

Social Skills for Successful Group Work

Interpersonal and small-group skills are vital to the success of cooperative learning.

In a 4th grade classroom the teacher is trying out learning groups. "This is a mess," she thinks. In one group, students are bickering over who is going to do the writing. In another group, one child sits quietly, too shy to participate. Two members of a third group are talking about football while the third member works on the assignment. "My students do not know how to work cooperatively," she sighs.

What is a teacher to do in such a situation? Simply placing students in groups and telling them to work together does not, in and of itself, produce cooperation—and certainly not the higher achievement and positive social outcomes that can result from cooperative learning groups. The reason? Traditional group efforts may go wrong in many ways. Group members sometimes seek a free ride on others' work by "leaving it to George" to complete the group's tasks. Students who are stuck doing all the work sometimes decrease their efforts to avoid being suckers. High-ability group members may take over in ways that benefit themselves at the expense of lower achieving group members (the "rich get richer" effect). Pressures to conform may suppress individual



Photograph by W. Stencel

Social skills—like other skills—must be learned. But once learned, the abilities to cooperate and to work effectively with others will serve students well in school and later on in their careers.

efforts. Or group work may break down because of divisive conflicts and power struggles.

Only under certain conditions can we expect cooperative efforts to increase students' efforts to achieve and improve the quality of their relationships with classmates and their psychological health. These conditions are positive interdependence, face-to-face (promotive) interaction, individual accountability, social skills, and group processing (Johnson and Johnson 1987, Johnson et al. 1988). Each of these elements mediates the relationship between cooperation and its outcomes (Johnson and Johnson 1989). And they are all interrelated. Using social skills, for example, makes sense only when there is positive interdependence. In competitive and individualistic situations, trust and empathy are inappropriate.

Teaching Cooperative Skills

People do not know instinctively how to interact effectively with others. Nor do interpersonal and group skills magically appear when they are needed. Students must be taught these skills and be motivated to use them. If group members lack the interpersonal and small-group skills to cooperate effectively, cooperative groups will not be productive.

To achieve mutual goals, students must communicate accurately and resolve conflicts constructively.

Fig. 1. T-Chart

Encouraging Participation	
Looks Like	Sounds Like
Smiles	What is your idea?
Eye contact	Awesome!
Thumbs up	Good idea!
Pat on back	That's interesting.

In order to coordinate efforts to achieve mutual goals, students must (1) get to know and trust one another, (2) communicate accurately and unambiguously, (3) accept and support one another, and (4) resolve conflicts constructively (Johnson 1986, Johnson and Johnson 1987). Interpersonal and small-group skills make possible the basic nexus among students; and if students are to work together productively and cope with the stresses of doing so, they must have at least a modicum of these skills.

Teachers can follow a series of steps in teaching students interpersonal and small-group skills. First, students must see the need to use the skill. To want to learn the skill, students must believe that they will be better off if they know it. Teachers can highlight the need for the skill by explaining why it is important, displaying what it looks like on posters and bulletin boards, and informing students they will be rewarded for using it.

Second, students must understand what the skill is and when it should be used. This information is most commonly conveyed through a "T-Chart" (Johnson et al. 1988) and through modeling the skill. (See Figure 1 for an example of a T-Chart.) The teacher lists the skill (e.g., encouraging participation) and then asks the class, "What would this skill look like?" After several nonverbal behaviors are generated, the teacher asks, "What would this skill sound like?" Several phrases are listed. The teacher then models the skill until the students have a clear idea of what the skill sounds and looks like.

Third, to master a social skill, students must practice it again and again. Immediately after defining the skill, the teacher should ask students to role-play the skill several times with the persons sitting next to them. The social skill may also be assigned to students as a role to be engaged in during group meetings. For example, the teacher could assign the roles of reader, encourager, summarizer, and elaboration-seeker to the members of a cooperative group. The roles could be rotated daily until every student has been responsible for each role several times. At the end of each cooperative lesson, teachers can announce how many times the skill was observed. New skills need to be cued consistently and reinforced for some time. Teachers should be relentless in encouraging prolonged use of cooperative skills.

Fourth, students must process how frequently and how well they are using the skill. Students need to discuss, describe, and reflect on their use of the skill in order to improve their performance. To ensure that they do so, teachers should provide a regular time for group processing and give students group processing procedures to follow. A standard processing task is, "Name three things your group did well, and name one thing your group could do better next time." Such group processing will not only increase students' interpersonal and small-group skills, it will also increase achievement (Johnson et al. in press, Yager et al. 1985) and the quality of the relationships developed among students (Putnan et al. 1989).

Fifth, students must persevere in practicing the skill. Students have to practice cooperative skills long enough to go through the stages of awkward enactment, phony (role-playing) enactment, and mechanical use of the skill to automatic, routine use where the skill is fully internalized. Ways to ensure that the students persevere include continuing to assign the skill as a group role, continuing to give students feedback as to how frequently and how well they are performing the skill, and rewarding the groups when members use the skill.

Teaching Social Skills: A View from the Classroom

Laura Carson and Sharon Hoyle

After cooperative learning training, I (Laura Carson) entered fall semester with high goals for using cooperative groups in my high school home economics classroom. I was determined to reap full advantage of the benefits by beginning early in the year, so I targeted the third day of Career Investigation class for my first cooperative lesson.

When the day arrived, I explained to my 29 students that they would be working in groups to teach each other vocabulary, using the social skills *encouraging* and *checking for understanding*. I also explained why those skills were important when working with others. As a class, we brainstormed and listed examples of what the skills would look and sound like in a group. Then I explained my role as observer, assigned students to groups, and anxiously awaited what I knew would be a successful and enjoyable experience for both the students and me.

However, as I monitored the groups, I quickly became frustrated. In several groups I saw students who weren't helping each other but who were merely trading their vocabulary lists. Other groups were interacting but not using the social skills. As the end of class drew near, I announced that we would spend the rest of the period discussing the use of the social skills. When I asked students what they had done to encourage each other or check for understanding, I got either no response or direct quotes from the examples on our list. As I had been unable to observe any use of the social skills, when I gave the students my feedback, many groups received observation sheets with nothing on them. We were all discouraged.

On reflection, I realized that I had expected my students to go too far too fast, without knowing *how* to work together. Most of my students had probably gone years without having to work with others. I also realized that I had given my students too many new things to focus on at once. They were not accustomed to sitting and working together, being responsible for teaching each other, or consciously practicing social skills, and I had asked them to do all of these—while concentrating on learning new content. No wonder we were all feeling disheartened.

I resolved to start again and ease my class into working in groups and practicing social skills. I planned frequent brief group activities without assigning social skills, to allow students to acclimate themselves to working and sitting together. I decided to keep students in the same groups for a while so they could get to know each other, and I assigned familiar tasks such as memorizing or completing worksheets to minimize the number of new skills being practiced at one time.

Two weeks later I reintroduced the concept of social skills. I decided to start with one skill—*encouraging*—instead of two. We again brainstormed reasons to use *encouraging*, along with what it would sound and look like. I paired the skill with a familiar task to allow students to focus on the use of the social skill. This time there was definite improvement in the amount of *encouraging* I observed in the groups, and yet a number of individuals still did not use the skill. I struggled to determine what was needed to fill the gap.

I concluded that some students still needed better models of the skill to relate to; listing examples of *encouraging* was not enough for them. So, over the next two weeks, I planned different ways to model the skill. On one day I asked two students who I knew were displaying the skill to role-play an assignment with me in which we demonstrated acceptable ways to encourage each other. On another day, students went through a "dry run" to practice the skill. For five minutes they sat with their groups and took turns saying encouraging phrases while displaying encouraging actions. There was no task involved. For a few of my students, it was the first time I had seen or heard any evidence of the skill.

When we returned to completing tasks, I altered my method of recording students' use of social skills during group work. Instead of recording words and actions used as a group, I began listing them for each individual. As an incentive for all, I began to offer a reward to groups in which I was able to observe each individual use at least two encouraging words and two encouraging actions. With this, I began to hear students encouraging each other to encourage! At last success was ours.

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Students learn more social skills and engage in them more frequently when the group is given bonus points for their doing so.

Using Bonus Points

Many teachers want to use a structured program to teach students the interpersonal and small-group skills they need. Such a program will give students the opportunity to earn bonus points for their groups by using targeted cooperative skills. We have found that students, even socially isolated and withdrawn ones, learn more social skills and engage in them more frequently when the group is given bonus points for their doing so (Lew et al. 1986a, 1986b). Bonus points can be accumulated for academic credit or for special rewards, such as free time or minutes listening to one's own choice of music. We recommend the following procedure:

1. Identify, define, and teach a social skill you want students to use in working cooperatively with one another. This skill becomes a target for mastery. Skills include staying with the group, using quiet voices, giving direction to the group's work, encouraging participation, explaining answers, relating present learning to past learning, criticizing ideas without criticizing people, asking probing questions, and requesting further rationale (Johnson et al. 1988).

2. Use group points and group rewards to increase the use of the cooperative skill:

- a. Each time a student engages in the targeted skill, the student's group receives a point.

- b. Points may be awarded only for positive behavior.

- c. Points are added and never taken away. All points are permanently earned.

Interpersonal skills may be the set of skills most important to one's employability, productivity, and career success.

3. Summarize total points daily. Emphasize daily progress toward the goal. Use a visual display such as a graph or chart.

4. Develop an observational system that samples each group for the same amount of time. In addition, use student observers to record the frequency of students' use of the targeted skills.

5. Set a reasonable number of points for earning the reward. Rewards can be both social and tangible. A social reward is having the teacher say, "That shows thought," "I like the way you explained it," "That's a good way of putting it," "Remarkably well done." The points earned can be traded in for a tangible reward: free time, computer time, library time, time to play a game, extra recess time, and any other activity that students value.

6. In addition to group points, class points may be awarded. For example, the teacher might say, "Eighteen people are ready to begin and helped the class earn a reward," or "I noticed 12 people worked the last 25 minutes." Class points may be recorded with a number line, beans in a jar, or checks on the chalkboard.

7. In addition to social skills, potential target behaviors include following directions, completing assigned tasks, handing in homework, behaving appropriately in out-of-class settings such as lunch or assemblies, or helping substitute teachers.

Long-Term Outcomes

Teaching students interpersonal and small-group skills produces both short-term and long-term outcomes (Johnson and Johnson 1989). Short-term outcomes include greater learning, retention, and critical thinking. Long-term outcomes include greater employability and career success.

Most people realize that a college education or vocational training improves their career opportunities, but many are less aware that interpersonal skills may be the set of skills most important to their employability, productivity, and career success. Employers typically value verbal communication, responsibility, initiative, and interpersonal and decision-making skills. A question all employers have in mind when they interview a job applicant is, "Can this person get along with other people?" Having a high degree of technical competence is not enough to ensure a successful career. A person also has to have a high degree of interpersonal competence.

For example, in 1982 the Center for Public Resources published "Basic Skills in the U.S. Workforce," a nationwide survey of businesses, labor unions, and educational institutions. The Center found that 90 percent of the respondents who had been fired from their jobs were fired for poor job attitudes, poor interpersonal relationships, and inappropriate behavior. Being fired for lack of basic and technical skills was infrequent. Even in high-tech jobs, the ability to work effectively with other personnel is essential, as is the ability to communicate and work with people from other professions to solve interdisciplinary problems.

In the real world of work, the heart of most jobs—especially higher-paying, more interesting jobs—is getting others to cooperate, leading others, coping with complex problems of power and influence, and helping

solve people's problems in working together. Millions of technical, professional, and managerial jobs today require much more than technical competence and professional expertise. Such jobs also require leadership. More and more, employees are asked to get things done by influencing a large and diverse group of people (bosses, subordinates, peers, customers, and others), despite lacking much or any formal control over them and despite their general disinterest in cooperating. Employees are expected to motivate others, negotiate and mediate, get decisions implemented, exercise authority, and develop credibility—all tasks that require interpersonal and small-group skills. Thus, the skills developed within cooperative efforts in school are important contributors to personal employability and career success. In addition, social skills are directly related to building and maintaining positive relationships and to keeping psychological health. Maintaining a set of good friends, being a caring parent, maintaining a loving relationship with your spouse—all directly relate to how interpersonally skilled you are. One's quality of life as an adult depends largely on one's social skills. Furthermore, the more socially skilled people are, the healthier they tend to be psychologically. For these and many other reasons, we should teach students the skills necessary to build and maintain cooperative relationships with others.

As Important as Academic Content

If the potential of cooperative learning is to be realized, students must have the prerequisite interpersonal and small-group skills and be motivated to use them. These skills should be taught just as systematically as mathematics, social studies, or any subject. Doing so requires that teachers communicate to students the need for social skills, define and model these skills, have students practice them over and over again, process how effectively students perform the skills, and ensure that students persevere until the skills are fully integrated into their behavioral repertoires. If teach-

ers do so, they will not only increase student achievement, they will also increase students' future employability, career success, quality of relationships, and psychological health. □

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