

CREATING OPPORTUNITIES FOR STUDENTS TO LEARN INTERDEPENDENTLY

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Many think that teaching high-progress students is a breeze. After all, these students learn fast and have the ability to absorb knowledge quickly. However, teaching this group of students also poses its own challenges. One such challenge lies in developing them to be cooperative and collaborative learners.

I took up the module 'Cooperative and Collaborative Learning: Practice, Theory and Research' while pursuing my Master's degree in education. I learnt the theories, practices and familiarised myself with the existing research on cooperative and collaborative learning. The elements of cooperative learning: positive interdependence, individual and group accountability, promotive interaction, interpersonal group skills and group processing resonated strongly with me. Hence, I adapted and customised some of the structures of Cooperative Learning and implemented them in my classroom.

A typical lesson structure that I came up with starts with instruction. I would begin by teaching the key concepts and strategies in solving a particular type of word problem. Following which, after stating the learning goals and instructions clearly, the class was divided into groups. Each group was tasked with solving four challenging word problems based on the lesson taught. I also incorporated some of the Habits of Mind such as listening with understanding and empathy, questioning and posing problems, and thinking interdependently into the activity. Throughout this activity, students were reminded of the rules and expected behaviors. They were also reminded that all members of the group must be able to solve those problems and understand the key concepts and strategies used.

To ensure that each group solves the word problems correctly, selected groups are chosen to present their solutions and the class would correct them if necessary. Giving them a platform to present their solutions helped the students articulate their understanding of the concepts and build their confidence in public speaking. After the activity, I would discuss with the class the common misconceptions and mistakes they might make in solving the word problems.

Initially, I faced difficulties in managing the group work, but as they were continually given opportunities to work cooperatively, they grew accustomed to the routine and I began to observe a change in their attitudes. They were more willing to help one another and I could see them starting to enjoy learning together. I kept emphasizing that they must help one another and work together to achieve success. Since group members must work together as a team to accomplish a common goal, everyone is interdependent on each other and success is achieved when everyone works well together as a team. They began to value each other as contributors to their common goal. With this cooperative learning structure, my students were more comfortable in seeking help and they saw each other as team mates instead of competitors.

When they were familiar with cooperative learning, a more advanced Cooperative Learning technique, called the Jigsaw, was introduced. As an ICT mentor, I also took the opportunity to incorporate ICT as a tool to help students become self-directed and collaborative learners. Using online discussion platforms such as Padlet and TitanPad, students assigned the same question would, as a team, discuss the different solutions and methods and become experts on their question online prior to the lesson. They were also given time in class to confirm, clarify and finalise their solutions. In their groups, students also had to rehearse their presentations as they would have to teach this question to their classmates who were assigned other questions and were experts in their own respective questions.

While facilitating this activity, I was impressed by the improvement in their behavior and social skills, as well as their ability to articulate mathematical concepts. I observed students questioning and teaching each other and felt a sense of satisfaction observing these positive changes. As an added bonus, they also made improvement in their Mathematics results!

Having observed how Cooperative Learning encourages listening, engagement and empathy by giving each student an essential role to play, I became an advocate of Cooperative Learning. When approached by my Principal to share my experience in Cooperative Learning with my colleagues, I jumped at the chance as I strongly believe that students should learn with and from one another.

Through this experience, what brought me the greatest satisfaction was that students who initially had difficulties working in groups had begun to enjoy working cooperatively and were benefiting from each other. It became a natural practice for the students in my class to seek clarification from one another, work together and help one another to succeed. This, to me, is what collaborative learning is about.