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The Cooperative Link



Block Scheduling And Cooperative Learning

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Greetings From The Johnsons

Here we are again. We are as busy and intent on changing schools to be cooperative places free from violence as we have ever been. Our major work in the last year includes (a) continued work with cooperative learning at the college level in a number of different countries, (b) continued work with Celebration Teaching Academy and School, Disney Corporation, and Stetson University, including a Nuts & Bolts training for teachers who will coach colleagues in cooperative learning, (c) work overseas in Italy, Thailand, Hong Kong, Malaysia, and Australia, and (d) work maintaining our network schools. In addition, our research and theorizing on cooperative learning, academic controversy, and conflict resolution are thriving. We continue to be impressed with your efforts to implement cooperative learning in your classrooms, schools, districts, and regions. We are counting on you to “stir up your share of trouble.” We are. Laurie Stevahn joined us this year to work on her doctorate, Jim Mitchell is finishing his dissertation, and Jane Zewers still gets us to the right places with the right materials.

Block Scheduling

Block scheduling is having at least part of the daily schedule organized into longer blocks of time. The 45 to 50 minute class

period is considered by many to be an obstacle to many instructional procedures that may raise achievement and make learning more active and personally relevant. Lengthening the class period to 90 or 120 minutes creates a change in structure that is necessary for many pedagogical changes to succeed.

Like all changes in structure, block scheduling represents an opportunity that may lead to better education or be lost through lack of training, initiative, and change. **The enemy of effective block scheduling is traditional lecture plus study hall.** If the teaching practices do not change, the advantages of the longer class period are lost. In order to capitalize on the opportunities of block scheduling, the three types of cooperative learning may be used.

Block Scheduling and Cooperative Learning

What teachers need to know in using block scheduling is how to use the three types of cooperative learning in an integrated way. While the times may vary, the overall pattern of a 90 minute class period is in the following table. The minutes allotted to each type of cooperative learning will vary according to the lesson.

In order to implement this schedule, you need to understand the nature of each type of

cooperative learning and how they may be used in an integrated way.

Step	Activity	Time
1	Opening base group meeting	10
2	Teaching with informal cooperative learning	25
3	Work on assignment in formal cooperative learning	40
4	Teaching with informal cooperative learning	10
5	Closing base group meeting	5

1. Opening Cooperative Base Groups

The biggest disease today is not leprosy or tuberculosis, but rather the feeling of being unwanted, uncared for, and deserted by everybody.

Mother Teresa, Nobel Peace Prize 1979

The class begins with students meeting in base groups. **Cooperative base groups** are long-term, heterogeneous cooperative learning groups with stable membership (Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec, 1992; Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 1991). They typically have four members, last for one to several semesters, and formally meet at the beginning and end of each class session. The base group is a support group that:

- Gives encouragement, assistance, and support for mastering the course content. The group provides information about what a member missed, discusses assignments, answers any questions about assignments, and plans, reviews, and edits papers.
- Provides interpersonal relationships that personalize the course.
- Provides a structure for managing course procedures such as attendance, homework, and assessments.

At the beginning of each class session students meet in base groups to:

- Greet each other and check to see that none of their group is under undue stress. Members ask: "How are you today?" and "Are we all prepared for class?"
- Check to see if members have completed their homework or need help in doing so. Members ask: "Did you do your homework?" "Is there anything you did not understand?" If extensive help is needed, an appointment is made. Periodically, the base groups may be given a checklist of academic skills and assesses which ones each member needs to practice.
- Review what members have completed since the previous class session. Members should be able to give a brief, terse, succinct summary of what they have read, thought about, and done. They may come to class with resources they have found and want to share, or copies of work they have completed and wish to distribute to their base group members.
- Get to know each other better and provide positive feedback by discussing such questions as: "What is the best thing that has happened to you this week?" "What is your favorite television show?" "Who is your favorite music group?"

2. Direct Teaching With Informal Cooperative Learning

Our survey of teaching methods suggests that...if we want students to become more effective...they need to spend more time in active meaningful learning and thinking—not just sitting and passively receiving information.

W. McKeachie

After base groups have met, the teacher may need to present new material or elaborate on what students have studied by giving a lecture or demonstration, showing a movie or videotape, or using a guest speaker. In such cases, teachers use informal cooperative learning to ensure that students are active (not passive) in cognitively processing the information being presented.

In **informal cooperative learning groups**, students work together to achieve a joint learning goal in temporary, ad-hoc groups that last from a few minutes to one class period (Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec, 1992; Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 1991). Teachers use informal cooperative learning groups to focus student attention on the material to be learned, set a mood conducive to learning, help organize in advance the material to be covered in a class session, ensure that students cognitively process the material being taught, personalize learning experiences, and provide closure to an instructional session. The **procedure** for using informal cooperative learning is as follows.

- 1 **Introductory Focused Discussion:** Teachers (a) assign students to pairs or triads, (b) explain the task of answering an initial question in a four-minute time period, (c) explain the positive goal interdependence of reaching consensus as to the answer. The discussion task is aimed at promoting **advance organizing** of what the students know about the topic to be presented and creating an **expectation set** about what the lecture will cover.
- 2 **Turn-To-Your-Partner Discussions:** Teachers divide the lecture into 10 to 15 minute segments. This is about the length of time a motivated adult can concentrate on information being presented. After each segment, teachers ask students to turn to the person next to them and work cooperatively in answering a question that requires them to cognitively process the material just presented. The procedure for the discussion pairs to follow is:

- Each student **formulates** his or her answer.
- Students **share** their answer with their partner.

- Students **listen** carefully to their partner's answer.
- The pairs **create** a new answer that is superior to each member's initial formulation by integrating the two answers, building on each other's thoughts, and synthesizing.

The question needs to be specific enough so students can complete this sequence in three or four minutes. The question should require students to (a) summarize the material the teacher just presented, (b) give a reaction, or (c) relate the material to past learning so that it gets integrated into existing conceptual frameworks. Teachers ensure that students are **individually accountable** for following the sequence in answering the question by randomly choosing two or three students to give 30 second summaries of their pair discussions. Teachers repeat this sequence of lecture segment and pair discussion until the lecture is completed.

- 3 **Closure Focused Discussion:** Teachers give a closure discussion task that requires students to summarize in four or five minutes what they have learned from the lecture. The discussion should result in students integrating what they have just learned into existing conceptual frameworks, point students toward what the rest of the class session will focus on, and identify questions students have about what was presented. This provides closure to the lecture.

3. Formal Cooperative Learning

Nothing new that is really interesting comes without collaboration.

James Watson

The heart of each class session is students working in formal cooperative learning groups. **Formal cooperative learning** is students working together, for one class period to several weeks, to achieve shared learning goals and complete jointly specific tasks and assignments (such as completing a curriculum unit, writing a report, conducting a survey or experiment, learning vocabulary, or answering questions at the end of the chapter) (Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec, 1993, 1995). Any course requirement or assignment may be structured for formal cooperative learning

groups. In formal cooperative learning groups teachers:

- **Make a number of preinstructional decisions.** A teacher has to decide on the academic and social skill objectives, the size of groups, the method of assigning students to groups, the roles students will be assigned, the materials needed to conduct the lesson, and the way the room will be arranged.
- **Explain the task and the positive interdependence.** A teacher clearly defines the assignment, teaches the required concepts and strategies, specifies the positive interdependence and individual accountability, gives the criteria for success, and explains the expected social skills to be engaged in.
- **Monitor students' learning and intervene within the groups to provide task assistance or to increase students' interpersonal and group skills.** A teacher systematically observes and collects data on each group as it works. When it is needed, the teacher intervenes to assist students in completing the task accurately and in working together effectively.
- **Assess and evaluate students' learning and help students process how well their groups functioned.** Students' learning is carefully assessed and their performances are evaluated. Members of the learning groups then process how effectively they have been working together.

4. Summary Informal Cooperative Learning

At the end of the class session teachers will wish to call the class together and summarize what was covered and point towards what will be covered in the next class session. In doing so, students should be asked to consider one or two issues phrased as questions. Informal cooperative learning is used. The teacher poses a question, students **formulate** their answer to the question, turn to another student and **share** their answer, **listen** to their partner's answer, and **create** a new answer that is better than either one.

5. Closing Cooperative Base Group

To have joy one must share it. Happiness was born a twin.

Indian Proverb

The class session closes with students meeting in base groups. Examples of closing tasks are:

- Ensure all members understand the assignment? Find out what help each member needs to complete it?
- Summarize at least four things members learned in today's class session?
- Summarize how members will use/apply what they have learned?
- Celebrate the hard work and learning of group members.

Example Of Integrated Use Of Cooperative Learning

An example of the integrated use of the cooperative learning procedures is as follows. Students arrive at class and meet in their **base groups** to welcome each other, complete a self-disclosure task (such as "what is each member's favorite television show"), check each student's homework to make sure all members understand the academic material and are prepared for the class session, and tell each other to have a great day.

The teacher then begins a lesson on the limitations of being human. To help students cognitively organize in advance what they know about the advantages and disadvantages of being human, the teacher uses **informal cooperative learning**. The teacher asks students to form a triad and ponder, "*What are five things you cannot do with your human limitations that a Billion Dollar Being might be designed to do?*" Students have four minutes to do so. In the next ten minutes, the teacher explains that while the human body is a marvelous system, we (like other organisms) have very specific limitations. We can not see bacteria in a drop of water or the rings of Saturn unaided. We can not hear as well as a deer or fly like an eagle. Humans have never been satisfied being so limited and, therefore, we have invented microscopes, telescopes, and our own wings. The teacher then instructs students to turn to the person

next to them and answer the questions, "*What are three limitations of humans, what have we invented to overcome them, and what other human limitations might we be able to overcome?*"

Formal cooperative learning is now used in the lesson (for the Billion-Dollar Being lesson, see **Topics in Applied Science**, Jefferson County Schools, Golden, Colorado). The teacher has the 32 students count off from 1 to 8 to form groups of four randomly. Group members sit so they can face each other and face the teacher. Each member is assigned a role: researcher/runner, summarizer/time-keeper, collector/recorder, and technical advisor (role interdependence). Every group gets one large 2 feet by three feet piece of paper, a marking pen, a rough draft sheet for designing the Being, an assignment sheet explaining the task and cooperative goal structure, and four student self-evaluation checklists (resource interdependence). The **task** is to design a Billion-Dollar Being that overcomes the human limitations thought of by the class and the group. The group members are to draw a diagram of the Being on the scratch paper and when they have something they like, transfer it to the larger paper. The teacher establishes **positive goal interdependence** by asking for one drawing from the group that all group members contribute to and can explain. The **criterion for success** is to complete the diagram in the 30-minute time limit. The teacher ensures **individual accountability** by observing each group to ensure that members are fulfilling their roles and that any one member can explain any part of the Being at any time. The teacher informs students that the **expected social skills** to be used by all students are encouraging each other's participation, contributing ideas, and summarizing. She defines the skill of encouraging participation and has each student practice it twice before the lesson begins. While students work in their groups, the teacher **monitors** by systematically observing each group and intervening to provide academic assistance and help in using the interpersonal and small group skills required to work together effectively. At the end of the lesson the groups hand in their diagrams of the Billion Dollar Being to be assessed and **evaluated**. Group members then **process** how well they worked together by identifying actions each member engaged in that helped the group succeed and one thing that could be added to improve their group next time.

The teacher uses **informal cooperative learning** to provide closure to the lesson by asking students to meet in new triads and write out six conclusions about the limitations of human beings and what we have done to overcome them.

At the end of the class session the **cooperative base groups** meet to review what students believe is the most important thing they have learned during the day, what homework has been assigned, what help each member needs to complete the homework, and to tell each other to have a fun afternoon and evening.

References

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Summer Training!

The foundational and advance trainings (Brown Book & Green Book) will pay special attention to block scheduling. There are a number of new trainings!

Assessment And Cooperative Learning:

The two most important assessment issues are making assessments meaningful and managing all the work the new assessment procedures require. Cooperative learning is essential for both of these issues. All the latest assessment procedures will be taught.

Teaching Social Skills: This two day course is focused on teaching students social skills. Leadership skills will be emphasized.

Managing Other People's Anger: This two-day course is for administrators as well as teachers. The training focuses on how to manage the anger of other people in a constructive way.

1997 Leadership Conference: Anyone who has taken our Leadership Training is invited to attend this conference. Call Linda for details. (612) 831-9500

Join The AERA SIGs

If you are not a member of the Special Interest Groups in the American Education Research Association on **Cooperative Learning** or on **Conflict Resolution**, you should be. Membership information may be attained from Laurie Stevahn at the Cooperative Learning Center (612) 624-7031.

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