

COOPERATIVE LEARNING*Students Learning With,
By, and For Each Other*

One of the major dilemmas all teachers face is how to engage every student in the learning process at the same time, without allowing one or a few to dominate the interaction and reduce the learning opportunities for others. Consider this scenario: Mrs. Prusak asks her fifth-grade class, "Who can show me three important things to do when you are throwing a ball?" Several students who have answers immediately raise their hands. Mrs. Prusak calls on Roberto, who says, "Make sure you step with your opposite foot," and he shows the rest of the class how to do that part of the throw. The teacher then calls on Mara, who says, "You need to follow through to your target," while she demonstrates the proper technique. Finally, Mrs. Prusak calls on Madison, who adds, "You should turn your opposite shoulder toward your target when you start, like this," as she also shows the other students the correct movement. Acknowledging all three as good answers, Mrs. Prusak continues to the next part of her task presentation. This is a very common scenario that could take place in almost any physical education lesson at any grade level. But, on a closer look, this approach to teaching raises a few important



questions. First, it becomes competitive because students who have answers raise their hands to get the teacher's attention and the chance to be "in the spotlight" for a moment. Second, when those students raise their hands, the other students are likely to stop trying to come up with answers of their own, in effect becoming passive learners for the moment. As a result, students who do not have an answer right away do not learn for themselves—they are actually taught by those students who do have answers. Third, this approach does not allow students to interact with each other, promoting a kind of isolation among them even while they are very close to each other. That is not to say this approach is bad—only that it contains some features that open the door to other possible ways to structure the learning environment. One such way is represented by the Cooperative Learning model, developed in the early 1970s and now used in many schools, at all grade levels, and for every subject area in the curriculum, including physical education.

Cooperative Learning is not really a model by itself. It encompasses a set of teaching strategies that share key attributes, the most important being the grouping of students into *learning teams* for set amounts of time or assignments, with the expectation that all students will contribute to the learning process and outcomes. Here the word *team* takes on the same meaning as it does in sport—all members work to achieve a common goal. In this model, that common goal is the completion of a learning task given to the team by the teacher. The task can require them to base their achievement on intra-group performance (trying to be the best team they can be), on inter-group performance (competing with other teams), or shared-group performance (learning content so that they can teach it to the rest of the class).

The Cooperative Learning model was developed and initially researched at Johns Hopkins University in the mid-1970s. Led by Robert Slavin, this development was first reported in a series of research and topical articles in educational journals. It is now one of the most recognized instructional models in education worldwide. Slavin's early label for the model was Student Team Learning (STL). Slavin (1983) stated that STL is based on three concepts: team rewards, individual accountability, and equal opportunities for success.

1. Team rewards. The main building block in STL is a task the teacher gives to each team (made up of 4 to 6 students). All teams can be working on the same task or different but related tasks. Either way, the teacher includes one or more stated performance criteria that teams must meet, along with the reward to be received by those teams who meet the standard. Rewards can be cumulative points, classroom privileges, public recognition, or grades.

2. Individual accountability. Another key part of the learning task is the specification that all team members' performance is included in the team score or

assessment. Therefore, all students must contribute to the team's effort, so it is important that all members learn and achieve to their fullest potential. This requirement leads to regular peer teaching within groups as higher-ability students interact with lower-ability students to enhance the whole team's performance. In turn, peer teaching becomes a large factor in the model's ability to promote high levels of social learning within teams.

3. Equal opportunities for success. The process of selecting student teams is critical in STL. The model calls for groups of 4 to 6 students who are as heterogeneous as possible and for all teams to be equal in their total performance abilities. Student learning teams should be established for a mixture of gender, skill levels, previous experience with the content, cognitive ability, and motivation. This diversity within teams promotes social learning outcomes within the model. Balancing teams on performance ability allows fair competition and increases student motivation. Once that balance is achieved, and with the stipulation that all team members' performances count, there is a greater likelihood that all students will have an equal chance to be successful and that each one's contribution will be valued by other team members.

As more techniques developed under these three main concepts, a more inclusive name was given to the model: Cooperative Learning (Slavin, 1983). The Cooperative Learning label is the one now used most often by Slavin and many other proponents worldwide, so it will be used in this book, even in reference to developments prior to 1983.

It is important to note the difference between Cooperative Learning (the model) and collaborative learning (various group-learning strategies). To live up to its name, the Cooperative Learning model stipulates that all three major design concepts must be present. The model also includes a finite number of recognized learning task structures that adhere to those concepts and have been validated by research. In addition, six procedural elements give the model much of its identity and uniqueness (Cuseo, 1992):

1. Intentional group formation
2. Continuity of group interaction
3. Interdependence among group members
4. Individual accountability
5. Explicit attention to the development of social skills
6. Instructor as facilitator

By contrast, collaborative learning techniques represent a much less formal and less enduring structure. They feature small groups that are together usually for only a short time, most often for reasons related to management, not to social and performance learning. Collaborative structures can be characterized as "students learning alongside or assisting one another," while cooperative techniques can be characterized as "students learning with, by, and for each other."

