Building Relationships and Real-World Skills for Journalism Learners: Cooperative Learning Strategies for Scholastic Journalism Classrooms

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Abstract

Cooperative learning models in recent decades have been heralded as a way to increase student performance, long-term understanding, cultural and intellectual tolerance, positive behaviors, and other worthwhile educational outcomes for students at every level when compared to the traditional classroom that utilizes individualistic, competitive approaches in a dog-eat-dog-world of grades. In sum, this approach flips the learning model from one recognizing top performers for individual work to one where students work together in an accountable and positive manner to learn with less emphasis on the competitive nature of grades. This project provides resources for cooperative learning strategies including lesson plans and materials for photography settings and composition, basic design and color theory, media law, AP Style, interviewing skills, news writing, and opinion writing via a printable format available through a website (greensjschool.com) available to all teachers who want to use them and written in a way that requires little training in cooperative learning to be able to use them.

Building Relationships and Real-World Skills for Journalism Learners

It is no secret to journalism advisers that publication programs tend to provide a litany of benefits through students' shared goals of creating yearbooks, newspapers, news websites, broadcast programs, and literary magazines, among others. Advisers constantly note personal growth in students in skills such as writing, editing, photography, leadership, marketing, design, and others developed in a laboratory setting compared to their peers. These skills do not stop at the doorway leading out of the journalism classroom, but affect scholastic journalists throughout their high school, college, and adult years, as will be shown more in depth later in this paper. These benefits are a prime example of cooperative learning – where students work to understand content together in a positive, interdependent, and individually accountable environment.

Under a more traditional-learning system, the typical lesson goes something like: warm up, instruction from a PowerPoint or textbook, individual practice or group work, assessment, and maybe homework. Rinse. Repeat. Throw a few tests and projects in the mix and – poof – a curriculum is born.

Existing resources for cooperative learning strategies focus on the general education teacher with a traditional curriculum setup, but not targeted at scholastic journalism class content or needs that differ from other core and elective classes. For example, there are no journalism-specific lessons available from Spencer Kagan's company that specializes in cooperative learning methods. Furthermore, existing journalism curriculum resources come from textbook companies, yearbook publishers, or scholastic journalism organizations that typically focus on traditional, competitive

classroom instruction. For example, in the Journalism Education Association's Curriculum Initiative, there are more lessons available than any teacher would have the time to do (Journalism Education Association, 2021). But even then, the lessons focus on individual learning. While most lessons on sites such as this can be transformed to be cooperative learning, this would require extra time or training that many scholastic journalism advisers don't have due to the needs of the program. For example, the Curriculum Initiative has released 365 lessons across 10 core subjects of journalism curriculum. Of those, only 87, or 23.8%, are classified as pair/group work. However, after reading those 87 lessons, only 24 heavily center around cooperative learning – defined later in the literature review – in a way that focuses the teacher as a guide to learning content knowledge rather than the provider of that content knowledge.

This individualistic learning is the typical curriculum put forth by companies, institutions, and scholastic journalism organizations that educators new to the field or subject, and many veterans, rely on. The lessons are a regurgitation of the same curriculum style this generation of teachers had when it was in school that is further encouraged by popular culture, class-rank systems, curriculum companies, and personal experience.

While the traditional learning model does work for some students, cooperative learning methods are more closely related to the real work of journalism programs. Organizations, institutions, and companies providing cooperative-learning curriculum have not yet provided any complete set of cooperative learning lessons or materials to help advisers in schools that require wholesale or partial cooperative learning in curriculum. While content has not really changed in recent decades when it comes to creating journalism content, the same curriculum has been created ad nauseum.

In other words, there are no commonly available resources for journalism teachers wanting to incorporate cooperative learning into the classroom. Thus, there is a need for an easy-to-understand and quick-to-implement set of strategies that can apply to most journalism programs.

Literature Review

In order to adequately understand why there is a need for cooperative learning strategies, there are two areas that must be explored: what cooperative learning is and what the benefits of cooperative learning are. Two other areas are also important: what strategies exist for cooperative learning and what current resources exist for journalism teachers wanting to use cooperative learning methods. However, the latter two will be addressed later on in this paper.

Cooperative learning contains five key elements (Johnson, Johnson, & Smith 2014).

- Positive interdependence
- Individual accountability
- Appropriate use of social skills, taught by the teacher
- Promotive interaction
- Group processing

These will be used to drive the creation of each lesson, which will have to contain all five elements to be considered cooperative learning. The five elements are positive interdependence – the perception that students cannot succeed without cooperation from other members of the group and that the work benefits everyone; individual accountability – the assessment is not just of the group but also each student; promotive interaction – students assist, support, encourage, and praise each other's effort to learn;

appropriate use of social skills – teaching students leadership, decision-making, trust-building, communication, and conflict-management procedures and strategies; and group processing – how members of the group reflect on the processes they used to see what helped and what could be improved.

Johnson, Johnson, and Smith detail each of the five requisite parts of the cooperative learning strategy below:

Three types of positive interdependence can be used: outcome, means, or boundaries. Outcome interdependence means the group is working toward a united, desired goal. Means interdependence includes resources, roles and task interdependence. Finally, boundaries interdependence references the definitions that separate or unite members into their groups, which could include environmental factors like dividing the room, similarities, seating proximity, past history together, expectations of being grouped together, differentiation from other groups, etc. that create either a group identity that unites them based on a common element, or unites them against other groups like a competition. Positive interdependence exists when individuals within a group perceive that they can reach their goals if, and only if, the others in the group also reach their goals. “No interdependence occurs when a situation is structured individualistically” where each student thinks they can reach their assignment goal regardless if others do (Johnson, Johnson & Smith 2014, p. 91). In other words, simply assigning students to groups, assigning a project, and hoping they actually work together does not in and of itself result in cooperative efforts.

Individual accountability includes giving results back to the individual and the group. Each group member has to be responsible for completing their share of the work and facilitating work of group members. Groups must know who needs assistance,

support, and encouragement, as well as refrain from piggy-backing on the work of others. These methods could include the teacher giving individual tests or required deliverables, having students explain what they learned to a classmate, or observing each group and documenting contributions of each member.

Promotive interaction requires students to help encourage and assist each other to learn. This helps with problem solving, processing oral explanations, teaching others, challenging reasoning and conclusions, and connecting present with past learning; as well as modeling appropriate social skills, supporting and encouraging others to learn, and participating in joint celebrations of success.

Appropriate use of social skills requires teachers to instruct students directly on leadership, decision-making, trust-building, communication, and conflict-management (Johnson 2014, Johnson and Johnson 2013, and Johnson and Johnson 1997). Procedures and strategies for teaching students social skills may be found more in depth in the methodology section of this paper.

Group processing focuses students on continuous improvement of the process by asking members to 1) describe what member actions are helpful and unhelpful, and 2) make decisions about what behaviors to continue or change. Group processing may result in making the learning process more efficient and simple, eliminating errors, improving teamwork skills, and celebrating success.

There is much support for cooperative learning strategies to be implemented in every classroom, not just a journalism lab. Cooperative learning is an “all for one, one for all attitude” approach to learning (Slavin 1985). Studies have repeatedly shown cooperative learning leads to academic success, stronger relationships, higher self-esteem, initiating meaningful relationships more, self-concept and self-efficacy,

quality of adjustment to campus life, positive attitudes toward the university, and reciprocal relationships among outcomes.

In Dr. Spencer Kagan and Miguel Kagan's book Kagan Cooperative Learning, four major areas are shown where students see improvement: enhanced academic achievement, closing the achievement gap, improving race relations, and boosting personal and interpersonal communication stills (Kagan & Kagan, 2017).

First, Kagan points to hundreds of studies that reveal cooperative learning's effect on academic achievement compared to traditional, individualistic and competitive methods. Marzano, et al (2005) found in a meta-analysis that students have an average 28 percentage-point gain for students in cooperative classrooms. The second area Kagan notes is a reduction in the achievement gap and more equitable outcomes. One study in the book looked at a 12-week, pre- and post-test of junior high English grammar tests in inner-city schools comparing black and white students (Slavin & Oickle, 1981). Researchers found that while both groups had greater gains in the cooperative classroom, black students had gains almost three times higher. Kagan's book also presents a case study of Foster Road Elementary School near Los Angeles with a predominantly Hispanic student population and nearly 70% on a free and reduced lunch program (Kagan 2007; Maddox, 2005). After all teachers had been trained to use cooperative learning methods produced by Kagan's company, the school exceeded California's Academic Performance Index target by 485%. The school also had significantly higher gains than the district as a whole. The school's principal, according to the book, attributes all of the gains to cooperative learning methods. Kagan goes on in the book to note that the achievement gap also applies to students of all levels of achievement: Higher learners make gains as well as low achievers. This is due to the

cooperative learning nature allowing both tutors and tutees in cooperative groups to learn from each other (Cohen et al., 1982; Cohen et al., 1981). The third area Kagan writes about is improving race relations. He notes Johnson and Johnson (1989) reported a meta-analysis of 177 studies since the 1940s that found cooperative experiences promoted more interpersonal attraction, specifically in cross-ethnic relations. Kagan's own research noted an increase in self-segregation among students every year based on race in traditional learning classrooms (Kagan et al., 1985). However, in cooperative learning schools, he reports, same-ethnicity dropped as a major predictor of friendship between student groups across all races. Slavin (1995) reported that negative cross-ethnic feelings dropped between groups as well.

Kagan continues in his book to note the positive effect on interpersonal and personal skills in a cooperative-learning environment broken down into several areas: understanding, empathy, and cooperativeness; liking and being liked; self-esteem; increased motivation; fewer discipline problems; higher-level thinking; cognitive and moral development; and reasoning strategies.

There are other examples of research that reiterate and expand on the work of Kagan, Slavin, and Johnson and Johnson.

In one study conducted at a college, involvement in collaborative learning became a strong predictor of student academic performance in class (Tsay and Brady, 2010). Tsay and Brady found several other benefits including: The relationship increased between finding grades to be important and participating in a group. There was significant support that active participation in team-based learning has a positive relationship with academic performance. Those who participated more heavily helped accomplish goals, came prepared to class, gave constructive feedback, cooperated, and

had higher test scores and final grades. Those who were more engaged in the group also performed well outside of the group setting.

Intermediate school level students with disabilities and/or lacking social skills who engaged in cooperative learning resulted in increased positive interactions, resolved behavior problems independently, improved listening and negotiating skills in role-play situations, and improved slightly in problem solving. The other, traditionally instructed group made no gains in these areas (Prater et al., 1998). Similar gains were detected in Bhutanese students learning English language oral communication (Singay 2020). Researchers found it expedites growth of oral communication ability and was better than conventional methods for enhancing student oral communication ability. Results "showed that students' English oral communication ability was enhanced after implementing (Kagan cooperative-learning strategies) in the classroom" (Singray 2020, pg. 38). They found significant gains for oral-task support, group interaction and likely helped experimental group students perform better in terms of linguistic, discourse, strategic, non-verbal communicative competence, and improved vocabulary to communicate orally. Students asked questions and listened to each other, creating a natural interactive context.

Slavin (1991) found the benefits were not just for students who struggle in mixed-ability groups nor did high-achieving students struggle when placed with lower-performing peers. In fact, he found that "since arguments for ability grouping depend entirely on the belief that grouping increases achievement, the absence of such evidence undermines any rationale for the practice. The harm done by ability groups, I believe, lies not primarily in effects on achievement but in other impacts on low and average achievers." (Slavin 1991, p. 69) This is because peers encourage the high

achievers to learn and because students learn best by describing to others. These high-achieving students benefited in comparison to similar students in control groups.

The research noted above served as the guiding star for the creation of the lessons. All lessons require positive interdependence, individual accountability, equal participation, and simultaneous interaction.

Explanation of Project

The purpose of this project is to provide journalism teachers a basic set of different instructional methods and materials using cooperative learning strategies. More specifically, it provides lesson plans and needed materials for core skills and concepts of scholastic journalism, which will be able to be used in nearly all journalism classrooms.

The lesson plans use cooperative learning methods while following a traditional lesson structure, which includes objectives, warm-up activities, directions for direct instruction, assessment strategies and/or materials, and closing activities. The materials are provided in a printable PDF format in a way that can be printed by any teacher with a standard black and white printer on 8.5- x 11-inch paper, able to be downloaded from a WordPress website — greensjschool.com. The goal is that any teacher can use the lessons in an accessible, easy-to-use way with minimal training in cooperative learning required, and that fits many of the requirements of any journalism class.

Specifically, the project includes 40 lessons (194 pages that include accompanying materials and 266 slides to guide the learning process) over seven units: the Associated Press Stylebook and word usage, interviewing, news writing, opinion writing, photojournalism, principles of publication design, and media law and ethics.

The AP Stylebook unit includes lessons on how to use the AP Stylebook effectively, proper formatting for attribution and quotes, time references, common

spelling errors, situations to capitalize words, when to use or not use abbreviations, rules for numbers, proper word usage, and rules for punctuation. The interviewing unit includes lessons on types of sources, types of questions, writing and ordering questions, preparing for an interview, and conducting the interview. News writing includes lessons on developing story ideas, the inverted pyramid style and its limitations, lede writing, nut graf writing, writing transitions, choosing quality quotes and information, and how to end a story. Opinion writing includes lessons on choosing a topic and ethics of opinion writing, how to construct strong arguments, writing the introductory and body of the opinion piece, refuting opposing viewpoints, and calling to action. Photojournalism includes lessons on basic composition, techniques to properly break basic composition rules, exposure triangle and white balance, photo editing, and writing storytelling captions. Principles of publication design includes lessons on principles of design (contrast, repetition, alignment, and proximity), typography, color modes and combinations, basic yearbook layout rules, and basic newspaper layout rules. The media law and ethics lessons include the ABCs of ethics (accuracy, balance, and concision), the First Amendment protections and their limits, defamation and right to privacy laws, and student-specific speech limitations in schools, as well as limitations on the schools to limit freedom of speech.

Methodology

There are several different types of cooperative learning strategies that were put into the lessons overall including formal and informal cooperative learning strategies.

Formal cooperative learning requires students to work together for a single class period up to several weeks, achieve shared learning goals, and complete joint tasks and assignments. This requires the teacher to specify objectives for the lesson – both

academic and social skills – the size of groups, method of assigning students to groups, roles students will be assigned, materials needed, and the room arrangement. The teacher must explain the task and positive interdependence, which includes a clearly defined task, teaching the required concepts and strategies, specify the positive interdependence and individual accountability, criteria for success, and explain expected social skills. Finally, the teacher will have to monitor and intervene to provide task assistance or to improve students' interpersonal and group skills, as well as assess student learning. Each lesson will have these concepts built in to achieve these results.

Informal cooperative learning means students work together in ad-hoc groups lasting from just a few minutes to an entire class period. Cooperative focus attention, set mood conducive to learning, set expectations of what will be covered, ensure students cognitively process and rehearse material taught, summarize what was learned, and pre-cue next session, and provide closure to an instructional session. These are often organized so that students engage in 3- to 5-minute focused discussions before and after a lecture and 2- to 3-minute turn-to-your-partner discussions interspersed throughout a lecture (Johnson, Johnson & Smith, 2014).

The lessons are designed to be used in either formal or informal cooperative learning groups. Teachers will be able to use what fits best in their classrooms and pick up the lessons in whichever way works most intuitively. The method is the key — not necessarily the length of time the students are in groups.

The cooperative learning strategies include problem-based learning, which gives students a problem to understand and solve with the goal of having them learn relevant information and procedures. Solving the problem correctly is less important than participating in the process of gathering and learning the information relevant to solving

the problem. For example, in the lesson on exposure triangle, students will solve a series of issues photographers really experience in the field using information learned from the instructional cards. This is inherently cooperative where the instructor is a facilitator or guide rather than source of answers and problem solving. The lessons could also be reformatted by the teacher for team-based learning where the teacher assigns students with diverse skill sets and backgrounds to permanent groups of 5-7 members. Students are individually accountable for contributing to the team in class. Credit can be given for in-class team activities and application exercises. In-class activities aimed at promoting academic learning and team development; structured to give frequent and timely feedback on their efforts. Teams must be structured cooperatively, not competitive/individualistic. Finally, strategies include — depending on teacher-selected group formats — collaborative learning that places students in groups, letting them generate their own culture, community and procedures for learning. This is natural learning rather than training and more student directed.

The following examples of some of these strategies all come from Slavin (1985) unless otherwise noted:

Student teams-achievement divisions (STAD): Teacher presents a lesson; students study worksheets in four-member teams in mixed-ability groups, or include individual quizzes and team scores; check to see who improved most. This has shown to increase cross-racial friendships. The AP Stylebook lessons, for example, can allow for this method if the teacher chooses to do so, or operate individual assessment. However, the base idea of students trying to increase the number of correct answers for one another and the group as a whole is the core idea.

Teams-games-tournament is STAD, but replaces the quizzes and improvement score system with academic game tournaments. Students from each team compete with students from other teams of the same level of past performance to contribute to their team score. This has shown to increase more friends outside students' own racial groups.

Team-assisted individualization (TAI): Cooperative teams, individualized instruction includes 4-5 members in mixed-ability groups using self-instructional materials. Students check, manage, route, and help one another with problems. Teacher works with small groups. Teams are rewarded with certificates if they meet standards in terms of the number of units mastered by all team members each week.

Jigsaw and Jigsaw II: Students in heterogenous, 6-member teams. Each team is given unique information on an overall unit. Students read their information and discuss in expert groups, made up of students from different teams with the same information. The experts return to their teams to teach the information to their teammates. All students are quizzed and get individual grades. Jigsaw II modifies the Student Team Learning format. Students in 4-5 member teams. All students read a chapter or story, but each team member is given an individual topic on which to become an expert. Students discuss topics in expert groups and teach to teammates. Quiz scores in II are added to team scores rather than individual. Jigsaw was shown to create tight bonds within the group. Several lessons include a modified jigsaw format with 4 members instead of 6 where members leave to instruct the other groups with each group acting as the independent expert for the material they have.

Johnson methods: Mixed-ability groups complete a common worksheet. They are then praised and rewarded as a group. This is the least complex and closest to a pure

cooperative model because it lacks an individualistic and/or competitive element. This created better friendships across racial lines and more cross-racial interaction than individualized classes during free time.

Group investigation: Students work in groups using cooperative inquiry, group discussion, and cooperative planning and projects. Students choose their own 2-6 member groups. Groups choose subtopics from a unit studied by the whole class. Group further breaks subtopics into individual tasks and carries out needed activities. Group makes a presentation to the entire class. Evaluation is based on the quality of the report. This has led to more positive ethnic attitudes than traditional classes. None of the lessons include a group presentation, but some use the investigation method by replacing the presentation with a class discussion about the results of their work.

Weigel et al. Methods: Students engage in information gathering, discussion and interpretation of materials in mixed groups, and prizes could be given to groups on the basis of the quality of the group's product. The principles of design lessons have several activities using a modified version of this method.

Highly structured methods have the best effects. (Slavin 1985, pg. 53) "Thus, it is apparent that cooperative learning methods have positive effects on relationships among students of different races or ethnicities, while also increasing their achievement.'" All lessons are highly structured with the activities occurring in a specific order with students assigned specific roles. However, the lessons allow for creative freedom of the students in many cases so the entire assignment does not come across as stiff and inflexible.

Several of the parts of the lessons are repeated throughout all other lessons so that students will feel more and more confident in teaching their peers the content they

read, as well as giving the teacher the confidence in facilitating instructions with a predictable format. Each lesson has a lesson frame with class and individual objectives, warm up activities that preview the needs of the lesson, closing activities that provide individual accountability, direct instruction that serves as a recap of concepts students needed to learn taught at the end, rather than the beginning, of class, and student-led instruction using cards split amongst the members of the group where each student becomes the expert to teacher their peers to give them ownership of the information. Aside from the instructional cards, the warm ups, closing activity, and practice/assessment activities vary in how they are conducted, but all exist to provide the predictable structure to the lesson. Furthermore, the lesson activities are occasionally repeated within one unit or in other units so that students become more familiar with the activity and, therefore, learn to master the role as educator of their peers and themselves in addition to the content.

The units were also structured for one lesson to build upon the last within each unit only. This would allow all units to be taught in the order most appropriate for that teacher, or just that unit altogether. The lessons are scaffolded to allow students to use skills repeatedly during the course of the unit to reinforce basic skills. Many of the units also work toward having students create work that could be published in the school's publication outlets. Although, most of these are optional.

The lessons in the project use various strategies like the ones above, as well as some created using the basic concepts of cooperative learning. Many were restructured methods found in Kagan & Kagan's "Kagan Cooperative Learning" (2017). The content for each lesson comes from a combination of textbooks — cited on each lesson plan — my experience as a professional journalist, and common practices learned at

conferences and workshops. Teachers may choose to alter or reformat some of the content to fit their own needs and ways of explaining concepts while retaining the method used in the cooperative learning style.

For accessibility, the lessons were designed in Adobe InDesign and Adobe Illustrator (for graphics) in a grayscale color scheme so that the design would not require color printing with the consideration that color printing is more expensive and would be off-putting to teachers not wanting to waste color ink on one lesson. This makes the lessons easy to print and copy without requiring a huge commitment from the teacher's time and finances. They were exported in an Adobe PDF format to both reduce the file size and because every modern computer can open a PDF that can be read by every printer. Finally, they were uploaded to a WordPress website by individual units and the entire lessons in compressed folders.

Project Limitations

There is one primary limitation to this project: It is impossible in the time allowed for this project to create lesson plans and materials that apply to every area of content knowledge, state requirement, class period structure, and individual program need. States vary on curriculum requirements for all journalism classes and some journalism classes are taught under different names with even more different requirements. This is why the project targets core journalism content areas that are universal in nature and can be taught in any journalism classroom primarily targeting concept categories included on the Journalism Education Association's Curriculum Initiative website.

Conclusion

Many journalism teachers must create cooperative-learning strategies throughout the school year with no experience in doing so. Those especially new to cooperative learning

may confuse it with group work in the process of generating their lesson plans. This project can be a resource for those teachers. Additionally, journalism publication programs already do much cooperative learning when it comes to actually producing the product. However, incorporating cooperative learning into the teaching of the content and skills required of journalism courses and/or to create those publications will come with all the benefits research has consistently shown in the last 50-plus years. The lessons are posted to greensjschool.com available in grayscale PDF formats along with the slideshows for ease of access. Then, the project will be shared with scholastic journalism organizations to promote the materials, which can also be put on their websites and disseminated as they see fit. While these lessons and materials may not be comprehensive for a year-long journalism curriculum in every state, they will provide the fundamental knowledge and skills required to produce content for student publications.

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