

Book Reviews

Cooperative Learning in the Classroom – Putting it into Practice

By Wendy Jolliffe

Published by Sage Publications, 2007. ISBN 9781412923798. Price £69.00 or \$77.95 (hardback)
ISBN 9781412923804. Price £19.99 or \$33.95 (paperback)

Reviewed by Lee Taylor

The ambition of this book is to provide a practical approach to the introduction of co-operative learning (CL) into the modern primary classroom. The author outlines the main themes which underpin CL as a tool for teachers and pupils to use. She is very careful in dispelling myths and preconceptions associated with CL and how it can offer an antidote to ingrained didactic practice. The emphasis on positive interdependence and individual accountability is particularly persuasive.

As a 'how-to', the book provides an uninitiated leadership team with the advantages and pitfalls when introducing a fresh pedagogical initiative into an established school. There are helpful hints in each of the seven chapters along with photocopiable resources including co-operative learning structures (CLS) and planning/tracking processes.

There have been several government policy changes since its publication including the change from Every Child Matters to student wellbeing. The author is considering an updated publication which will take account of new directions.

Focus is directed on how a co-operative group must work as a team and for any active learning to take place. It is clear that the role of the teacher is pivotal in providing an environment that is conducive to this type of learning. They should be able to re-focus groups to stretch learning and discussions, to encourage pupils to take an active part and know how valuable that part is, to have recognition for the inputs that are made by pupils and to provide the pupils with the necessary skills in order to become effective participators and good communicators.

The chapter on using diversity as a strength gives tangible ideas to help promote CL and I like how some of the activities are written, encouraging discussion activities between professionals, exactly what we are asking pupils to do. There are some really useful ways of monitoring the classroom environment which I think would be particularly useful for classroom management with professionals new to teaching.

The key messages from the chapter, *Putting Cooperative Learning into Practice* are about knowing when formal and informal CL can/should take place. It was good to read that professionals can decide the kind of lesson/ topic/ theme/ knowledge that is needed to be taught and what type of CL could help. Some of the example lesson plans provided for all key stages give tangible ideas that would help promote formal CL and also as a tool of discussion when planning lessons with other teachers.

Some of the structures suggested were new to me and I know would be suitable for lessons in my subject area.

The chapter, *Using Diversity as a Strength*, explores the academic and emotional factors that are present in any classroom but specifically those that need to be addressed and developed when using CLS. Firstly, multiple intelligences (as identified by Howard Gardner) are explored followed by an overview of some of the factors suggested by Daniel Goleman in his research into emotional intelligence. Underpinning this chapter and of fundamental importance when employing CLS is knowing the capabilities of the students from both multiple intelligence and emotional intelligence point of views. Important also is the notion that emotional intelligence needs to be taught by schools nowadays as there is evidence to suggest that many parents are unable (for whatever reason) to guide their children in this aspect of their upbringing. Wendy Jolliffe completes the chapter by offering teaching strategies to encourage positive behaviours with reference to the five domains identified by Goleman.

The book is a well-written and non-threatening guide through the minefield of introducing a new pedagogical mindset. I would urge the author to consider a secondary school version of the book and possibly to make available a web version of the documentary resources she has painstakingly prepared.

At last, teachers have a 'how-to' for co-operative learning, so now there are no excuses not to do it!

Kagan Cooperative Learning

By Spencer Kagan and Miguel Kagan

Published by Kagan Publishing, 2009. ISBN 9781879097100. Price £31.00 or \$44.00 (paperback).

Reviewed by Lee Taylor

The intention of this publication appears to be to cover every aspect of co-operative learning (CL) from furniture to brain behaviour. The authors unpick the strands behind the theories of co-operative learning and offer a practical approach to its implementation. The book itself is the size of a telephone directory and in some respects it can be used in a similar way. If you are completely new to teaching then you would benefit from starting at the front, however, a more experienced professional may want to continually refresh and stimulate their use of CL by exploring the separate sections. I tend to use the book to cross reference activities I am planning with classes and to strengthen the content of training courses. However, for CL to be effective everything in this mighty tome should be considered. The 17 sections include, *Why do we need co-operative learning?*, *Why does co-operative learning work?*, *Seven keys for success*, *Structures*, *Management*, *Class building*, *Assessment and Grading* and *Motivation Without Reward and Competition*.

The book is not for the fainthearted and trouble has been taken to reference the many contributors that have guided us to a better understanding of this approach to learning. Chapters are broken down into bite-size subsections and this helps the book to become less formidable.

It is packed with photocopiable resources that teachers can use as they are, or take as a starting point for something more bespoke. Many of my colleagues at school have been put off from using the resources, as they appear in the book, because they seem more directed towards primary schools in their style and illustration. The book seems aimed primarily at the American market and as a teachers' co-operative learning manual. Experienced teachers may find some of the language a little twee in places, especially in the names given to co-operative learning structures. The 'high five' celebration is called for to indicate success or a pairing up; some pupils at my school have found this a challenge, possibly because of cultural differences, and perhaps because teachers have been reluctant to encourage physical contact in lessons. There is something of the 'burger restaurant chain' in the house trade mark style and this, together with the promotion of a vast array of additional educational books and resources, has disenfranchised some of my colleagues who see this as compromising their professionalism.

Kagan has created a brand out of co-operative learning. He has captured an illustrative approach with easy-to-remember named structures that can help to create a common language for learning in even the largest school. If you take the trouble to adjust the stylistic idiosyncrasies to your institution's cultural norms then what remains is an encyclopaedic guidebook through the labyrinth of approaches to CL.

When my school decided to implement a co-operative learning model in all lessons we started with Kagan. Even if teachers are still reluctant to adopt all the features of this model, they at least know what CL looks like in its simplest form. Kagan's book has helped teachers and pupils alike in my school it is a great place to start. Anyone interested in making teaching and learning active and fun should have this book in their collection.

The Reviewer

Lee Taylor is the Deputy Head of Sutherland Business and Enterprise College in Telford which is a co-operative school. He studied music and education at Cardiff, Nottingham and Keele before entering into school leadership. He has been leading the ethical and educational policies in his current school and introduced co-operative learning three years ago where it continues to grow and have a positive effect on teachers and pupils. He has a particular interest in the creative potential of co-operative learning and is pursuing an investigation in how this approach can unlock social and individual barriers to creative expression.

Cooperative Learning: Integrating Theory and Practice

By Robyn M Gillies

Published by Sage Publications, 2007. ISBN 9781412940474. Price £65.00 or \$99.95 (hardback) ISBN 9781412940481. Price £36.99 or \$56.95 (paperback)

Reviewed by Mark Latus

This title is aimed at both teachers in training and more experienced professionals wishing to extend their understanding and use of co-operative learning (CL). Gillies emphasises repeatedly that CL is so much more than learning in small groups, both in terms of learning outcomes and the thought and skill required of the teacher in establishing and managing CL teaching. CL is about *structured* learning and the structure, created by the teacher, leads to *positive interdependence* where all group members must co-operate in order for each to succeed with each member being accountable for the success of all group members.

For Gillies, CL is an answer if not the answer to ending the malaise in contemporary educational practice. Indeed, tantalisingly, suggestion is made of the potential of CL to mitigate many of the social ills of our day. Alas, it is always difficult to prove and rarely politically convenient to connect positive social improvements to educational activity. Far easier and common is the blaming of teachers and schools for society's ills, as we saw in some media reports after the August 'riots' in England in 2011. Gillies shares her considerable experience as a researcher in a range of compulsory education settings and there is much to be gained from this book not only in terms of the theory, application and evaluation of CL but about what in broader terms makes effective teaching and a good school. It would have been good to read about Gillies' own experiences of education and learning and the absence of a foreword from the author is surprising.

Content is divided in a clear text-book format with reflective activities for the reader, case-study scripts and classroom resources. Case studies taken from elementary and secondary schools (mainly US and Australian) illuminate the theoretical discussion of CL. Step-by-step guidance is offered for all elements of the CL process including how establishing CL groups, promoting student thinking, learning and discourse, getting the composition right in groups, and conducting assessment and evaluation. Each chapter ends with a summary of academic research and suggestions for readers wishing to delve deeper.

For me, Gillies' examination of the process of group self-evaluation and parallel metacognitive skills was particularly instructive; as a student I have no recollection of this taking place and as a teacher I recognise that it figures low in my practice. I also found particularly useful the discussion and guidance on the assessment of learning.

There is stimulating discussion of possible future developments in CL including examination of ICT in the classroom and the computer-supported collaborative environment (CSCL). However there is little on the impact of online learning: can the important social elements of CL be reconciled with blended learning in which face to face contact is a diminished part of the learning environment. Increasingly, UK and US students in both the post-compulsory and compulsory sectors find themselves spending part of their learning time working in online communities. In times of financial austerity the reduction of contact hours in favour of online learning is likely only to increase.

As Wendy Jolliffe notes in her paper for this journal, CL is a minority pedagogy in UK schools and I am sure wide reading of Gillies' erudite, thoughtful and persuasive text would help to change this lamentable state of affairs.

The Reviewer

Mark Latus is a lecturer in the post-compulsory education sector in England and is completing a Master's degree at Liverpool Hope University. His research interests include: the acquisition of number skills in children and how learning difficulties arise in numeracy and maths, developing the use of living educational theory and action research in schools and in the professional development of educators.

Participation - Spice It Up! - Practical Tools for Engaging Children and Young People in Planning and Consultations

By Carol Shephard and Phil Treseder

Published by Save the Children Fund, 2002. ISBN 1 84187 062 5. Price £18.99 (softback).

Reviewed by Martha Harding

Spice It Up!, as it is known to its fans, is an A4, spiral bound (easy to photocopy) practitioners' handbook in five parts, with the sometimes dense text broken-up with excellent cartoons by Les Evans. The book is aimed at people working with children and young people but I use it with any audience.

Navigating the book can be a challenge! It has five parts but confusingly, has 10 sections. Annoyingly there is no contents list to allow quick reference.

Most new users go straight to Part 3: *The Toolkit*. Here, the reader is taken through the natural path of a participatory workshop with 'starting activities' (ice breakers) and 'information gathering and promoting discussion' through 'planning' to finish with 'evaluation and end games'.

Like any tool, the activities are only really effective if you know how and why to use one tool over another; you can bang a nail in with a screwdriver but it's not easy. Part 2: *Values, Practice and Issues to Consider*, emphasises the need for practitioners to have a strong value base and to plan rigorously. Adopting this approach opens you up to a "there are no rules for these tools" attitude. You are encouraged to adapt and improve the tools to suit the group or context as appropriate. I dislike cotton buds so I use butter beans instead!

The authors have clearly used the tools repeatedly and found them to be robust, reliable and easy to deliver. A trainee facilitator I spoke to felt very confident that he could read and present any tool without 'seeing' it done.

My favourite tool is *Opinion Finders*. I use it not just as suggested in the book but also as a qualitative monitoring and evaluation tool. As a participatory evaluator, I need to evidence the 'difference' an intervention, project or programme has made. By using *Opinion Finders* at the beginning and end of a process, it is very easy for a group to recognise if, and by how much, their attitude, behaviour, or understanding has changed. The tool contains a graded scale and a comments section. It shows the number of people who have changed their opinion and by how much (reveals the breadth of change - the quantitative stuff) and why they have changed their opinion (illustrates depth - the qualitative stuff).

I have seen this book used successfully in Swansea, Sierra Leone and Sri Lanka and recommend it to any educator, trainer, facilitator or group leader.

The Reviewer

Martha Harding is a facilitator based in Cardiff. She has extensive experience of participatory monitoring and evaluation, running training in the UK and overseas for Centre for Development Studies at Swansea University and more recently the British Council. She currently works with peer-led trainers, and is a board member of No Fit State Circus and Circus Eruption.