

Collaborating to Create Future Societies with Young Learners

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Frequently the words “cooperation” and “collaboration” are used interchangeably; both words mean to develop relationships or to form associations by helping and supporting one another through organized teamwork and partnerships. Many elementary school teachers emphasize the word “cooperation” to encourage their young learners to get along nicely with one another in social and academic settings. Teachers also like to employ cooperative learning strategies, especially during social studies, so their learners experience working in groups, exchanging ideas, taking responsibility, and producing outcomes that are shared with others.¹ Many educators who have studied cooperative learning report that it expands the learning and better prepares young learners for group activities found in high school, college, professions, and life.²

Although both cooperation and collaboration feature working in groups to produce outcomes, we would like to make a distinction between the two terms. Learners organized into cooperative learning groups tend to be more closely directed and managed by the teacher. In cooperative learning, the teacher establishes specific guidelines and detailed operating procedures based on one set of expectations that frame the process and anticipated results, i.e., criteria, materials, timelines, and so forth. In general, all cooperative learning groups function the same way and generate similar outcomes or separate pieces of an overall cohesive product. Teachers readily assess the learning with a teacher-made tool developed by aligning goals and objectives with procedures and outcomes.

In contrast, collaborative learning offers the following seven distinct features that also serve as guidelines for implementation:

1. Give only tentative expectations. After identifying the goals and objectives, the teacher drafts only temporary or short-term expectations to guide the overall process.
2. Co-establish reasonable parameters. Teacher and learners together establish reasonable and realistic parameters for what work will be done and what the outcome will be. Both the teacher and learners know that these parameters can (and most likely will) be revisited and revised during the activity. The expectations tend to develop and change throughout the activity to better meet the needs and interests of the teacher and the learners as the result of events that evolve and discoveries that are made along the way.
3. Allow more freedom and creativity. Less restrained guidelines and procedures give learners more freedom and promote more creativity. (The teacher does not direct and manage the learning as closely as in cooperative learning.)
4. Allow assorted conclusions. Groups function in various ways and produce assorted conclusions—both planned and unplanned. Collaboration features a different-but-equal status among the participants and their outcomes or products (whereas cooperation promotes collective tasks and common outcomes).³
5. Vary group membership, responsibilities, and productivity. Groups vary in size of membership, distribution of responsibilities, and construction of products, much as groups of people operate within the socio-cultural context of real life.⁴
6. Share outcomes in ways that the groups select for themselves. The teacher and learners decide what is expected of the products to be considered successful.
7. Co-develop assessment tools and processes. Teachers and learners develop an assessment tool and participate in the assessment process together, albeit parts of the assessment tool may be teacher-made or vary according to the group’s expectations and products.

Like cooperative learning, collaborative learning groups share their outcomes or products with one another, although

learners using collaboration usually demonstrate or perform outcomes in a multitude of self-selected, self-directed formats. Authentic collaboration also prepares young learners for future learning, working, and living although the emphasis is more on valuing differences than achieving similarities.⁵

Introducing Collaborative Learning

Most teachers are unfamiliar with authentic collaboration. We found an experienced fifth-grade teacher who was willing to try this strategy, comfortable with constructivism as a theory of learning, and eager to create a diverse community of thinkers.⁶ The fifth-graders in this particular classroom had participated in many well-developed cooperative learning groups in all subject areas. The teacher was interested in introducing a different strategy to promote effective teaching and learning to increase learner engagement and enthusiasm in social studies. She was curious about a process that could expand her learners' critical thinking, decision-making, and problem-solving abilities in ways that they had never experienced in her classroom.

During the first half of the school year, the fifth-grade class studied the fifty states, and during the second half they studied cities and countries around the world. Traditionally, the teacher liked to conclude the year with a social studies project in which her fifth-grade students worked in cooperative learning groups to “design their own societies.” This project integrated all of the social studies strands, especially **VI POWER, AUTHORITY, AND GOVERNANCE**; **VII PRODUCTION, DISTRIBUTION, AND CONSUMPTION**; and **VIII SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY, AND SOCIETY**.⁷ The teacher welcomed the opportunity to teach her annual project integrating standards, concepts, and practices from across the social studies curriculum while incorporating more learner responsibility and ingenuity.

The first step involved guiding the teacher in rethinking and redeveloping

Figure 1. General Characteristics of Societies

(in alphabetical order)

arts, buildings, cleanliness, clothing, communication, community, cooking, customs, child care, domestic animals, economics, education, entertainment, family, fashion, folklore, food-growing, food-stores, fuel, geography, government, habits, happiness, health, histories, hobbies, houses, humanity, gifts, jokes, labor, language, law, luck, manners, meals, money, peace, personal space, physical fitness, recreation, relations with other societies, religion, responsibilities, rights, safety, senior citizens, social organizations, sports, stores, symbols, technology, time, tools, transportation, visiting, waste, weather, welfare, work

the project using genuine collaboration by comparing and contrasting the two strategies, cooperation and collaboration. For this fifth-grade teacher, the significant differences were:

- reframing the project to allow for a wider range of project outcomes rather than designing a society set in a contemporary context fulfilling probabilities. Students could explore more imaginative possibilities for future societies;
- crafting instruction for learners to comprehend the concepts and practices of collaboration quickly and easily; and
- viewing the teaching/learning processes as a shared enterprise engaging the teacher and learners together from start to finish.

Beginning the Collaboration Process

This project began with the teacher selecting several pieces of children's literature to include in a “Library about Future Societies:” (1) *Weslandia* by Sid Fleishman; (2) *In the Next Three Seconds...* by Rowland Morgan; (3) a selection of books by Isaac Asimov, David Louis, and Douglas Smith; (4) *Feathers and Fools* by Mem Fox; and (5) *City of Ember* and *People of Sparks* by Jeanne DuPrau.

On the first day, the teacher read aloud *Weslandia* and led a class discussion brainstorming the characteristics of a contemporary society. Each learner was given five sticky notes and asked to write one characteristic of a society on

each sticky note. Then learners placed their sticky notes on a word wall labeled “Characteristics of Societies” where the teacher had drawn swirling clouds to represent the unknown possibilities. The teacher added a few of her own words on sticky notes, and then grouped similar characteristics together. As the discussion progressed, the teacher asked one of the learners to read the words aloud to the class. The learners brainstormed, posted, and shared more characteristics of a society until the teacher decided that an adequately large number of assorted characteristics had been identified and posted (Figure 1).

Highlighting the Features of Collaboration

The teacher announced that the fifth-graders would be working in groups creating their own future societies as shown on large murals. Students could illustrate some of the characteristics of such a society (now listed on the board) in their murals.

The teacher encouraged students to use a variety of methods and materials (See item 1 on page 13: tentative expectations). The teacher explained that she and the learners together would be determining how to complete their projects. She emphasized that all groups would be creative in their own self-directed ways (item 2: co-established reasonable and realistic parameters). The murals of their societies would be similar to the illustrated characteristics found in *Weslandia*, but each of their created societies could, and should, be unique from all the other societies

(3: freedom and creativity) with various final products demonstrating their knowledge and skills (4: assorted conclusions).

The teacher continued to explain to the fifth-graders that they would be forming groups and functioning differently than they usually had functioned in the past (5: varying membership, responsibilities, and productivity). Groups would be sharing their products, but exactly how each group decided to do this would be unique (6: self-selected formats for sharing outcomes). The teacher and learners decided what was expected of the products to be considered successful (7: co-developed assessment tool and process).

The teacher referred to a previous project that the learners recently completed while working in cooperative learning groups. This time, however, they would build on their cooperative group experiences and work in collaborative learning groups. The teacher showed her learners the assessment rubric for this project (Figure 2):

Modeling Features of Collaboration

The teacher began modeling the features of collaboration with her learners by asking them to think about the assignment and the specific learners with whom they could work to accomplish the goals and objectives. She urged the learners to select group members who would work well together and could add different ideas to each group's unique product. The teacher reminded the learners that groups needed to have at least two members but could have more members if desired. Then, learners were invited to move around the classroom and form groups.

The 28 fifth-graders in this class formed two groups of 3 students, three groups of 4, and two groups of 5. No one wanted to work in a group of just 2 learners; students said there would be too much work to accomplish individually, and no one wanted to work in a group of more than 5 learners, as this size seemed unmanageable. The learners were fully

Figure 2. Future Societies Project Assessment Rubric

(Each item can be marked Exceptional, Proficient, or Insufficient)

1. Each learner will listen carefully to the literature.
2. Each learner will contribute to brainstorming characteristics of a society.
3. Each group will select 10 characteristics of a future society.
4. Each characteristic will be described in a long paragraph (typed and mounted on a card).
5. Each characteristic will be communicated artistically with all 10 characteristics combined in one large display.
6. Each group member will be involved in the selection of the characteristics and planning of the project.
7. Each group member will be equally responsible for the development of the paragraphs and artistic displays.
8. Each group member will be equally responsible for sharing the paragraphs and artistic displays.
9. Each group member will listen carefully as other group members share their products with the class.
10. Each group member will help construct the assessment tool and complete a self-assessment at the conclusion of this project.

capable of making these decisions independently.

Next, the teacher asked the learners to help design the specifics of the assignment. She reassured the learners that she was open to their ideas and suggestions, and she had some of her own ideas to share too. These words modeled her understanding and dedication to collaborative participation. The fifth-graders and their teacher agreed that they could complete their projects within 10 days with 45 minutes each afternoon dedicated to social studies. Five days during the third week would be dedicated to sharing their products with one another and assessing both the process and products, according to suggested guidelines and the assessment rubric (Figure 2).

Implementing the Collaboration

During the following ten days, the teacher read aloud and discussed *In the Next Three Seconds* and *Feathers and Fools*; she shared the books by Asimov, Louis, and Smith among the many resources for these learners to use while creating their future societies. The teacher also read aloud *City of Ember* and, later, *People of Sparks*. As the teacher and learners engaged in discussing these books, students made connections between the story lines

and both the concepts of collaborative learning and the creation of their murals showing future societies.

Ultimately, the fifth-graders created a wall mural divided into seven sections, one section per collaborative learning group. Each group's section of the mural included ten characteristics of their society illustrated artistically in a variety of formats ranging from separate pictures to free-flowing collages. Each mural was unique although many of them included the same characteristics of a society, such as aspects of food production and consumption, shelter, and transportation. Murals were created using combinations of water colors, tempera, finger paints, crayons, colored chalk, markers, cut-outs, pop-outs, and three-dimensional multi-media artifacts glued onto the mural.

Identifying Benefits

Introducing collaborative learning strategies required the teacher to advance her understanding, application, and appreciation of new pedagogical content knowledge.⁸ First, she ascertained that she needed information and guidance related to the concept and practices of collaborative learning for planning and assessment;⁹ then, she realized she needed mentoring to engineer and put

Children's Literature



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Jeanne DuPrau, *City of Ember*. USA: Random House, 2005.

Jeanne DuPrau, *People of Sparks*. USA: Random House, 2004.

Paul Fleischman, *Weslandia*. Cambridge, MA: Candlewick Press, 1999.

Mem Fox, *Feathers and Fur*. New York, NY: Harcourt, 1997.

David Louis, *2,201 Fascinating Facts*. Gramercy Books, Greenwich, CN: 1988.

Rowland Morgan, *In the Next Three Seconds*. UK: Hamlyn, 1999.

Douglas B. Smith, *Ever Wonder Why?* New York, NY: Fawcett Gold Medal, 1992.

the pieces together that made sense to her and her learners.¹⁰ As the learners' processes and projects evolved, the teacher discovered that she was learning as much from her learners as they were learning not only from her but, more so, from themselves and one another.

Learning to collaborate authentically established reciprocal relationships that brought benefits to both the teacher and her young learners.¹¹ The benefits exceeded the teacher's anticipated scope of the project and offer insights for other elementary social studies teachers and their learners who may not have had experience with cooperative learning groups. These benefits unique to collaboration include:

- Building upon differences and valuing diversity;
- Depending upon a culture of trust and mutual respect;
- Capitalizing upon integrated and non-linear experiences;
- Expanding decision-making and problem-solving;
- Advancing critical thinking and risk-taking;
- Increasing networking and accountability; and
- Developing confidence and entrepreneurialism.¹²

Collaborative learning strategies equip teachers to transform traditional projects and teaching approaches into powerful teaching, learning, and schooling reflective of, and necessary for, successful learning and living. 🌐

Notes

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