

WE ARE NOT ALONE: A CLASSROOM FULL OF TEACHERS

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Renowned mountain climber Willi Unsoeld once told a group of climbers to "take care of each other. Share your energies with the group. No one must feel alone, cut off, for that is when you do not make it."¹ Cooperation is a vital component of human life, a vital component of success. However, until recently America's schools and colleges have functioned under the idea that cooperation in education was somehow wrong and counterproductive. Most schools and colleges continue to emphasize the traditional teaching method of lecture—a one-way monologue where the professor gives facts and knowledge and where students passively listen, take notes, and absorb knowledge. Sharan and Sharan have noted that traditional education makes students consumers and teachers feeders—whereby one individual, the instructor, decides what is on the menu, the size of the portions, and how fast the consumer, that is the student, must ingest.² And, to continue with this analogy, the consuming student is asked to regurgitate what has been consumed.

Many educators now argue that we should not consider students as empty vessels awaiting precious professorial pourings. Students should not be considered Lockean blank slates upon which only educators can write. This would mean that the only person in a classroom with knowledge to share is the professor, and that we as professors are alone in the classroom. In fact, there are 20, 30, 40 or more other teachers in the classroom. We are not alone. The room is full of teachers. And, in such a classroom the best way to utilize all of the minds is through the interactive educational process of active and cooperative learning.

Although some educators see active and cooperative learning as separate activities, they are inextricably linked in my classroom and therefore I use the terms somewhat interchangeably. Active learning is easiest to define in the negative, as the opposite of passive learning—that type of spoon-feeding discussed in the opening. Active learning, as defined by Charles Bonwell and James Eison, is any type of learning that "involves students in doing things and thinking about the things they are doing." It means students are doing more than listening; they are engaging in higher-order thinking—analysis, synthesis and evaluation—and in activities—writing, discussing, and reading.³

Cooperative learning, like active learning, seeks student involvement in the educational process. Cooperative learning is students "working together to accomplish

¹David W. Johnson, Roger T. Johnson and Karl A. Smith, *Cooperative Education: Increasing College Faculty Instructional Productivity* (Washington D.C.: George Washington University, 1991), 22.

²Yael Sharan and Shlomo Sharan, *Expanding Cooperative Learning Through Group Investigation* (New York: Teachers College Press, Columbia University, 1992), 3-5.

³Charles C. Bonwell and James A. Eison, *Active Learning: Creating Excitement in the Classroom* (Washington, D.C.: George Washington University, 1991), 2.

shared goals." It is "the instructional use of small groups so that students work together to maximize their own and each other's learning." Cooperative learning, then, is simply active learning using a group format to achieve shared educational goals.⁴

Cooperative education enjoyed a renaissance in the 1960s, and has since proliferated. Some today employ it for the same reasons as those who first introduced this methodology into American schools in the late 1800s—as a way to strengthen democratic and community values. Early cooperative learning advocates—Francis Parker, John Dewey, William Kilpatrick, Kurt Lewin, and Morton Deutsch—identified a direct correlation among classroom environment, the educational process (i.e., instructional method), and societal values.⁵ Dewey and the others saw the classroom as a microcosm of society; thus a key goal of education is to create a social learning environment that allows one "to develop the moral character needed for living in the ... community."⁶ That is, "schooling should embody in its very procedures the process and goals of democratic society."⁷

Other recent converts to cooperative education stress its interpersonal rather than its civic value. They believe such learning fosters improved social relations on campus. Studies have shown that cooperative group learning promotes team-building, a sense of inclusion, common identity, higher self-esteem, self-confidence, positive psychology adjustment, an understanding of another person's perspective, an increased ability to work effectively with others, better peer relationships, and better student-faculty relationships.⁸

⁴Johnson et al., *Cooperative Learning*, 1-4.

⁵According to Johnson et al., America's cooperative educational roots can be traced to the work of Englishmen Joseph Lancaster and Andrew Bell. In 1806 a school based upon their cooperative educational ideas was founded in New York City. Such ideas were carried on by the Common School Movement of the early 1800s, and revitalized in the late 1800s by Colonel Francis Parker. Parker, as superintendent of Quincy, Massachusetts, schools, made cooperative learning all the rage, as 30,000 visitors a year came to Quincy from 1875 to 1880 to study his techniques. See Johnson et al., *Cooperative Education*, 4-5.

⁶Emmy A. Pepitone, *Children in Cooperation and Competition*, (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1980), 3-23.

⁷Historically cooperative education was promoted as a laboratory for democracy. Yet, cooperative education has another social implication. Cooperative education at its core implies, seeks cooperation instead of competition; it looks to shared group effort to achieve goals. By doing this it promotes, intentionally or unintentionally, a shift from competitive to cooperative social values. Thanks largely to the work done by Kurt Lewin and Morton Deutsch, many educators today find a greater classroom value, and by definition societal value, in cooperative learning. Classroom cooperation, they argue, will spill over into society and help create a greater cooperative social environment. See Sharan and Sharan, *Expanding Cooperative Learning*, 3-5.

⁸Neil Davidson and Toni Worsham, eds., *Enhancing Thinking Through Cooperative Learning* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1992), xiii-xv. See also Shlomo Sharan et al., *Cooperative Learning in the Classroom: Research in Desegregated Schools* (Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum, 1984); Johnson et al, *Cooperative Education*, 42-53.

Moreover, in our racially divided and racially conflict-ridden colleges and universities, cooperative group learning can create better relations between races and diverse ethnic groups. One study of fourteen cooperative classroom experiments, where the students were placed in inter-ethnic or inter-racial groups, found that students placed in such mixed cooperative groups developed long-term friendships with members of different races. The group setting forced students to associate across races, and association and working at shared goals helped break down racial barriers.⁹

Still other recent cooperative learning advocates support this methodology because of its proven track record in improving academic performance. Studies have shown that "Cooperative learning promoted higher achievement than did competitive or individualistic learning." It also "resulted in more higher-level reasoning, more frequent generation of new ideas and solutions, and greater transfer of what is learned within one situation to another than did competitive or individualistic learning." In college classes research shows that the second most important factor in learning in large survey courses was other students. Students admit that they learn from others and that they like it. A related academic benefit of cooperative learning is attitude toward subject matter. Studies suggest that students who interacted with other students and with the instructor were more "satisfied" with their learning than students in strict lecture courses,¹⁰ that students who experienced group learning and discussion had a greater predilection toward developing positive feelings toward the subject matter, felt more satisfied with what they learned, and wanted to take other courses in the discipline.¹¹

Clearly, cooperative education has recognized civic, social, and academic value—and it works! For three years now, I have experimented with cooperative education in my European, United States, and African-American survey courses. In the European survey, I employ cooperative methods in two ways—both involving groups composed of three to five students. I use cooperative methods to support and enhance my traditional lecture methodology and to increase reading comprehension through shared discussion.

As to the first—using groups to support lectures—I have students immediately get into groups on Monday morning—or the first class that meets that week. They must then, as a group, come up with the seven most significant terms—individuals, events, movements, or ideologies—from lecture or reading. Each individual does this and then,

⁹Robert Slavin, *Cooperative Learning* (New York: Longman, 1983), Chapter 4. Norman Miller and his colleagues have also done a great deal of work in the area of cooperative education in a multicultural setting. See N. Miller and M. Brewer, eds., *Groups in Contact: The Psychology of Desegregation* (New York: Academic Press, 1984).

¹⁰See Donald A. Bligh, *What's the Use of Lectures?* (Middlesex, England: Penguin, 1972).

¹¹See J.A. Kulik and C.L.L. Kulik, "College Teaching," in P.L. Peterson and H.J. Walberg, eds., *Research on Teaching: Concepts, Findings, and Implications* (Berkeley: McCutcheon, 1979); Johnson et al., *Cooperative Learning*, 42-47.

within their group, they agree on the best seven. Each group puts its seven on the board and out of the 35 or 42 terms, we as a class choose the top seven. At the end of five weeks we have 35 terms, and it is from this list of 35 that I choose 7 to place on the exam.

The value in this method is multifold. First, it makes the students review their lecture notes, read them over, and re-familiarize themselves with what we discussed. This improves long-term performance. Total grade point average in classes using this system have gone up approximately 0.3 to 0.5 of a letter grade. Second, it improves group skills and facilitates other group exercises. And third, it allows them an opportunity to see what the historical process is all about. I begin each semester with the question "What is History?" Through discussion, we answer this question with the response—history is what historians say it is—which, generally I think is true. Historians decide what is significant. By having students choose key terms, they engage in the historical process themselves. Students are thus introduced to the process of historical interpretation. They learn what historians do. And I think this is fascinating and valuable.

The other group exercise that we do throughout the semester relates to assigned readings. For my European surveys, I use J. Kelley Sowards's *Makers of the Western Tradition*, (and for the U.S. survey Marcus and Burner's *America Firsthand*).¹² I use Sowards because he deals with individuals and because he presents three different articles about each individual, which allows for comparing and contrasting and a sense of historiography. I use individuals in the European Survey for a number of reasons. Ken Wolf notes that using biography "help[s] students see how real people dealt with real problems" and allows students to see that the "problems that many of these [past] individuals faced continue to exist, albeit in different forms today."¹³ Reading about individuals also seems to facilitate group discussion.

In the second group exercise, I have students read about the assigned individual before coming to class and then they do a group exercise. The exercise can be varied from week to week or group meeting to group meeting. Let me give just one example, dealing with the readings on Elizabeth I, which illustrates one way of employing group learning in the history survey.

Sowards's readings on Elizabeth include selections from a contemporary, Sir Francis Bacon, from a nineteenth-century historian, James Anthony Froude, and a twentieth-century historian, Garrett Mattingly. The selections discuss numerous issues, from Elizabeth's relations with Philip II, to her role as protector of England, to the Spanish Armada, to her abilities as a monarch, to her personal strengths and

¹²Kelley Sowards, ed., *Makers of the Western Tradition* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993); Robert D. Marcus and David Burner, eds., *America Firsthand* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995).

¹³Ken Wolf, "Teaching History the Old Fashioned Way—Through Biography," *AHA Perspectives*, May/June 1994, 3-6.

weaknesses, to the Catholic-Protestant question, to why Elizabeth never married. In class, I asked each group (there were 8 groups) to come up with what they believed to be the two most central or significant questions that, when asked and answered, best captured the one major theme addressed in all three articles. After about fifteen minutes I asked each group to write their two questions on the board. Obviously, some groups came up with the same or similar questions, and out of a possibility of sixteen total questions, eight different questions emerged. I asked each group to explain briefly why they thought their particular questions were the most significant or accurate?¹⁴ Then, I asked, of these eight questions which is the one most significant? After about ten minutes of discussion, the class narrowed it down to two questions: one dealing with Elizabeth's role in defeating the Spanish Armada and its impact on England's rise to power; and the other on how Elizabeth handled, and the significance of, the Protestant-Catholic conflict in England and Europe during her reign. After more discussion, all groups decided that the question dealing with the Spanish Armada best captured the essence of Elizabeth's reign. They gave some excellent reasons, including the importance of the defeat of Spain's navy, which helped pave the way for the rise of England's navy and its commercial fleet; England's emergence as a colonial power; how the defeat of the Armada led to greater security, including minimizing the threat from Spain's position in Low Countries. But, then, in the midst of this free-flowing discussion with every group participating, one student brought up the fact that the defeat of the Armada aided in maintaining Protestantism in England. At this juncture, a number of students asked, "Didn't Philip II attack England because of Protestantism, and wasn't it only after Elizabeth executed Mary Queen of Scots, heir to the throne and a Catholic, that Philip moved against Elizabeth and England?" Finally, one student, who seemed hard-to-motivate, proposed that the other question on the religious issue was the best one. Everyone else started agreeing, and then the class adjourned. Clearly, everyone was involved, all felt comfortable enough to speak, and a real intellectual exchange existed. This example was but one of many times that such active learning emerged from group activity.

In the particular survey class from which that example was drawn, nearly every student (27 out of 28), in an anonymous questionnaire, reacted very favorably to group

¹⁴Nearly all advocates of cooperative group learning argue that within each group there should be a division of labor whereby each group member has a specific task to perform, including group leader, group recorder/secretary, group checker, etc. In my classes, I do not use this. College students, I believe, unlike high school students, do not necessarily need this division of labor to ensure individual accountability—which is the main function of the division. N. Davidson, in "Small-Group Learning and Teaching in Mathematics: A Selective View of the Research," in *Learning to Cooperate, Cooperating to Learn*, edited by R.E. Slavin, et al, (New York, Plenum, 1985), argues that cooperative group learning in college classrooms need not demand individual accountability to be successful. Yet, I do agree with cooperative education experts that "checking"—making sure that all members in the group can explain the group's collective answer if called upon—is vital to successful group learning.

learning exercises. (I assured them before distributing the questionnaire that I wanted them to be honest in their evaluation of cooperative learning. I believe they were, and their overwhelmingly favorable comments were genuine.) Interestingly, what students found valuable in the group exercises, as expressed in their written comments, substantiated what researchers in cooperative learning had claimed—that active learning promotes thinking and analysis, creates a positive learning environment, and improves social relations. For example, one student stated that "it is better than just listening to lectures every class. It forces us to use our brains." Another echoed this comment in stating that group learning "is better because you are thinking" and "not just taking notes." Overwhelmingly, students commented that group learning allows them to "get different points of view," and it "helps [them] create an opinion about the time/person instead of just knowing facts." Clearly, this is not rote learning; rather it is active analysis.

But perhaps the comments I found most interesting, and which I believe best attest to the value in this methodology, concerned the ways in which small groups aid in learning comprehension and knowledge confirmation by creating a sense of security. How many times have all of us had a student come up to us upset at a poor grade and say "I didn't really understand the material" or "I thought I understood it, but I guess I was confused." And we would respond, as caring professors ought, "Well, why didn't you raise your hand, ask a question, or ask me to go over the material again." And the student either then proceeds to shrug their shoulders, say nothing, or state that they feel uncomfortable doing that. We all know that many students simply cannot ask a question, for in doing so they believe they are exposing themselves in front of the entire class as being slow or stupid. For us to deny this reality or to state that it is silly for students to feel this way does not negate it. Group learning exercises, however, do break down this very real barrier to learning. For example, one student quite plainly wrote that small group learning "allows those of us to speak to a small group who do not necessarily participate in a larger group setting." Reading between lines it is clear that this student, and probably many others, feel more comfortable asking questions and expressing doubts in a small group environment.

That this environment also aids in learning comprehension is clear from numerous written comments I have received over the past few years. One student wrote that small group exercises allow me "to make sure that I fully understand [the readings]." Or, as another put it, small group learning "helps me to see if other people in the class got the same meaning from the writings as me." That is, small groups allow students to ask questions and express doubts in the safe confines of "their own kind" as well as to use other group members as sounding boards to confirm what they believed they understood. Group methodology creates a learning-friendly environment. Such an environment improves comprehension and hence grades. For this reason, it deserves our attention.

In concluding, the one major drawback with group learning deals with time. It is a time-consuming exercise. How can you cover all the material that needs to be covered and still utilize cooperative group learning? Well, in simple English, one cannot. And this strikes at the last point to be made—the issue of content versus process. When educators speak of content they mean "the compendium of information that comprises the learning material for a particular course." This information is, of course, a body of facts, laws, theories, or a description of events. In short, it is the facts presented to students.¹⁵ When speaking about process, educators mean the way students are taught and how they process the information they are given. For content advocates the mission is to deliver the facts. For process people, the mission is to develop thinking abilities for acquiring and processing knowledge.

In teaching any introductory survey this seeming dichotomy is ever-present. I believe, as do probably all advocates of cooperative education, that one should not dwell on content. Deep concern with content necessitates straight lecturing, spoon-feeding, shoving the material into students until they are full of all the facts they are supposed to learn. Not only do we know that this is not the best way to teach or learn, but in fact there is simply too much content—too much history. We know much more history now than we ever did. The new social historians of the 1960s and beyond have opened entirely new areas of exploration. There are simply too many facts that can be taught, too much content, too much material to cover. One way to deal with the overload of content is to concern ourselves more with process.

I am not arguing that content is meaningless or that facts should not be taught. But I am saying that we ought to remember that we are dealing with introductory material. And in an introduction one need not cover everything. We need not concentrate on telling the whole story, but rather present some interesting material, make the student want to ask some questions and learn more about the subject. From my experiences with cooperative education and from what I have read, I believe this approach to the introductory survey, the curtailing of content and incorporating small group learning, will not only lead our students to an understanding of the significance of the Rubicon, but will also make them want to cross it with us.

¹⁵J. Cecil Parker and Louis J. Rubin, *Process as Content: Curriculum Design and the Application of Knowledge* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1966), 1-3.