Cooperative Learning
Why Isn't More of it Going On?

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Cooperative Learning. When you're in the presence of teachers you hear about it. When you pick up a professional journal, you read about it. When you see learners experiencing it, obviously, they are learning and having fun in the process. Yet, when I walk through the halls of schools and peep through the windows of the closed doors, I observe most learners seated, in rows, being taught individually, with lecture, workbook, and ditto sheets dominating the scene. Why is this so?

As an educator who now spends the majority of time in teacher training, teaching graduate and undergraduate courses, and conducting teacher inservice, the question continually haunts me, "why is it so hard to get change into the classroom where it affects the students?" We are aware that books are written on this subject, people get on the education bandwagon and preach on it, particular segments of society — namely politicians — run campaigns on it, yet little happens.

Cooperative learning has been my dominant professional endeavor the last six years. My interest was aroused by a colleague who had attended a conference that featured Drs. David and Roger Johnson, recognized leaders in development and research on cooperative learning. His enthusiasm aroused my interest, and I started reading. Then I began observing teachers who were implementing the concepts, and eventually I developed a graduate course in cooperative learning as well as conducting teacher inservices.

During the last five years I have had the opportunity to share cooperative learning with over two thousand teachers, primarily through teacher inservices. On one site I had the opportunity to work with a school staff for a full academic year, first training and then implementing cooperative learning.

When a teacher chooses to teach a particular lesson they naturally have to determine what specific understanding, knowledge and/or skills they want the student to have as a result of experiencing the lesson. Once the outcomes have been determined, perhaps due to past teacher training and societal values, the planning normally stops. The students are then taught in a traditionally individualized manner.

Individualized teaching centers around executing the lesson in a way where there is no need for connectiveness with other students. The message is, "I'm in this alone, what I do has little or no effect on anyone else, and what others do has little or no effect on me." The students are seated in rows: lecture, individual reading, discussion and individual seatwork typify the lesson.

Cooperative learning, as another way to deliver the lesson, has an opposite view as its philosophical base. "What I do has a definite effect upon you, and what you do has a definite effect upon me." In order for this phenomenon to happen, the teacher must design the lesson in ways that create and continually strengthen interdependency. Teachers often believe they are doing cooperative learning, but upon investigation find they are actually doing small group instruction. Cooperative learning, in its true form, must program interdependency into the group work. The simplest way to find if it's cooperative learning or not is to ask the learners if one member is doing the bulk of the work. The one that is will almost always come forth and express their disbelief with small group learning. This overworked member will often be a high achieving student who is concerned about grades.

Cooperative learning, when designed correctly, becomes a highly effective way to teach lessons that concern the need for problem solving and/or critical thinking. There is ample objective research to prove this point. Neither problem solving nor critical thinking skills can be developed in isolation. These skills come about as a result of listening to others' points of view; learning how others think problems through; having others reinforce your own thinking and problem solving system; and, by having your thinking challenged by others. In order for all this to happen there must be an atmosphere where there is no coercion. No in-depth problem solving or critical thinking skills will evolve if they are being done on the learner's part to receive an extrinsic reward or when there

is the possibility of punishment.

I recently spoke with a class of sixth graders who had completed a cooperatively taught unit on the environment. Their overriding comments about their experience centered on how much they had learned by bouncing ideas and concepts off one another.

Learners, for the most part, thoroughly enjoy cooperative learning. Nancy, a fourth grade teacher, stated, "I almost hate to get them into cooperative learning because that's the way they then want to learn everything from then on." When talking to learners that are experiencing cooperative learning and asking them for their opinions about it, it's normally, "we like it." What do you like about it? "It's more fun than just doing it alone. "What makes it more fun? "We get to talk and know the rest of the class better. I like to hear other people's ideas."

So, if research proves the effectiveness of cooperative learning, learners are enjoying the experiences, teachers are being introduced to it in inservice training, and professional journals are promoting it, why isn't it being used in more classrooms? I will present for your consideration five possibilities of why it has limited implementation.

Traditional Undergraduate Instruction

I have recently contacted numerous teacher training programs and inquired about their plan and process for presenting cooperative learning knowledge and skills to undergraduates. The most common response I received was that they are aware of cooperative learning and training in cooperative methods is being combined with already existing classes. Undergraduates have consistently reported that they see minimal relationship between their education classes and what they eventually do as teachers. It appears that most undergraduates are entering the teaching profession with a textbook knowledge of cooperative learning that was presented to them in an individualist manner. What actually shapes their teaching style is the individualist style of the instruction.

Current Models of Inservice

Teacher inservice, as conducted by school districts, is a "come let's take a look but don't develop a skill" model. Typically, on any particular inservice day there is a smorgasbord of presenters, and the teachers who attend usually pick out three or four presenters to listen to, then go back to the classroom the next day and proceed as usual.

Cooperative learning requires a thorough knowledge base and the development of complex management skills. Teachers need to develop an in-depth understanding of the philosophy behind cooperation and why it is so powerful as a learning model. This requires understanding how large and small groups function, learning about mutually accepted relationships, communication systems, decision making strategies, leadership styles and how to reach decisions. The teacher needs to develop management skills for grouping students into base and task groups; to process information that is being generated from the small groups; to create positive interdependency, to monitor the small groups; to provide feedback to individuals and groups; and to evaluate the work that is being produced. This kind of knowledge base can not be established in a typical two-hour inservice session! Teachers hear about cooperative learning, read about it, and are encouraged to expand their delivery system to include cooperation learning, but they are frustrated by the lack of time they have to learn. In industry, the factory shuts down, rethinks, retrains the workers, and then starts up with the new model in place. In education, it would seem that retraining is supposed to happen in some mystical, magical way after a two-hour inservice session.

Prevailing Perceptions of Teachers

A third factor causing difficulty in implementing cooperative learning is how those outside of the actual profession (including school administrators) perceive teachers and teaching. There is a tendency to view teachers as know-all, do-all, in-charge people. They are to run their classroom — most often in an atmosphere of isolation — in such a way that learning for every student is at an optimal level. There are supposed to be no disruptions, as quiet and order must be observed at all times. Cooperative learning is based on an alternate set of perceptions. The students are being empowered to discover, tap into one another's already existing knowledge, to jointly plan and divide up laborious tasks, to disagree and then to come to consensus agreements. The classroom often becomes noisy. Students are moving, discussing, debating, creating, and the teacher-in-charge model is no longer observed. However, there is structure, and it has been purposely programmed into the lesson to guarantee its accountability. When this isn't understood by the non-teaching professions, teachers tend to fulfill the expectations that were traditionally implied, and individualized instruction fits that model.

Teacher Self-Perception

A fourth factor is how teachers perceive themselves. Teachers tend to be people who are of the take-charge type. They accept the idea of working individually — somewhat isolated in their classroom — and the responsibility of being in charge of learning. They perceive their task as one that is to teach the learner whatever needs to be taught. It's as though the individual students are per-

ceived as people to deposit learning upon, and who have little or no power in the process. Cooperative learning centers around the concept of student empowerment. Students learn by interaction and inquiry, which forces the teacher to re-conceptualize the learner. They must see the student as capable of self-motivation, of being self-reliant, of being a problem solver and motivated to inquire and explore. In order for this to happen, the students must have the power to become responsible for their own work. This requires a shift of power from the teacher to the student.

I recently spent an afternoon with seventeen teachers who have been using cooperative learning as part of their instructional delivery system for the past three years. I asked them the question, "What was the single most difficult thing to change as you began to use cooperative learning?" The response was unanimous — "to give up the power." I also asked them why they felt they were able to develop the level of expertise they had when using cooperative learning. They quickly agreed it happened because they were in the same school district and were able to build a support system with one another. They broke the isolation that teachers typically work in. They met, on their own, every two weeks to share successes and critique problems, they cooperated and empowered one another.

American Societal Attitudes

The fifth, and last, factor that I'll cite, is one that relates to societal attitudes. America was sold on the idea that individualism is the way to success and fulfillment. Stake out your claim, fight your own battles, and you can succeed if you try hard enough, became the philosophy of the land. Competition and one-ups-manship is how we operated. The concept of cooperation and teamwork has been a relatively foreign concept and it still is, to a large extent. We read about the know-it-all, do-it-all company executive who is going to turn the company around, the multimillionaire athlete who will be the force that will make the winning team, the national secretary of education who will turn the schools and education around. Schools reflect this mindset, the attitudes are projected into the classroom, and the idea of "you can do it if you try," prevails. The idea that we can do it together, you are part of a team, we have responsibility for each other, we can all profit if we work together is new. I have heard parents say, "I don't want my child to be taught cooperation. She/he has to be taught how to compete, it's a cruel world out there."

Cooperation or Competition?

Are we at a point in world relations where individual national power will give way to international cooperation, where our national internal power struggles will give way to national cooperation, where the individual will still have respect yet be willing to cooperate and work cooperatively with others? I don't know. I don't have the answers, but I will continue to work to assist teachers and students to understand the value of cooperation. If we eventually see cooperation on an even plane with individualism, it will happen because the classrooms of our schools will have become places of cohesiveness.

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