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**COOPERATIVE AND COLLABORATIVE
LEARNING WORKSHOP**

***Kevin Galvin***
East Los Angeles Community College

I would like to summarize very briefly my recent presentation, Cooperative and Collaborative Learning, which was a part of the APA/AAPT Workshop on Teaching Philosophy at the 1996 Central Division meeting. This ninety-minute workshop provided the participants with a hands-on experience of cooperative/collaborative learning, which is intended to encourage students to take more responsibility for what they learn. First let me sketch what Cooperative and Collaborative Learning is, and how it is applied in my own classes in philosophy.

**Cooperative/ Collaborative Learning**

Cooperative/ collaborative learning projects involve students working together in small groups on some well defined task. A group goal or reward is provided so that students must work together to succeed as a group. Group success depends on the individual learning of each group member, not on a single group project. The main difference between the two procedures relates to the manner of assessment peculiar to each. In cooperative situations, students are assessed individually, while in collaborative work, the group is assessed as a whole. With either strategy, members of each student team are selected to reflect the overall social composition of the class, and the level of achievement and the sex of the students. Although learning methods peculiar to each format differ, we can distinguish these general features:

Cooperative Learning: Students are assessed individually within the course. Oftentimes some percentage of the overall grade reflects the individual student’s participation in group projects. Since most instructors can easily include group work and team projects within an established course without much disruption to the syllabus, cooperative learning strategies are the more frequently used form of small group or team process. In my philosophy classroom, a cooperative project will typically involve presenting Utilitarian moral theory, and then having students work in teams to apply the concept to several specific moral conundrums. Alternatively, I might ‘jigsaw’ an assigned reading. A selection from J.S. Mill on utilitarianism, for example is subdivided into several sections, which furnish the pieces of the jigsaw. Each team is assigned a specific section and asked to summarize the author’s argument, to clarify meanings where appropriate, and to provide an overall evaluation of the author’s reasons and arguments for his position. As each team reports its results to the class, the pieces of the jigsaw are reassembled.

Collaborative Learning: In a collaborative learning environment, individual performance is de-emphasized, while teamwork is promoted. Groups plan learning activities together, divide tasks among themselves, carry out their action plans, and present a completed project, display or report to the class, and are graded on their work as a team. For example, in my course in critical thinking, students were required to turn in a project that showed that they understood both causal and analogical arguments. They were expect ed to find examples of these arguments in newspapers, television, and other textbooks, and to devise a project demonstrating their ability to analyze the arguments using the criteria we had developed in class. They were free to work individually or as teams, and were encouraged to meet with me to review their projects in progress so that they might receive advice about revisions of various sorts. To my surprise, all students chose to work in teams, and the overall quality of the projects was much higher than previous individual projects in similar courses.

**The Workshop**

I organized the workshop around six processes that are basic to my involvement with cooperative/collaborative learning:

(1) Responsibility for learning/teacher as coach;

(2) Strategies that take account of different learning styles;

(3) Group work outside class;

(4) Authentic assessment, beyond paper and pencil tests;

(5) Revised/ revisited work;

(6) Increased student participation.

**Workshop Strategy**

After a brief discussion of the first issue, the participants were divided into small groups. The remainder of the workshop involved alternating small group work with periodic general sessions. For each of the above processes, workshop participants were asked how they might revise their existing courses to increase the amount of time and effort that students are engaged in them, that is, how could they revise their courses so that their students take more responsibility for learning philosophy? Participants shared with each other how they were engaging students in these practices at present in their classes, and thereafter planned changes in their courses that would increase and improve their skills as cooperative/collaborative teachers at their home campuses. During the general sessions that followed each small group session, teams reported on their progress. So as to provide participants with an understanding of some of the most common group reporting strategies, which is a fundamental requirement of good c/c learning, I arranged for the groups to model different reporting mechanisms:

(1) using a spokesperson for the group;

(2) creating overhead transparencies;

(3) brainstorming during the general session;

(4) posting butcher paper from each group using an envoy from one group to travel to another group

(5) putting group reports on a blackboard.

**Brief Description of the Workshop**

The session passed very quickly, and the general atmosphere was collegial and relaxed. Participants were surprised at how much fun we had, and how competitive we became, when we were given a roll of butcher paper or an empty transparency to play with as part of their group activity. The participants included teachers who had no previous experience with cooperative/ collaborative learning, and others who were using these or similar strategies frequently. The groups were able to address four of the six issues above, and at the end of the brief session, plans were made to continue sharing ideas and course materials after we returned to our campuses.

Some instructors are discouraged from using collaborative learning strategies because of the problems inherent in attempting to assess group projects fairly. While a thorough discussion of these issues is better off left to a future article, I have encountered some distinct advantages to this approach. First, although in general collaborative projects are similar to the types of projects that I previously assigned to individual students, I often find that I can hold teams to higher standards then individual students. For example, it would be unusual for a team project to leave out key steps in completing a rubric, or to include frequent misspellings or grammatical errors that were so severe that the meaning of the passage was unclear, whereas I might encounter these problems in individual student work. Secondly, I find that my students often assist me in developing evaluation criteria. In the critical thinking class, for example, my students suggested that the length of the project should be proportional to the number of team members-a student working alone would not be required to turn in as large a project as a team of four or five students. Having helped in devising the assessment procedure, they tend to take it more seriously, and to be comfortable with the outcome. And, lastly, as a practical matter, one very real advantage of collaborative work for me is that with fewer projects to assess, I can spend more time in progress and at completion meeting with each group to share with them the strengths and weaknesses of their project. Arranging repeated and regular conferences for six groups per class is manageable; doing the same for thirty individuals, in my experience, is not.

**Benefits of Cooperative and Collaborative Learning**:

Cooperative/ collaborative learning methods increase student achievement. With these strategies, students encourage one another to do their best, and help one another to learn. Low achievers contribute and experience success in academic work, while bright students develop and extend their understanding of concepts by explaining them to others. Discussions foster critical thinking about and improved understanding of both course content and the learning process. As an additional benefit, students learn the valuable skill of cooperating with others to achieve a common goal. Small groups and the multicultural classroom: Research has shown that women, and also marginalized, disadvantaged, and minority students, perform better in collaborative and cooperative learning situations. My own experience confirms this generalization I teach at East Los Angeles Community College, an inner city minority institution serving a poor barrio. The majority of our students are Hispanic (approximately 70%) and Asian (approximately 30%). Our major feeder high schools have some of the highest drop-out rates in the country and nearly 25% of our students have not graduated from high school. Many of our students are recent immigrants; most are first-generation college students with little understanding of the culture of higher education.

I would be interested in communicating with anyone interested in cooperative/ collaborative strategies in philosophy. I can be contacted at: galvinkg@laccd.cc.ca.us or at the Philosophy Department, East Los Angeles College, 1301 Avenida Cesar Havez, Monterey Park, CA 91754, or phone (213 ) 265-8774 or visit our home page: <http://www.lafn.org/education/elac/philosophy.htm>