

I Was Ready to Quit, Until Kagan Came to My Class

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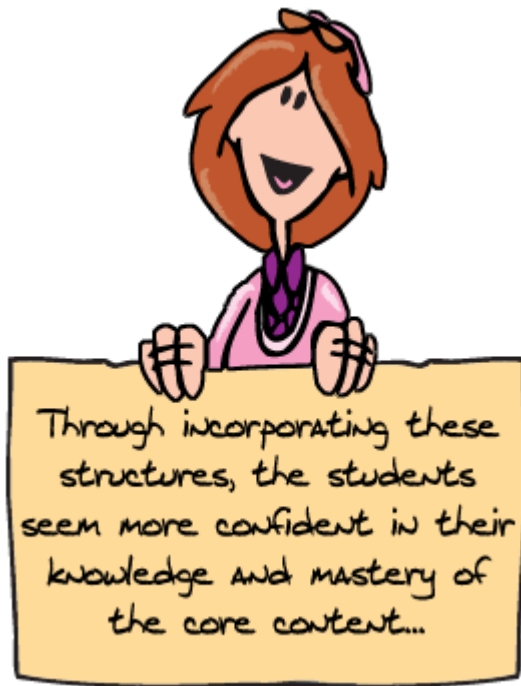
I recently read an article that attempted to describe the rollercoaster of emotions experienced by a teacher during his/her first year. At the beginning of the school year, the teacher feels excitement and anticipation at the possibilities that lie ahead. However, this is soon replaced by anxiety and frustration around the second month of school and, according to the article, the teacher finds him or herself in a state of disillusionment by mid first semester. Then, an uphill swing begins in second semester when, once again, the teacher finds him or herself feeling the excitement and anticipation for the following year.

For me, my first year of teaching left me dangling in a state of disillusionment questioning my decision to become a teacher. I spent the early part of the summer following my first year entertaining other job offers. However, **I ultimately decided to return to teaching to attempt one more year before making my final decision.** At the end of that same summer, our district held a two-day district-wide professional development focusing on cooperative learning structures for the classroom. By the end of the two days I finally felt the excitement and anticipation return. I was impressed and inspired by what I had learned and was eager to try it in my own classroom and now, **following five years of using these structures and hours of additional training, I am more convinced than ever of their positive impact on the learning process.**



In order for a person to learn, we know he/she must be actively engaged in the learning process. Cooperative learning accomplishes this through the use of structures that hold each student accountable for the content whether it is describing the movement of carbon through the ecosystem in a Timed Pair Share or identifying the parts of a cell during a Find Someone Who. One of the most significant changes that I've observed in my classroom since implementing these structures is that the students are doing most of the work, not me. My role has truly become that of a facilitator of the content. During my first year of teaching I often went home exhausted, feeling as though I had been in the heat of battle all day. **Cooperative learning has provided a way for me to place learning in the hands of the students** by enabling all students an opportunity to respond to the content instantaneously while receiving immediate feedback from their peers.

One of the greatest challenges during my first year of teaching was trying to reach the needs of all the students and their various learning styles. **I needed a way to allow the students to interact with the curriculum in manner that would engage all of the multiple intelligences and these cooperative learning structures have met that need.** In any given lesson the students may be given the opportunity to describe the content in words either written or verbally. They may be asked to draw a picture, construct a graphic organiser, or even create a song to help further their understanding. Through incorporating these structures, the students seem more confident in their knowledge and mastery of the core content, and for me this has been especially evident in the success of the students in my collaborative classes, both in their grades for my class and their scores on the state assessment.



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While the increased academic achievement of my students has been impressive, the embedded curriculum of cooperative learning has additionally made significant changes in my classroom and its overall atmosphere. I quickly noticed during my first year of teaching that **many students lacked necessary social skills when interacting with either peers or adults. By using these structures and correctly modelling the required social skills, my students are being equipped with skills necessary for success in the real world.** I have observed many students shift from indifference of others in the class they may not know, to genuinely wanting to see each person do well. They have become encouragers, praisers, coaches, and most importantly, they have learned how to be contributing members of a team.

In addition, my classroom management has improved, and I now feel that my classes run smoothly by effectively utilising the time in both block classes and in the shorter afternoon classes. These **structures help in chunking the material** and offer a way to help avoid that "eyes glazed over

look" we often see in students when we have focused on something for too long without allowing them a chance to respond in some manner. **Students can quickly and easily transition from one activity to the next and the constant change helps to avoid losing their attention.**

I truly feel as if I have been given this endless sack of tools from which I can draw upon at any given moment. Each day brings renewed enthusiasm and confidence and this is mirrored by the students in each of my classes.

Comment by a beginning teacher after a Cooperative Learning workshop

"Was excellent, very useful - can't wait to implement. Is much more useful than anything I have learnt in 4 years at uni" Hanna, Grafton HS, NSW