Jette in Denmark sent me this question:

The thing about Cooperative Learning that people seem to question the most is the principle of heterogeneous teams. They believe they can improve on Cooperative Learning by not using these teams but instead using homogeneous teams or random teams. This worries me. In my view it is pretty much undermining Cooperative Learning. I have looked for an article on the issue but did not find one. Is there one? I know that almost every expert on Cooperative Learning agrees, but an overview of the most important research confirming the heterogeneous principle would be really useful.

Here is what I wrote back:

Regarding heterogeneous teams, surprisingly I don't know of controlled empirical research that contrast use of heterogeneous teams with random or homogeneous. There are several reasons, though, to advocate heterogeneous:

1. Almost all of the empirical research on cooperative learning has been done with heterogeneous teams. There is tremendous empirical support for heterogeneous teams. To work with random or homogeneous is to work with methods that do not have an empirical basis.
2. A random team can result in the four lowest achieving on same team. In contrast carefully assigned teams structure for success by teaming low students with high increasing probability of successful tutoring.
3. A random team can result the four biggest management/behavior problems/ on the same team. This can result in magnified management/discipline problems. Heterogeneous teams avoid these pitfalls.
4. Heterogeneous teams help with management. By having the top quarter of the class spread out, one per team, someone on each team is likely to be able to explain directions and keep the team on task.
5. Homogeneous teams creates winner and loser teams. I did a research study years ago on TGT. It is a cooperative learning method that has a bumping system. Each week students leave their learning teams and go to tournament tables, three per table. If they win, they bring 6 points back to their team, least points gets 2 points to bring back, the other student
4. The bumping system equalizes competition because the losers go to a lower achieving table and the winners move up. Over time students all bring back the same amount of points. The surprise was that lower achieving students dropped in self-esteem. Even though everyone was brining back the same amount of points, the low achievers knew they were going to the loser tables. It is the same with homogeneous teams. The low achieving students feel like losers. Same thing results when we have high, medium, and low reading groups. There are status and esteem problems.
6. Heterogeneous teams maximize opportunity to learn different thinking skills. The more there is diversity, the more we can learn from each other. By explaining to a student who is thinking differently about a problem or issue, a student is challenged to stretch or cement his/her own learning.
7. Heterogeneous teams improve race relations. Minority students tend to be lower in achievement. If we have homogeneous teams, we have de facto racial segregation.
8. Heterogeneous teams improve the social skills of high achievers. They learn to coach, encourage, praise, tutor, and they learn patient waiting.

Hope this helps,
Spencer