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Todd Applegate

Through the years, millions of students have participated in some version of cooperative learning. As evidenced by the numbers of published papers, several educators have reassessed and revised their cooperative learning techniques, but perhaps very few have done more for the refinement of this form of teaching than Roger and David Johnson, professors at the University of Minnesota and founders of the Collaborative Learning Center. These two educators have been training teachers to use small groups for instructional purposes since 1966 and seem to have the most productive approach to collaborative learning. Cooperative learning has been misused or undervalued, a fact illustrated by the number of educators who have never been taught how to realize and appreciate its potential. In this paper, practices regarding traditional and high-performance cooperative learning groups are reviewed and an example of how these techniques have been used in a secondary art classroom is described.

Traditional Classroom Learning Group

Most educators are familiar with the traditional classroom learning group. Students are usually assigned to work together but have little or no interest in doing so. Some students hide inside the group and generate next to nothing. Often the groups are too large or are wrought with off-task behavior due to poor planning or organization (Webb, Farivar, & Mastergeorge, 2002). Unfortunately, the traditional classroom learning group is often an ill-prepared venture into mediocre learning and time-wasting where the students have not performed at peak level, where they have not valued their efforts, or have not learned as much as they could have individually. A productive approach to cooperative learning does exist. High-performance cooperative learning does not happen automatically after students are placed in a group; its success is a product of structure, planning, technique and genuine cooperation.

High-performance Cooperative Learning Groups

When a cooperative group is performing at a high level, students care about each group member learning the material, are less likely to shy away from participation, and understand that differing opinions and theories can broaden student experience enhancing learning (Johnson & Johnson, 1999). Sharing in the responsibility of achieving a goal becomes something more than completing an assignment in a group of three or more. A high-performing group does not have to consist solely of ultra-high achieving members; the “A” students benefit from understanding the material enough to explain it, and the lower performing stu-
Students benefit from learning the material through the sometimes clearer explanation of peers. Before a group performs at a high level, the participants must understand the characteristics and contributions that are to be made by each group member throughout the process.

Students need to practice cooperative learning during primary education before unproductive group behavior is developed. Groups that have not practiced high-performance peer learning before secondary education do not generally perform at peak levels after their first couple of attempts (Palinscar & Herrenkohl, 2002). Students must be taught and reminded how they should work with each other. They must be encouraged to care for and help each other learn the material. They must learn how to challenge each other.

As in a constructivist classroom, the teacher acts as a guide, monitor, and supporter of deeper meaning, and the students understand the social skills, individual accountability, and positive interdependence required. Roger and David Johnson (1999) have found it important for teachers to review and explain the students' responsibilities before they work in the group, and for the students to assess how well the group functioned and what might be done to improve in the future.

**Cooperating During an Art Project**

One example of a project where high-performance cooperative learning techniques worked well occurred during a group drawing project in a secondary classroom. The students spent the first day of the project processing information and building the content (meaning) for a collaborative drawing about bats. The students were given several questions and processed them in groups of five after the teacher introduced the project and explained how the groups should function. The groups hypothesized and shared experiences, misconceptions, and facts about bats before fine tuning their ideas with the teacher.

On the second day, a large sheet of drawing paper was laid out and a large bat was drawn and divided into sections equaling the number of participants. The students reviewed the previous day's work and received a charcoal drawing demonstration. They each chose a section and began drawing ideas that related to the subject matter. After ten minutes, the students rotated one space to the left and drew on their neighbor's section. Before they rotated, the students were told that they could draw whatever they wanted in their neighbor's section. The students seemed nervous as they began to modify their neighbor's section and witness the modification of their own, but shortly they began to understand the collaborative nature of the project. They continued to draw in each section until it was time to rotate again. The students continued this technique until the drawing was complete. Each member wrote a statement about the subject matter that followed the outer contour of the large bat shape.

This collaborative technique has been conducted with people between the ages of 6-74. Non-artists from different cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds have been placed together to share in this experience.
Benefits of High-performance Cooperative Learning

Surprising results can occur when participants understand the purpose and role of the group and are not simply thrown together into the familiar and routine traditional learning group. If the group learning experience is properly prepared and led, the outcome is often one that reaches beyond the learning objective. High-performance collaborative learning can promote positive interdependence, individual accountability, face-to-face promotive interaction, social skills and achievement (Johnson and Johnson, 1999).

Todd Applegate is an art teacher and the boys varsity soccer coach at Central High School in Phenix City, Alabama. He is also an artist and a graduate student pursuing a MEd in the Department of Art at Columbus State University. His current research interests are drawing, painting, and postmodern art theory and education.

References