What is cooperative learning?
It is defined as the “instructional technique or grouping structure in which students are divided into heterogeneous groups to complete instructional activities” (Marr, 1997, p. 7). The technique however has been used with both heterogeneous and homogeneous groups of students.

What makes a group cooperative? (Marr, 1997)
♦ Interdependence among group members
♦ Individual accountability
♦ Cooperation among members
♦ An evaluation of how the group worked together

Two ways to group students…
Homogeneous Ability Groups: Students are grouped according to their abilities, so that everyone in the group is around the same level.
♦ Positives.
  • Each group can work on a different activity, which will fit the needs of the group.
  • Beneficial for students who are gifted (Evans, 1996), “Students with high ability levels prefer to learn with students having similar ability levels” (Leikin & Zaslavsky, 1999, p. 244).
♦ Negatives:
  • Not beneficial for students with average to low abilities (Evans, 1996).
  • May limit teacher’s expectations of lower ability groups. (Scniedewind & Davidson, 2000)
  • Doesn’t allow students to learn from others’ intelligences and perspectives (Scniedewind & Davidson, 2000)

Heterogeneous Groups: Groups include students with a variety of different ability levels, talents, and interests, using their different abilities, the group works together to complete a single activity.
♦ Positives:
  • Each student can contribute his or her strength to the activity.
  • Students are exposed to each other’s differences, and they interact with and learn from each other.
♦ Negatives:
  • Students with higher abilities may feel as if they are being held back and become bored.
  • Students with lower ability levels may feel as if they cannot keep up and become frustrated.

***Differentiating within heterogeneous groups allows individual needs of the students to be met. Ways to do this include: 1) differentiate individual tasks within the group by complexity or quantity; 2) have students work on tasks independently but use the group for support and feedback; 3) provide enrichment opportunities; 4) design activities that sue multiple intelligences; and/or 5) vary criteria (Schniedewind & Davidson, 2000).

Cooperative learning set-ups:
♦ **Student Teams Achievement Divisions**: Teacher presents concept to whole class, groups work on a follow up activity and then the groups take a quiz (Marr, 1997).

♦ **Team-Game Tournament**: Same as above, except instead of a quiz the teams play a game (Marr, 1997).

♦ **Team-Assisted Individualization**: Students work individually on activities appropriate for their level, but receive guidance and support from group members (Marr, 1997).
♦ **Group Investigation**- Groups receive a topic that they break into sub-topics to research. They then pool their research into a final report and present to the class (Marr, 1997).

♦ **Cooperative Integrated Reading and Composition**- Within a group of four there are two pairs of students at the same reading level. Together the whole group works to complete an extension activity (Marr, 1997).

♦ **Exchange of Knowledge Method**- This is a math activity that combines both heterogeneous and homogeneous groupings. Students are placed in a mixed ability group of six, and each group receives a different card with an example math problem and explanation. These students become experts on their problem and then work on a second example, which they check with each other. Next, one person from each “expert” group is placed into an “exchange of knowledge” in which there is one person who knows how to do each problem. In pairs, they teach each other how to do the problems. Each of the second groups is heterogeneous except for the one with high ability students who are all placed together (Leikin & Zaslavsky, 1999).

♦ **Number Heads Together**- Students think about answers to questions within their groups, but only one student is picked to share with the class.

**Benefits of cooperative learning:**

♦ Promotes higher level thinking, reasoning, metacognitive skills (Marr, 1997)

♦ Provides models for social behavior (Marr, 1997)

♦ Students get to see things from other perspectives (Marr, 1997)

♦ Helps to develop communication skills and vocabulary (Leikin & Zaslavsky, 1999)

♦ Increases student involvement in his/her own learning

♦ ENHANCES THE LEARNING EXPERIENCE!

**Classroom Implications:**

♦ Teachers start developing more student student-student activities.

♦ Less direct instruction

♦ Classrooms should be filled with the appropriate conversation and movement to engage students

♦ Teachers need to keep in mind their students needs as they set up groups and create activities that challenge every student within the group.

♦ Establish a classroom atmosphere that is comfortable and respectful.

♦ TEACHERS WILL HAVE TO MAKE TIME TO CREATE COOPERATIVE GROUP ACTIVITIES AND USE CREATIVITY!

References


