

# Cooperative Learning in the Time of C3

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*Nothing is so practical as a good theory.*  
—Kurt Lewin

With this quote, former NCSS president Robert Stahl and co-author Ronald VanSickle began their NCSS bulletin, *Cooperative Learning in the Social Studies Classroom*, published in 1992.<sup>1</sup> This bulletin became important in my professional journey as a teacher.

But how does a quotation from a twentieth-century social psychologist apply to social studies today? It applies because Lewin paved a new path in the 1920s and 30s researching group dynamics, which his student Morton Duetsch extended with theories on the types of interdependence. By the 1970s and 80s, these ideas had become the theoretical foundations of cooperative learning.<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps a new teacher might still wonder, “Okay, where is the relevance?” The relevance is that the principles and structures of cooperative learning hold particular importance to social studies teachers today. Though its principles and structures were developed decades ago, cooperative learning can play an essential role in our teaching. In the time of the C3 Framework, with its emphasis on inquiry, disciplinary concepts, and civic skills,<sup>3</sup> cooperative learning principles and strategies can improve our students’ learning and help us create a civic space within our classrooms.

## Cooperative Learning Models: My Introduction

In my teaching career, I studied and adapted the work of cooperative learning “gurus” Roger and David Johnson, Robert Slavin, Spencer Kagan, and Elizabeth Cohen. The ideas gleaned from these individuals informed the instructional methods throughout my career.

David and Roger Johnson created a cooperative learning model often referred to as *learning together*. In their model, student learning could be maximized by creating structured small group experiences in lessons. Slavin’s approach, known as *Student Team Learning*, developed lesson formats to use for specific learning situations (such as reviewing content material).<sup>4</sup> Kagan created the *Structural Approach* to cooperative learning in which teachers incorporate a variety of teacher tools,

called structures, into their instructional repertoires.<sup>5</sup>

Another cooperative learning influence was the *Complex Instruction* model of the late Elizabeth Cohen and Rachel Lotan from Stanford University.<sup>6</sup> This model approached cooperative learning from the perspective of an educational sociologist. Cohen felt that existing status problems within groups could lead to “higher-status” students dominating the work and thus gaining the most benefit. With her cooperative learning methods, teachers pay particular attention to unequal participation of students and employ strategies, such as verbally assigning competence to quiet or “lower-status” students, as groups work on a task. A teacher observes and makes statements that point out the important contributions of reticent students in group work in a manner that both the student and the classmates hear. Assigning competence leverages the power of the teacher as the authority figure, and when the teacher publicly commends the contributions of reserved students, it carries weight with both that student and others around them.

## Using Cooperative Learning Principles and Structures

Although the cooperative learning models vary, their principles are similar. These principles differentiate cooperative learning from simply putting students into groups and hoping for the desired outcomes.

1. **Positive Interdependence:** This principle holds that there must be a group goal, and that this goal involves students helping each other learn. As Stahl and VanSickle wrote: “Students are expected to work as groups and not merely in groups. They are to work with one another as a team of learners and as full partners in each other’s learning efforts and success.”<sup>7</sup>
2. **Individual Accountability:** Even though students are working within a group, they are responsible for their own learning. Student learn-

ing is enhanced through the group process, but the learning is assessed individually. When I discussed grading with students, I often referred to a poster I had up that simply said “Learn Together. Perform Alone.”

3. **Face-to-Face Equal Interaction:** The activity of a cooperative learning group is structured so that participation among students is face-to-face, promotive, and as equal as possible. This simple principle is critical because students learn by participating in the collaborative interactions that take place.
4. **Teaching Interpersonal, Discussion, and Small Group Skills:** Students can be taught the skills necessary to discuss and work together. By learning to participate in thoughtful discussions, cooperative groups can become the “training ground” for the type of worthwhile thorough discussions that are so important to the social studies classroom and a significant part of our students’ growth; paraphrasing, responding to the ideas of others, building on or challenging ideas, synthesizing ideas, etc.<sup>8</sup>

Taken together, these principles, along with the cooperative structures below, used in our teaching can engage students in the collaboration and civic spaces that the C3 Framework envisions.

The cooperative structures from the aforementioned Kagan model are quick, elegant, and incorporate interaction and cooperative learning into every social studies lesson. These are a few that I frequently used in my teaching:

#### ***\*Numbered Heads Together***

During the lesson, the teacher stops to ask questions. Instead of having students raise their hands and compete against one another to answer, all students interact to process the learning. Using this structure ensures that all students are engaged in producing language, listening, and processing. There are four simple steps: (1) Students in small groups number off; (2) The teacher poses an open-ended question; (3) Students discuss the question in their group and come to an understanding; (4) A number is called and students of that number stand and briefly each explain their group’s consensus answer.

#### ***\*Sharing pairs***

This concept of having students pair up and briefly process information on a topic, answer a question, and/or engage in pair reading is an instructional structure that is familiar. This type of immediate processing allows students to explain their ideas and hear the ideas of another student. When students process in pairs, both are talking about their ideas

and listening to their partner’s. It is active, clarifying, puts ideas into kid language, and adds energy to any activity.

Some of the various Kagan pairing strategies include ***Think—Pair—Share*** (students are asked a question, are given think time, and then pair up to discuss their answers), ***Rotating Pairs*** (having pairs share and then rotate partners in order to have sharing with many students), ***Mix—Pair—Share*** (the students get up and mill about the classroom/open area until the teacher tells them to pair), and ***Think—Write—Pair—Share***. A sharing pair structure that my students particularly enjoyed was ***Timed—Pair—Share***, in which each student has a certain amount of time to share ideas, say 45 seconds.

#### ***\*Roundrobin/Roundtable***

In a small group, students take turns either generating ideas, giving their responses to a teacher question, or explaining their individual answers to a question. The sharing literally goes “around the table.” This is a quick and efficient way to bring about simultaneous interaction over any idea being taught.

As I progressed in my teaching career, I found that combining the principles, structures, and concepts of cooperative learning in my teaching enhanced my students’ interpersonal, collaboration, and discussion skills, engaged them in interacting and thinking through the curriculum, and nurtured civic spaces within the classroom.

Using cooperative learning principles and structures can enhance social studies lessons and the strategies used in those lessons. The remaining section will examine how the use of cooperative learning principles can improve the use of two familiar social studies teaching strategies: (1) document-based questions (DBQs) and (2) classroom discussions.

### **Incorporating Cooperative Learning into Social Studies Teaching**

#### ***\*DBQ Learning Stations***

The middle school in which I taught was divided into houses and, in every house, each core classroom opened into a large open area. This open area accommodated lockers, but was also a large enough area to spread small groups out. My classes spent a lot of time in this open area, and one of the activities that we used was DBQ Learning Stations.

DBQs, *document-based questions*, were originally short essay questions on Advanced Placement exams in which students worked off of teacher-provided sources (often primary). The concept has grown and DBQ is now a well known teaching strategy with excellent curricular materials available commercially or online.

Using group learning stations and adding cooperative structures and principles with the document-based question is an

excellent match. Applying disciplinary concepts and tools is the second dimension of the C3 inquiry arc. Incorporating cooperative learning principles and structure into a DBQ activity enables our students to dig more deeply into the tools underlying the discipline that we teach. For example, I taught history for much of my career and the concepts and tools of history would include sourcing documents, finding evidence and asking questions of that evidence, understanding context, and developing (and defending) interpretations.<sup>9</sup>

In my history classes, after dividing up the content I planned to teach into six or seven stations, I chose the materials for my students. The materials included primary source quotes, often adapted to be kid-friendly,<sup>10</sup> charts, maps, statements by historians, and images. I put these into Word documents (or Google Docs) and created a task sheet for each station.<sup>11</sup>



I used a poster-making copier to enlarge task sheets created in Microsoft Word and placed these poster-sized sheets at each learning station.

At each station, students dug deeply into the material while developing their answers to several questions at the station. For

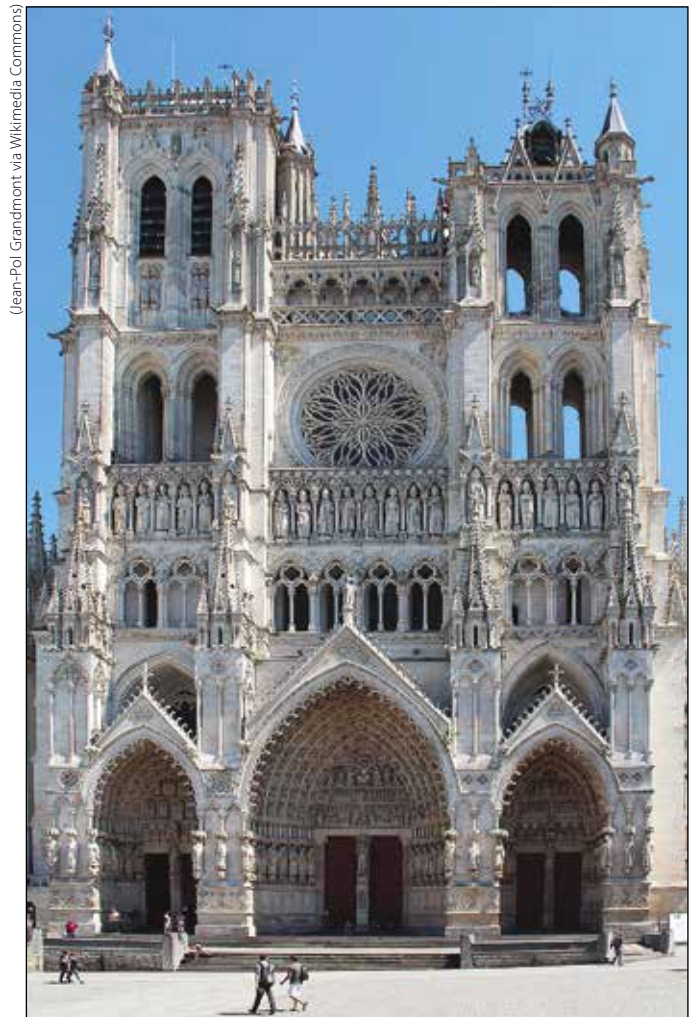
instance, one DBQ Learning Station lesson involved the people and culture of medieval Europe. At one of the stations in this DBQ, students explored medieval cathedrals by viewing images of two cathedrals, the floor plans of these cathedrals, the beginning and ending date of their construction, and by discussing several open-ended questions as they considered what these awe-inspiring structures might tell us about the people of medieval Europe (see p. 278). Additionally, the task sheets invited students to pose any questions they might have about the cathedrals.

The task at each station provided positive interdependence and group interaction. Following the completion of the stations, we would discuss the inferences using the *numbered heads together* structure. Finally, the principle of individual accountability was incorporated via an individual essay in which students explained their answers to the overall question by synthesizing information from the sources provided.

Learning stations are engaging, collaborative, and allow students to tackle the sources, ideas, and the tools of the discipline in “chunks.” Physical movement adds to the energy. Combining DBQ’s with the principles and structures of cooperative learning zips up the thinking, the interaction, and the energy level.

#### \*Classroom Conversations

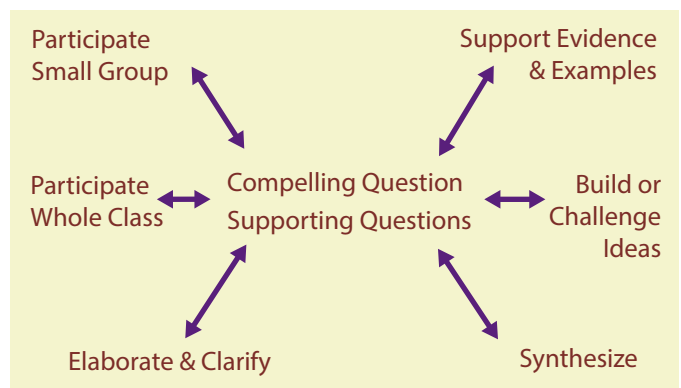
To state that classroom discussions often fail to engage students in meaningful conversations is not controversial. Much instruction does not involve discussions at all, but rather consists of a “closed question-response-closed question-response” format. An in-depth exchange of ideas in the classroom requires thoughtful



The Roman Catholic Basilique Cathédrale Notre-Dame d'Amiens, or Amiens, in Picardy, France, was built between 1220 and c.1270. The architecture represents the classic High Gothic style.

preparation. Utilizing the principles and structures of cooperative learning can transform discussions to cooperative classroom conversations (I would use the word “conversation” knowing my students may have experienced closed “discussions”).

Using cooperative learning tools and structures, along with the necessary careful planning and questioning, can bring discussions to a deeper level—to the level of an authentic classroom conversation.



View of York Minster, the Cathedral and Metropolitan Church of Saint Peter in York, England. The Gothic style cathedral took several centuries to construct and was completed in 1472.



The importance of good classroom conversation in social studies is a goal to which we should all aspire. Today, in an atmosphere of cultural and linguistic diversity, this is more important than ever. Prior to participating in large group conversations, the practice students have had in small cooperative groups helps them become comfortable speaking, learn how to respond to others, really listen, and build on ideas. In this way, students develop the discussion and response skills important not only for large group classroom discussions, but for civic competence. Small group cooperative work also gives the teacher a gateway for assigning competence to “lower status” students.

The use of cooperative learning principles and structures can create a classroom atmosphere conducive to in-depth classroom conversations. In addition to the atmosphere, I’ve found conversations must be planned and carried out with the following precepts in mind:

1. *Develop open-ended questions, as well as several supporting questions to guide the conversation.*

The social studies teachers in the middle school in which I taught used the C3 Inquiry Design

Model (IDM) for the development of our units.<sup>12</sup> Using this model, our seventh-grade Professional Learning Community (our PLC consisted of the four social studies teachers in grade seven, one per “house”) developed open-ended “compelling questions” to begin each unit and these became excellent guiding questions for the end-of-unit conversation in my classroom.

Because each unit was an inquiry to find possible answers to the question, by the end of the unit, the students were prepared for a conversation based on that question. Using the IDM model, our PLC also developed “supporting questions” for each unit, and, in my class, we used these for additional questions during our classroom conversations.

2. *Incorporate the use of “uptake questions” in the conversation.*

Uptake questions are those in which “teachers ask students questions about what they and other students said.”<sup>13</sup> By emphasizing the cooperative learning principle of interpersonal and discussion

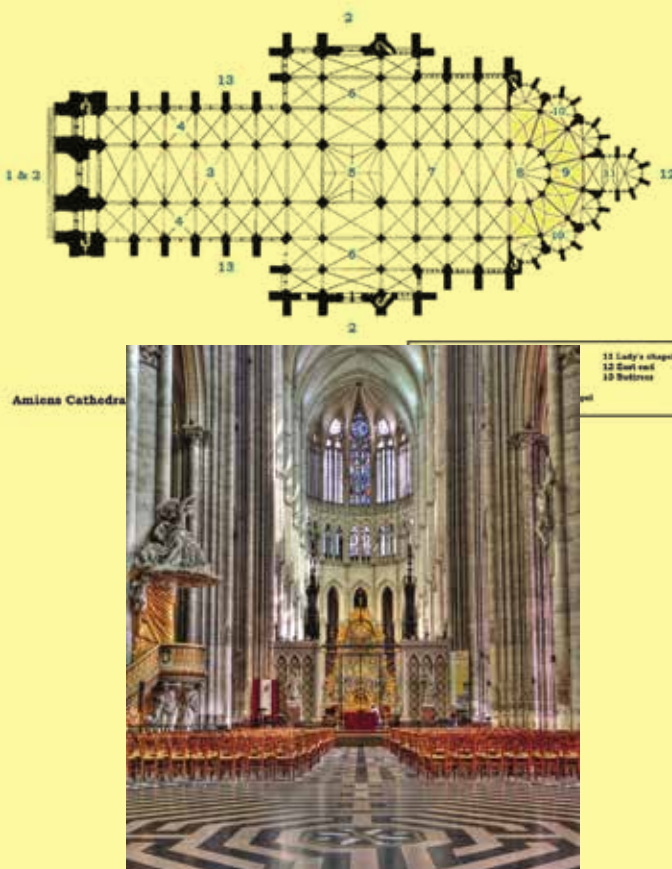
# Medieval Cathedrals

Taking hundreds of years to build, the medieval cathedrals inspire wonder. In a time without large cranes and equipment, these enormous cathedrals were obviously dangerous to build, which may tell us much about people in Middle Ages.

Look over the info sheets on York Minster Cathedral and Amiens, and find additional information on these two cathedrals. As you look at the images and read about York and Amiens, discuss and following questions. Justify your answers.

- What can the floor plan and images tell you about the feeling of people in the Middle Ages toward these massive cathedrals?
- Being that they are similar in size, what might account for the huge difference in time it took to build York as compared to Amiens?
- Do these cathedrals tell you anything about the people of the Middle Ages? What and why?
- What additional questions about cathedrals do you have?

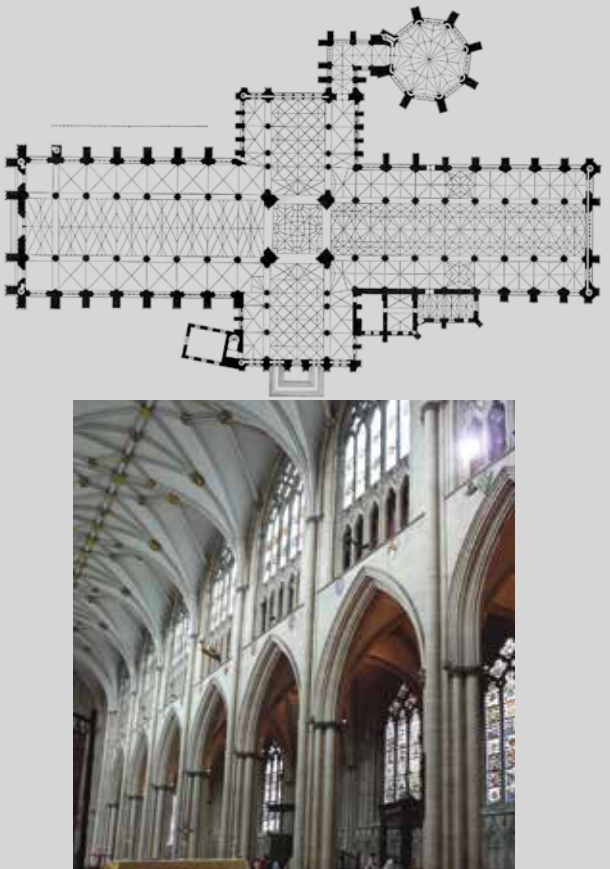
Info Sheet A



The floor plan of Amiens Cathedral is shown on a yellow background. It features a long nave with a central aisle and side aisles, a large choir, and a prominent rose window at the west end. The interior photograph shows the high nave with flying buttresses, a large rose window, and a checkered floor.

**Amiens Cathedral, France**  
Begun in 1220 and completed in 1288  
Spire height 370 feet, length 476 feet

Info Sheet B



The floor plan of York Minster Cathedral is shown on a grey background. It features a long nave with a central aisle and side aisles, a large choir, and a prominent rose window at the west end. The interior photograph shows the high nave with flying buttresses, a large rose window, and a checkered floor.

**York Minster Cathedral, England**  
Begun in 1230 and completed in 1472  
Tower height 235 feet, length 525 feet

skills in small group work, students can be taught to use their own uptake questions with an emphasis on the skills important to an effective discussion. During small group work, students become comfortable sharing, asking questions of, and responding to the ideas of other students.

3. *Include small groups/sharing pairs in whole-class discussion.*

Not all students are comfortable speaking up in the whole class discussion without first listening to others and “trying out” their ideas in a smaller group setting. So, after posing an open-ended supporting question, before the large group discussed it, my students would share and compare their ideas within a small group.<sup>14</sup> These small group discussions allow students to discuss their ideas, compare, and question each other to be better prepared when the whole-class discussion resumes.

4. *Building positive interdependence and individual accountability into a classroom conversation.*

Using open-ended compelling and supporting questions, uptake moves, and alternating between the whole-group discussion and small-group structures, moves along the dialogue and uses the cooperative principles of face-to-face interaction along with individual interpersonal and discussion skills. I found that incorporating a summative assessment procedure, following the classroom conversation, introduced the principle of individual accountability.

Of course, discussion need not always be graded, but I used a culminating classroom conversation focusing on the unit’s compelling questions, as a portion of each unit’s summative assessment. In this assessment, I used class roster spreadsheets with such criteria as participation, paraphrasing, elaborating and building on ideas, supporting with examples and evidence, and synthesizing ideas. Using these types of criteria added the interdependence and accountability principles in that the assessment was designed to have students not only give their ideas, but listen and respond to the ideas of other students as well.

and structures can be incorporated into whatever lesson the teacher finds appropriate, whether it includes discussions, writing, compare and contrast, or learning from text or video sources. Cooperative strategies and principles can make all lessons engaging lessons turning the classroom into a civic space for student discussion, enjoyment, and thinking. In a time that calls for renewed emphasis on *College, Career & Civic Life*, such classrooms are more important than ever. 🌐

#### Notes

1. Robert J. Stahl and Ronald L. VanSickle, *Cooperative Learning in the Social Studies Classroom: An Introduction to Social Study* (Washington, D.C.: National Council for the Social Studies, 1992).
2. David W. Johnson, Roger T. Johnson, and Edith Johnson Holubec, *The New Circles of Learning: Cooperation in the Classroom and School* (Alexandria, Va.: ASCD, 1986).
3. Kathy Swan, John Lee, and S.G. Grant, C3 Teachers: College Career & Civic Life, (2014). C3Teachers.org.
4. R. Slavin, “Student Team Learning: A Practical Guide to Cooperative Learning,” ERIC Education Collection, number ED339518 (1991). The Slavin strategy that I found most useful in the classroom was the review strategy Teams-Games-Tournaments (TGT). Because it is a review strategy, TGT is beyond the scope of this article.
5. S. Kagan and M. Kagan, *Kagan Cooperative Learning* (San Clemente, Calif.: Kagan Publishing, 2009), p. 1.5
6. Elizabeth G. Cohen and Rachel A. Lotan, *Designing Groupwork: Strategies for the Heterogeneous Classroom*, 3rd edition (New York, N.Y.: Teachers College Press, 2014).
7. Stahl and VanSickle, p. 3
8. J. Zweirs and M. Crawford, *Academic Conversations: Classroom Talk that Fosters Critical Thinking and Content Understandings* (Portland, Maine.: Stenhouse Publishers, 2011).
9. Bruce VanSledright, “What Does It Mean to Think Historically ... and How Do You Teach It?” *Social Education* 68, no. 3 (April 2004): 230–233.
10. Sam Wineburg and Daisy Martin, “Tampering with History: Adapting Primary Sources for Struggling Readers,” *Social Education* 73, no. 7 (Sept. 2009): 212–216.
11. Two excellent sources for building your DBQ’s from The Stanford History Education Group (<https://sheg.stanford.edu>) and The DBQ Project (<https://dbqproject.com>).
12. Swan, Lee, and Grant, The Inquiry Design Model, (2014), <http://c3teachers.org/inquiry-design-model>
13. Diana Hess, “Discussion in the Social Studies: Is it Worth the Trouble?” *Social Education* 68, no. 2 (March 2004): 151–155.
14. H. Silver, R. Strong, and M. Perini, *The Strategic Teacher: Selecting the Right Research-Based Strategy for Every Lesson* (Alexandria, Va.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2007), 220.

## Conclusion

Students learn in a multitude of ways. Our classrooms should provide opportunities for students to work independently, to compete appropriately, and, perhaps most importantly, to work collaboratively. Cooperative learning has been around for some time; there are years of educational and sociological research behind it. These cooperative learning principles



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