In this column, we conclude our series on the high yield strategies as described by Robert Marzano in Classroom Instruction that Works: Research-Based Strategies for Increasing Student Achievement.

As presented in previous columns, this significant work has outlined the nine instructional strategies that are proven to demonstrate the most significant gains in achievement for students. The purpose of these columns has been to explore ways to implement these strategies within classrooms.

As Marzano suggests in Classroom Instruction that Works, when students are organized into working groups, the effect on learning can be powerful. However, cooperative grouping has become one of those basic strategies that seems to be very misunderstood. When practiced in a generic fashion, without paying attention to the important features, cooperative grouping will not yield the powerful learning results that make it an important strategy to use. Therefore, it is important to rediscover the elements of this very important strategy. Marzano presents three generalizations that research has suggested:

1. Organizing groups based on ability levels should be done sparingly.
2. Cooperative groups should be kept rather small in size.
3. Cooperative grouping should be applied consistently and systematically but not overused.

Cooperative grouping is the instructional technique where students work together in small groups to complete learning tasks. Johnson and Johnson (1999) specify five important conditions of cooperative grouping: positive interdependence of the group, face-to-face interaction, individual and group accountability, collaboration skills, and group processing. Additionally, it is important for these groups to be of mixed ability. By using groups of mixed abilities, students can see the various individual gifts and talents of their respective group members as they contribute to the completion of the project.

Steps to explicitly use cooperative grouping

Explicitly teach social skills.

In order to fully capture the power of this particular strategy, the skills that form the foundation of cooperative groups must be explicitly taught. It cannot be enough to put students in groups and describe this approach as “cooperative grouping.” This strategy must be applied systematically and with planning. First, the social skills that form the foundation of cooperative grouping must be taught to students.

Some important social skills that may require direct instruction include:

- **Listening:** The ability to listen to other group members is critical to the functioning of the group. In this way, no one person can dominate the group. Within this skill, the additional skills of encouraging and valuing others’ ideas are critical to successful use of cooperative grouping.

- **Being assertive:** Being able to advocate for one’s own ideas without taking over or controlling the group in ways that limit the group’s capacity to complete its task is an important social skill that oftentimes must be taught to students.

- **Handling conflict:** In any group, conflict will arise. Students should be taught steps to understand the conflict and ways to resolve those disagreements.

- **Explicitly teach group dynamics and group roles**

  In addition to the social skills that are required to engage in cooperative grouping, an understanding of group dynamics and roles is a critical feature. In order to fully utilize cooperative grouping, students should be reminded that there are roles/responsibilities of group members that will enhance the functioning of the group.

- **Leader:** This role is responsible for leading the group to completing the task. This position ensures that all group members are contributing to the completion of the job.

- **Reporter:** This role is responsible for documenting the completion of the task.

- **Timekeeper:** This role focuses on keeping the group on track to complete the task in the allotted time.

- **Cheerleader:** This role focuses on providing encouragement and promoting what Johnson and Johnson (1999) call positive interdependence, i.e., each group member is assigned a specific contribution to make to the completion of the task, AND the group task cannot be completed successfully without each member’s contribution.

- **Give directed feedback**

  In addition to the completion of the task, the cooperative group also must receive directed feedback regarding group members’ functioning as a group. Having group members provide feedback to one another
on their roles is critical to improving their ability to execute their roles. An example of a team functioning rubric can be found at the Center for Catholic School Effectiveness Website (www.luc.edu/ccse).

Hold both the group and the individual accountable

Often, when cooperative grouping is used as a strategy, the accountability is placed on the group. While this is important, there also should be some accountability placed on the individual. Group members need to have their performance assessed as both the individual as well as the group member.

Select an appropriate group task
In order to effectively use cooperative grouping, teachers should match the task to the strategy. Cooperative grouping would not be appropriate for simple types of tasks such as completing a worksheet or reviewing for a test (although working in groups can be a good way to do this). Cooperative grouping is best used when the task is complex and the answer is not immediately evident. (Only a more complex task requires the interdependence that is the hallmark of a genuine cooperative grouping strategy.) Additionally, a complex task appropriate for cooperative grouping will require the use of critical thinking skills.

Pitfalls to avoid
In order to fully utilize this important learning strategy, there are several pitfalls that need to be avoided. Sometimes this strategy is over used. Simply telling students to work in groups is not cooperative grouping; nor is placing students in groups the entire time a valid use of cooperative grouping. It is important to authentically match the strategy with the learning outcomes that the teacher wants to achieve and to use this powerful strategy judiciously.

Sometimes parents raise concerns about their children working in cooperative groups. Parents may express concern that their child is doing all of the work and pulling the weight of others in the group. It can be helpful to assist parents in understanding that part of cooperative groups is practicing the social skills related to assertiveness. If students do not get structured support in being assertive and learn to raise their concerns within their group in appropriate and productive ways, students will never develop these skills for real life. Also, ensuring that there is an accountability process to provide feedback on both individual and group contributions can help allay the concerns of parents.

A final pitfall in using cooperative grouping strategies can be the use of teacher authority to quell conflict. When groups experience conflict (as the groups inevitably will), it can be too easy for a teacher to just “end it.” Rescuing students from conflict instead of facilitating the successful resolution of the conflict robs students of valuable opportunities to practice conflict resolution skills. Yes, it does take more time to do this. However, if students can master the skill in classroom situations, then they will be better able to transfer this critical skill to other settings!

Implementing together
Read and discuss the SOS article and support materials at a faculty meeting or team meetings. (Watch the Webcast on our Web site together to spark discussion.)

Brainstorm concrete ways to use cooperative groups. Share specific learning tasks in each subject area and grade level that support the interdependence of genuine cooperative groups.

Share stories that show the impact of cooperative grouping on learning. Collect stories of your own students.

In learning teams, go deeper. Examine the steps and the pitfalls. Agree on and clearly identify one concrete thing you will all do to help students experience the value of cooperative grouping to improve performance over the next two weeks. Agree to log your actions and set a schedule for observing each other at least once. Arrange with the principal and/or department chair to observe as well.

Share observations about using the strategy and its impact on learning. Refine and agree on actions for the next two weeks.

Share actions taken and observations of impact at next faculty meeting.

This concludes the series’ focus on the high-yield strategies. We have appreciated the feedback that we have received through these past two years. We also have enjoyed hearing how people have used this column and supplementary materials with their staff members. All of the 10 articles and supporting materials and webcasts are available on CCSE’s Web site (www.luc.edu/ccse). Next year, we will change the focus of the column and explore methods and strategies for using differentiated instruction within the classroom. We wish all of you a restful summer! —Authors’ note

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