

IMPLEMENTING COOPERATIVE LEARNING GROUPS IN THE WRITING CURRICULUM

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As part of my undergraduate degree in teaching, I studied how to teach Values Education or how to increase students' awareness of their mutual existence with other people. Despite this training, my classroom showed no signs of interdependence because each student's grade depended on him or herself. There might have been discussion or study groups, but the end result depended on the individual student producing the facts or skills that I wanted him or her to produce, usually on a test or written assignment.

Then, as part of my graduate program, I registered for a course known as Social Psychology of Education and on that fateful first day was flung into a cooperative learning group. My group, composed of five people, had no choice but apparently to accept yet another professor's biases. I asked myself, "Aren't cooperative learning groups simply small groups with a new name?" To my amazement, my experience embodied much more than simply "working in a small group."

Research indicates that a vast majority of students in the United States view school as a competitive enterprise where students try to do better than the other students, and this expectation is widespread and grows stronger as students progress through school. According to researchers Roger and David Johnson there are three basic ways students can interact with each other as they learn: "They can compete to see who is 'best'; they can work individually on their own toward a goal without paying attention to other students; or they can work cooperatively with a vested

interest in each other's learning as well as their own. Of the three interaction patterns, competition is presently the most dominant" (1-2).

A paradox emerges when you look at the vast majority of research comparing student-student interaction patterns. While most teachers stress competition, interaction patterns indicate that students learn more effectively when they work cooperatively. Over 800 studies suggest that students who learn via cooperative learning groups (as compared to competitive or individualistic learning) achieve more; are more positive about school, subject areas, and teachers; are more positive about each other, regardless of ability, ethnic background, handicapped or not; and are more effective interpersonally (Johnson and Johnson, Johnson et al.). Cooperative learning emphasizes the cognitive approach to learning where students actively discover knowledge, gain insight into problems, organize and process information, and direct their own learning.

As part of the "process" approach to writing, we as writing teachers have been encouraged to structure opportunities where teachers and students discuss the process they go through as they write. We encourage students to work with prewriting and writing strategies: to brainstorm, to invent numerous tree structures, outlines, flowcharts, and lists; to read and react to each other's writing. Teachers such as Moffett, Elbow, Macrorie, Rackham, and Beach have promoted the use of student-teacher interaction and student-student interaction in order to promote students' awareness of audience, purpose, and goals as they write. By following their guidelines, we have taken away some of the artificial setting of "writing for the teacher" and have hopefully promoted a more realistic situation of writing for specific audiences, purposes, and effects. While we view this approach as vital to our students' cognitive development in understanding writing as a process, we are often at a loss as to how to plan, organize, and evaluate the subsequent interactive sessions. As Holubec states, "We may glean an idea here or there, and try it. If it works, we are delighted, but if it doesn't, we haven't the slightest idea about how to make it work. In the long run, it may just be easier to teach writing the way we were taught it, rather than to try experiments which may or may not be successful" (35).

I suggest that English teachers follow the cooperative learn-

ing group guidelines listed below as a step toward an effective use of small group interaction in the teaching of writing. These guidelines will help you design student-student interaction sessions which serve your particular needs and classroom situations. These guidelines helped me design student-student interaction sessions for use in a junior or senior high writing curriculum:

1. As far as possible, specify the instructional objectives.
2. Select the group size most appropriate for the lesson.
3. Assign students to groups. Usually, you will want to maximize the heterogeneity in the groups.
4. Arrange the classroom. Cluster the groups of students so that they will not interfere with one another. Within the groups, all students should be able to see the relevant materials, talk with one another, and exchange materials and ideas.
5. Explain the task and the cooperative goal structure. Tell students that there is a group goal, that there are set criteria to meet, and that all group members will be rewarded on the basis of the quality of their group's work.
6. Provide the appropriate materials.
7. Observe interactions between students. Keep a tally of types of interactive situations and look for signs of higher ability students aiding lower ability students.
8. Intervene only in the role of a "consultant" who will suggest possible solutions to the groups' questions, and "consult" in a way as to help members learn the interpersonal skills necessary for cooperating.
9. Formulate an exact statement of the criteria students must meet to demonstrate mastery of the assigned material and evaluate the group product using this set of criteria.

As a composition teacher, cooperative learning can be used to practice invention techniques, share writing, write together, revise, edit, discuss material assigned, etc. For the groups to be cooperative, group interdependence and individual accountability must be included in the assignment. Interdependence is established by assigning a group goal such as producing a single paper or set of answers, giving the group a single set of materials, or assigning group roles which encourage participation. Individual accountability is established by requiring that everyone participate in the group. You can assign individual work as preparation for the group work or appoint each member to fulfill a particular job.

Rackham, in his text *From Sight to Insight*, includes activities where students individually explore the sensory qualities of things around them. The following are the steps I took when revising Rackham's "Senses Perception" activity for use as a cooperative learning activity at the junior or senior high level. In developing this activity, I followed the cooperative learning guidelines listed earlier.

SENSES PERCEPTION ACTIVITY (adapted for group use)

First, I determined the specific instructional objective and group size for the activity:

Objective: During the writing class, the student will describe details using his or her senses, one at a time, by first speaking and then writing down the details in a class journal and in small group compositions.

Group size: 4-5 students randomly put together, or grouped heterogeneously, depending on the situation.

Next, I determined the task(s) for each group:

Tasks: Through a cooperative goal structure, students will do the following —

1. Each person in the group will listen to what is read, answer aloud, and then jot down the sensory words or sentences which come to his or her mind.

2. Each student will write his or her sensory perceptions in his or her journal for the writing class.

3. Students will then do two small group activities, writing up their perceptions in the form of two group compositions.

I then thought of possible small group activities from which students could write two group compositions:

Small group work: Students could take a notebook with them to a laundromat, basketball game, mall, lunchroom, lab, lake, bus stop, anywhere! They should spend 30 minutes (minimum) recording what they see, hear, smell, and feel. They should look for the specific, concrete elements that would help them to share the experience with their complete small group. After rereading what they've recorded they should rewrite these perceptions in a paragraph, making sure to use the most sensory details.

Free-writing activity (individual and/or small group): Each student can recall a good experience in his/her life. He/she should

think back and focus on the sensory details of that experience and then write up this experience. When sharing these experiences in the small group, group members should concentrate on listening for sensory details and asking questions about any details they'd like to see, hear, or feel more.

Small group work: Students could read a section from their literature text. They should be allowed to pick any section their group likes, but it should not be more than two pages long. As a group they should take notes as to how many senses are present, at what points in the story the author chooses to describe sensory details, and what revisions they would make as authors if they thought more/less sensory details should be included.

More small group work: Students could write a paragraph on the sensory quality of something ordinary, for example, a fruit, vegetable, a T.V., refrigerator, sofa, sneakers, anything! Encourage them not to do it from memory but to get the object or get near it and write lists, sentences, phrases, and thoughts.

After determining the above activities, I explained the task(s) and the cooperative goal structure to the students. I emphasized that the group goal was to produce two group compositions which include sensory details about what they are describing. Besides including sensory details, I noted that the compositions should be as creative as possible. A group might decide to write a description without ever naming what they are describing or to build a story around the one main object. As a reader of these compositions, I would look mainly for sensory details. The compositions would be due in three days and all four or five names should be on the assignments.

I then passed out the following "Senses Perception" paper and the students began.

SENSES PERCEPTION PAPER

SIGHT

Describe details of your left hand (color, texture, size, shape, line, knuckles, fingernails, rings, hair, scratches, wrinkles, everything SEEable). Share these with your group.

Pick another part of the body and do the same thing OR pick out something outside the window or something in the room and describe all its details.

SOUND

Listen! Do you hear ANY kind of machine? If so, listen and jot down EVERY word that comes to mind as you listen. Unusual words are fine. Then put the sounds into complete sentences. Did you each hear the same machine? The same sounds? Did you hear cars outside? Computers inside? Lawn mowers? Snow blowers?

SMELL

Describe a smell, but don't define where it actually came from. See if your language is explicit enough to define the smell. Exchange your description with someone in your group, and see if that person knows what smell you are describing. See if you know what they are describing.

TOUCH

Touch something. Describe it (verbally) in new detail. Keep touching until you come up with 10 to 20 sensations.

TASTE

Write about tastes, NOT reactions, as you slowly eat hard candy, the first bite of gum, a swallow of lemonade, toothpaste the morning after pizza. Find words and phrases that say the ACTUAL taste, NOT the commercial words!

As stated in the guidelines, during the activity the teacher should observe interactions between students, possibly presenting this data to the students at a later date. The teacher should encourage the groups to "consult" with him or her at any time during the activity.

While I will not detail my steps in developing this next activity, the following are the objective and tasks for a group activity adapted from Elbow's text *Writing With Power*.

LOOP WRITING PROCESS = CONTROL AND CREATIVITY

Objective: Students will experiment with the loop-writing process by discussing the different approaches to writing and choosing several to try. They will discover how different perspectives can lead to richer compositions.

Tasks:

1. Determine a common subject which your group would like to write about. It will help if the topic is somewhat controversial.
2. Read the 13 procedures which can be used when loop-writing.
3. Choose which procedure(s) your group will follow as you write.
4. Write individually following the chosen procedure(s).
5. At the next class period, each member should share his/her writing with the group following the usual peer feedback questions used in class.
6. Taking parts of all the papers, revise and write one paper as a group. This paper will be given to the teacher and other groups to read and react to.

After discussing how loop-writing can be used when prewriting for any paper, the teacher should give each group one copy of the "Tasks" and one copy of the following handout:

There are 13 procedures to the loop-writing process.

1. FIRST THOUGHTS

For 15 minutes, put down all the thoughts and feelings you have (not GOOD or TRUE, but FIRST!).

2. PREJUDICES

What are your biases? What is most satisfying? Find your point of view or assumptions, then jump into that point of view and write as prejudiced as possible.

3. INSTANT VERSION

Write a sketch of your final piece. Do this BEFORE too much thought.

4. DIALOGUES

Do this if you have 2 or 3 conflicting prejudices. Give each feeling a voice and have them talk to each other. Arguments are fertile ground for new insights. Use speech and talking language rather than "essay" language. Generate tension and energy!

5. NARRATIVE THINKING

Write the "story" of your thinking. Sometimes this helps you to "see" more clearly.

6. STORIES

Let stories and incidents come to mind and jot them down. What stories strike you when you think of your subject/topic? What

are any memories or experiences you have that relate to this topic?

7. SCENES

Stop time. Focus on individual moments. What places, moments, sounds, or moods come to mind?

8. PORTRAITS

What people come to mind? Tell their qualities or characteristics.

9. VARY THE AUDIENCE

Write about the topic to someone very different from the actual audience. Write to a child or to someone with the opposite view. VISUALIZE your audience; write TO them.

10. VARY THE WRITER

Take an opposite view. BE that opposite person and write a self-portrait or self-analysis.

11. VARY THE TIME

Write as though you were living in the past or the future. Or write to an audience in the past or future.

12. ERRORS

Write down things that are almost true or trying to be true.

13. LIES

Write down odd or crazy things you come up with. You'll discover important assumptions or preoccupations.

In the past I molded writing activities into a kind of win-lose struggle which showed whose writing was "best." If I attempted a task which utilized group interaction, its finale invariably became a contest where each individual student either "made the grade" or "fell further behind." Instead of continually promoting this struggle, cooperative learning groups are another means of providing challenges to a student's present knowledge. By observing more mature reasoning, a student gains a more mature process of reasoning and thinking. By using these activities as a guide toward having students write collaboratively, students gain in their ability to work with writers and audiences other than the teacher. A student needs repeated experiences where he or she is forced again and again to see the perspectives of others. As a means toward better communication and better writing skills in the future, I urge you to follow these guidelines and develop cooperative learning group activities as part of your curriculum.

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WORKS CITED

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