



## CLEARING MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT COOPERATIVE LEARNING THROUGH PERSONAL EXPERIENCES

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### Abstract

*Cooperative learning is a successful teaching strategy in which small teams, each with students of different levels of ability, use a variety of learning activities to improve their understanding of a subject. Each member of a team is responsible not only for learning what is taught but also for helping teammates learn, thus creating an atmosphere of achievement. Students work through the assignment until all group members successfully understand and complete it. The author has been using cooperative learning strategy for the last eight odd years. She has observed that although teachers in general have a positive opinion about cooperative learning they have their reservations regarding the hurdles which one may face while using cooperative learning strategy. Some of these are hurdles are due to misconception. The author through this paper tries to clear eight such misconceptions using her experiences with cooperative learning teaching strategy.*

**Keywords:** Cooperative learning, misconceptions, teacher education.



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### Introduction:

A classroom full of active learners is the need of the hour. Teachers understand the importance of having an interactive class but are not sure how to change passive learners into active ones. Cooperative Learning teaching strategy is one way to answer this question. **Cooperative learning** is a successful teaching strategy in which small teams, each with students of different levels of ability, use a variety of learning activities to improve their understanding of a subject. Each member of a team is responsible not only for learning what is taught but also for helping teammates learn, thus creating an atmosphere of achievement. Students work through the assignment until all group members successfully understand and complete it (Kagan, 1994).

It is only under certain conditions that cooperative efforts may be expected to be more productive than competitive and individualistic efforts. Those conditions which are also the **elements of cooperative learning** are stated by David W. Johnson and Roger T. Johnson. They are as follows:

1. Clearly perceived **positive interdependence**

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2. Considerable promotive (**face-to-face**) **interaction**
3. Clearly perceived **individual accountability and personal responsibility** to achieve the group's goals
4. Frequent use of the relevant **interpersonal and small-group skills**
5. Frequent and regular **group processing** of current functioning to improve the group's future effectiveness (Thousand, Villa & Nevin, 1994).

The author has been using cooperative learning strategy for the last eight odd years. During this time she and her mentor Dr. Lalita Vartak have had the opportunity to interact with per service teachers, teacher educators, professors from different faculty, school teachers and school students. What is interesting is how cooperative learning is viewed by different people. Although teachers in general have a positive opinion about cooperative learning they have their reservations regarding the hurdles which one may face while using cooperative learning strategy. The teacher education field is no exception, with both teacher educators and pre-service teachers having hesitation regarding the use of cooperative learning teaching strategy (Roy, 2016)

In the course of interactions at various education levels, the author came across a number of misconceptions among teachers which the author through this paper attempts to clear using her experiences with cooperative learning teaching strategy.

#### **Misconceptions:**

1. *It is impossible to use cooperative learning in a large class:*

A teacher who is trained in conducting cooperative learning techniques will be able to handle large classes. The rationale is that giving individual attention to 60 students at a time is a huge challenge, but this becomes less challenging when these students are divided into 10 to 12 groups. When the students are divided into groups the teacher needs to supervise the 10 or 12 groups and not 60 individual students. More over as the students become active learners, there is less problems of class management. However, students too need to be trained while sharing their ideas in the group for e.g. Use soft voices while discussing in the group and use loud voices when sharing with the class.

2. *It is difficult to identify who is doing the work in a group activity:*

This is related to another misconception that teachers will have a lot of time during class to catch up on paper work. The role of the teacher is to supervise the cooperative learning activity. The teacher should go around and observe the members of the groups while they interact with each other in completing the task. This way the teacher will

come to know which of the members are actively participating in the class while assigning grades. The teacher may use observation tools like rating scales or rubrics while supervising the activity of the students. This will help to make their observations easy, accurate and specific.

3. *It is time consuming and causes a hurdle in covering the course material:*

There is some truth to this statement, yet this hurdle can be diminished. It is often seen that teachers tend to pay a lot of attention in covering the course. However, even if the course is covered there remain gaps in students regarding actually 'learning concepts.' This gap can be bridged if teachers focus on the core competencies and provide students with the tools needed to self-assess their progress towards learning those competencies. Cooperative learning techniques provide opportunities for self-assessment and focus less on rote learning. This makes completing the course material more effective. Furthermore, as students become familiar with cooperative learning techniques, the time taken for the activity reduces.

4. *Cooperative learning has no room for lectures:*

The role of the teacher using cooperative learning is that of a facilitator. That does not mean that the teacher should not use lecture while using these teaching techniques. We need to create a balance between the use of lecture and cooperative learning techniques to make new concepts easy to understand. The balance may change depending on the topic and learning objectives. Short lectures can be interspersed or combined with Cooperative learning techniques to keep students engaged.

5. *Doing group work is cooperative learning.*

Although cooperative learning consists of group work, it will be incorrect to state that using group work is synonymous to using cooperative learning. Group work may not consist of all the elements of cooperative learning as mentioned earlier. Elements like 'Group Processing' may not be planned in group works conducted in classes. Furthermore, roles are not clearly given while using group work and there is a tendency of one member to do all the work and the other members slack off and reap the benefits. Where as in a cooperative learning activity the teacher assigns roles to the students, which is supervised by the teacher and each student is held accountable in the team effort (The Cooperative Learner, 2015).

6. *The activity ends with sharing of answers with the class:*

A common misconception is that a cooperative learning technique ends when pairs or groups share their answers with the class. Not only does the teacher need to give feedback regarding the answers being shared, there is also the need to give time to the group or pair members to discuss how they arrived at solving the problem. This is an important element of cooperative learning i.e. Group Processing. During this discussion the teacher needs to give chance to the groups to discuss the tactics used by the groups in completing the task. Such a discussion helps students work better in successive classroom activities. Though this takes time during the initial stages of using cooperative learning, it becomes very useful in saving time during classroom activities in the future.

7. *Any cooperative learning technique can be used for any content*

There are roughly 200 cooperative learning techniques or structures, which have been designed by Dr. Spencer Kagan(Kagan, 2008). Simple Pair work techniques like ‘Think-Pair-Share’ or ‘Timed-Pair-Share’ is a good way to introduce students to cooperative learning. In case the students need to list down an answer then the teacher can use ‘Think-Ink-Pair-Share’. ‘Pairs Compare’ and ‘Pairs Check’ are handy techniques which can be used in mathematics using peer tutoring and peer evaluation to help students learn technical concepts (Roy &Vartak, 2015)

Similarly, if the task involves several answers then the teacher can use group activities like ‘Round Robin’ or ‘Numbered Heads Together’. In ‘Round Robin’ the students take turns to write answers on a sheet of paper passed around to all the group members and then decide on a collective response. In ‘Numbered Heads Together’ each group member is allotted a number and at the end of the activity the teacher selects a group member to share the answer by calling out random numbers. This activity keeps every member of the group on their toes as anyone can be called to present their group’s answer, hence keeping the group and individual accountability high.

In the ‘Three Minute Review’, teachers ask students to reflect and share with the class what has been taught previously. Hence it is an activity which can be effectively used in the beginning of a class or even in between to review what has been discussed. Thus some techniques are useful at the introductory stage, some during the actual teaching stage and some at the evaluation stage.

8. *Students are hesitant to work together:*

Generally, it is felt that high achievers don't want to work in groups as it may decrease their pace of learning. Still, if roles are properly assigned to such students they tend to appreciate working in groups and in fact become effective peer tutors. Each group member should be assigned a particular role in completing the task. There are many roles that students play in a cooperative learning activity like the researcher, summarizer, time keeper, group leader, reporter etc. (Johnson & Johnson, 1991). Students will do the work if they are held accountable. It also gives them an opportunity to demonstrate what they know and take pride in the work they have done provided appropriate and timely feedback is given to them by the teachers.

### **Conclusion:**

Like any teaching strategy cooperative learning has its limitations. However, with training and experience these limitations can be reduced. There are many academic and psychological benefits for students who are taught using cooperative learning. It helps reduce anxiety, promotes critical thinking, models appropriate student problem solving techniques among other benefits (Teacher to Teacher UK Limited, 2018). As a teacher educator the author personally finds cooperative learning a very enriching way to interact with students in the class and earnestly wishes that teachers give it a try and have similar experiences.

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