

# Introduction

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**L** Lynda Baloché (1998) recounts that in her first days as a teacher, she quickly realized that students were much more interested in their classmates than they were in her or in what she was trying to teach. Lynda decided to use her students' fascination with their peers as a resource by introducing group activities. However, the success of these activities was hit and miss, and Lynda didn't know what she was doing right on the hit days or wrong on the miss days. Does any of this sound familiar?

A breakthrough came when Lynda started reading books and articles on cooperative learning (CL):

I discovered that cooperative learning was what I had been trying to do. I discovered that there were basic principles that I could apply in my own teaching. I was excited. I was hooked. I was sure I could master it in about 6 weeks. (p. 2)

Well, it's now more than 25 years later, and Lynda has been using CL successfully all these years, in a wide variety of teaching settings. In fact, a few years ago, she wrote her own book on the topic (Baloché, 1998), and she's still learning!

## WHAT IS COOPERATIVE LEARNING?

Johnson, Johnson, and Holubec (1993) define CL as "the instructional use of small groups so that students work together to maximize their own and each other's learning" (p. 9).

Our definition is similar: Principles and techniques for helping students work together more effectively.

The main difference in our definition is that by not using the term *small group*, we hope to emphasize that CL has value beyond the small group, a point that Johnson, Johnson, and Holubec most likely agree with.

The purpose of this book is twofold. First, we want to help teachers who are at the stage where Lynda was initially—who want to improve student learning and engagement and try some different ways to have students work together but aren't sure how. We will share eight key principles for facilitating cooperative learning in your classroom along with a variety of CL techniques and examples of how to use them. We call Part I of the book *Getting Started With Cooperative Learning*.

**X THE TEACHER'S SOURCEBOOK FOR COOPERATIVE LEARNING**

As Lynda realized, there's more than a lifetime of things to learn about CL. The second purpose of this book is to provide new ideas for teachers who have already started with CL. We look at a variety of issues and challenges that arise when we use CL. Over years of teaching our own students, using CL, observing other teachers doing the same, attending workshops and classes, and, later, training thousands of teachers—as well as years of reading and writing about CL—we have collected a wide range of ways to address these issues and challenges. We present these in *Frequently Asked Questions, Part II*.

We hope that teachers of all levels, from preschool all the way to university and adult education, and all subject areas, will find this book holds useful ideas on how the power of student–student cooperation can enliven their classrooms. Obviously, not every idea in the book will apply exactly as presented in every teacher's context, but we sincerely believe that the principles we offer have relevance to all contexts.

### **Three Windows on Peer Interaction**

Deutsch (1949), in work expanded on by Johnson and Johnson (1998), has identified three windows through which students can view their peers—individual, competitive, and cooperative. Let's consider three students—Maria, Yan, and Ralph.

Maria looks at her peers through the individual window. She feels that whether her peers achieve their goals has no effect on whether she achieves hers, just like noncompetitive swimmers trying to improve their times.

Yan looks at her peers through the competitive window. She feels that what helps her peers achieve their goals hurts her, and what hurts them helps her, just like competitors in a tennis tournament.

Ralph looks at his peers through the cooperative window, believing that what helps them achieve their goals helps him achieve his, and what hurts them hurts him, just like the teammates on a soccer or debate team, or any group that shares the work and the benefits.

CL encourages students to see peers through the cooperative window, as resources, as people to share with, as fellow adventurers in the search for knowledge. Clearly, individual work and competition still have their place, particularly when preparing students for the world outside school. With CL, we attempt to tilt the balance in favor of cooperation, not to eliminate the other two perspectives.

Furthermore, it can be argued that rarely does only one perspective apply. For instance, let's return to our tennis example above. While I may want to win, if my opponent plays much worse than I, it's not much fun, but if my opponent plays very well, I get a good challenge. Thus the person I'm playing with is both my opponent and my partner.

## THE BENEFITS OF COOPERATIVE LEARNING

Research has shown that by participating in CL, students can benefit in the following areas:

- Improved academic achievement
- More active involvement in learning by students, regardless of past achievement level or individual learning needs
- Increased motivation to learn
- Increased student responsibility for their own learning
- Improved interethnic relations and acceptance of academically challenged students
- Improved time on task (sometimes dramatically improved, compared to whole-class, teacher-led instruction)
- Improved collaborative skills
- Increased liking for school
- Improved student attitudes toward learning, school, peers, and self
- Increased ability to appreciate and consider a variety of perspectives
- Greater opportunities for the teacher to observe and assess student learning

Books listed in Resources, in Part III, describe some of the research on which this list is based. If you have tried CL, no doubt you could add some benefits of your own.

### A Brief Historical Note

Although we can trace the roots of cooperative learning back at least 100 years, and even thousands of years, the term *cooperative learning* seems to have arisen in the 1970s. It was at that time that an ever-expanding flow of research and practical work began to gather force. Many people have made, and continue to make, major and minor contributions to this vibrant flow. Many of the best-known of these contributors are mentioned in this book.

## HOW TO GET THE MOST FROM THIS BOOK

The best way to use this book is, as you read, to try out the ideas and techniques with your students. Keep in mind that, as with any new approach, there is going to be a transitional time during which things will not go as well as you hoped. You may be tempted to give up, but please stick with it.

At the same time that you are learning a new way to teach, your students are learning a new way to learn, as well as the content you are

teaching. Your class may be the exception that gets it completely the first time you try CL, but it's more common that the first three or four times are a little rough, and then, as the students start to understand why they are working in groups and become comfortable with the new classroom routines, you start to see the benefits.

If you can, find a colleague who is willing to try CL with you or who already uses CL. Having someone with whom to share your challenges, successes, and insights can be valuable. Just as a key premise of CL is that students can learn better when working with peers, so, too, can teachers. See Frequently Asked Questions in Part II for more ideas about teacher-teacher collaboration.

## KEY POINTS

Aside from learning new instructional techniques, we hope you also take away from this book these two key points:

1. Cooperation among students is powerful.

The general concept of collaboration for learning is one of the best-researched topics in all of education, with hundreds, if not thousands, of studies, over more than 100 years, from many countries, in many subject areas, and with students of a wide range of ages. These studies found that activities that support cooperation are usually associated with gains in academic, emotional, and social areas.

2. Just because students are in a group does not mean that they are cooperating.

Students just don't get into groups and then, BOOM! start cooperating brilliantly. Indeed, sometimes working in a poorly functioning group can be worse than working alone. Group work does not equal CL. Instead, CL represents the accumulated experience of more than 100 years of trial and error, theorizing, and research on how best to help students learn together. In this book, we share some of that experience with you. No doubt, in time, you will be able to contribute innovations and variations of your own.

## A NOTE ABOUT NAMES FOR TECHNIQUES

Kearney (1993) noted that attempting to attribute specific CL techniques to individuals "was like trying to catch the first drop of rain" (p. 2). Instead, Kearney attributed some techniques to those who popularized them, some to those who gave them a name that stuck, and others to those who formalized the techniques. Kearney also found that as he explained CL techniques to educators, they sometimes told him that they had developed similar techniques on their own but hadn't given them "fancy names."

Our experience has been a bit like Kearney's. Furthermore, not all the CL techniques in this book are described exactly as we found them in the original sources. In the spirit of cooperating to make CL work even more effectively, we invite other educators to use, and improvise on, our work.

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