



# INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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## PERFORMANCE IN THE COOPERATIVE LEARNING CLASSROOM

In *Heart of a Leader*, bestselling business author Ken Blanchard describes the work situation necessary for people to be successful: set clear goals, let people perform, observe, and praise progress or redirect efforts. This approach to business is equally valuable in teaching, especially in a cooperative learning classroom. In cooperative learning, students work together in small groups during class time to master the material being presented to the class. These groups are created by the instructor, either randomly or by some predetermined criteria—such as performance on a previous test. The value of the cooperative learning classroom lies in its insistence on group interdependence. As a result, students are interested not only in their own ability to understand the material, but in the success of the group. This group dynamic creates a more focused, interactive classroom and provides students with the interpersonal tools they will need to succeed.

### Application

I begin lessons by placing the students in their small groups by some method I have decided upon before class begins and identify the goal for the groups, depending on the objective I have for the material I am about to present. For example, if I want to teach four methods for correcting a fused or comma splice sentence in a Developmental English class, I identify that as the goal for the group. I then lecture—for approximately 15 minutes—often using an overhead so the students have a written guide and visible examples of the corrections.

The second step is letting students perform. After I have provided lecture material and students have taken notes, the cooperative model kicks in. Students are allowed to use one set of notes and one textbook. Such control of the materials requires them to work interdependently to complete the assignment. An added bonus to this model is that the students never know whom I will choose to have out his or her notes or book.

As a result, everyone comes to class prepared and takes notes because no one wants to handicap a group by not having the required materials. I then give the groups an assignment that they are to complete by applying the lecture material; in this case, they might identify sentences as either fused, comma spliced, or o.k. Then as a group, members decide on an appropriate correction option. The students have the added responsibility of making sure all group members understand the corrections and can explain them if called upon. They work as a group, but they will be asked to respond and be evaluated as individuals.

The third step is the observation step. This step is critical, and it occurs in conjunction with the previous one. As the students perform in the small groups, I move about the class, sitting in and listening to their discussions. I tell the class before I begin the exercise that I will be sitting in, but that I am not there to offer answers. My goal is to have them take ownership of their group and the material. Initially, the students are uncomfortable when I sit with them, but they soon learn to ignore my presence and depend on each other to achieve success in the assignment. Sitting in offers me an invaluable insight into the students' critical thinking processes and their understanding of the material that I have presented. It is also a critical step if I am going to move on to step four.

The fourth and final step is to praise progress or redirect efforts. Rarely do I carry out this step with the class as a whole, unless the entire class has misunderstood the material, which indicates clearly that I have failed to teach the material. Instead, I check group progress individually as I sit in with the different groups, verbally quizzing and questioning individuals' thinking processes and answers. In this way, I am able to offer specific praise or specific redirection to individuals in the class, which has a greater value than a generalized response to the class as a whole.

### Results

The results of this approach are impressive. Because students have a group of peers to depend on, they become more comfortable answering my questions



and working with the material. Additionally, they are transformed into active learners—no longer can they expect to sit for a 50-minute class period, only taking notes. Instead, students know they all will be called upon to perform individually and that their group requires and depends on their input. Such active learning results in higher rates of retention, both of material and of students in the class. Students are more likely to ask questions now that they have had close contact with me in a small group. They have been encouraged to take ownership of the material, and they react positively.

### **Implementation and Adaptation**

The cooperative model can work in any discipline. Perhaps the obvious application is in the science classroom in a lab situation, but any discipline can benefit from the approach: a math instructor may have students solve problems together when she introduces a new concept, a history instructor may ask cooperative groups to identify the major causes of WWI, and a humanities instructor may ask groups to identify characteristics of the Baroque period in a painting.

However, the initial implementation requires some extensive planning on the part of the instructor. The cooperative model requires that the formation of groups, group goals, group exercise, and evaluation criteria be clearly established prior to the start of the exercise. In that regard, creating the initial exercises can be time-consuming, but the benefits are tremendous. When students are given clear goals, allowed to perform, and praised or redirected as needed, they feel an ownership of the material and their own progress, making them better students and more active learners.

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