



Sabotaging Cooperative Learning: or, Snatching Defeat from the Jaws of Victory

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Over the last few years a number of faculty at CSU Dominguez Hills have had the opportunity to share strategies for implementing Cooperative Learning with colleagues within the California State University system and around the nation. In discussions with these colleagues we have compiled a list of small group teaching techniques which are commonly (and we believe wrongly) used. We offer them to you along with our suggestions for dealing with the problems.

1. Let students do their own thing.

They are, after all, adults and to impose one's value system on them regarding assignments, content, and assessment denies students possibilities for growth associated with making their own decisions in these matters.

It has been our experience that, at least initially, high levels of structure need to be in place to ensure that students clearly understand the assignment. It is the teacher's job to clearly articulate in very specific terms what the students are to focus on in their groups, precisely what the ultimate objective or product (paper, presentation, etc.) is to be, and how the student's individual contribution to the total group effort will contribute to his/her course grade. Once students have experienced success within this highly structured format, greater amounts of student control may be initiated. When structure is absent, students tend to go off task and to question the efficacy of the small group work in fostering the objectives of the course.

2. It's group work, so let's give group grades.

Perhaps the most often heard complaint lodged against small group instruction is the dominator/sandbagger phenomenon. Too often, students work together on a group project and the group is then assigned an undifferentiated group grade which does not reflect the relative contribution of each member. Robert Slavin (1988) has demonstrated in precollegiate research on CL that if group grades are not discarded in favor of individual accountability, CL does not have a significant impact on achievement. It is our experience at the college level that little or none of the course grade should be assigned based on undifferentiated group grades. When group work is assigned, some technique for assessing the individual contribution of each member should be attempted. This can be done by giving brief exams over the content of the group work or by having each team member submit a draft of materials that the person contributed to the team product. In general, it is our view that, at least for in-class work, the CL groups are sufficiently rewarding that group grades are not necessary if the in-class work is related to individually completed exams, papers, presentations, etc. In general, undifferentiated group grades tend to be resented by the hard-working members of the group. And the people who do not work hard within the group see the group grade as inequitable, even when they are allowed

to slide through on others' efforts. If you do elect to give group grades, we would urge you to make such work count less than 10% of the total course grade.

3. It's called Cooperative Learning-let friends work together.

One good reason for doing CL is to acquaint students with people unlike themselves. For that reason, we strongly believe that the teacher should assign students to groups. These assignments should generally emphasize diversity in prior achievement, sex, race, culture-whatever issues are felt to be important to the instructor in structuring the course. Either random assignment or student self-selection of teams results in off-task behavior and decreases the probability of exposing students to a diversity of opinion and background. One of the most consistent findings of CL research is that CL increases students' tolerance of others of different races, cultures and sexes. We believe that such attitudinal change is as important as the cognitive gains associated with CL in producing a liberally educated person.

4. The more the merrier. If it's diversity you want, let's have groups of seven or eight.

Our experience tells us that groups of three to five are usually best. Most of us prefer groups of four so that we may have students work for a time in pairs, then have a pair within a group share with the other pair within the group. If groups are too small, there is insufficient diversity of views. If the groups are larger than five, some team members will not have sufficient opportunities to contribute. One advantage of CL over the lecture is the opportunity for the teacher to model the skill being taught, then provide students with multiple opportunities to practice the skill and receive feedback on that practice in groups. All students within the groups must have many opportunities to verbalize their thoughts. Such opportunities are maximized in heterogeneous groups of four.

5. Class time is too precious to spend in groups.

While some CL work can be done outside of class, we strongly recommend that at least some CL work be completed in class. This allows the teacher to monitor the work and to intervene if the teams are focusing their efforts incorrectly. One good use of in-class CL is to assess whether the students understand the assignment. In-class CL allows you to diagnose the students' understanding of the lecture, homework and other materials presented prior to group work. You can both diagnose the quality of your teaching and the quality of the students' learning by listening to students verbalize course concepts. If much or all of group learning must be done outside of class, be sure students complete group processing sheets, rating the members on punctuality, preparedness, contributions to the group during the group meeting, etc. Although these processing sheets may be shared with the instructor, it's sometimes the case that the knowledge that such forms are part of the out-of-class assignment encourages less motivated students to become more productive teammates. When out-of-class assignments are given, the clarity of the assignment is particularly important. That is why many of us take ten minutes at the end of class and have the teams simply verbalize what they believe the assignment to be and perhaps set up a preliminary plan of attack. This often saves both the teacher and the students many hours of frustration and remediation later in the term.

The research indicates that doing CL during some of the class time results in greater academic achievement and better critical thinking than conducting the class using more traditional modes of instruction. One might easily argue that class time is too precious not to spend some of it doing Cooperative Learning.

6. Jump right in; the water is fine.

It is our general belief that one should start small in implementing CL. Pick the course that you feel most comfortable with and initiate CL in a small way. Perhaps you could use CL to review for an exam. Or it could be used on a pilot basis for a week or two. Whatever you do, students need to know exactly what is expected of them. This implies that the instructor needs to clearly identify his/her reasons for assigning the group work and why the instructional objective is best completed in groups rather than in lecture, discussion, etc. If the students perceive the assignment as busy work, unrelated to the course objectives, their motivation to work productively will diminish.

We believe that high degrees of structure and individual accountability are essential elements of effective CL classrooms. The students must perceive the task as relevant to the course objectives. The instructor must organize the groups with care and must clearly specify the relationship of individuals' contributions within their groups to the ultimate course grade. In short, careful planning and organization are essential in order to make Cooperative Learning realize the enormous potential that it has- to provide an exciting, interactive educational experience for both student and teacher.

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