7.7: Benefits and Drawbacks of Cooperative Learning

**Benefits of Cooperative Learning**

Ted Panitz (1996) lists over 50 benefits provided by cooperative learning. These benefits can be summarized into four major categories: social, psychological, academic and assessment.

Cooperative learning promotes social interactions; thus students benefit in a number of ways from the social perspective. By having the students explain their reasoning and conclusions, cooperative learning helps develop oral communication skills. Because of the social interaction among students, cooperative learning can be used to model the appropriate social behaviors necessary for employment situations.

By following the appropriate structuring for cooperative learning, students are able to develop and practice skills that will be needed to function in society and the workplace. These skills include: leadership, decision-making, trust building, communication and conflict-management.

The cooperative environment also develops a social support system for students. Other students, the instructor, administrators, other school staff, and potentially parents become integral parts of the learning process, thus supplying multiple opportunities for support to the students (Kessler and McCleod, 1985).

Students also benefit psychologically from cooperative learning. Johnson and Johnson (1989) claim, "cooperative learning experiences promote more positive attitudes" toward learning and instruction than other teaching methodologies. Because students play an active role in the learning process in cooperative learning, student satisfaction with the learning experience is enhanced.

Cooperative learning also helps to develop interpersonal relationships among students. The opportunity to discuss their
ideas in smaller groups and receive constructive feedback on those ideas helps to build student self-esteem. In a lecture format, individual students are called upon to respond to a question in front of the entire class without having much time to think about his/her answer.

Cooperative learning creates a safe, nurturing environment because solutions come from the group rather than from the individual. Errors in conclusions and thought processes are corrected within the group before they are presented to the class.

Students also tend to be inspired by instructors who take the time to plan activities which promote an encouraging environment (Janke, 1980). Receiving encouragement in a cooperative setting from both the instructor and peers helps to develop higher self-efficacy (see the Motivation chapter). As a result of higher self-efficacy, student grades tend to increase; thus, cooperative learning methods provide several academic benefits for students.

Research indicates that students who were taught by cooperative methods learned and retained significantly more information than students being taught by other methods. Requiring students to verbalize their ideas to the group helps them to develop more clear concepts; thus, the thought process becomes fully embedded in the students’ memory. Vygotsky supports this concept in his research on egocentric speech by claiming that verbalization plays a significant role in task solution (Bershon, 1992).

Discussions within the groups lead to more frequent summarization because the students are constantly explaining and elaborating, which in turn validates and strengthens thoughts. Students also benefit from cooperative learning academically in the sense that there is more of a potential for success when students work in groups. Individuals tend to give up when they get stuck, whereas a group of students is more likely to find a way to keep going (Johnson & Johnson, 1990).

Cooperative learning calls for self-management from students because they must come prepared with completed assignments and they must understand the material which they have compiled. As a result, a more complete understanding of the material is developed.

There are also many benefits of cooperative learning from the aspect of assessment. It provides instant feedback to the students and instructor because the effectiveness of each class can be observed. As instructors move around the room and observe each group of students interacting and explaining their theories, they are able to detect misconceptions early enough to correct them. Only a few minutes of observation during each class session can provide helpful insight into students’ abilities and growth.

Cooperative teaching methods also utilize a variety of assessments. Grades are not dependent solely on tests and individual assignments which only allow for right or wrong responses, leaving little or no room for reflection and discussion of error or misconceptions. With cooperative learning, instructors can use more authentic assessments such as observation, peer assessment and writing reflections.

Cooperative Learning Benefits in Mrs. Solomon’s Classroom

As Mrs. Solomon learns all of the benefits gained from the use of cooperative learning, her curiosity is piqued; however, she still finds herself questioning whether her complex class could overcome all of the barriers that are hindering the learning environment. There is evidence, though, that most of the problems experienced in her class could be solved by
using cooperative learning.

**Poor Attendance** – In addition to the four major categories of benefits detailed above, schools utilizing this strategy report an increase in student attendance because students feel that they are a valuable and necessary part of their groups (McBrien & Brandt, 1997).

**Classroom Disruptions** – Students are less likely to act out in a cooperative setting. Students act out to get attention; however, the “stage” is removed in a cooperative environment because it is very difficult to gain the attention of the entire class when students are divided up into smaller groups (Stahl & Van Sickle, 1992). As a result, students are more likely to stay on task and are less likely to be disruptive. Cooperative learning also helps reduce classroom disruptions because students are allowed to socialize during the learning process. Students need peer interaction, and without the integration of interaction among students, the need for social contact emerges in a negative context.

**Violence**– According to Johnson and Johnson (1990), cooperative learning also helps to reduce violence. If enforced correctly, cooperative activities model non-violent resolutions to problems. Because group consensus is promoted, blame is eliminated and honor, friendliness and quality are promoted.

**Diversity among students** – Research shows that cooperative learning also builds diversity awareness among students. It encourages students to use their differences to help each other. Because students are placed in a situation where they are able to interact with peers that they otherwise may never socialize with, behaviors which might appear odd in other settings become understandable when students are given the opportunity to explain and defend their reasoning.

In a traditional classroom, there is very little opportunity for students to defend their perspectives. As students observe each other’s reasoning processes, there is more room to understand and appreciate their differences (Johnson and Johnson, 1990). As a result, a much deeper understanding of cultural and individual difference is developed (Yager, 1985).

In addition, because students are placed in a supportive environment where group-processing skills are essential, they are more likely to accept these differences than they would in a competitive, non-interactive environment. This greater understanding of their differences also helps students learn to resolve social problems which might arise (Johnson and Johnson, 1990).

**Students with special needs** – Cooperative methods are flexible and can easily be adapted for students with special needs. Because of the reasons mentioned above, this type of learning environment allows for improved social acceptance of mainstreamed students with learning disabilities (Slavin, 1990).

**ESL students** – Cooperative learning is especially useful in courses where interactions involving the use of language are important, such as ESL courses. It is an ideal way to “facilitate the acquisition of language and to practice the customs of debate and discussion which occur within the classroom” (Brufee, 1993). Research conducted using cooperative learning in classes with ESL students shows significant development in acquiring English-language skills.

Cooperative learning helps students learn language better than the drill and practice of traditional language training. It would appear that peer interaction in natural settings is the ideal use of language that is necessary for successfully acquiring second language skills (Neves, 1983). In addition, most educational psychology textbooks now contain...
“extended discussions of cooperative pedagogics and their effectiveness with regard to improved racial relations, self-esteem, and internal locus of control” (Sherman, 1991).

**Arguments among students** – Marzano (1992) asserts that in a cooperative setting, students can analyze the effects of the groups and “suggest activities which will promote positive interactions or deal with conflicts or personality problems within each group.” It provides a supportive environment within which to manage conflict resolution (Johnson & Johnson, 1990).

**Disrespect toward instructor** – In the cooperative classroom, instructors have more opportunities to explain policies and procedures. When instructor expectations are clear, there seems to be less room for personal interpretations, which often leads to a negative attitude toward the instructor. The class could also, potentially, be empowered to contribute to the development and implementation of classroom rules and procedures. This classroom management technique, when intertwined with cooperative activities, could help students overcome resentments which were created as a result of the teacher-centered classroom.

**Differences in learning abilities** – Performance is improved among weaker students when they are grouped with higher achieving students because the stronger students model successful reasoning processes. Students who usually struggle in academics are able to learn to prepare for tests, check and correct homework, and see alternative solutions to problems. Vygotsky (1978) hypothesizes that the social interaction among students extends the students’ zone of proximal development (the difference between a student’s understanding and their potential to understand).

When students work cooperatively in groups the more knowledgeable students are able to help the less knowledgeable students understand new concepts. High achieving students also benefit because they are verbalizing their ideas and actually teaching others. As mentioned earlier, the process of verbalizing thoughts helps to further promote understanding of material.

Cooperative learning also accommodates learning style differences among students because they are utilizing each of the three main learning styles: kinesthetic, auditory and visual. Material presented by the instructor is both auditory and visual, and students working together use kinesthetic abilities by working with hands-on activities. Discussing issues within the groups further enhances verbal skills, and class presentation of group findings helps to reinforce visual and auditory skills (Midkiff & Thomasson, 1993).

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**Drawbacks of Cooperative Learning**

Instructors who are unfamiliar with cooperative learning may not initially accept this style of learning because they may feel they will lose control of their classroom, or they may be unsure of the techniques used or possibly even think that it is too time consuming. In this next section, we will discuss some of the possible drawbacks to cooperative learning.

**Loss of Control** – Cooperative learning is a structured approach that requires instructor support and guidance. In order for cooperative learning to be utilized in the classroom, instructors must receive training to be proficient in implementing the techniques. Maximum learning will only emerge if proper training is received by the instructor and then transferred to the student.

Instructors may resist using cooperative learning techniques in their classroom because they are afraid they may lose control of their teaching routine. Cooperative learning takes time to implement; therefore, initial lessons may take longer.
Once students and the instructor are comfortable with the process, then the amount of time for each lesson decreases.

Instructors may have a difficult time giving up their control of the content that is being covered (Panitz). They are accustomed to presenting the curriculum to the students and are unable to give students the freedom to learn on their own. Students learning only one part of the curriculum in their group may make an instructor anxious about what their students know.

Showing their expertise in a subject area is important for some instructors. Giving up the opportunity to show off this expertise may deter instructors from using cooperative learning in their classrooms. Also, if students are expected to explore on their own, then they may have questions that the instructor cannot answer. Both of these possibilities may cause an instructor to lose confidence in her teaching abilities. Instructors can still be experts, but they will be using their knowledge as a facilitator rather than a giver of information.

**Group Work** – Depending on the age level, students may resist using cooperative learning in their classrooms. Lecture does not require much interaction and participation from the students; therefore, they can get as much or as little from the class as they like. Being required to work in a group may ruffle a few feathers with the students because now they are being asked to participate and contribute to their learning. In addition, they are also asked to learn new concepts and taught how to work in a group. They may not be accustomed to working in a group, and therefore, may be unsure of the dynamics involved in group work.

Since cooperative learning is centered on group work, students may be concerned that other members of their group are going to bring their grades down. This is especially true if students are grouped by mixed ability, requiring higher ability students to guide lower ability students.

Deciding how groups should be formed is an important part of the cooperative learning planning process. There has been some debate as to how groups should be formed in order for students to effectively work together and reach their maximum potential.

Mixed ability grouping allows for all group members to be involved, though the type of involvement differs. Advanced students can teach struggling students, but concerns arise about advanced students doing all the work and struggling students not being motivated to be involved at all. There are also concerns that gifted students are held back by the lower ability students in their group.

If students are grouped with others of the same ability level, then the lower ability group may feel frustrated and unmotivated to try. This is also true of those who are grouped by gender or race because it may support stereotypes that certain subject areas are dominated by certain groups.

There are also varying opinions about the optimal number of people for small group formation. The consensus seems to agree that no more than 4 people in a group produces higher achievement (Slavin, 1987). Fixed seating and large class sizes may make group arrangement difficult though. Still, even if the room is easily arranged into small groups, instructors may have a difficult time accessing all of the numerous small groups.

Most students are not accustomed to group work, especially in high school classrooms. Students will have to be taught to work effectively in a group setting. Resolving group conflict can be a major challenge for instructors. Groups will need to make sure that every member listens to and appreciates each group member’s contribution. Identifying
responsibilities within the group and encouraging each to do their best work needs to be addressed before group work begins. Also, students that work better alone may struggle to succeed in a group atmosphere.

Since the classroom will be made up of several small groups, the noise level will escalate. This can be very uncomfortable for some instructors, especially if they are accustomed to a lecture and seatwork classroom. This can also cause problems for those students who have attention difficulties.

Cooperative learning is based on social interaction; thus, grouping students together to work independently even for a short period of time may encourage behavior that is off task. While the instructor is circling the room to observe and interact with the groups, it is difficult to make sure every group is productively working on their assignment. Self-management skills will have to be introduced before students break out into groups and be reinforced as they progress through their work.

**Time Requirements** – With cooperative learning, the textbook is used only as an instructional supplement, so it is necessary for instructors to create additional materials for the students. Usually these materials are made from scratch because many instructors’ manuals offer limited suggestions for group activities. Creating these new materials can be very time consuming. So, not only are instructors spending a large amount of time implementing this new way of learning, but they also have to create the materials to go along with it.

Since students have to generate an answer or information within their group, work time may take longer than the traditional lecture. Because of this additional time, instructors may be unable to cover the same amount of curriculum as before when they used teacher directed class discussions. Many times, in a traditional classroom, the quality of the work is compromised in order to teach the entire curriculum.

Vague objectives, avoidance of teaching, and lack of critical thinking activities are other problems associated with cooperative learning. With the focus on managing groups, it is possible for instructors to overlook the students’ objectives and tasks. Therefore, students are not receiving the needed guidance to effectively learn the task at hand. Some critics say that instructors who rely on small group work are avoiding their teaching responsibilities. Students are left on their own to teach themselves the curriculum. In addition, since students are working in small groups that require additional time, instructors may be more apt to assign tasks that do not demand higher level thinking skills. The quality is overlooked in order to increase the quantity of assignments.

**Other Drawbacks** – Since students are working together on a group assignment, it is difficult to assess students with a paper and pencil test. Instructors will have to find another way to assess student work and progress. Since students are used to concrete assessments, it may be difficult for students to adjust to authentic assessments.