Cooperative Learning as Effective Social Study within the Social Studies Classroom: Introduction and an Invitation

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Nothing is so practical as a good theory.
—Kurt Lewin

One of the strongest illusions that influences many educators' and parents' notions of the nature of schooling elevates and sometimes glorifies noncooperative attitudes and behaviors. "Only the strongest survive," "It's a dog-eat-dog world," and "Competition makes the world go around" are frequently heard expressions of this illusion about preparing students for the real, competitive world that exists out there beyond the school yard and the school years. We tend to forget that the real world exists for students every moment they are outside school and inside their school as well.

A complementary illusion is that of the rugged individual—the strong, self-sufficient, and independent individual coping in the real world and achieving great things alone against great odds. Charles Lindbergh, Jane Addams, Martin Luther King, Jr., and George Washington, for example, are lauded for their personal accomplishments as though they had no colleagues or support groups that worked cooperatively to help them achieve their dreams and hopes. Focusing on what individuals have done as though they were alone in their endeavors is to overlook and misrepresent how these individuals worked toward their goals. As students find answers to questions such as "How was it possible for Charles Lindbergh to fly nonstop across the Atlantic?" and "What factors contributed to the success of Jane Addams's Hull House in Chicago?" they discover the network of cooperative support that contributed to the successes associated with each individual.

Social studies educators strive to enable their students to become educated and competent so that they will be successful in the world. Students should study individual and group actions, thoughts, and artifacts in ways that will both facilitate their achievement of selected social studies knowledge and abilities and enable them to function well inside and outside the social studies classroom. Our task as professional educators is not to establish a mini real world in the classroom where students are left to sink or swim on their own as though the purpose of school is to provide survival experiences. Rather, we need to continue to work in our classrooms so that whenever and wherever students hit the water, they will be able to swim well both on their own and with others from then on.

We will attempt to provide answers to such questions throughout the chapters that follow. The answers strongly indicate that appropriate cooperative learning groups can result in large numbers of students achieving our expectations for them both inside and beyond the social studies classroom.

This chapter builds a conceptual framework for understanding cooperative learning as an alternative instructional approach. We introduce the cooperative learning approach to social study by examining a number of assumptions about students as learners and about social studies educators' commitments to achieving the maximum learning for their students.

Assumptions

We assume that students enter the social studies classroom wanting to succeed and not merely to survive. Students want their studies to make sense and to mean something from their own perspectives. They want to leave school with new knowledge, abilities, and orientations that will enable them to function well in the world as well as within the school and the social studies classroom.

We assume that virtually all students can learn nearly every set of knowledge, abilities, and perspectives that social studies educators expect them to learn. We are optimistic about what students can learn within appropriate instructional environments. This view of learners suggests that we can provide learning environments in schools that will help improve students' learning and thus motivate them about social studies topics, content, and abilities. Furthermore, this view reinforces the belief that every student should attain social studies goals and
abilities. Finally, this view values each student as an individual capable of achieving success in the classroom regardless of conditions outside that classroom.

We assume that academic success eventually leads students to engage actively in activities likely to continue that success. Students who do well in particular areas of the social studies tend to be interested in other topics and data they perceive as related to these areas. Students who do well in the prerequisite knowledge and abilities are more likely to be successful and interested in complex and challenging topics, knowledges, and abilities. Conversely, students who do not have the prerequisites or prior successes are not likely to become or remain interested in social studies topics without them. Social studies teachers must not assume that topics, activities, and teacher personality will automatically motivate students who lack the prerequisites to become highly involved, interested, and studious. Therefore, teachers who are concerned about the levels of their students’ interest and achievement need to consider using strategies that facilitate student success. These teachers will find that as they use these strategies appropriately, their students will tend to improve their learning and their interest and involvement in social study.

We assume students expect their teachers to do what is necessary to facilitate successful attainment and maintenance of the targeted knowledge, abilities, and orientations. They hope that their teachers are committed to taking them from where they are to as high a level as they are able to achieve. They hope their teachers do not intend to teach only as much as is convenient for the entire class to cover. These expectations and hopes are consistent with an essential reason for providing social studies education—to prepare young people to be humane, civil, rational, participating citizens in a world that is increasingly interdependent, pluralistic, and changing (NCSS 1979).

We assume that social studies educators are committed to providing students with quality curriculum and instructional opportunities that facilitate their attainment of valued social education goals.

We assume that social studies educators, because they are professionals, will seek out, seriously consider, and, where appropriate, learn to use alternative curriculum and instructional strategies to help each student achieve maximum success. Consequently, we assume that in situations where students are not learning the academic content, are not using appropriate social interaction abilities, or are not attaining the positive self-conceptions teachers expect, teachers will seriously consider an instructional approach that offers considerable promise for changing the situation in their classrooms. Cooperative learning is one approach that, from theory through actual classroom practice, works in helping students become successful learners.

We assume that teachers who have students who are achieving at acceptable levels and who use many appropriate social interaction behaviors will continue to search for and use instructional strategies that may increase the positive results of their present strategies. In other words, we assume that social studies educators have a continual desire to improve their teaching.

Finally, we assume that to be effective in a school setting requires a considerable amount of cooperative effort and support from one’s colleagues to ensure that appropriate social study occurs within the social studies classroom.

Social Study in the Social Studies Classroom: “Getting Better Together”

Social studies classroom instruction has always included individual and group work. Thinking about what constitutes effective social studies instruction has generally focused on specific subject matter and citizenship knowledge, abilities, and perspectives. Consequently, teachers who emphasize the learning of these knowledge bases, abilities, and perspectives are teaching social studies. Group activities are often integral parts of classroom instruction. Students participate in groups within which they are to acquire and practice abilities associated with effective citizenship. Teachers expect students to communicate clearly, use social and group interaction abilities, and work together to complete assigned group tasks.

Effective social studies teaching also involves appropriate social study.

In this context, the word social reminds us that the words and language rules we use in the classroom are part and parcel of culture. We think and speak using terms, symbols, grammar, and meanings that are integral parts of the language that we share within our society. Although students construct and ultimately must make knowledge their own, they do so in one or more societies or subgroups that influence, share, and interact using language in addition, students use, share, negotiate, and revise meanings according to the verbal and nonverbal language others use in their social world.

Social also refers to the need to engage in worthwhile, goal-oriented tasks within supportive interpersonal environments. These social tasks and environments need to be relatively frequent and endure over extended periods of time. Within such environments individuals must become active, contributing, and integral parts of the social community that benefits from their participation. To be effective within this social environment, students must learn and practice the knowledge, abilities, and attitudes necessary to function effectively within the social group and as part of the social community that is formed. Individuals must have a sense of belonging to, participating in, and contributing to one or more groups as a viable, personally meaningful, social community.

According to this view of the term social, it is not
enough to be in a classroom of students who may on occasion interact or do things together in small groups or as a class. Individuals in a class must come to sense that they constitute a meaningful social community in which certain actions and attitudes are acceptable and others are unacceptable. They must come to value what the community and the required social interaction mean and can do for them. If we generate such environments in the classroom, students will not see themselves as individuals in a class, but rather as members of a social community that happens to meet in a social studies classroom.

This view of social is consistent with the essence of effective citizenship within any community. If individuals are to participate and contribute, they must have a sense that the community is worthwhile and that their involvement will have both personal and social meaning. Individuals must be an integral part of the group rather than merely working alongside others in the group. They must come to believe that their voices can help to change society and that their votes count to change and improve society. Individuals must sense a personal power within the social group and believe that the group will benefit from their contributions. Likewise, students must perceive and receive benefits from active participation within their community (the classroom).

By study we mean the systematic and focused pursuit of knowledge and the ability to apply that knowledge when needed. Students should engage in inquiry, apply appropriate study skills, or use other strategies for acquiring knowledge and abilities; they should not merely complete projects either by themselves or in groups. Consequently, when students finish their study, we and they should expect that they are able to do things they could not do prior to this effort.

If social study is to become a component of social studies classrooms, teachers must find ways to enable students to form viable social communities that work cooperatively and systematically to acquire new knowledge and abilities as a group. Members must see these groups as beneficial both for themselves and for the group. That is, each individual must be a successful learner and the achievement of the group as a group must be relatively high. Teachers need to structure classroom activities, rewards, and student roles such that students establish a social community and participate as effective members of this community at the same time focusing on achieving the shared learning goals.

Cooperative learning strategies are a means by which social studies teachers can arrange for, promote, and reward social study in their classroom. As students engage in completing appropriate social study activities, they are likely to benefit in a wide variety of ways beyond academic achievement and become skilled at using social interaction behaviors.

One way to envision cooperative learning group participation and benefits is captured in the expression “Getting Better Together.” By working with one another in appropriate ways, students enhance each other’s knowledge and abilities as well as their own. Essentially, by working together to facilitate each other’s learning, students “get better” individually and “get better together” as a team focused on team success.

These strategies, however, are not likely to be used appropriately unless the teacher has an adequate conceptual view of cooperation and cooperative learning.

Building a Conceptual Framework about Cooperating to Learn and Cooperative Learning Groups

The notion that teachers can achieve positive results consistent with social studies educational goals through the use of cooperative groups is not new to the social studies. Social studies teachers have always expected—and continue to expect—that cooperative groups must be more than collections of students who sit together, complete essentially independent tasks, and fit their individual parts together so that they have a single product as proof of their cooperative effort. Students are expected to work as groups and not merely as groups. They are to work with one another as a team of learners and as full partners in each other’s learning efforts and success. When such group cooperation exists over a sufficient period of time, both the quantity and the quality of interaction are high and student achievement for all is optimal for the time spent.

Slavin (1983) delineated cooperative learning as a distinct instructional model with particular criteria that separates it from typical group work and group activities. For Slavin, teachers need to establish heterogeneous groups of four to six members who are mutually responsible for each other’s success relative to the same knowledge and abilities. Group members earn recognition, rewards, and sometimes grades based upon the academic achievement of their respective groups. This does not mean that all cooperative learning model-builders share all of these criteria and set the same expectations, goals, and guidelines. Sufficient overlap and consistency across many of these models, however, maintain the integrity of each as an example of cooperative learning.

Teachers are most likely to use cooperative learning strategies correctly once they build an adequate conceptual framework that provides the perspective needed to carry out the strategies on a moment-by-moment and day-by-day basis (Johnson, Johnson, and Holubec 1990). This framework should work to modify present misconceptions about cooperating to learn and cooperative learning groups and prevent future misconceptions from arising. Below are a number of ideas that should become permanent fixtures in conceptions of cooperative learning.

(1) Not all cooperative groups are instructionally effective (Slavin 1990). Leaders in this field continually
caution teachers, supervisors, and administrators against believing that cooperative learning strategies simply involve students working in groups. Cooperative learning models are strategies for structuring the learning environment within classrooms. These models cannot substitute for, make obsolete, or make up for poor curriculum decisions (Stahl 1990). They cannot improve curriculum decisions already made. These models are tools that facilitate student progress toward achieving the cognitive, affective, and social outcomes set within the curriculum used. These strategies are what teachers use after the curriculum decisions have been made. In other words, one does not start with cooperative learning and then plan the curriculum. Rather, one makes the curriculum decisions and selects the cooperative learning strategies that are most appropriate for the students involved and the learning they need to accomplish.

(5) Cooperative learning models are independent of the outcomes selected and the materials used during the group tasks (Stahl 1990). Teachers may use many cooperative learning strategies in connection with textbooks, content-filled handouts, or other printed resources—nearly any resource aligned with what students are to learn. If a teacher uses a strategy only in reference to a textbook, however, the teacher’s decisions—and not the strategy—are solely responsible for this textbook dependency. If a teacher uses a particular cooperative learning strategy only to help students memorize and recall basic facts and low-level skills, this also reflects a decision the teacher has made. Every cooperative learning strategy, when used appropriately, can enable students to move beyond the text, memorization of basic facts, and learning lower-level skills. Each strategy can serve to help students become proficient transferers of academic and social knowledge and abilities.

(6) Cooperative learning techniques or strategies are structured ways of operating within a classroom. One key for ensuring that cooperative learning models work is to envision each model as describing a particular way to structure the learning, the learning task, and the learners’ roles (Kagan 1989, 1989–90). Such structures are content-free ways of organizing social interaction aimed toward enabling all students to be successful. Structures provide steps, guidelines, and requirements that, when met, will allow students to achieve their maximum potential in alignment with clear outcomes. Teachers may use structures such as Jig 3w, Coop-Coop, and Teams-Games-Tournament over and over across an extremely wide range of topics, content, grade levels, and outcomes (Kagan 1989, 1989–90). These structures differ according to their cognitive processing, academic, affective, and interpersonal emphasis, length of time for completion, required teacher and student roles, usefulness for selected content, and degree of complexity.

(7) Each cooperative learning strategy should be viewed as a structured way of operating within the classroom—not as an activity. The distinction between a
learning structure and an activity is important. Activities like those found in many books and articles describe what a teacher might ask a group to complete within a single lesson or unit. Students might complete the activity, however, without students or the teacher ensuring that they are meeting requirements for appropriate cooperative learning group work. Merely because one labels an activity a cooperative learning activity or strategy does not make it so. What counts is that the learning tasks and environment are structured such that the requirements are met. When students complete appropriate cooperative learning tasks, teachers find that large numbers of students leave the group tasks and the course with high levels of success for the outcomes set for them.

8. Each group member needs to learn appropriate cooperative learning group behaviors. Students must acquire, practice, and refine the variety of positive group behaviors necessary for them to work as a group so that they become skilled users of these abilities and accompanying attitudes. We cannot expect students to bring all the appropriate abilities and attitudes with them to these groups or to develop them simply by being told to work as a group. In many instances, teachers will need to take time before they form the groups, during the group interactions, and after the groups have finished to describe particular productive and dysfunctional group behaviors and attitudes. These are as much a part of the group learning process as the academic content and abilities. Proponents of cooperative learning emphasize the need to help students learn what is necessary to contribute to the group’s goal-directed efforts.

9. Appropriate cooperative learning structures and guidelines are neither simple nor easy to implement (Johnson et al. 1984). Even for teachers who have used groups in the past, learning concepts and procedures of cooperative learning strategies and properly implementing them in the classroom requires time, effort, and adherence to the criteria provided. Although the concept of cooperation is simple and appealing, teachers should not assume that achieving high levels of cooperation for learning will be easy. Cooperative learning as an approach to teaching generally, and the various cooperative strategies in particular, are complex ways of operating in the classroom. They require the typical teacher to use a number of new behaviors that will take time to perfect. Old notions that run contrary to effective cooperative learning are likely to persist. These notions and accompanying behaviors represent habits that teachers and supervisors will need to unlearn while learning the ways of appropriate cooperative learning. Old habits are hard to break—much less forget; teachers wanting to use cooperative learning need to accept at the start that creating effective cooperative learning classrooms will be challenging work. They will find, however, that the positive results for both students and themselves make the effort and time spent worthwhile (Johnson et al. 1984).

10. Cooperative learning will work when only one teacher in the school or department is using it. Sometimes teachers have a sense that if they are the only one using cooperative learning their students will not gain much by its use. Consequently, they may try a few cooperative learning activities waiting for the day every teacher uses them. Cooperative learning has been effective in achieving many of the valued goals of social studies education. Social studies teachers should consider its use on the basis of the classroom evidence. We would encourage teachers to become the first cooperative learning teacher in their departments or schools. With the success that is likely to follow, colleagues will join this movement toward expanding the cooperative learning concept and accompanying strategies to other students and into other classrooms.

In this section we addressed a number of fundamental conceptions of appropriate cooperative learning along with a sample of misconceptions to overcome. Educators need to include these ideas as a part of a large, comprehensive, conceptual framework for cooperative learning. Social studies educators may read these and other materials on cooperative learning and believe that they are already engaged in cooperative learning in their school or classroom. The section that follows should help teachers begin a systematic assessment of current group instructional practices to determine the extent to which they are already practicing cooperative learning.

Am I Engaged in Cooperative Learning?

Teachers who use groups and supervisors who promote group work might perceive that they are already engaged in cooperative learning in the classroom. Numerous criteria and guidelines are available to verify whether what occurs within these groups meets the requirements for appropriate cooperative learning groups (e.g., Aronson et al. 1978; Cohen 1986; Johnson and Johnson 1991; Johnson et al. 1984; Kagan 1989; Slavin 1983, 1990; Stahl 1992). One way to determine whether cooperative learning is occurring is to observe how closely students follow these structures and requirements. To the extent that all group members meet these requirements, appropriate cooperative learning activity is occurring.

Another way to determine whether group activities and assignments are consistent with appropriate cooperative learning is by collecting systematic, objective data about the effects of cooperative learning on the majority of students compared to expected student outcomes of cooperative learning. For instance, most students involved in cooperative group tasks over an extended period should

- improve scores on academic tests
- voluntarily increase their personal contact with other students in a variety of contexts
- have strong feelings of group membership
• work cooperatively in small group settings toward attaining a common goal
• have many of the positive attitudes necessary for working effectively with others
• feel positively about others in their groups
• be willing to share and interact positively within group settings
• integrate their academic learning and social and intergroup relations
• improve relations with individuals from ethnic or racial groups other than their own
• be willing to express and discuss their own ideas in public
• improve their opinions about and relationships with handicapped students
• see their peers in a positive light
• increase the number of voluntary friendships based on human qualities
• have enhanced positive self-concept and self-esteem
• be positively adjusted psychologically
• have high levels of intrinsic motivation to learn
• accept their peers as knowledgeable agents in learning, i.e., as learning resources
• have proficiency in critical reasoning abilities and strategies
• reduce disruptive behaviors and increase on-task behaviors
• increase the amount of time they spend on-task
• have positive attitudes toward teachers, principals, and other school personnel
• have positive attitudes toward learning, school, and the subject matter content

Not all cooperative learning groups, whether lasting one class period, one week, or one month, will generate all of these results every time. Rather, these are results that are likely to occur when such learning groups function over an extended period of time. If the group structure and activities being used are not making noticeable progress along many of these lines by the end of the first semester, for instance, then teachers should reassess the extent to which they are actually engaging students in cooperative learning.

The list is also relevant for teachers not using groups or using groups only sparingly over the course of a school year. If teachers and their students are not achieving the results listed above from the strategies, resources, and activities they are using, they should seriously consider cooperative learning group strategies.

An Invitation

We invite social studies educators to study and reflect upon the information in these chapters. We invite them to acquire a conception of appropriate cooperative learning and to envision how they might use these strategies and guidelines in their classrooms. We invite educators to arrange for face-to-face communication with colleagues in their department, district, conference session, or college classroom to review this information and develop this vision cooperatively. Taking such steps should encourage social studies educators to work collaboratively and cooperatively to increase the effectiveness of cooperative learning groups in their classrooms. Finally, we invite social studies educators to ensure their social studies classroom activities facilitate successful social study via appropriate cooperative learning structures. When these are done, the evidence suggests that students can and will “get better together.”

Notes

1 The motto “Getting Better Together” originated with Jim Weyand, former principal of Bill Reed Junior High School in Loveland, Colorado. A most remarkable educator, Jim invented and used many of the concepts and principles of cooperative learning with his faculty and staff beginning in the early 1970s to build and maintain cooperatively one of the most powerful, effective, and collegial instructional staffs one author, Robert Stahl, has personally encountered. Jim’s genuine concern for students and student success evolved into a collegial team whose members, by working as a staff development cooperative learning team, “got better together” to enable students to achieve remarkable levels of academic, affective, and social abilities.

2 Introductory descriptions of a number of cooperative learning models are available in the works referenced at the end of these chapters.

References

——. Cooperative Learning: Theory, Research, and Practice.


**Additional Sources**

