

Peer Peacemakers

What would your school be like if students knew how to help their peers work out problems and misunderstandings? The Johnsons have recently developed a new book and videotape entitled, "Teaching Students to Be Peacemakers." The tape points out that conflict is inevitable. It is how we deal with our conflicts that makes the difference between friendship and alienation or resentment.

When conflict occurs in a traditional classroom, the teacher steps in as arbitrator and judge. It becomes his or her responsibility to work out the problem fairly. In a cooperative classroom, the teacher will have peer mediators work with their friends to resolve the conflict. Often "peer mediators are preferable to adult mediators."¹⁰

All students should learn the steps to conflict resolution. Those students who are more interested and willing to receive additional training can become peer mediators. In many cases, young people will open up to one another more than to an adult. Peer mediation trains students to accept responsibility for themselves and their classmates.

Control or Cooperation?

Classroom management is often referred to as classroom control. Unfortunately,

this view leads to struggles about who is going to do the controlling. According to William Glasser, adversarial relationships between teacher and students develop when the teacher feels the need to be the “boss” of the classroom. Rules are important to a boss, and he will do whatever is necessary to make sure that the rules are followed.

Glasser says that when teachers get in a struggle for control they focus on a reward/punishment system that is basically coercive in nature. “The child knows when he or she is being coerced,” Glasser explains. “As soon as this occurs, the child’s main agenda becomes resistance, the personal power struggle between teacher and pupil begins, and education is left behind.”¹¹ Glasser puts it simply, “Coercion begets coercion.”¹² Ellen White, in her usual clear way, states that “Too much management is as bad as too little. . . . Minds are constituted differently; while force may secure outward submission, the result with many children is a more determined rebellion of the heart.”¹³

No teacher wants that kind of spirit in the classroom. Consider what kind of people inspire and motivate others to do their best. Are they boss types who seek to control, or leaders who encourage input and respect individual feelings? A cooperative management plan, combined with an overall commitment to cooperative learning, will allow teachers to respect the uniqueness of each student while maintaining order and decorum.

Ellen White encouraged such a strategy. In the book *Education* she wrote, “Cooperation should be the spirit of the schoolroom, the law of its life. The teacher who gains the cooperation of his pupils secures an invaluable aid in maintaining order.”¹⁴ Cooperative learning and classroom management are not limited to any age, grade, or subject matter. Rather, these strategies are rooted in the principles of Scripture and can be applied anytime. Whether in a multigrade setting or secondary classroom, students can learn to work together and appreciate one another in

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the process.

The Adventist Church and society desperately need people who cooperate rather than compete, who value others’ opinions and who are skilled at peaceful negotiations. Such skills do not just happen. They must be modeled by teachers and practiced by students who cooperate in the classroom learning and management.

How much greater would be teachers’ influence and effectiveness if they could trust the paradox as lived by the Master Teacher. For indeed, you gain power as you give it away. ☞

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The author has compiled a catalog of cooperative-education materials. For a copy, contact:

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1903), p. 287.
2. David Johnson, Roger Johnson, and Edythe Holubec, *Circles of Learning: Cooperation in the Classroom* (Edina, Minn.: Interaction Book Company, 1990), pp. 3:13-3:18.
3. Chick Moorman and Dee Dishon, *Our Classroom* (Bay City, Mich.: Personal Power Press, 1986), p. 151.
4. The Johnsons’ Brown Book Foundation Course is an excellent program. It is taught in several locations throughout the U.S. during the course of a year. Many “disciples” of the Johnson model are teaching beginning and advanced courses, as well. This model fits well with Adventist principles and values.
5. Jean Piaget, *The Moral Judgment of the Child* (New York: The Free Press, 1966), p. 362.
6. Thomas Lickona, “Cooperative Learning and Moral Development,” *Cooperative Learning*, 10: 3 (March 1990), p. 3.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 4.
9. Moorman and Dishon, p. 50.
10. David Johnson and Roger Johnson, *Teaching Students to Be Peacemakers* (Edina, Minn.: Interaction Book Company, 1991), p. 1:5.
11. William Glasser, *The Quality School* (New York: Perennial Library, 1990), p. 29.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 10.
13. White, p. 288.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 285.