Group Grade Grubbing versus Cooperative LEARNING
Group Grade Grubbing versus Cooperative Learning

Until very recent the source of interest in cooperative learning (CL) was primarily whether or not students benefit from being assigned to work in groups. Concerns about what precisely the benefits were and how the ideas should be implemented were secondary. Constructionists (or, less charitably, taskish advocates) have theorized with respect to every aspect of CL: theory and practice. Everyone in the field agrees that students benefit when they can either work for each other to learn instead of against each other or from each other to learn in a task that they can start by themselves and solve if they all pull their weight.

What should be one of the central areas of discussion, however, has not received the attention it deserves. It refers to the proper role assigned to grades, awards, certificates, and other rewards in many of the CL models now being offered to teachers. While some approaches incorporate these rewards without calling attention to that fact, others assert that rewards are the linchpin of cooperation. Some writers even go so far as to use the phrases “cooperative goals” and “intrinsically motivated work” as if one could form a list of goals that would be applicable to all forms of CL. My impression is that the control condition typically consists of either (a) a “traditional” classroom, which, as I have described above, is one in which students work individually and receive grades for what they do, or (b) a “no-reward” condition, in which students work individually or in teams but are not assigned grades.

My impression is that the control condition typically consists of either (a) a “traditional” classroom, which, as I have described above, is one in which students work individually and receive grades for what they do, or (b) a “no-reward” condition, in which students work individually or in teams but are not assigned grades.

To answer these questions definitively, we first need to consider the evidence offered in support of reward-driven CL by such careful researchers as Robert Slavin. His review of the data has persuaded him that “cooperative learning methods may also lead to increased achievement” (Slavin, 1985). It should not be surprising, then, that students who receive such rewards will get better grades than their counterparts who do not. In fact, many studies have shown that students who receive grades for their performance are more likely to work hard than those who do not. However, this is not to say that grades are necessarily good—or, more accurately, that they have no negative effects.

The Competitive Ethos and Democratic Education

Fourteen of these studies have shown that...