

# Cooperative Learning: Seventeen Pros and Seventeen Cons plus Ten Tips for Success

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I am just a bit biased in favor of cooperative learning. So you might want to get a second opinion about the cons of cooperative learning. But, let's start with the seventeen pros. (By the way, research backing up these claims is summarized and referenced in my basic book, Cooperative Learning.)

## Seventeen Pros

- 1. Academic Achievement.** Over 500 research studies back the conclusion that cooperative learning produces gains across all content areas, all grade levels, and among all types of students including special needs, high achieving, gifted, urban, rural, and all ethnic and racial groups. In terms of consistency of positive outcomes cooperative learning remains the strongest researched educational innovation ever with regard to producing achievement gains.
- 2. Ethnic/Race Relations.** Not as many studies here, but the effect sizes are even greater and more consistent than with academic achievement. Heterogeneous cooperative teams are the single most effective tool we as educators and we as a nation have to transform race relations in positive ways. In classrooms without cooperative learning, there is increasing polarization along race lines over time; in classrooms with cooperative learning, there is increasing cross-race friendships and mutual understanding.
- 3. Self-Esteem.** Students in cooperative learning teams increase in feelings social and academic esteem. These increases in self-esteem are realistic as the students in fact do better academically and are accepted more by their peers.
- 4. Empathy.** Students in cooperative learning teams gain in ability to take the role of the other and to understand and empathize with the point of view and feelings of others.
- 5. Social Skills.** Cooperative learning increases a long list of social skills, including listening, taking turns, conflict resolution skills, leadership skills, and teamwork skills. Students coming from cooperative learning classrooms are more polite and considerate of others.
- 6. Social Relations.** Students in classrooms in which there is cooperative learning feel accepted, liked, and cared for. Again, these feelings are realistic as in fact cooperative learning results in more mutual acceptance and caring among students. They have more friends.
- 7. Class Climate.** Cooperative learning leads to increased liking for school, class, academic content, and the teacher.
- 8. Responsibility.** Cooperative learning is associated with enhanced internal sense of control; students feel more like origins than pawns. They take more initiative and feel more responsible for the outcomes they receive. They feel more effective. Their increased sense of efficacy is realistic because in cooperative learning they make more choices and have more input into what and how to study. What they do makes a difference.

**9. Diversity skills.** As a result of working in heterogeneous cooperative teams, students learn to understand and work with others who differ from themselves. These skills are essential for the 21st century as we are becoming more and more diverse.

**10. Higher Level Thinking Skills.** One of the main roads to higher level thinking is interaction with points of view different from one's own. Each of us carries his or her own set of information and way of interpreting that information. We tend to persist in our own way of thinking until we are challenged by interacting with someone with different information and/or a different way of interpreting the information. At that point we are pushed to higher level thinking. A higher level synthesis. Interaction in heterogeneous teams, therefore, creates higher level thinking.

**11. Individual Accountability.** In a traditional classroom a student can dream, knowing they will not be held accountable if only they don't raise their hand to be called on. In a cooperative learning team there is not the luxury to slip through the cracks. As we do a RoundRobin, for example, each student in turn is held accountable to make a contribution.

**12. Equal Participation.** Volunteer participation leads to some always raising their hands, and others volunteering seldom or never. In cooperative learning structures, there is not the luxury to slip through the cracks, making participation more equal. For example, in a Timed Pair Share each student has equal time to share.

**13. Increased Participation.** If we call on students one at a time, even if we said nothing, and transitions were done in no time, in a class of 30 it would take 30 minutes to give each student one minute to share his or her point of view. In pairs the same amount of participation can be accomplished in two minutes! Overall, therefore students in cooperative learning are engaged a far higher percent of the time.

**14. Social Orientation.** In the traditional classroom students see each other as an obstacle. They know there are a limited number of top grades, and the success of another decreases their own probability of success. In cooperative learning students know the success of a teammate (mastering the material, for example) will increase the probability of their own success. They begin to see others as someone to work with rather someone to beat.

**15. Learning Orientation.** Too often students in traditional classrooms do their assignments for a grade. In cooperative learning they more often do their work for the joy of working with others, accomplishing a challenging goal, and being of worth to their teammates and classmates.

**16. Self-Knowledge and Self-Realization.** Students in interaction with others learn about themselves. If I am dominant, shy, rude, or overly-helpful, I do not discover that until I interact with and get feedback from others. This self-knowledge leads to change and growth so I am more likely to realize my potential. Alone, in an important sense, we are stuck; in interaction we grow.

**17. Workplace Skills.** Students learn how to work in teams, preparing them for the interdependent team-based workplace of the 21st Century in which increased technology and complexity demands increasing use of interdependent teams.

## Seventeen Cons

It seems only fair that we come up with seventeen downsides to cooperative learning, if nothing else, to respect the need for symmetry. It turns out cooperative learning can go wrong in many ways. None of the following downsides have to happen. I and others have spent a good part of our lives designing methods to ensure they do not. For example, the largest chapter of my basic book on cooperative learning is on social skills. It deals with issues like what to do with difficult clients, the student who refuses to work with others, the rejected student, the hostile student, the shy student, and so on. The reason I devote so much attention to the social skills in my book is that students today have not been socialized like those of prior generations. Many do not come to school with basic politeness, caring about the needs and feelings of others, or the ability to control impulses. So, when we put students in groups, there is potential for all sorts of social interaction problems. Cooperative learning does not create the lack of social skills, it unmask it. There are six keys to successful cooperative learning:

1. How to form teams (Teams)
2. How to create the will among students to work together (Will)
3. How to manage the cooperative classroom (Manage)
4. How to foster social skills (Social Skills)
5. How to make sure there is Positive Interdependence, Individual Accountability, Equal Participation, and Simultaneous Interaction (PIES), and
6. How to structure the social interaction within groups to maximize different types of positive outcomes (Structures).

We say, "Teams Will Manage Social Skills and PIES through Structures." A teacher needs all six keys to avoid the cons of cooperative learning. Only the prepared teacher will be able to avoid the major pitfalls. All of the following pitfalls can be avoided, but when they are not, they constitute the cons of cooperative learning.

- 1. Lack of Social Skills.** Students who do not know how to work together. Without instruction and structuring students will put each other down, boss each other around, and fail to resolve basic task conflicts (the topic for the team project) and social conflicts (I hate Johnny and won't work with him).
- 2. Group Grades.** Team projects which have a group grade create resentments and are unfair. One student does most or all the work, the rest receive the grade.
- 3. Lack of Diversity Skills.** Once heterogeneous teams are formed the high achiever looks across the table at the lowest achiever in the class and says, loud enough for everyone to hear, "I don't want that dummy on my team." The lower achiever retaliates with "Nerds suck!"
- 4. Avoidance of Failure.** A student is afraid to appear dumb in front of his peers and masks the fear of failure by not participating, saying, "This [task] is stupid," or "Cooperative learning is dumb!"
- 5. Between Team Competition.** Only the best teams receive recognition or rewards. After not winning several times, some teams stop trying, finding it face-saving to say "We don't care." They don't admit they really want to win and cannot.
- 6. Within Class Tracking.** Tournaments are set up so the highest achievers go to the highest tournament table, and the lowest achievers go to the lowest tournament table. After a few times, those at the lowest tournament table realize they are the "dummy table" and drop in self-esteem.

**7. Complex Co-op Lessons.** Complex cooperative learning lessons are planned. They take so much time and effort that cooperative learning occurs only occasionally, and the benefits of cooperative learning are not reaped.

**8. Special Materials.** Cooperative learning methods are adopted which require special methods and materials. After the curriculum is adapted to the special methods, and materials are laboriously created, the teacher changes grade level or the curriculum focus is shifted, making the materials useless, so cooperative learning is dropped.

**9. No Parent Prep.** The teacher uses the "Guess the Fib" strategy without first explaining it to parents. When Susie comes home from school, her mother asks her what she did in class today. She responds, "Our teacher taught us how to lie!" Her mother is outraged.

**10. Stepping on Sensitive Toes.** A teacher uses a Line-Up on the pros and cons of abortion in an attempt to have students take a stance on a social issue and articulate their own point of view. A student goes home and reports he had to paraphrase the ideas of a pro abortion classmate. The anti-abortion parent is outraged, accusing the school of brainwashing his child.

**11. Dependency.** Students work almost exclusively in teams. They become dependent on their teammates and do not want to work alone.

**12. No Principal Prep.** A teacher is using the Same/Different strategy in her class. An uninformed principal peeks into the room and walks out saying, "I came to observe you teaching. I see you have the students playing games. I will come back later when you are teaching."

**13. Lack of Management Strategies.** A teacher fails to put a quiet signal in place and becomes exhausted attempting to control the attention of the students.

**14. Off Task Behavior.** Students are working on a math project in teams. One mentions a bit of hot gossip. The students get completely off task.

**15. No preparation with neighboring teacher.** The students are doing a Team Chant. They become very loud. The teacher next door peeks in and looks aghast, asking, "Have you completely lost control of your classroom?"

**16. No preparation with Community.** A radio broadcaster who has never seen real cooperative learning in action and who has not reviewed the research, loudly proclaims cooperative learning is the misguided attempt to have students who know very little about a topic teach others who know even less.

**17. Feeling Used; Being Used.** A parent of a high achieving student complains his son or daughter is being used, spending time teaching the dummies in the class, rather than learning critical curriculum.

Clearly cooperative learning is not for the timid. There is potential for any number of problems. To avoid those problems it is tempting to have the students sit in rows, not talk or interact with each other, and quietly take notes from a wise teacher. We can do that. We can choose to mask the fact that students do not have social skills. But then, when or how will they acquire the social interaction skills which will most predict their life success and enjoyment? If we are too afraid of the potential pitfalls of cooperative learning, we fail to reap the potential benefits.

Laurie's favorite T-shirt says "The Greatest Risk in Education is Not Taking One." Thankfully there is a strong community of researchers, theorists, and teachers who have worked hard for the last quarter of a century to minimize the risks.

There now exists a great deal of methodology which allows us to reap the benefits while avoiding the pitfalls. Can we obtain the pros without also the cons? Yes! Following some simple principles goes a long way toward allowing a relatively painless transition into the wonderful world of cooperative learning. Some of my favorites:

## Ten Tips for Success with Cooperative Learning

1. Never use group grades.
2. Inform and establish buy-in with parents, your principal, PTA, and community members before transforming your classroom.
3. Do not assume social skills from students; carefully structure for their acquisition.
4. Do not allow interaction which exceeds your management methodology.
5. Create the will to work together (via teambuilding and class building) before moving to academic tasks.
6. Begin with highly structured and brief cooperative tasks, move slowly to unstructured and longer projects.
7. When you are ready for academic tasks, begin with tasks which are well within the capacity of even the lowest achiever.
8. Do not allow unstructured interaction until students have acquired both the will and the skills to work together.
9. Don't try to reinvent the wheel: begin with proven, structured student interaction strategies.
10. Take it slow. Make it easy on yourself and your students. Learn one new strategy well before attempting the next new strategy.