

# FIRST STEPS IN COOPERATIVE LEARNING

**A**bout three years ago, we became impressed with the principles of cooperative learning and decided to join the growing number of teachers who are changing the way learning takes place in the classroom. It has been a worthwhile learning journey and our students have benefitted. But there have been challenges. Our path has included victories and discouragements, exhilaration and exhaustion, fun and satisfaction. As we have reviewed the steps we took over the past three years, certain ideas seem especially important. In collaborating on this article, we want to share what our experience says the “first steps” should include.

## **Get Training**

Many teachers take to cooperative learning like ducks to water. Cooperative learning principles seem to be exactly what they have been looking for. But even so, mere beliefs and values aren't enough. Any teacher interested in starting cooperative learning should be trained by

a competent instructor. One-day orientation courses have their place, but can only introduce the concept. A beginning foundation course, on the other hand, usually requires at least 30 hours of instructional time. Most Adventist colleges offer cooperative learning courses during the summer, and there are probably opportunities in your local area during the school year.

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Although books and cooperative learning resources are helpful, these can't replace training.

## **Begin With Community**

In bringing cooperative learning into the classroom, you can't simply spring the concept on students without adequate preparation. We learned that the hard way. Before people of any age can work together successfully, they must form a com-

munity. This comes from knowing one another and appreciating other people's uniqueness. We tried to move directly into cooperative learning group work, but we and our students became frustrated and discouraged when it didn't seem to work. We forgot that before skiers race down the hill, they must snowplow. In other words, working with others cooperatively is a complex skill that doesn't just happen. It is learned in small steps over time. We cannot assume that our students know how a community behaves or even what a community looks like. Unfortunately, most rarely see community behavior in their homes, churches, or classrooms. Fortunately, community-building doesn't need to be complicated. (See page 14 for some ideas.) It simply means giving students an opportunity to get to know one another.

We sometimes assume that because our students sit in the same classroom together that they must know one another and be ready to work together. We have found that this is not the case. We had to make conscious efforts to melt the spoken and unspoken divisions that produce intolerance, insecurity, and cliques. When stu-

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dents mistrust one another, they view others as opponents. These and other divisions can prevent a sense of community from developing. But these divisions must be curtailed for our students to work together. Only when you start to see your class operating as a community should you consider the next step.

### Introducing Cooperative Learning

Moving into formal cooperative learning in academic tasks will feel more natural once a community environment is established within the classroom. Even here, though, it is good to remember that the spectrum of cooperative learning activities runs from the simple to the complicated and elaborate. We suggest that you start with simple structures, and move to more complex ones as you become comfortable. In fact, you shouldn't feel obliged to implement more complex structures if you can accomplish your goals through simple formats, such as: Numbered Heads Together, Mix-Freeze-Group, Roundtable, Rallyrobin, Simultaneous Roundtable, Read and Explain Pairs, Reading Comprehension Triads, Turn to Your Neighbor Summaries, and Drill and Review Practice. (See page 15 for more details.) These formats don't require extensive lesson preparation, don't put students in complicated group situations, and will not change the way you grade, but they will promote student involvement and achievement.

It's important that teachers implement cooperative groups only as they feel ready. When a teacher attends a class or workshop and becomes excited about a new teaching strategy, he or she will often do one of two things—either move ahead quickly, jumping in with both feet, or wait until everything falls into place. The first is like jumping into the deep end of the pool before knowing how to swim. The second is unrealistic. Things will never be

totally in place. In other words, go at a pace you are comfortable with, but go!

### Process Social Skills

Cooperative learning training teaches both group task and maintenance skills. Group task has to do with specific jobs or goals the group must accomplish, while maintenance deals with how the group accomplishes the task. For instance, after a group activity, the teacher concerned about maintenance skills might ask, "Did

and said, "I think the Dolphins is a pretty good name after all." After recess, each team reported on how well they had worked together, using a scale of 1 through 10, 1 being "not so well," and 10 being "terrific." The Dolphins gave themselves a 3 and discussed the problem and how they might avoid it in the future. Their conclusion was added to the class "How to Work as a Team" chart. It read, "You can't always have your own way."

If you're wondering if it is really so

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everyone contribute? Was everyone's opinion important, or did one person overpower the others?"

Any team activity can have positive results if it is evaluated afterwards. A class of third graders was making team banners to hang from the ceiling over their group. While other teams were excitedly designing and painting their banners, one team was still trying to choose a name. A girl sat, her arms crossed, her lips pursed and a determined set to her jaw, refusing to accept any name other than her choice. Her teammates tried different tactics, to no avail. The teacher felt a strong urge to jump in and fix the problem, but decided to let them solve it on their own. Finally, one child announced that they had 10 minutes until recess. The stubborn team member looked up at the clock, then at the rest of the room working busily, and at the door

important to process group maintenance skills, imagine for a moment how it might affect our church boards and school boards if they took time to process maintenance skills along with accomplishing tasks. What if the last agenda item each month gave members a chance to openly discuss how the meeting went? How exciting it will be when our students begin to fill vacant seats on our boards if we have taught them to communicate well.

### Network

In this case, *network* is a verb. Beginning with the initial training phase, it is important. Schools or conferences should send teams of teachers, rather than individual teachers, to workshops or classes. Ideally, the principal and/or superintendent should be part of the team. Networking and an ongoing support sys-

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tem are always necessary whenever innovation and change are attempted. Too often, teachers are sent to workshops and then return to their classrooms without any further feedback or help. Any decision to train teachers for cooperative learning should include a commitment to follow-up support. This support can be in the form of additional training, opportunities for peer feedback, administrative support, and mini-staff meetings. Many of these ongoing support tools will require that time be set aside or built into the school schedule. In short, teachers can experience the same benefits as their students when it comes to working as a group, instead of alone.

### Inside Leads to Outside

An eighth-grade teacher described it like this, "I used to think that cooperative learning was something I scheduled into the day, like math or history. I discovered that once cooperative learning is intro-

## COMMUNITY BUILDERS

### Name Tag Experience

Begin a class or workshop by handing out index cards and asking students to write their first name in large letters in the middle of the card. In the upper left-hand corner, have them write in smaller letters where they were born; in the upper right-hand corner where they would go if they could have a free, one-week vacation; in the bottom left-hand corner, two words that describe them; and in the bottom right-hand corner, have them share who they would have as a dinner guest if they could invite anyone in the world. Other topics might be: the place that you have lived the longest, favorite Old Testament character, favorite story from the Bible, a hobby, a significant crossroads in your life, or a new year's resolution. You can easily think up many more topics, as well. Give each person a piece of masking tape to attach the completed cards to their lapels or jackets. Then have them get into groups of four and read each other's cards. This will begin a friendship bond among the class members. (Taken from David and Roger Johnson, *Warm-Ups, Grouping Strategies, and Group Activities*.)

### The Magic Box Sheet

Divide a sheet of paper into six boxes with the following titles: Hobby or Interest; One Thing I Hope to Do This Summer; Three Words That

Describe Me . . . ; Name; Someday I Am Going to . . . ; and the Magic Box. Students fill in the boxes. The Magic Box is special because it allows each one to put in or take out something, perhaps "put in" the ability to play the piano, or "take out" the fact that they have to move because their dad got a new job. Students are to get with a partner or small group and share what is on their papers.

### My Favorites

On a sheet of paper, list the following areas of interest. Students simply fill in their favorite:

Sport to Play  
Sport to Watch  
Hobby  
Holiday  
Place to Be  
Time of the Day  
Season  
Flower  
Tree  
Song  
Music Group  
Book  
Movie  
TV Program  
School Subject  
Person to Visit

Dream Car  
Dream Career  
Dream Vacation  
Food  
Drink  
Candy Bar  
Author  
Animal

After completing the sheet, students get with a partner and small group and share what they have written. (Taken from Spencer Kagan, *Cooperative Learning*.)

### Other Community-Building Ideas

Students can be placed in teams or groups to create team banners, logos, pipe cleaner inventions, T-shirts, shelters, and towers. Newspaper and tape are the only things to be used on the shelters, while cardboard tubing (paper towels or toilet paper) and tape are the only items used for the towers.

More elaborate community-building exercises include the Survival in the Desert simulation, Lost on the Moon, or Shipwrecked at Sea. These exercises give participants a scenario and a list of items that they must prioritize to survive.

Such exercises are very effective in starting people on the road to being able to work together, without immediately throwing them into an academic work group.

duced into the classroom, it begins to infiltrate all the classes and change the spirit of the room. Mostly, it changed me.”

A second-grade teacher stated that “cooperative learning really isn’t a teaching technique.” After a pause, she explained that “it is really a way of life, and once you internalize it, it’s hard not to include it in everything every day.”

As teachers, we are tempted to look for recipes and “how-to’s” and quick fixes. To be sure, cooperative learning has its share of recipes, but these don’t change hearts and lives; convictions from the heart do that. When we believe in cooperative learning, it shows in the classroom! ✍

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## SIMPLE COOPERATIVE LEARNING IDEAS

### **Numbered Heads Together**

Put students in teams, groups, or pods of three to five and have them number off. Announce a question and allow time for each group to make sure everyone knows the answer. Call a number and have that student give the answer. Questions can range from simple recall (What is the capital of Switzerland?) to higher-level thinking issues (Give two reasons why President Lincoln stuck with General McClellan for as long as he did.) Numbered Heads keeps the whole class involved rather than the same few who always call out the answer. (By Spencer Kagan)

### **Mix-Freeze-Group**

Good for questions with a numerical answer. Have students mill about the room. Ask a question like, “How many players are on a baseball team?” Students quickly group according to their answer—in this case, nine. If the class does not evenly divide, leftover students go to “lost and found.” No one is allowed to go to Lost and Found twice in a row. Students in Lost and Found can ask the next question. Other questions might be, “On what day did God create fish?” or “Take 4 divided by 2, and multiply times 3.” (By Spencer Kagan)

### **Roundtable**

Can be used with any subject matter, but

is most often used at the beginning of a lesson. Have the group sit around a table. Ask a question with many possible answers. (For example, “Name all the sports you can.” “List all the possible pairs of numbers that add up to 11.” “Name the items in your home that had not been invented 50 years ago.”) Ask students to make a list on one sheet of paper, with each student writing an answer and then passing the paper to the person next to him or her. The paper literally goes around the table. (By Spencer Kagan)

### **Simultaneous Roundtable**

When long answers or production is the goal, two, three, or four papers can be passed around at once. For example, a Roundtable on the Food Groups might have one paper representing each of the food groups. (By Spencer Kagan)

### **Read and Explain Pairs**

The task is to learn the assigned reading material and agree on the meaning of each paragraph, formulate a joint summary, and be able to explain it to the teacher. Group students in pairs (one high and one low reader in each pair.) Have both students silently read the first paragraph. Student A is initially the summarizer, while Student B is the accuracy

checker. The summarizer outlines in his or her own words the content of the paragraph to the partner, while the accuracy checker listens carefully, corrects misstatements, and adds anything the summarizer has left out. Then the students move on to the next paragraph, switch roles, and repeat the procedure. (By David and Roger Johnson)

### **Turn-to-Your-Neighbor Summaries**

Instead of having one student answer questions during whole-class discussions, have each student turn to his or her neighbor and share insights. For example, during a Bible lecture on Joseph ask, “What do you think was the most significant thing about the life of Joseph?” and then say, “Turn to your neighbor and share your answer.” (By David and Roger Johnson)

### **Drill/Review Practice**

Use this procedure with pages of math problems. Students must correctly solve each of the problems and ensure that their partners understand the strategies required to do so. One member explains and shows how to solve a problem, while the partner listens and checks the explanation and solution for accuracy. The two students then switch roles and repeat the procedure. (By David and Roger Johnson)