

## ***A Good Idea. But It Might Not Work***

### **Cooperative Learning for Higher Education Faculty**

By Barbara J. Mills and Philip G. Cottell

Phoenix: American Council on Education and Oryx Press, 1998.

*Reviewed by Constance Chapman*

Cooperative learning, according to Cooper and Mireck (1990), is “a structured systematic instructional strategy in which small groups work together toward a common goal.”

*Cooperative Learning for Higher Education Faculty* is a “definitive how-to book on cooperative learning at the postsecondary level designed to serve as a vital resource for faculty who use a collaborative approach to education.” In essence, the volume transfers the concept of peer study groups to the classroom.

The volume is divided into five parts. “Overviews of Cooperative Learning and Teaching and Learning” reviews the literature on this method of instruction.

“Classroom Management” explores methods for setting up and planning for the cooperative classroom. “Structuring the Cooperative Classroom” covers study and teaching teams and the use of technology in cooperative learning. “Assessing the Cooperative Classroom” addresses the crucial problem of grades. The final section, “Supporting Cooperative Efforts,” discusses the importance of a support system for faculty members who adopt cooperative learning technique for their courses.

Millis and Cottell offer thorough and well-documented support

for cooperative learning at the college level. Still, cooperative learning is a method that, even though proven successful, will probably not gain any more popularity than it now enjoys. I see several reasons for this: It is difficult to get cooperation for this method at the college level. The method is time-consuming and assessment is difficult.

The first problem arises because of the nature of cooperative learning. This type of learning requires that the same method be used in an entire discipline unit—all of the basic math courses or all of the third-year history courses, for example. A cooperative learning course might employ the “Think-Pair-Share” structure where students are given a problem, time to construct an answer on their own, and time to discuss it with a peer before sharing the answer with the instructor or the entire class.

Unless all sections of a course use this approach, students in such a course have an advantage over students who must provide answers without the opportunity to first share their ideas and ways of constructing meaning with their peers.

Students in traditionally structured “lecture/take notes” classes will certainly rebel, and fairly so, because they will be evaluated differently than their peers in other

sections of the same course.

As Millis and Cottell admit: "getting faculty to agree readily on a new textbook, let alone a concerted course of instruction such as cooperative learning, is virtually unheard of."

The second problem arises because the essence of cooperative learning is group work. Millis and Cottell continually emphasize that, for students to work effectively in groups, they must be trained. Note the authors:

No one is allowed to coast on the achievements of others, as sometimes happens in less-structured group settings, where one or two team members do most of the work on a joint project but all members received the same grade.

But most college courses have too much "ground" to cover to take the time for such training and monitoring.

Probably the most difficult aspect of cooperative learning is evaluation. As the authors note:

The instructor cannot be involved with all groups at all times. In fact, few faculty can accurately monitor the behavior of more than two students at once. Therefore, students should not be assessed for their group contributions for each in-class activity.

As an alternative, Millis and Cottell suggest a combination of individual, peer, and self-assessment. While the authors suggest that students work in concert to create

evaluation criteria, they admit that "unless students are properly trained and similarly committed to the practice, they may be hesitant about passing judgment on their peers."

Those of us who have experience in the classroom are aware that there is nothing to preclude students from agreeing to evaluate their peers above average.

I'm not saying that cooperative learning is an unsatisfactory teaching/learning method. On the contrary, it is—and has been proven to be—an excellent technique, especially in grades K-12.

I agree with the authors that in "institutions where teaching is valued and considered a legitimate form of scholarship, then faculty will quickly realize that they must adopt student-centered approaches."

But in colleges and universities where the watchwords are "publish or perish" and where students value grades more than knowledge, cooperative learning will probably never attain the status and use it deserves. ■

## References

- Cooper, J. and R. Mueck, R. "Student Involvement in Learning: Cooperative Learning and College Instruction." *Journal on Excellence in College Teaching*, (1990): 68-76.

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