Cooperative Learning in the Block (60+ minute Secondary lessons)

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Block scheduling has been replacing the traditional 40 to 50 minute class period considered by many to be limiting the possibility for schools to raise achievement and make learning both more active and personally meaningful. With block scheduling, students attend fewer classes daily, but for longer blocks of time. Increasing the class period to 80 or more minutes allows teachers and students to delve deeper into the content, and to use more varied and interactive teaching strategies.

If we merely increase course time, learning will not necessarily improve. Longer lectures and longer independent practice time do not take advantage of the extended class period. **If the teaching practices do not change, the advantages of the longer class period are lost.** Block scheduling will lead to better learning only if teachers can provide an improved instructional environment that engages students. In this article, I describe one such change — the use of cooperative learning to actively engage students during the block. The focus of this article is a schedule and detailed description of how to actively engage learners by implement cooperative learning for block scheduling.

Breakdown the Block by Objectives

To take advantage of the block, teachers need to break down their classroom objectives. What do you hope to accomplish with your extended class period? Here's one possible breakdown of objectives: review the previous day's homework, present new content, do an activity using the content, provide guided practice, reteach the concept, and provide closure.

Assign Times for Each Objective

Once we know all the things we want to get accomplished in the class period, we break down the block with specific time assignments for each objective. The following table presents a breakdown of an 80-minute class period. While the times may vary from day-to-day and class-to-class, the overall pattern remains.

Homework Review	Presentation	Activity	Guided Practice	Reteach	Closure
10 minutes	20 minutes	20 minutes	10 minutes	10 minutes	5 minutes

Select Appropriate Cooperative Learning Structures

In order to implement this schedule using cooperative learning, knowledge of the **structural approach to cooperative learning** and how structures may be used in many ways is the key.

A. Homework Review

The class typically begins with students meeting in their teams. Cooperative learning teams are long-term, ***heterogeneous*** groups with long term membership. They have four members, last for one to several units, and formally meet at the beginning and end of each class session. The team supports each other by:

• Giving encouragement, coaching, and support for mastering the content by:
  - providing information about what a member missed,
  - reviewing and discussing assignments,
  - answering any questions about assignments, and
  - planning, reviewing, and editing papers;
• Building interpersonal relationships;
• Providing a structure for managing course procedures such as attendance, homework, and assessments.

• Checking to see if members have completed their homework or need help in doing so. Members might ask: "Did you do your homework?" "Is there anything you did not understand?" If extensive help is needed, **RallyCoach** can be used where one student works a problem out loud while the partner coaches as needed.
• Reviewing what members have completed since the previous class session. Use Homework Review structures such as **RoundRobin, RallyRobin,** or **Team-Pair-Solo**. Members should be able to verbalise what they have read, thought about, and done.
• Getting to know each other better and providing positive feedback by participating in Teambuilding activities periodically.

B. Presentation Using the 10/2 Method

(*10 minutes input-2 minutes processing*)
After homework review, the teacher will need to present new material or elaborate on what students have studied by giving mini lectures or demonstrations, showing movie or videotape clips, or using a guest speaker. In such cases, teachers can use cooperative learning structures to ensure that students are actively processing the information being presented.

Using a variety of cooperative learning structures, students work together to master the material in temporary, short-term random pairs or groups that last from a few minutes to one class period. Structures like **Stand Up, Hand Up, Pair Up**, or **All Around the Clock** help to form quick partners outside their base teams. Teachers use the four cooperative learning principles, **Positive Interdependence**, **Individual Accountability**, **Equal Participation**, and **Simultaneous Interaction (P.I.E.S.)** to select specific structures to focus student attention on the material to be learned, set a mood conducive to learning, help organise in advance the material to be covered in a class session, ensure that students cognitively process the material being taught, personalise the learning experiences, and provide closure to an instructional session. The procedure for using structures to do this may be as follows:

1. Introductory Discussion: Teachers (a) form student pairs, (b) explain content question to be discussed or processed, (c) explain the **structure** to use to reach the answer interdependently (i.e. **Timed-Pair-Share**). The discussion is aimed at discovering what the students know about the topic to be presented and creating an anticipatory set about what the lecture, or input, will cover.

2. Partner/Team Processing: Teachers divide the lecture into10 to 15 minute segments. After each segment, teachers ask students to partner up in the *pre-determined way* (**Stand Up, Hand Up, Pair Up**, or **All Around the Clock**) and work cooperatively in answering a question that requires them to cognitively process the material just presented. The verbal structures for the discussion pairs/teams to use are:

Timed Pair Share, RallyTable, Think-Pair-Share, Pair View, RallyRobin, Paired Heads Together, RoundRobin, RoundTable, Numbered Heads Together, Three Step Interview, Sages Share.

The question needs to be specific enough so students can complete this sequence in *two-to-four minutes*. (Thus the 10/2 concept) The question should require students to (a) summarise the material the teacher just presented, (b) give a reaction, or (c) relate the material to past learning so that it gets integrated into existing conceptual frameworks. Teachers ensure that students are individually accountable for following the sequence in answering the question by randomly choosing two or three students to give 30 second summaries of their pair discussions. Teachers repeat this sequence of lecture segment plus pair/team discussion until the lecture is completed.

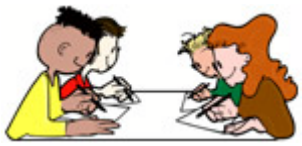
3. Summary: Teachers give a summary discussion structure (see above verbal structures) that requires students to summarise in four or five minutes what they have learned from the lecture. The discussion should result in students integrating what they have just learned into existing conceptual

frameworks, point students toward what the rest of the class session will focus on, and identify questions students have about what was presented. This provides closure to the lecture.

Cooperative Learning Activity, Team Projects or Guided Practice

Students learn best when working in formal cooperative learning structures. In implementing formal cooperative learning, teachers:

• Must understand and have in place the Seven Key Concepts of Cooperative Learning, including: Forming Teams of various size, type and duration, developing the will to cooperate using Teambuilding and Classbuilding activities regularly, implementing several management strategies to efficiently and effectively manage activities, and identifying and integrating Social Skill development;
• Explain the task, AND the structure(s) such as **Pairs Check, Rally Coach, Find Someone Who, Mix-N-Match, Quiz-Quiz Trade, Fan-N-Pick, Teammates Consult, Team Statements, Team Word Webs, Stir-The-Class**, etc, or the positive interdependence if a Team Project is performed. The teacher clearly defines the assignment, teaches the required concepts and strategies, specifies the positive interdependence and individual accountability, gives the criteria for success, and explains the expected social skills to be engaged in.



• Monitor students' learning and intervene within the groups only when all group members require it. When it is needed, the teacher intervenes to assist students in completing the task accurately and in working together effectively.
• Assess and evaluate students' learning and help students process how well their groups functioned. Members of the learning groups may process how effectively they have been working together, however, students' learning is individually assessed. Group grades are never a part of effective cooperative learning.

D. Reteach, then Closure

At the end of the class work session, teachers may wish to reteach or summarise what was covered and point towards what will be covered in the next class session.

In doing closure, students should be asked to consider one or two issues phrased as questions. Another cooperative learning team structure is used; such as **Numbered Heads Together, Three Step Interview, RoundRobin, Showdown**, etc.

The class session closes with students back in their base teams. Examples of closing tasks are:

• **RoundRobin** to ensure all members understand the assignment. Find out what help each member needs to complete it.
• **RallyRobin** to summarise at least four things members learned in today's class session.
• **Timed Pair Share** to summarise how members will use/apply what they have learned. Celebrate the hard work and learning of group members.

The block schedule is the ideal framework for cooperative learning to be utilised to its full potential, and thereby help students to reach their full potential.

References
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Johnson, D. W., Johnson, R., & Holubec, E. *Cooperation in the classroom*. Edina, MN: Interaction Book Company. 1993