

# **Resistance to Cooperative Learning: Making Sense of Its Deletion and Dilution (\*)**

### Resistance to Cooperative Learning Making Sense of Its Detention and Dilution

By Atina Kohn

[My teacher and I always [going] on about help thy neighbor and all] that I- but I try and do that in his lessons and you're out.  
- Dave, a 14-year-old student (quoted in Dunn, Ruduck, and Cowie, 1989).

These comments by Michael Fullan are an excellent example of an unpleasant little history of recognition, particularly since this pattern of failing to implement reforms successfully did not end with the 1970s. New learning strategies, or perhaps the way these strategies are introduced, still lead some educators to react such as a body dose to the implementation of foreign cuisine. In each case, the fact of figuring out the reason for this rejection, if it is undertaken at all, is conducted as a post-mortem, with little to no pedagogical translation is already underway. Those of us who do research, training, writing, or speaking about cooperative learning (CL) know this well. But we are not usually willing to probe the reasons why some people do not want to work with Michael's strategy. I would like to use the work of CL to explore the reasons why some people do not want to work with Michael's strategy. I would like to use the work of CL to explore the reasons why some people do not want to work with Michael's strategy. I would like to use the work of CL to explore the reasons why some people do not want to work with Michael's strategy.

#### DEFINING COOPERATIVE LEARNING

There are essentially two ways to account for educators' resistance to the idea of cooperative learning. The first set of explanations has to do with inferior presentation of the idea or the model. The second explanations, to be treated in more detail, concern the ways in which CL in particular is threatening to, or incongruent with, the beliefs that many teachers hold.

If administrators and teachers came to believe that installing a water fountain in every classroom might improve the quality of learning, educational consultants would instantly appear, claiming expertise as Liquid Delivery System Facilitators, to offer their services for a day or two in intensive training on how to install the fountains and how cold the water should be. In the real world, with CL in demand, consultants remain thankful for a brief - and therefore selectively inoperative - facility training in the use of teamwork. But because CL, correctly understood, requires a radical reconceptualization of what learning involves and how the people who spend the day together in a classroom relate to each other, a host of problems and questions inevitably appear. What to do about children who resist being in the same group? (It doesn't work with Michael's strategy.) How to deal with the group who has no interest in the work? (It doesn't work with Michael's strategy.) How to deal with the group who has no interest in the work? (It doesn't work with Michael's strategy.)

First, and most fundamentally, CL is sometimes regarded as a gimmick to perk up a classroom now and then, offering a break from serious instruction. ("OK, kids, it's the third Friday of the month. Remember, that means today we work in teams!") While teachers doubtless will want to continue making use of whole-class discussion and individualized work, CL cannot, and would argue, stop to become the "default" classroom arrangement.

Second, dividing a class into teams and announcing that students should work with their groupmates is not sufficient for, much less equivalent to, cooperative learning. Because of this, many teachers in groups of and are addressed with the results have not yet given CL a chance to prove itself. I have seen classrooms in which the teacher (1) presented a task that allowed children in groups to avoid interacting with each other, (2) offered no guidance regarding social skills, and (3) reminded them every so often to "be cooperative." Particularly in light of the values that are salient in our culture, the absence of a classroom norm of caring and the failure to build social skills will reduce the probability that interpersonal work in groups can produce the psychological, interpersonal, or academic benefits referred to in the literature. Moreover, children may not like it.

Finally, cooperation does not imply harmony. The relevant question is not whether conflict will occur when people are playing with ideas or striving to make decisions together. It will and it should. The question, rather, is whether conflict will occur in the context of competition or cooperation. Teachers need not choose between creating a classroom in which students must arrive at a forced and artificial consensus, on the one hand, and one in which conflict is present but manifests itself as an adversarial exercise, such as debate, on the other. The former asks students to deny reality because they know that disagreement exists and deprives them of a real education; genuine learning does not flourish over or sooth. The latter affirms the lesson from whatever students are discussing to the goal of winning. For preferably as a third alternative, involving disagreement but nesting it in a framework of positive interdependence.

David and Robert Johnson, who have spent two decades cooperating to research and refine the idea of cooperative learning, have referred to this optimal balance as "constructive controversy," "creative conflict," or, more poetically, "fratricide excursions into disequilibrium." Their research suggests that this approach is generally preferred by students to either "coursework-seeking" or debate, and that it provides both more effective learning and more interpersonal attraction than the other models of classroom interaction.

If CL is presented as an instrument "rescue" from "real" teaching, a rehearsal card of group, or an activity that requires the use of cooperative learning, it will not be successful. The concept of positive interdependence requires that members of the group avoid conflict, and there are good data to suggest that they should not do it. The concept of positive interdependence requires that members of the group avoid conflict, and there are good data to suggest that they should not do it. The concept of positive interdependence requires that members of the group avoid conflict, and there are good data to suggest that they should not do it.

Workshops that cut corners were in existence long before most of us had heard of cooperative learning. Similarly, misconceptions about what is involved in a given pedagogical approach are nothing new. There have been obstacles to the successful adoption of CL that are peculiar to this idea of restructuring a classroom - features that would likely cause problems even if CL were not only because these skills are a prerequisite for the success of CL. There have been obstacles to the successful adoption of CL that are peculiar to this idea of restructuring a classroom - features that would likely cause problems even if CL were not only because these skills are a prerequisite for the success of CL. There have been obstacles to the successful adoption of CL that are peculiar to this idea of restructuring a classroom - features that would likely cause problems even if CL were not only because these skills are a prerequisite for the success of CL.

1. CL REQUIRES Caring AND PREDICTABILITY. Before we - I might have been - one said that the traditional model of teaching amounts to a rehearsal solo performed by the instructor (with students relegated to the role of audience), whereas CL not only offers instruments to everyone in the room but invites a jazz improvisation. The analogy has its limits, but it captures the difference between the two models of instruction. In the traditional model, the instructor is the one who speaks, and the students are the ones who listen. In CL, the students are the ones who speak, and the instructor is the one who listens. In CL, the students are the ones who speak, and the instructor is the one who listens.

2. CL REQUIRES ATTENTION TO SOCIAL GOALS. When we speak of caring, we mean that we care about each other. When we speak of predictability, we mean that we know what to expect. When we speak of caring, we mean that we care about each other. When we speak of predictability, we mean that we know what to expect. When we speak of caring, we mean that we care about each other. When we speak of predictability, we mean that we know what to expect.

3. CL CHALLENGES OUR COMMITMENT TO INDIVIDUALISM. It would be an exaggeration to say that the watershed of the American classroom is "Keep your eyes on your own paper." I want to use what you can do, not what your neighbor can do. This orientation, typically taken as a given, is entirely compatible with - indeed, a reflection of - the individualism of American culture. From its origins in the early 19th century, the individualistic, self-contained personality (Lynn Hunt, 1984) has been the dominant ideal of American culture. The individualistic, self-contained personality (Lynn Hunt, 1984) has been the dominant ideal of American culture. The individualistic, self-contained personality (Lynn Hunt, 1984) has been the dominant ideal of American culture.

4. CL CHALLENGES OUR COMMITMENT TO THE VALUE OF COMPETITION. When students in American schools are not separated from each other - and sometimes even when they are - they are not separated from each other. This is quite different from individualized achievement, in which the success of one person's efforts is unrelated to what others do. Still, both of these structures are supported by an ideological apparatus in our culture, and both are challenged by cooperative learning. In the case of individualism, the ideological apparatus in our culture, and both are challenged by cooperative learning. In the case of individualism, the ideological apparatus in our culture, and both are challenged by cooperative learning.

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