
American History and Cooperative Learning

A Rationale and Sample Lesson for the Secondary Level

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Once again, American history instruction at the secondary level has come under attack. A number of prestigious commissions and individuals (e.g., Bradley Commission 1988) have come to the realization that there is little enthusiasm for the American history courses that require students to “memorize the parades of dates, names, and facts” (Gagnon 1988, 45). The typical high school history student comes “to class believing that history is a matter of time lines and treaties, getting or missing the date of the battle” (Holt 1990, xi). This perception troubles many reform-minded experts (Ravitch and Finn 1987; Cheney 1987), who tout the study of history as essential for the continuation of American democracy in the twenty-first century. The perception also troubles the many effective history teachers who go beyond handing over information to their students.

Much of the blame for students’ aversion to the study of history has

been attributed to the dominance of the lecture method. This approach is said to perpetuate passivity and apathy in students and provide little opportunity for student–teacher interaction—and even less student–student interchange about the nature of historical study. The Bradley Commission on History in the Schools (1988) has called for the elimination of history lessons that focus on the memorization of facts without context (History Curriculums Faulted 1988). Instead, the commission suggests, lessons should “focus upon broad trends and questions and . . . encourage students to think critically” (p. 10a). Rather than simply being given information, students should be engaged in answering questions that have “no final, agreed upon answers” (Gagnon 1988, 45).

Holt (1990) takes this idea of focusing on questions in historical study a step further and suggests that students engage in the work of historians in order to change their negative views of history. Rather than merely reading or listening to a litany of historical facts, Holt proposes the development of lessons that immerse students in working with the tools and questions of historians, that is,

a set of questions one puts to the materials or document. Is it a primary or secondary source; that is, is it produced by an eyewitness or participant, or by a commentator after the fact? What is the point of view of this source? How and why was this document produced, and how does that affect its trustworthiness? What are the document’s silences? What does it leave out? What does it assume? (10)

Using this approach, students examine historical documents, artifacts, and questions and then write narratives about the events or developments they are studying. The process of research and analysis culminates in having students reconfigure historical materials into a plot that has personal meaning. Approaching the task as historians do, students work with the raw materials of history, “letters, diaries, reports, maps, and photographs—to reconstruct the larger story of which these artifacts were merely a part” (Holt 1990, 11). Students thus develop personal interpretations and write narratives about historical problems. For the student, as Holt concludes, history can “become an ongoing conversation and debate rather than a dry compilation of ‘facts’ and dates, a closed catechism, or a set of questions already answered” (13). Rather than “receiv-

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ing” history, students investigate it and try to find what it says to them.

Using Cooperative Learning in American History

Wineburg and Wilson (1988) have aptly defined the history teacher who has the ability to alternate effectively between different modes of teaching as the “wise practitioner.” One alternative strategy that holds promise for engaging students in meaningful historical study is cooperative learning.

How Cooperative Learning Works

Incorporation of cooperative learning in the secondary history classroom is appealing for a number of reasons. Cooperative learning’s effectiveness has been demonstrated in both academic achievement gains for students of all ability levels and in greater interdependence among students in and out of the classroom. Cooperative learning strategies not only can improve academic achievement but also can have positive influences on intergroup acceptance (Johnson and Johnson 1981), acceptance of mainstreamed students (Slavin 1983), and enhanced self-esteem (Johnson and Johnson 1983).

To some teachers, cooperative learning may seem to be simply a new term for traditional “group work,” in the sense that students are required to work in teams to attempt to master an assigned set of academic materials. However, cooperative learning differs from traditional groups in the way tasks and incentives are structured for successful completion of the assigned work. Margolis, McCabe, and Schwartz (1990) point out these features of cooperative learning when they describe it as follows:

In cooperative learning students are randomly or systematically assigned by the teacher or one another to heterogeneous groups or teams to accomplish designated tasks. Tasks are structured so that (1) students realize they are dependent upon one another for success, (2) success is con-

tingent upon students’ strengths and abilities rather than weaknesses, (3) students are encouraged to cooperate with one another, and (4) students discern that they are responsible for each group member’s achievement. (111)

Research on cooperative learning methods consistently finds that this approach involves students in cooperative behavior (helping others); cooperative incentive structures (the group is rewarded according to the performance of all group members); and, cooperative task structures (the group must work together to achieve a final goal) (Slavin 1983; Johnson, Johnson, Johnson-Holubec, and Roy 1984). Thus, cooperative learning fosters student-to-student interaction because learners are placed in a situation where they must help one another learn academic content or engage in meaningful tasks. Although the teacher decides the content to be covered during the activity and monitors the groups to ensure that students are on task, team members ultimately share responsibility for the entire team’s “getting” the material. For the team to be successful, all students must be engaged in the task at hand.

Organizing for cooperative learning exercises is not a simple task. The cooperative learning literature is replete with admonitions that cooperative activities must be thoroughly organized if they are to be effective. Simply telling students to get into groups and work with historical documents does not qualify as a cooperative learning exercise. Structure and attention to procedures are critical components of a successful activity.

One particular approach for incorporating cooperative learning into the American history classroom is the jigsaw method developed by Aronson et al. (1978). Slavin (1983) reports this method “uses a cooperative task structure that creates a great deal of interdependence among students” (p. 28). A modification of jigsaw, known as jigsaw II, builds in cooperative incentives with the cooperative tasks in

the form of recognition or team grades (Slavin 1983; Anderson and Palmer 1988).

To implement the jigsaw model, the teacher must first divide students into heterogeneous teams of four to six students. Next, the teacher presents appropriate content material to each team, with each team member receiving a unique section of the material (the individual pieces of the puzzle that have been designed by the teacher). After being given a chance to read the material, individual students move to designated “expert” groups to meet with students from other teams who hold the same piece of the puzzle. In the expert groups, students help each other learn the material and prepare strategies to teach the information to other students who do not have this particular puzzle piece. The experts then return to their original teams and take turns teaching their pieces of the puzzle to the members of the team. Finally, students are tested on the material or “participate in a culminating activity in which they must apply the entire range of knowledge or skills for the lesson” (Ferguson 1989–90, 25). To be consistent with the idea of cooperative incentive structures, team as well as individual grades may be recorded or recognition may be accorded the teams with the best final scores or products.

To lessen the chance of collaborative mayhem as students move through these stages, the teacher needs to follow a number of procedures during the planning stage of a cooperative learning activity (Arends 1988).

1. *Choose appropriate content.* For the jigsaw approach, content should be divided into subtopics that do not require extended explanation by the teacher. The content should also be of interest to the students.

2. *Form student teams.* Social benefits result from teams that are comprised of students of diverse (academic, social, ethnic) backgrounds. When making the team assignments, teachers should delineate their social and aca-

ademic objectives while taking into consideration the nature of students in their classes. Teachers should always be responsible for forming the teams.

3. *Develop materials and directions.* In a jigsaw activity, students primarily interact with printed or visual material, which should highlight the most appropriate content. The teacher gives written directions that tell students their roles during the lesson, the goals and objectives of the lesson, and when and how they will be moving to the various stages of group work.

It is important to communicate to students how to make the transition from the whole class to learning teams (Arends 1988). Listing key steps on charts or the blackboard will provide visual reinforcement for verbal directions that some students may quickly forget. Asking students to paraphrase directions is also beneficial. Clearly marking locations for learning teams will ensure that students are evenly distributed around the room. Taking care of what may seem like minor points such as these can greatly reduce the frustration that can accompany initial attempts at cooperative learning.

A Sample Lesson

[H]istory is about people. . . . [By] inquiring into the struggles and triumphs of "small 'p' people" students are confronted with how [an] individual's experiences can be related to the larger meanings for human experience. (Holt 1990, 18)

Primary sources from such people can be used in a cooperative learning exercise in the secondary school American history classroom. For example, during a unit on the Civil War, students can examine diary entries in order to develop their own interpretations and narratives about the impact that the war had on the lives of individuals. The students can also use other primary source materials to develop critical-thinking skills as well as social skills as they collect data and reach conclusions.

Mary Chestnut's Civil War, edited

by C. Vann Woodward (1981), provides an interesting view of the war from the perspective of a privileged woman from the South. Because Chestnut's diary entries address the war years from beginning to end, the teacher can select entries that illustrate major public events and the changes that took place in the writer's own views and in her attitudes toward the South's chances for success.

To use the jigsaw approach with this material, four selections from the diary that illustrate the changing fortunes of the Confederacy during the war can be chosen. (Entries I used with a social studies methods class were July 24, 1861; June 29, 1862; August 19, 1864; and March 30, 1865. These particular entries reflect Confederate jubilation after victory at Manassas; the successful defense of Richmond; Grant's later siege of Richmond and Sherman's march to Atlanta; and events leading up to Lee's surrender at Appomattox.)

Next, the instructor assigns students to four-member teams and prepares the room to accommodate the appropriate number of teams. If the students have not previously participated in cooperative learning activities, team-building activities (Johnson et al. 1984) may be necessary to establish a sense of cohesiveness among team members.

Once students enter the room and form their teams, materials are distributed and academic tasks and procedures are described and posted. After each team member receives one entry from Mary Chestnut's diary, he or she is responsible for telling other team members about the information contained in that particular document. The teams are informed that as a group they will be required to create a time line that illustrates the significant events of the war and the changes in the author's personal views toward the war from 1861 to 1865. Additionally, at the end of the activity, each student will write a short paper that describes why the people of the South finally conceded defeat. The student-generated time line serves as the catalyst for

writing the narratives that chronicle the changes in attitude toward the war from Mary Chestnut's perspective.

For the next step in the activity, students move to the appropriate expert group (i.e., all students with the July 24 entry will form one expert group). These groups may be subdivided if the class is large. The goal of the experts is to gain an in-depth understanding of the assigned diary entry so they can teach the other members of their original teams about the perspectives and information found in that entry. By meeting with others who hold the same piece of the puzzle, each expert can share ideas and interpretations, organize information, and rehearse what will be presented to the original team members when those teams are reconvened.

The teacher may give guiding questions to the expert groups in order to focus their discussions. Such questions might include the following:

1. What main event regarding the war is the author describing?
2. What is the author's reaction to the event? What is she reporting about the South's general reaction?
3. What other ideas or attitudes can be taken from this diary entry?

Any questions that individual experts have about their material should be answered before rejoining the original team. The teacher can provide supplemental materials that verify the factual information in the diary entries.

Once the original jigsaw teams have been reassembled, each member will take a turn teaching his or her teammates about the information gleaned from her or his particular diary entry. Students should be encouraged to ask questions and seek clarification about the information being presented. The material that is presented by each expert will then be condensed and compiled on a poster-board time line so that students will have a visual representation of the changing nature of the war as reported by Mary Chestnut. The students will use the information on the time line in a culminating writing assignment.

Once the students have gathered data from an example of "the raw material of history," interpreted it for themselves, and engaged in analysis with classmates about the significance of the information, they write their own explanation of Southerners' changes in attitude during the war as reflected in Mary Chestnut's diary. (With my class, I set a target of two pages for the writing exercise.) As a result of fitting the pieces of the puzzle together in their jigsaw groups, students craft their own narratives, incorporating significant events of the war with the changing perspectives of real people who lived through those terrible years. Students thus have an informed opportunity to reveal what history says to them.

Conclusion

If history instruction in the secondary school curriculum is truly as passive and irrelevant for students as has been reported, efforts must be made to involve groups of students in actively working with the raw materials of history. Such involvement can

make history more appealing to students and engage them in critical thinking. Cooperative learning is an approach that offers the involvement we seek for our students.

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