Many general and special education teachers ask questions like these when first considering using cooperative learning in their classrooms. They may ask privately: The strategy may come highly recommended and may be supported by research, all right—but have any of these researchers actually implemented it? Have they seen my classroom? This article explores these issues and more, presenting the personal experiences of one of the authors (see box), and provides guidelines and recommendations for other teachers dealing with the same dilemmas.

**Five Strides to Cooperation**

Based on our cooperative learning experiences, we made a list of strides teachers should consider to ease implementation of cooperative learning in their classrooms. Schools do have a responsibility for socializing students in the values of caring, sharing, and helping (Kagan, 1994). Why not use a socially intensive method, such as cooperative learning, to teach such critical values?

Burron, James, and Ambrosio (1993) perceived cooperative learning as a strategy to help students improve both intellectual and social skills. Many other researchers have found cooperative learning a valuable component of classroom learning (Blumenfeld, Marx, Soloway, & Krajcik, 1996; Gamson, 1994; Kohn, 1991; Webb, Troper, & Fall, 1995). Cooperative learning involves holding students accountable for their learning, as well as the learning of their group members (Johnson & Johnson, 1991, 1999; Kagan, 1990; Wood & Algozzine, 1997) and provides students with positive interdependence and individual accountability. Positive interdependence focuses on the group and fosters an attitude of *we* rather than *me*. Individual accountability focuses on the individual and fosters the feeling that

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This group is collaborating to make cookies.
each person is individually responsible and needed for contribution to the group project. Both skills are not only necessary, but also critical for social development.

Teachers play a critical role in developing conditions for cooperative learning (Mueller & Fleming, 2001). The following strides illustrate strategies for using cooperative learning while capitalizing on students’ progression of social skills.

Teach What You Preach
First, we must teach cooperative learning. Otherwise, students may not know how to appropriately engage in the cooperative learning process. The outcome will be chaotic if students are expected to complete a project as a group, if they never learned or acquired skills necessary to accomplish a task as group member.

You may find it helpful to develop a cooperative learning format (Figure 1). The format includes “what” the students will be required to do during cooperation, and “how” the teacher visualizes outcomes of a final project. Answering “When?” and “Where?” questions will allow you to forecast upcoming cooperative learning projects. These questions will also allow you to help the students better understand what it will take for projects to be successful. Remember, you need to target prerequisite behavioral/social skills for each student before the project’s engagement.

Accountability Counts
As stated previously, for cooperative learning to be successful, each group member must be accountable for contributing not only to project completion, but to a high-quality project. You may need to actually teach students lessons through the cooperative process (e.g., sharing, eye contact, conversations). The cooperative learning format I developed for my classroom became a scaffold for students who lacked social skills and empowered them with the ability to work with others.

Perhaps the hardest lesson I learned as a teacher was the art of monitoring students during cooperation. At first, I would jump into group discussions and make suggestions and even decisions for students who eventually would have made decisions for themselves. My intrusiveness often stifled any brainstorming that was taking place among group members. Eventually, I learned to “zip my lips.” My silence was rewarding as I grew accustomed to its potential to prevent group aggravation.

After a few years of teaching, I eventually left the classroom to complete my graduate studies. I am currently a professor of education at the college level, and I still use cooperative learning. I regularly immerse preservice teachers into cooperative/collaborative activities. I have found that using cooperative learning in higher education prepares preservice teachers for the implementation of the strategy in the classroom. Specifically, novice teachers will develop skills that will help them confront and overcome potential cooperative learning growing pains that may occur when they get their first classroom. In fact, some growing pains can be avoided entirely. Also, cooperative techniques better prepare preservice teachers for inclusionary practices, such as collaboration, before they begin teaching.

When looking back, I wonder how I found the courage to be a cooperative learning facilitator and what maintained my motivation. The answer? My students. Seeing their social and academic growth, I knew I was on to something good.

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My first year of teaching was successful. I will not mention the goriest details or my trials and tribulations as a novice teacher. I will conclude, however, that I completed my first year successfully. The first challenge I noticed, after receiving my caseload of individualized education programs (IEPs; which put me in overload), was the unexpected finding that all my students had IEP objectives documented in the area of social skills. This, of course, would mean I would have to teach socialization to my students, and I was not sure how I would make it happen.

I began my adventure by first learning to manage daily routines of teaching. After getting organized, I began to merge student-centered cooperative learning activities into daily lessons. Unfortunately, the students were not as enthusiastic as I anticipated about the group projects and activities presented to them. Of course, they had no previous cooperative learning experiences to make my efforts easier. But I was persistent, I pressed on, and I eventually became more comfortable, as did my students. I will not pretend that my cooperative learning growing pains or pangs were minimal. On the contrary, pangs were unavoidable as I embarked on my journey of trial and error.

Growing up, I remember my teachers’ contriving spontaneous group activities that were neither organized nor fair. A student who autonomously finished their first classroom. In fact, some growing pains can be avoided entirely. Also, cooperative techniques better prepare preservice teachers for inclusionary practices, such as collaboration, before they begin teaching.

When looking back, I wonder how I found the courage to be a cooperative learning facilitator and what maintained my motivation. The answer? My students. Seeing their social and academic growth, I knew I was on to something good.

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on “accountability.” For some students, this will seem like a big and scary word; but using your ingenuity and creativity, you can successfully help students master the concept of how to work in groups with accountability.

Mediation Versus Aggravation

Learn the art of monitoring—not controlling—students during cooperative learning. Observing, taking notes, facilitating, mediating, encouraging—all these activities let students own their learning and prevent a great deal of aggravation on your part. Learn to enjoy watching students grapple with difficult concepts and ideas as they learn on their own and from each other.

As you polish your facilitating skills and promote students’ growth, you will notice that academics, social interaction, and good teaching practices take place concurrently. Turn your observations and notes into anecdotal records that you can use later for instructional decisions (see Figure 2).

Publish or Perish

The cooperative process is not complete until students have published or presented their project. Once learners have made a commitment of effort, a celebration of hard work is inevitable. To celebrate “brain connections” that have been made and encourage lifelong learning, you must provide closure to your class. Publishing can take place in many forms, including presentations, projects or displays, bulletin boards, electronic slide shows with music, digital images, art projects, and so on. A sense of completion and reward grows from the cooperative process for all learners who have had the benefit of seeing the fruits of their labor.

To Create or Satiate

Finally, one should remember that students quickly bore from similar projects and activities heaped on them. For this reason, you need to consider a variety of projects and activities that will lead to higher-level learning outcomes. After

Integrating cooperative learning in all academic areas can foster higher-order thinking skills in your students.
students are familiar with working together and sharing ideas, coming up with different activities will be essential in maintaining high levels of motivation. Variety may, indeed, be key in avoiding redundancy and boredom.

**Evaluating Progress**

Once you have attempted cooperative learning in the classroom, you should begin to evaluate progress. Feedback from students is an essential part of evaluation.

**Student feedback can have a positive effect on future cooperative projects.**

Allow Student Feedback

Student feedback can have a positive effect on future cooperative projects. When you begin to understand students’ personal perspectives, you are more likely to design activities around students’ likes and dislikes. Taking advice from your students may, at first, be a painful event. You may not agree with their judgments. But good instructional leaders listen to their learners. How else will we find out what they need and how to make provisions for their instructional and social needs?

Peer evaluation can also help students evaluate their personal accountability and success. Students need positive experience in judging the quality of their work and work of their peers. They may find it helpful to complete peer evaluations (see Figure 3). Such rubrics can be developed quickly with students’ input.

Students need to recognize their personal strengths and weaknesses in the cooperative process. How can students improve socially if they never receive constructive criticism or praise regarding their cooperative efforts?

**Integration Into All Curricula**

Once you are familiar with cooperative learning strides, evolution is necessary. One way you can move forward is to plan cooperative learning across the curriculum. Integrating cooperative learning in all academic areas can foster higher-order thinking skills in your students.

We do not advocate teaching cooperative learning as an end unto itself. Rather, it needs to be a part of how you teach everything. Integrating content curricula with conceptual goals will naturally lead to the development of cooperative learning environments essential for both teacher and student. When students begin to see their success in the cooperative process and see how ideas and concepts relate, they will likely make curricular connections.

Specifically, cooperative learning activities that facilitate generalization and higher-order thinking skills lead students beyond what a traditional classroom might have offered. In fact, students with learning disabilities will gain a great deal from such experiences—they will not only attain higher levels of knowledge but will acquire greater social skills than in traditional settings.

**Final Thoughts**

Teaching cooperative learning is a process, and all good things take time. Cooperative learning has promise for the field of special education because students with disabilities need quality experiences grappling with academics in...
social settings. Although special education teaching practices tend to be governed by IEPs, we can still employ experiential learning strategies in the classroom. Cooperative learning is a good place to start.

References

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