



Cooperative Learning: *Dictionary Entry*¹

Ted Ward

A well-kept secret among teachers of small children and among doctoral seminar faculty is that when learners relate well to each other, they make learning a very active process. In general, the educational procedure used in much formal education seems more to deny than to affirm this key to effective teaching and learning.

Instead, learners are made more “self-reliant” by isolating them during the central parts of the learning experience. “Everyone, do your own work now! Don’t look on anyone’s paper! C’mon, Charlie, you can do better than that!” The underlying assumption is that competition motivates and motivation is fed by the desire to surpass someone else. One’s grade on a test, a project paper, even a piece of art, becomes the essence of learning; the grade is more important than the experience, the effort, the personal identity of the one who produces, the one who thinks, believes, invests. The grade shows how well the performance or product was accepted by the small but overpowering audience—the teacher. What one person (on his or her own, mind you) says about the worthiness of the private project ultimately determines what the learner is worth. Small wonder that schools—as well as other forms of education built on the schooling model—have become mechanistic, remote, threatening, and often boring. Why should Christian education be copied from such practices that so seriously degrade the worth of God’s special creation?

At its heart is the investment of trust in the worth of each person in the learning group (often called the learning community). This trust leads the teacher to become a sharer and a peer more than a commander. Talking down is replaced by talking at eye-level, symbolically and actually. The worth of each learner is affirmed. But beyond this, the valuing of interaction and shared responsibility is developed as surely as is the concern for individuals. In such a learning environment, competition is less important than cooperation. People learn to derive their satisfactions from each other and from the collaboration process itself, not merely from their own privatized activity and output. Learning exercises are more apt to be group projects; investment of time is in longer but fewer blocks; evaluation is part of the learning experience, and the learners become more accomplished in assessment, playing a significant role in discriminating judgments and setting subsequent goals.

In public schools and higher education, cooperative learning has become more widely used within the past twenty-five years. Arising partly from insights into teaching derived from the “mainstreaming” movement (accommodating a wider range of skills and competencies within one learning group), the necessity for cooperative learning has become recognized as a desirable way for teachers and learners to help each other, not just a necessity.

¹ Ted Ward. Cooperative Learning: Dictionary Entry. In Michael Anthony (ed). *Evangelical Dictionary of Christian Education*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2001, pp. 179-180. Used by permission. www.bakerpublishinggroup.com

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