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Cooperative Learning and Social Skills: What Skills to Teach and How to Teach Them

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Cooperative Learning and Social Skills:
What Skills to Teach and How to Teach Them

MARILYN W. GOODWIN

Cooperative learning strategies can be successful with students of all ages, learning styles, and ethnic backgrounds. However, students who have never been taught the prerequisite social skills cannot be expected to work together effectively. This article links cooperative learning arrangements with social skills instruction to accelerate student learning and to improve students' social relationships.

ooperative learning is a teaching arrangement that refers to small, heterogeneous groups of students working together to achieve a common learning goal and a collaborative relationship among participants (Rich, 1993; S. Sharan & Hertz-Lazarowitz, 1979). In this learning arrangement, small groups of students discuss topics and learn to take charge of their own learning. Team spirit, rather than individual competition, is stressed as students work together. Positive interdependence is the goal of cooperative learning. The success of the group depends on each member attaining both the group learning goal and his or her individual learning goal (Putnam, 1993). Cooperative learning strategies are among the most extensively evaluated alternatives to whole-group instruction; research has shown that academic achievement, intergroup relations, and self-esteem improve for many students as a result of cooperative learning instruction (Slavin, Madden, & Leavy, 1984).

An essential component and important prerequisite for academic learning is the teaching of social skills. Social skills encompass communicating, building and maintaining trust, providing leadership, and managing conflicts (Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec, 1993). Many teachers often experience failure in implementing cooperative learning strategies with students with learning disabilities because these students may need more training in social skills that promote cooperative learning, such as giving and receiving feedback, listening, and sharing and trusting (Owens, 1986).

Because the basic elements of collaboration, cooperation, and problem solving are critical for the workplace of today and tomorrow, efforts should be made to assist all students in developing and maintaining social skills. The purpose of this article is to present information pertaining to social skills instruction in three areas: (a) deciding what social skills to teach, (b) deciding how to teach social skills in cooperative groups, and (c) beginning social skill activities.

WHICH SKILLS SHOULD I TEACH?

Deciding what social skills should be taught depends on the skills that students have and have not mastered. By observing, monitoring, and evaluating, teachers can pinpoint which social skills students lack. For example, numerous social skills affect the success of cooperative learning. Figure 1 delineates four levels of cooperative skills: forming, functioning, formulating, and fermenting (Johnson et al., 1993). *Forming* skills are those skills needed to organize the group and establish minimum norms for appropriate behavior. *Functioning* skills are those skills needed to manage the group's activities in

Forming	Functioning	Formulating	Fermenting
• moving into groups with undue noise	• giving directions to the group	• summarizing	• disagreeing without criticizing
• staying with the group	• expressing support and acceptance toward ideas	• providing constructive feedback	• extending member's answers
• using quiet voices	• asking for help or clarification	• elaborating on a comment or answer	• probing by asking questions
• encouraging others	• paraphrasing	• checking for understanding	• generating further answers
• looking at the speaker	• using humor to motivate group	• demanding vocalization to make implicit reasoning overt	• integrating ideas into a single position
• exhibiting self-control (keeping hands to self)	• offering to explain	• asking members to plan out loud	• testing reality by checking out the group's work with the instructions

Figure 1. *Four levels of coooperative skills.* Note. *From* The New Circles of Learning: Cooperation in the Classroom and School, by *D. W. Johnson, R. T. Johnson, and E. Holubec, 1993, Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD). Copyright 1993 by ASCD. Adapted with permission.*

completing a task and in maintaining effective working relationships among team members. *Formulating* skills are those skills needed to build deeper levels of understanding of the content being studied, to stimulate the use of higher level thinking, and to emphasize mastery and retention of the assigned material. *Fermenting* skills are those skills needed to stimulate concepts of prior learning, cognitive conflict, the search for more information, and the communication of reasoning behind one's conclusions. Teachers start with forming skills, proceed through functioning and formulating, then to the most complex, fermenting skills. These skills are appropriate for most upper elementary classrooms.

HOW SHOULD I TEACH THE SKILLS?

We cannot assume that cooperation will occur in cooperative learning groups simply because we have instructed students to "work together." Students who have never been taught cooperative skills cannot be expected to work together effectively. Social skills become most important when students are engaged in cooperative groups; therefore, cooperative groups are the best setting to begin teaching these skills.

Learning cooperative skills is no different from learning academic skills. The teacher should provide opportunities for students to do the following:

• see the need for the skill,
• understand what the skill is and when to use it,
• practice using the skill,
• receive feedback on how well they are using the skill, and
• persevere in practicing the skill until it becomes automatic (Johnson et al., 1993).

One method of teaching social skills is to teach them as part of a cooperative learning lesson. Since the early 1970s, a variety of cooperative learning methods have been developed. Some of the methods are simple, whereas others are more complex or difficult to learn. Using one of the suggested cooperative learning structures outlined in Figure 2, teachers can begin to teach important cooperative skills.

The cooperative learning structures in Figure 2 are arranged on the basis of their degree of complexity, or level of implementation difficulty. The following is a brief description of each, from simplest to most complex:

1. *Think-Pair-Share* (Kagan, 1990) is a cooperative structure in which partners answer a question privately,
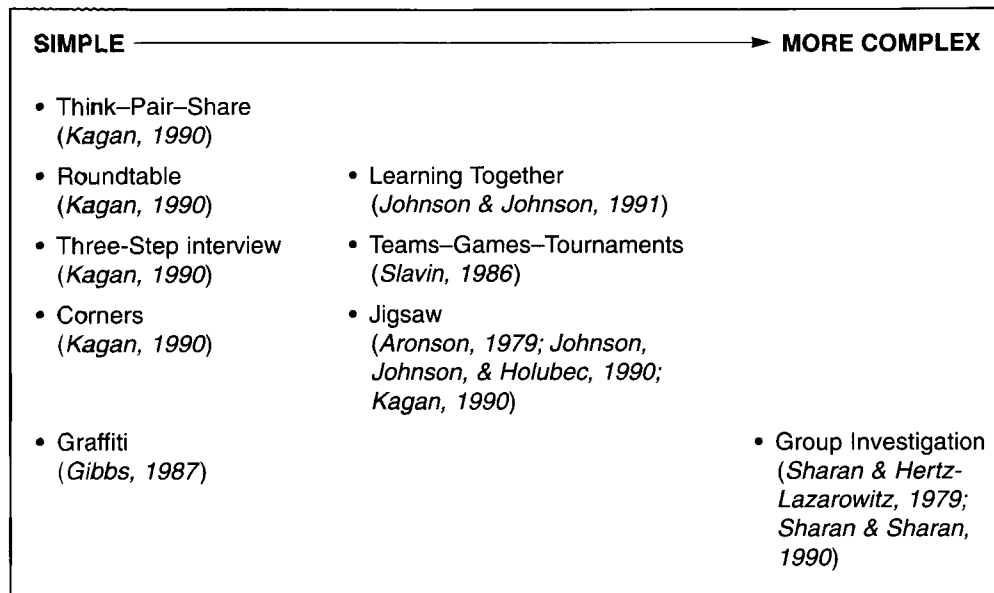
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SIMPLE ──────────────────────────────────────────────→ MORE COMPLEX

• Think–Pair–Share
  (Kagan, 1990)

• Roundtable                    • Learning Together
  (Kagan, 1990)                   (Johnson & Johnson, 1991)

• Three-Step interview          • Teams–Games–Tournaments
  (Kagan, 1990)                   (Slavin, 1986)

• Corners                       • Jigsaw
  (Kagan, 1990)                   (Aronson, 1979; Johnson,
                                  Johnson, & Holubec, 1990;
                                  Kagan, 1990)

• Graffiti                                          • Group Investigation
  (Gibbs, 1987)                                       (Sharan & Hertz-
                                                      Lazarowitz, 1979;
                                                      Sharan & Sharan,
                                                      1990)
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Figure 2. *Cooperative learning structures.* Note. *From* Cooperative Learning: Where Heart Meets Mind, by *B. Bennett, C. Rolheiser-Bennett, and L. Stevahn, 1991, Toronto: Educational Connection. Copyright 1991 by Educational Connection. Adapted with permission.*

discuss their thoughts with a partner, and share the combined responses with the class.

2. *Roundtable* (Kagan, 1990) is a cooperative structure in which a single piece of paper and a pencil are systematically passed around a small group. One partner responds to a question or idea and then passes the paper and pencil to the team member to the left.

3. *Three-Step Interview* (Kagan, 1990) is a cooperative structure in which team members interview one another on a particular topic. Partner A interviews Partner B while Partner C records important points of the response. Roles are rotated until all members have been interviewed.

4. *Corners* (Kagan, 1990) is a cooperative structure in which students can choose and discuss the particular dimensions of a given topic. Different dimensions of a topic are posted in designated corners of the room. Students move to the corner that represents their feelings on the topic and discuss their reason for choosing the corner with other students who are there. After discussion, the teacher randomly selects students in different corners to report responses from their corner.

5. *Graffiti* (Gibbs, 1987) is a cooperative structure that can be used as a group energizer or to facilitate brainstorming. Each small group is given a large piece of paper with different colored felt pens and asked to respond to a question, topic, issue, or statement. All members of the team write their *graffiti* (words, phrases, graphics) for a given amount of time. Then, each group passes its graffiti sheet to the next group and the process repeats, with each group responding to a new topic.

Students read and discuss the new comments. A summary from each group could be given to the class as an evaluation.

6. *Learning Together* (Johnson & Johnson, 1991) is a cooperative structure in which small groups work to accomplish mutual learning goals. Teammates work on academic or social tasks that involve preparing a single team product to which all have contributed.

7. *Teams-Games-Tournaments* (Slavin, 1986) is a cooperative structure in which teammates study in heterogeneous groups to master learning and individually apply their learning in homogeneous groups in a competitive game based on the learning. After the game (tournament), students return to their cooperative group with their individual scores. Then a team score is calculated and winning teams are recognized.

8. *Jigsaw* (Aronson, 1979; Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec, 1990; Kagan, 1990) is a cooperative structure in which the members of each cooperative group become experts on different aspects of one topic of study. After becoming experts on the assigned subtopic, teammates teach one another. The group goal is that all members of the team master all aspects of the major topic.

9. *Group Investigation* (S. Sharan & Hertz-Lazarowitz, 1980; Y. Sharan & S. Sharan, 1990) is a cooperative structure in which students plan and carry out an individual course of study. Small groups make decisions about what to investigate, what each member will contribute, and how to communicate the information learned. This structure is complex in that students are asked to perform learning tasks that require greater

student autonomy and group self-direction (Johnson et al., 1993).

TIPS FROM EXPERIENCED TEACHERS

The implementation of cooperative learning is sometimes easier said than done. As in all new efforts to increase social skills, there are several keys to successful implementation. The following is a list of tips from experienced teachers who have used cooperative learning to include students with learning disabilities in their general education elementary classrooms:

- Start slowly.
- Teach beginning social skills with nonacademic activities.
- Pairs and three's work better than large cooperative groups.
- Gradually extend applications to new subject manner.
- Make changes incrementally.
- Have a parent meeting to dispel fear of group grades.
- Keep things simple.
- Use old tennis balls to fit on desk legs to cut down on noise when students are moving into groups.
- Fine-tune procedures to improve functioning.
- Pick and choose from a variety of cooperative structures.
- Share your concerns with a "veteran" teacher.
- Have a written ongoing evaluation of social skills progress for both the group and individuals.

Teaching social skills in cooperative groups is a three-step process. First, the teacher decides which social skill to target based on observation, monitoring, and evaluation. Second, the teacher chooses an activity with a social component. Third, the teacher combines the social skill with an appropriate cooperative structure. The following is a list of beginning social skills activities from experienced teachers:

1. *How Many Rectangles?* This activity can be adapted for any age. It works well with Three-Step Interview or Think-Pair-Share. Students are given a piece of paper with a box on it similar to the one shown in Figure 3. The question is: how many rectangles? Students answer individually, discuss their answers, and report one answer for the team. The target social skill could be any skill from the forming or functioning skill level. For example, at the forming level, the teacher could target *moving into groups with undue noise* for this activity. At the functioning level, the teacher could aim for *expressing support and acceptance toward ideas.* This skill could be expressed as "no put-downs." This particular activity has no one correct answer, which allows for students accepting all answers as correct, but collaborating to report one team answer.

2. *What's Your Opinion?* This activity is adapted especially for the Corners cooperative structure and could be varied in many ways. Place signs in the four corners of the room: Strongly Agree, Agree, Strongly Disagree, Disagree. Make the following statement: "All forms of violence should be censored on television." The targeted social skill could be any from the functioning skill level.

3. *True or False?* This activity could be used in Think-Pair-Share or Three-Step Interview. Students are directed to write three statements about themselves, two false and one true. Students mix the order of the statements, then ask teammates to guess which statement is true. One member of the team reports the findings to the class. The targeted social skill could be any from the forming or functioning skill level. For example, at the forming level, the teacher could target *using quiet voices* for this activity. At the functioning level, the teacher could target *paraphrasing,* a skill needed for reporting the results of the team activity to the class.

Figure 3. *Example of a "How Many Rectangles?" form.* Note. *This figure could have many variations.*

4. *Dots and Boxes.* This activity is useful for keeping score and fits well with the Teams-Games-Tournament structure. Teams are given 1-centimeter graph paper. When an individual student in a group gives a correct answer in a game or tournament, he or she makes a small dot at the corner of a square on the graph paper. The fourth student to place a dot on the square completes the box and draws the completed square. This student then puts his or her initials in the box. At the end of the game or tournament, teams and individuals are awarded points for each box completed. Target social skills for this activity could be any from the formulating or fermenting skill level.

5. *Cooperative Treasure Hunt.* This activity works well with the Jigsaw cooperative structure. Each group is given a sheet of paper with questions that can be answered only by asking different members of the class. The following are a few examples:

- Find someone in this class who has a parent or grandparent who came to this country from another country.
- Find someone who has an older relative in their household.
- Find someone who has traveled somewhere interesting.
- Find someone who shares a hobby or past-time interest with you.
- Find someone who has accomplished something this year that he or she has wanted to do for a long time.

Students collect information from each other and report back to their cooperative group to share. The targeted social skill for this activity could be any from the forming, functioning, or formulating skill levels. The questions could be varied to fit a number of different subjects or grade levels.

The activities suggested here are intended to encourage teachers to begin teaching social skills in cooperative groups using social activities. The skills involved in cooperation are important life-long skills that can be easily taught in cooperative groups.

SUMMARY

There are many ways to accelerate student learning, but few can document improvements in learning and also show an improvement in students' social relationships, self-esteem, and liking of school (Slavin, 1987). Cooperative learning arrangements are practical, inexpensive to implement, and attractive to most teachers.

Teachers have discovered that cooperative learning strategies can be successful with students of all ages,

learning styles, and ethnic backgrounds. Moreover, cooperative learning's unique structure accommodates students with learning disabilities in the general education classroom (Goor & Schwenn, 1993).

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