

COOPERATIVE EDUCATION NECESSARY TOOL FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING

BY JIM ROY

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In 1963, New York City was hit simultaneously with two problems—the alarming number of students who were falling behind in basic skills and a lack of money to hire teachers to help the growing number of at-risk students. In trying to reach these students, administrators devised a plan¹ using peer tutors. At the end of the session, school officials were surprised by the camaraderie that had developed between these inner-city students and their fellow-student tutors. They were equally surprised by the friendships that formed among the tutors themselves. It was satisfying, too, to see that the tutored students in the 20-week program showed a six-month gain in reading ability. But what totally amazed the administrators and made the tutoring program a landmark event was the progress of the tutors themselves. Over the same 20-week period, “the tutors gained an extraordinary 3.4 years” in their reading levels.

This would not have surprised Quintillion, the great Roman teacher of the first century. His response would simply have been *Docemur docendo*—“He who teaches, learns.” And Joachim Fortius, a master teacher of the 17th century, wouldn’t have been surprised by the New York City results, either. “If a student wished to make progress,” Fortius wrote, “he should arrange to give lessons daily in the subjects which he was studying, even if he had to hire his pupils.”² During the 20th century, there has been a growing conviction, based on ever-increasing research, that students in cooperative learning teams achieve more than those working independently or against other students. Cooperative learning isn’t a fad, but a needed teaching and learning tool that is here to stay!

Cooperative learning is different from a traditional classroom, where students are reminded “to keep their eyes on their own work,” and where those who work together are suspected of “cheating.” Two of the main components of cooperative learning are *positive interdependence* and *individual accountability*.³ When teachers incorporate positive interdependence into their lesson plans, students are no longer fearful of sharing information that might give fellow students an advantage. Instead, students see that learning goals can be reached better as teams work together.

However, the success of the group depends on the individual learning of each member. That is where individual

accountability comes in. Although students must learn to give and receive help from one another, it is equally vital that they be held individually accountable for acquiring information or skills. Students should not be allowed to hide among other pupils who “know the material better.” Cooperative learning is meant to tap into the strengths of the group by enhancing the skills of each member.

Yet we so often try to minimize student interaction, rather than creating an atmosphere where they are encouraged to talk and share with one another. One of the benefits of students working in cooperative groups is the positive change that begins to take place in classroom management. Rather than a classroom full of students who watch out for their own interests and compete for any advantage, a learning community develops in which they become comfortable helping one another.

The field of cooperative learning has been researched extensively in both education⁴ and business. In fact, the business world is even more sold on the value of teams than schools are.⁵ Consequently, their products and services are better. Schools can be assured of the same results.

Cooperative learning has shown measurable results in the following areas:⁶

Higher Achievement

Cooperative learning encourages discovery and conflict. Conflict can be good when controversies are structured and students are taught to disagree in an agreeable way. Retention increases as students enjoy the give and take of opinions and ideas. Frequent oral repetition and opportunities for explaining ideas clarify students’ thinking and solidify their learning.

Improved Critical Thinking

As students brainstorm with the group and literally see and hear how other students think through a problem, and as students are given opportunities to defend an idea or position they have taken, their own ability to think is improved.

Increased Caring for Classmates

For many teachers, this is the most significant issue on the list. How many teachers go home each evening heavy-

hearted because of the way students treat one another? It takes the joy out of school for teachers and students when simple caring and courtesies are absent. Research shows that students who cooperate display greater caring and commitment for one another. Admittedly, this does not happen overnight. Students may have ingrained habits that make them view others as op-

ditional classrooms, where students feel that they must “get it on their own,” perpetuate this dislike. One solution to this isolation is cooperative groups. Students work through challenges together. One teacher can’t look over the shoulders of 20 pupils at one time to help them all with a math problem, but students can do that for each other. The end result? Students like

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ponents. However, as teachers stick with cooperative principles, students will regularly begin to exhibit genuine kindness.

Better Attitudes Toward Subject Areas

Too often, students don’t like school. This feeling can result from a sense of isolation. Students understand that they are expected to learn how to solve story problems, or write neat, well-written, perfectly spelled and punctuated papers, or be able to explain when atoms lose or gain electrons. When students consistently “feel stuck,” or “behind,” or “stupid,” they come to dislike whatever causes their discomfort. (Adults react the same way!) Tra-

school and schoolwork better. They feel less intimidated by difficult subject matter when they can work with someone else. And, “What we can do together today, we can do alone tomorrow.”

Better Psychological Health and Self-Esteem

Studies show that students used to cooperating display a basic self-acceptance, while students used to competing have varying self-esteem. That is, their self-worth depends on the outcome of the event, be it a physics test or a basketball game. Students with contingent self-esteem appear to have it together, and are often very successful because they try so

hard to do well, but this often hides a fragile and even fearful existence. Competition leads to fear, while cooperation leads to trust.

I am often asked, “Won’t kids learn to

something teachers do *with* students. William Glasser, author of *The Quality School*,⁷ and its accompanying Quality School movement, believes that students learn better from a teacher they like. The

“control,” not the subject matter or learning. When teachers share responsibility for learning and classroom behavior, this improves their relationships with their students.

Cooperative learning has been propelled by teachers’ deeply felt need for a teaching model that was more student-centered. In the beginning, cooperative learning was dramatic, like a huge wave. Now it is more like a river that contributes to the greater ocean of educational practices. To be sure, certain attributes of cooperative learning continue to be discussed, and some areas that were emphasized five years ago are no longer emphasized today. Theory is always improved by practice.

Educational Movements Featuring Cooperative Learning

Cooperative learning forms an important part of some notable educational movements.

The Quality School

Dr. William Glasser wrote *The Quality School* and *The Quality School Teacher*⁸ to explain how students can be motivated to produce quality work, not because they are coerced, but because they want to and enjoy it. Admittedly, very few classrooms are places where all or even most of students “yearn to learn.” This is even more reason to consider Glasser’s ideas. He emphasizes the need to eliminate coercion in the classroom, which Deming⁹ stresses in the workplace as well. Glasser contrasts “boss-management” to “lead-management.” Teachers who act as bosses feel a responsibility to tell students what to learn, when to learn it, and how to learn it. After giving the opportunity for learning, a boss teacher evaluates the student’s performance and usually gives a percentage or letter grade to represent it. When behavior issues arise, the boss teacher acts as detective, lawyer, and judge. It can be stressful for one person to take on such responsibility. But aside from this, think what the students have lost when teachers do everything.

Glasser emphasizes cooperative learning because it meshes so well with lead-management. Rather than always

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depend on others, rather than being independent?” Some go so far as to call it cooperative *leaning*, rather than cooperative *learning*. However, when students work in teams, experiencing the joy of discovery, the give and take of exploring ideas, defending a position, and formulating opinions, their personal identity becomes stronger, not weaker.

Improved Ability to See Others’ Perspectives

This ability helps families, classrooms, churches, and countries learn to be successful and to live in peace. Students who learn to cooperate tend to become less egocentric. They come to understand that the world doesn’t revolve around them, that there are other opinions and ways of doing things, and that there are others on this planet who struggle every day just as they do.

Better Relationships With School Personnel

In traditional classrooms, teaching is something teachers do *to* students, whereas in cooperative classrooms, teaching is

Two of the main components of cooperative learning are positive interdependence and individual accountability.

Johnson brothers’ research would agree. Too often, an adversarial relationship develops between teacher and students over who will control the classroom. Students seem to have limitless imagination and energy in vying for classroom supremacy.

Sometimes teachers raise the stakes ever higher, and make students’ lives miserable, too. Such a teacher may say, “I don’t care if my students like me, just as long as they respect me.” A teacher may “win” control of the room, but such a victory has its price. The focus becomes

telling students what and how to learn, teachers can sometimes become partners in learning. Rather than students getting a grade, they can become self-evaluators. And rather than having to be detective and judge, teachers can share peacemaking duties with students in an environment where students learn to be self-governors. For exciting insights on this topic, read pages 57 and 58 in *Fundamentals of Christian Education*¹⁰ by Ellen G. White.

Students working with one another and with teachers is essential to their producing quality work.

Dimensions of Learning Program

In 1988, the Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development published a book entitled *Dimensions of Thinking*, describing how people learn. As a result, a consortium of more than 90 educators began to put these theories into

practice, and to shape a plan for curriculum, instruction, and assessment called *Dimensions of Learning*.¹¹ One of its major premises is that “Learning involves a complex system of interactive processes that includes five types of thinking—indeed, the five dimensions of learning.” These dimensions are:

Dimension 1 Positive Attitudes and Perceptions About Learning

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The success of the group depends on the individual learning of each member.

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that people learn. Unique in many ways, yet complementary to the Dimensions of Learning model, Gardner's work has identified seven distinct ways in which people are gifted or intelligent to a greater or lesser degree. The seven intelligences are:

Verbal/Linguistic
Logical/Mathematical
Visual/Spatial
Body/Kinesthetic
Musical/Rhythmic
Interpersonal
Intrapersonal

Schools and classrooms usually focus on the first two intelligences—Verbal/Linguistic and Logical/Mathematical. Students who possess these kinds of intelligence are more apt to do well in our paper-and-pencil, memorizing, answering-the-questions-at-the-end-of-the-chapter classroom worlds. Those who have less of that kind of intelligence are usually labeled as slow learners, accused of having attitude problems, or of being lazy or suffering from some learning disability. Gardner has shown us that most of such labeling just isn't true. The question to ask when we look at one of our students should not be "How smart are you?" but rather, "How are you smart?"

This point was recently driven into my understanding. Students who were doing marginal work on my traditional paper-and-pencil social studies tests absolutely amazed me when I gave them the opportunity to develop audio and video tapes depicting the subject matter we were studying. When teachers include various "intelligences" into their lesson planning, there is a greater likelihood that all students will be successful.

Notice that one of the intelligences is Interpersonal Intelligence.¹³ Research and practice have shown that indeed, there are some students who process information in such a way that they learn best when

Dimension 2 Acquiring Knowledge
Dimension 3 Extending and Refining Knowledge
Dimension 4 Using Knowledge Meaningfully
Dimension 5 Productive Habits of Mind

DOL chief author Robert Marzano offers practical ideas and suggestions on how units of instruction for any subject to include the five dimensions of learning in the DOL teacher's manual, which explains, "Cooperative interactions are so important that they are built into the Model as a part of Dimension 4; Using

Knowledge Meaningfully."¹²

Best knowledge/best practice indicates that we learn better when we can use and share our new skills or knowledge with others in a meaningful way. I am convinced that the Dimensions of Learning model, especially if applied within a Quality School framework, would greatly enhance our teaching and learning effectiveness.

Multiple Intelligence

Many teachers are familiar with the ideas and research of Howard Gardner of Harvard University on the different ways

working with others. Imagine how frustrating it would be to be kept from acquiring knowledge in the way that you learn best?

Each of these models has unique differences, yet cooperative learning is an important part of what makes them work. And whether or not you have begun to use any of these strategies in your classroom or school, cooperative learning can be an important part of what makes things work for you, too. Most importantly, cooperative learning aligns perfectly with the great themes of Scripture—themes that are vital to our individual well being and to the health of our church. We have been instructed to “love one another” (John 13:34) and to recognize that the church, like “the body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts” (1 Corinthians 12, NIV). Each part, no matter how small, is important. At the beginning of this earth’s sad history, one of our forefathers asked God, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” Deep down we know the answer. And as teachers, we yearn for our students to reflect that reality. Cooperative learning can be one more tool to help students not only learn subject matter better, but also care about one another. ✍

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