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Cooperative Learning: An Overview

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Cooperative Learning: An Overview

The issue with cooperative, or collaborative, learning is not whether it is a panacea to all ills; it is not. Rather, the issue is one of emphasis among classroom methods. David W. Johnson and Roger T. Johnson of the Cooperative Learning Center at the University of Minnesota place cooperative learning in perspective as one of four possible learning structures: competitive, cooperative, individualistic, or structure free (1974). They say that each type of structure has a place in education depending on the objectives of the lesson; however, individualistic, competitive structures are the most common structures in present classroom use.

In *A Place Called School: Prospects for the Future* (1984), John I. Goodlad concurs. From his study in which trained observers completed descriptions of 129 elementary classes, 362 junior high classes, and 525 senior high classes, he concludes:

No matter what the observational perspective, the same picture emerges. The two activities, involving the most students, were being lectured to and working on written assignments (and we have seen that much of this work was in the form of responding to directives in workbooks or on worksheets). When we add to the time spent in these learning modes the time spent on the routines of preparing for or following up instruction, the extraordinary degree of student passivity stands out. The amount of time spent in any other kind of activity (e.g., role playing, small group planning and problem solving, constructing models) was miniscule—and does not add up to a great deal even when the totals for all such deviations are computed. Students were working alone most of the time, whether individually or in groups. That is, the student listened as one member of a class being lectured, or the student worked individually on a seat assignment. (p. 230)

Studies abound that show traditional classroom practices to be failing at a time when educational demands are increasing. *A Nation at Risk*, conducted by the National Commission on Excellence in Education (1984), stated, “the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people” (National Commission on Excellence in Education, p. 5). Some have suggested increased emphasis on cooperative learning to offset some of the problems with education. The three units which follow suggest some of the possibilities.

Carla Nicholson