# 13th Week:

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# Cooperative learning

Cooperative learning is an instructional method in which students work together in small, heterogeneous groups to complete a problem, project, or other instructional goal, while teachers act as guides or facilitators. This method works to reinforce a student's own learning as well as the learning of his or her fellow group members.

## History of Cooperative Learning

The strategy of cooperative learning was developed as a means to reduce competition in American schools, which James Coleman (1959) identified as a negative component of the education system.[1] In a two-year study of students at nine high schools in the Midwest, Coleman developed what he called a "climate of values" for the "adolescent society" he studied. Based on his findings, Coleman suggests that instead of encouraging competition in the academic setting, "which effectively impedes the process of education," schools should introduce a more collaborative approach to teaching.

Building on the work of James Coleman, Robert Slavin (1994) conducted research on a form of cooperative learning he described as Student Team Learning.[2] Slavin defines cooperative learning as "instructional programs in which students work in small groups to help one another master academic content."[3] Slavin suggests that cooperative learning has the potential to capitalize on "the developmental characteristics of adolescents in order to harness their peer orientation, enthusiasm, activity, and craving for independence within a safe structure."[4] Slavin explains that there are various methods for implementing cooperative learning techniques into classes of all subject areas and grade levels; however, the underlying concept requires all students to work together and be responsible for each other's learning.

Through his review of the literature on cooperative learning, Slavin identifies three concepts that are fundamental to all cooperative learning/Student Team Learning techniques:

- Students are rewarded as a team but are graded individually.
- The team's success is not conditionally based on individual performance of one student. All students must help each other to achieve learning goals.
- All students are expected to improve based on their own previous performance, thus ensuring all students are challenged to do their best.[5]

Daniel Holt, Barbara Chips, and Diane Wallace (1991) recognize the possible benefits of cooperative learning in linguistically and culturally diverse classrooms.[6] Holt, Chips, and Wallace suggest that English Language Learners (ELL) need "the maximum amount of time possible for comprehending and using the

English language in a low-risk environment in order to approach the language proficiency of their peers."[7] By utilizing cooperative learning groups, teachers offer ELLs the opportunity to interact with students who are proficient in English language skills. Furthermore, because ELLs are not usually provided with content-area classes taught in their primary language, they often struggle with the difficult academic material. Cooperative learning groups enable them to work in a team with other students who have already gained proficiency with the language. This group dynamic not only provides a supportive environment for learning new content and acquiring English language skills, but also helps to foster friendships and social development.

## Cooperative Learning in the Classroom

Teachers are often afraid to implement cooperative learning in the classroom because it requires them to give up some control. However, this method of instruction has been shown to increase student communication skills and academic achievement if done correctly. Here are tips for effectively implementing cooperative learning into the instructional program.

Spencer Kagan (1989) recommends that teachers use the "structural approach" to cooperative learning, which involves "content-free ways of organizing social interaction in the classroom."[8] Kagan explains that structures require a series of steps to be implemented into the group dynamic. Kagan lists well-known structures that have been successfully used in multiple grade levels and subject areas[9]:

- jigsaw
- student teams achievement divisions
- think-pair-share
- numbered heads together
- three-step interview
- co-op
- round robin
- inside-outside circle
- roundtable

## "THE POWER OF ONE"

"The Power of One" is a cooperative learning method that facilitates positive interdependence.[10] Elements of this method include the following:

- Group members work toward one common goal (i.e. completion of a graphic organizer, creating a poster, reading a story).

- Each member of the group is assigned one role to ensure accountability (i.e. materials, illustrator, reporter, recorder).
- Limit students use of materials to create the necessity for working together (i.e. one pair of scissors, one piece of paper).
- Give students one specific space in which to work together.

## THE KEY ELEMENTS OF COOPERATIVE LEARNING

According to James A. Duplass (2006), the following are the most commonly found characteristics of cooperative learning:[11]

- Teacher supervision—the teacher should always monitor group activity to ensure that students are not veering too far off task. The teacher should also be available to answer student questions and guide discussion if necessary.
- Heterogeneous groups—the teacher creates groups of diverse ability levels and backgrounds.
- Positive interdependence—by setting group goals and working towards a reward or final learning outcome.
- Face-to-face interaction—students are encouraged to use verbal and nonverbal communication to solve problems and explain learning material.
- Individual accountability—students are accountable for their tasks and for assisting the whole group meets learning goals. This accountability is enforced through student roles.
- Social skills—the teacher needs to establish rules so that all students are respectful, speak in a manner appropriate to the classroom setting, and utilize their time wisely during group interaction.
- Group processing—students engage in reflection on how the group functioned during activity.
- Evaluation—all activities should include both individual and group assessment.