

# Cooperative Learning in the Classroom

Putting it into Practice

Wendy Jolliffe



**C**OPERATIVE LEARNING IN THE CLASSROOM





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Paul Chapman  
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## A BOUT THE AUTHOR

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# A KNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the staff from the Bransholme Networked Learning Community schools and in particular the facilitators for their hard work and commitment to cooperative learning. I would also like to thank my husband, David, for his unfailing support.

# HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

The format of this book consists of a range of activities to reinforce important aspects of cooperative learning. Key points will be summarised at the end of each chapter for ease and a separate section will outline staff development sessions. In addition, a school self-evaluation tool is set out in Chapter 5 to be completed at key points during implementation.

This book will provide the reader with a clear understanding of the following:

1. Learning for all: issues of inclusion and the impact of cooperative learning.
2. Providing for a range of learning styles and supporting personal, social and emotional development.
3. Strategies for effective talk in the classroom.
4. The impact of cooperative learning and issues in its use.
5. A phased implementation of cooperative learning.



## **Cooperative Learning: What Is It and Why Does It Matter?**

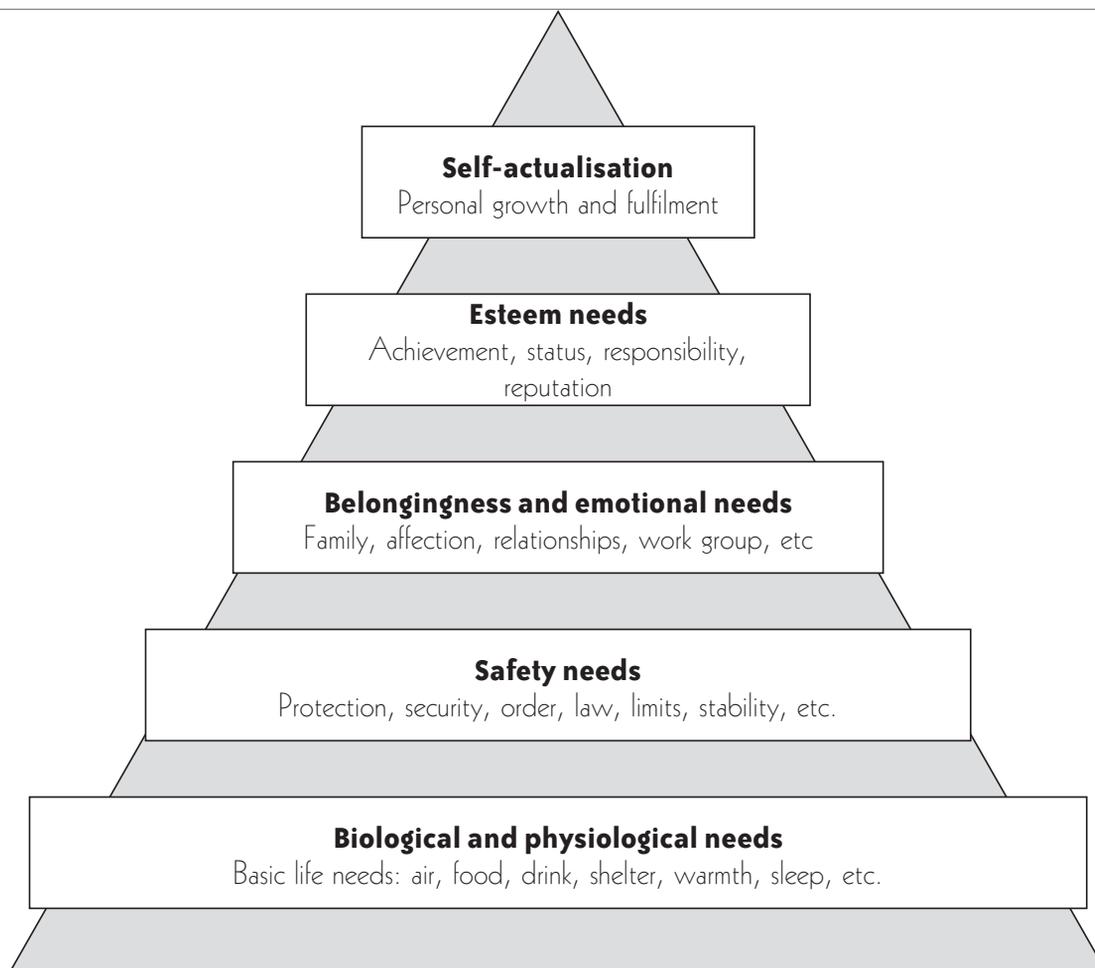
### How this book supports learning and teaching in the classroom

This book not only ensures a clear understanding of cooperative learning and how it supports effective learning, but also provides step-by-step guidance on how to put it into practice in the classroom. It is designed to be used for whole-school professional development and each chapter sets out a range of activities for use in this way. Appendix 1 summarises this programme, giving timings for each session. The book can also be used by individual teachers or trainees who wish to find out more about cooperative learning and how to apply it in the classroom.

### Understanding pedagogy

Pedagogy is a word that teachers tend to shy away from. Some notable academics, such as Robin Alexander,<sup>1</sup> have lamented a lack of clear pedagogy in the UK. Let us consider what the word itself means. The most common definition of pedagogy is: 'the science and art of teaching'. It involves the knowledge and skills that a teacher brings to bear to support the constant decisions that need to be made. It is not a static art or science: it should be dynamic and reflect ongoing technological and cultural changes. So what is an appropriate pedagogy for the twenty-first century? Robert Slavin, one of the originators of cooperative learning, exemplifies this point vividly when he describes the 'Rip Van Winkle effect' with respect to teaching:

Imagine a doctor goes to sleep for 100 years and then wakes up. He decides to go to work and practise medicine. Imagine his surprise at the latest technology, methods and medicines, or indeed the reaction of other doctors or patients. Imagine instead a teacher who does the same and goes back to the classroom after 100 years. He goes to the front of the classroom and takes up his chalk, writes a few key points and then goes on to question pupils, to which individuals put up their hands to respond. Would anyone notice that 100 years have elapsed since he last taught?<sup>2</sup>



**Figure I.1** Maslow's hierarchy of needs, reprinted with permission from John Wiley and Sons, Inc.

Food for thought indeed: has pedagogy not changed in 100 years? We have computers and interactive whiteboards and we are directed to teach 'interactively' by the Primary National Strategy. But what does that mean and how many teachers really understand it? Does holding up objects such as mini-whiteboards or number fans by pupils, consist of interactive teaching? Is it about open questioning? Research<sup>3</sup> has shown that most questions are closed and consist of the type of 'guess what is in my mind', that is, the teacher has a clear idea of the answer, and the children have to guess it. Have we really taken advantage of all we know about how we learn effectively, that learning does not take place in a vacuum? Crucial issues such as being in a physical state to learn, as we know from Maslow's hierarchy of needs (see Figure I.1), show that we need to feel secure, valued, and with our physical needs of food, heat, clothing, environment fulfilled. If we are in a state of distress, we know the brain reacts to protect us and the pathways to new learning are blocked. In Chapter 2 we examine this link to learning more closely, but meanwhile you may like to look at Appendix 2, which will help you review how well you fulfil pupils' needs. You can then discuss this with colleagues as a starting point to introducing cooperative learning.

As well as ensuring that pupils are able and ready to learn, the work of Vygotsky shows us that learning takes place with, and alongside, others. We need to orally rehearse what we are learning. We need to explain and elaborate not only to consolidate, but also by working alongside more proficient peers, we can take steps forward in our learning, or as Vygotsky described it, progress in our 'zone of proximal development'. William Glasser illustrates this by saying we learn:

10 per cent of what we read  
 20 per cent of what we hear  
 30 per cent of what we see  
 50 per cent of what we hear and see  
*70 per cent of what we discuss with others*  
*80 per cent of what we experience personally*  
*90 per cent of what we teach to others.*

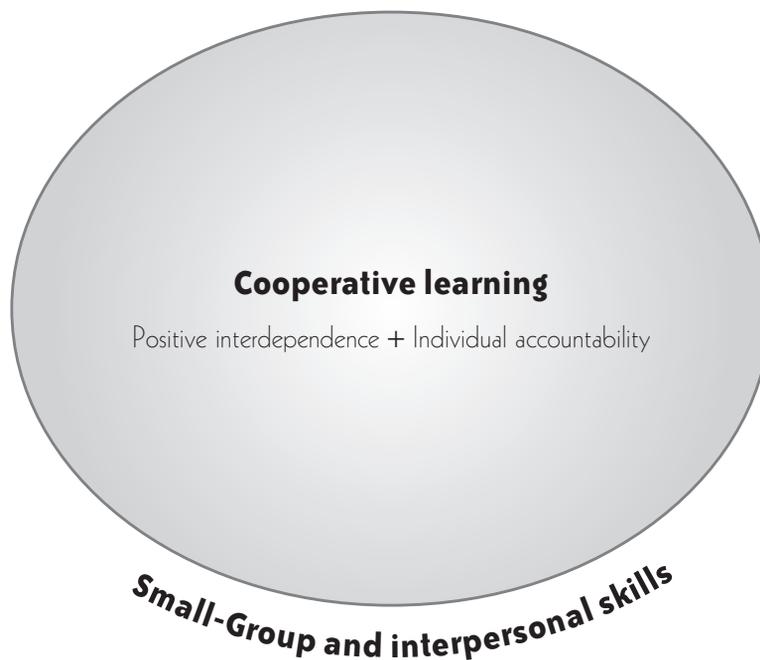
So, as this brief preamble shows, we know considerably more about learning than 100 years ago. But, returning to the example of Rip Van Winkle, how much have teachers put into practice? Over the past 30 years, key researchers such as Robert Slavin, Spencer Kagan, David and Roger Johnson, Shlomo Sharan, Richard Smuck, Elizabeth Cohen, Don Brown and Charlotte Thomson have been both researching and putting into practice a very different approach to the traditional method of IRF/E teaching (initiation–response–feedback/evaluation): that of cooperative learning. This book shows practitioners how to put theory into practice in their own setting. It also aims to put cooperative learning into the twenty-first century UK context using the author's experience of teaching cooperatively and supporting schools to implement it. Whilst the book is based on extensive research, it does not aim to analyse or synthesise this in depth. It aims to support teachers and schools to implement cooperative learning effectively.

## What is cooperative learning?

It is important first to establish exactly what we mean by cooperative learning. We could say in essence *cooperative learning requires pupils to work together in small groups to support each other to improve their own learning and that of others*. However, it is not quite so simple, because there are variations on cooperative learning and some fierce arguments amongst academics as to the value of each, for example should it include any element of extrinsic reward or should reward be purely intrinsic? This book is not going to take a purist attitude, rather a pragmatic one. What is important is how teachers can plan for cooperative learning and manage it in the classroom, but fundamental to that is an in-depth understanding of what it is. Most researchers agree that to be truly cooperative, learning should consist of key elements and two of these are particularly vital:

1. **Positive interdependence – ‘We sink or swim together’**  
 This requires each pupil in a small group to contribute to the learning of the group. Pupils are required to work in a way so that each group member needs the others to complete the task. It is a feeling of ‘one for all and all for one’.
2. **Individual accountability – ‘No Hitchhiking!’**  
 This means that each member of the group is accountable for completing his or her part of the work. It is important that no one can ‘hitchhike’ on the work of others. It requires each pupil in the group to develop a sense of personal responsibility to learn and to help the rest of the group to learn also.

Whilst researchers disagree about the other essential ingredients, many feel that one further aspect is necessary, what is called the ‘lubricant of cooperative group work’: interpersonal and small-group skills. These consist of two elements: the academic (task) skills, such as following instructions, staying on task, planning and reviewing progress, managing time, generating and elaborating on ideas. The second element concerns the interpersonal skills such as listening to



**Figure 1.2** Elements of cooperative learning

others, encouraging, achieving a consensus, conflict resolution, and valuing others. Figure 1.2 shows these key elements visually.

## Why is it different from group work?

As stated previously, cooperative learning has two main prerequisites. Tasks need to be structured to ensure pupils are interdependent and individually accountable; just putting pupils into groups does not mean they will work together cooperatively. Group work itself is nothing new or magical. Traditionally, primary schools have often organised pupils to sit in groups of four or six, although interaction between them may be very limited. The reason underlying this is the ethos of individual competition where pupils often complain: 'He's copying me!' In this situation where pupils are not required to work collaboratively to complete a task, they would often be better working alone. To become cooperative, groups must work together to accomplish shared goals. They need to discuss work with each other and help each other to understand it. Of course, this does not happen instantly, it is a gradual process aided by a clear teaching programme of small group and interpersonal skills together with tasks and teaching techniques that foster interdependence. A step-by-step programme will be provided in the following chapters to enable teachers to do this.

## Teamwork – developing a necessary life skill

Many academics agree that humans have been successful as a species, not because we are physically strong, or able to camouflage ourselves, or run swiftly as some animals do, but because we

are intelligent. But even this would not ensure our survival; what does is our ability to work with others to fulfil shared goals: to cooperate.

Teamwork is a well-known and sought after characteristic of professionals, and cooperation in many forms is a key aspect of modern life. It is therefore somewhat bizarre that schools are normally the least cooperative and, instead, the most competitive places. Most of the time, pupils work independently and compete with each other; hence the distress pupils feel if someone copies their work. It is not just pupils who work individually. Teachers, too, usually work individually in classrooms, lacking the support and help of colleagues. One of the major themes of this book is that cooperative learning necessitates a sea change in attitude from teachers and pupils, or put another way: *cooperative learning in the classroom requires cooperative learning in the staffroom*. It requires teamwork from teachers to support its use and teamwork from pupils to achieve its ends. A cooperative learning school becomes a community of learners with pupils and teachers alike working towards shared goals.

## Learning to learn/creating a learning climate

To achieve such a community of learners it is necessary to create a learning climate, and this requires certain conditions to be met. At its heart is a supportive ethos that values and celebrates diversity. The use of language needs to be carefully examined to ensure it is of a 'no blame' nature and, most importantly, children's personal, social and emotional needs should be given priority. These are the necessary prerequisites for learning and the 'glue' for pupils working cooperatively.

The Primary National Strategy's professional development materials, *Excellence and Enjoyment: Learning and Teaching in the Primary Years*,<sup>4</sup> puts creating a learning culture and understanding how learning develops, as two central themes to effective learning. Indeed, it states its aim is for pupils, by the end of Key Stage 2, to be able to work well with others. It recognises that this requires a range of skills including:

Cognitive aspects of learning	Affective aspects of learning
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Enquiry</li> <li>• Problem-solving</li> <li>• Creative thinking</li> <li>• Information processing</li> <li>• Reasoning</li> <li>• Evaluation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Self-awareness</li> <li>• Managing feelings</li> <li>• Motivation</li> <li>• Empathy</li> <li>• Social skills</li> <li>• Communication</li> </ul>

The social and emotional skills, or affective aspects, have now been supported with a series of documents and professional development materials entitled *Excellence and Enjoyment: Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL)*,<sup>5</sup> to support teachers in providing a teaching programme for pupils. Research has also shown that programmes that teach social and emotional skills impact on pupils' academic skills, motivation, attendance and morale.

The professional development materials distributed by the Primary National Strategy provide a range of supportive documents and videos for schools to help develop a learning culture and, indeed, one of the sections deals with 'Classroom community, collaborative and personalised learning', including a short section on cooperative learning. However, this does not provide sufficient background or details of how to implement it. This book aims to do this and to show how it can be a vehicle for improving cognitive and affective aspects of learning.

## Every Child Matters

The Children Act 2004 and *Every Child Matters: Change for Children* (2004) set out the framework for services for children to maximise opportunities and minimise risk. The main aspects of reform centre around five key themes: be healthy, stay safe, enjoy and achieve, make a positive contribution and achieve economic well-being. *Every Child Matters* makes important links not only between services for children but also shows that learning cannot occur unless all these needs are met. Working cooperatively with others can support these aims, as can be seen from its many proven advantages. As can be seen from Figure I.3, the outcomes and aims of *Every Child Matters* can be clearly mapped to the advantages of cooperative learning.

## Advantages of working cooperatively

Cooperative learning is one of the most heavily researched areas of education. Studies<sup>6</sup> have shown three main categories of advantages: achievement, interpersonal relationships, and psychological health and social competence.

Improvements in learning have been shown through:

- greater productivity
- higher process gain (that is, more higher-level reasoning, more frequent generation of new ideas and solutions)
- greater transfer of learning from one situation to another
- more time on task
- greater problem-solving.

Improvements in interpersonal relationships have been shown through:

- promoting the development of caring and committed relationships
- establishing and maintaining friendships between peers
- a greater sense of belonging and mutual support
- improved morale.

Improvements in psychological health and social competence have included:

- higher self-esteem
- improved self-worth
- increased self-confidence
- greater independence
- supporting sharing of problems
- increased resilience and ability to cope with adversity and stress.

<i>Every Child Matters</i> Outcomes and aims		Cooperative learning Advantages	
<p><b>Be healthy</b> Physically healthy Mentally and emotionally healthy Sexually healthy Healthy lifestyles Choose not to take illegal drugs</p>	<p><b>Stay safe</b> Safe from maltreatment, neglect, violence and sexual exploitation Safe from accidental injury and death Safe from bullying and discrimination Safe from crime and antisocial behaviour in and out of school Have security, stability and are cared for</p>	<p><b>Improved psychological health and social competence</b></p>	<p>Higher self-esteem Improved self-worth Promotes self-confidence Develops independence Supports sharing of problems Increased resilience and ability to cope with adversity and stress</p>
<p><b>Enjoy and achieve</b> Ready for school Attend and enjoy school Achieve stretching national educational standards at primary school Achieve personal and social development and enjoy recreation</p>	<p><b>Make a positive contribution</b> Engage in decision-making and support the community and environment Engage in law-abiding and positive behaviour in and out of school Develop positive relationships and choose not to bully and discriminate Develop self-confidence and successfully deal with significant life changes and challenges Develop enterprising behaviour</p>	<p><b>Improved learning</b></p>	<p>Greater productivity Higher process gain (i.e. more higher-level reasoning, more frequent generation of new ideas and solutions) Greater transfer of learning from one situation to another More time on task Greater problem-solving</p>
<p><b>Achieve economic well-being</b> Engage in further education, employment or training on leaving school Ready for employment Live in decent homes and sustainable communities Access to transport and material goods Live in households free from low income</p>		<p><b>Improved interpersonal skills</b></p>	<p>Promotes the development of caring and committed relationships Helps establish and maintain friendships between peers A greater sense of belonging and mutual support Improved morale</p>

**Figure 1.3 Mapping the aims and outcome of *Every Child Matters* with the advantages of cooperative learning**

Now examine Figure I. 3 to see how the proven advantages of cooperative learning can support the aims and outcomes of *Every Child Matters*.

## So why is it not widely used?

If cooperative learning has such an extensive pedigree, why are schools not using it more? This was a question that I puzzled over until, on further research and from use myself in the classroom, I realised it is crucial that pupils are given training and support in developing the interpersonal and small group skills necessary for effective cooperative learning. By just putting pupils together to work and providing some of the cooperative learning structures or techniques, will not guarantee success. A clear programme of teaching the skills required needs to be in place, which is valued and assessed in the same way as other areas of the curriculum. In Chapter 5 a staged approach to developing these skills is set out. Links are made to the Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE) curriculum and the use of circle time, as well as the SEAL materials from the Primary National Strategy.

Another reason for a lack of either interest or success with cooperative learning is that it can be problematic. It requires pupils to talk, discuss and interact, which can, at least initially, make teachers feel a loss of control over a class. In addition, teachers have worried over the ability to effectively assess pupils as individuals when they work in a group. These issues are discussed at length and a range of solutions provided in Chapter 6. At the heart, perhaps, of any reluctance for teachers to use cooperative learning is what amounts to a totally different role for the teacher. The teacher becomes a facilitator of learning, organising, monitoring, supporting and intervening where appropriate. The teacher is not in the role of imparter of knowledge, firing questions at pupils – the ‘chalk and talk’ of common classroom practice. In effect, the teacher in cooperative learning has moved on a long way from the Rip Van Winkle example. He or she has become the teacher of the twenty-first century.



### Points to remember

1. Learning is a social process which requires interaction amongst pupils.
2. Cooperative learning is not just group work – tasks are structured to necessitate the interaction of pupils in pairs/groups.
3. Advantages of cooperative learning include achievement, interpersonal relationships, psychological health and social competence.
4. Teachers need to understand the key elements and how to incorporate them successfully into lessons.
5. Cooperative learning is linked to social and emotional skills.
6. Cooperative learning can support the aims of *Every Child Matters*.
7. Pupils need support and training in interpersonal and small-group skills.
8. Cooperative learning in the classroom requires cooperative learning in the staffroom!

## Further reading



Johnson, D.W., Johnson, R.T., and Holubec, E.J. (1994) *Cooperative Learning in the Classroom*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

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