

Structures Ensure More Learning for All

Greg Heinrichs



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With cooperative learning gaining in popularity and use across the world, more and more administrators and superintendents are expecting their teaching staff to regularly implement cooperative learning structures into their instruction. Given this fact, a recent request from my superintendent, Dr. Vern Minor, caught me off guard, especially knowing that he is a proponent of **Kagan Structures** and a trainer for Kagan.

He actually wanted me to purposely plan a learning activity where my students would be expected to work in groups, rather than in cooperative learning teams. In **Kagan workshops**, the instructor allows teachers to experience the difference between traditional teaching (Teacher A), group work (Teacher B), and cooperative learning (Teacher C). I was going to become "Teacher B" and have my students work in groups, without implementing a specific structure. Dr. Minor went on to inform me that there was a reason behind his odd request. Our district was in the midst of hiring a curriculum coordinator and Dr. Minor wanted to video my students working in groups so that potential applicants could watch the tape and analyse the activity to determine whether students were engaged in the learning, among other things. Not wanting to pass up the opportunity to go against the grain, at least for a little while, I agreed to Dr. Minor's request.



I decided to have my students make a poster of some geometry content we had been studying in math. They were to divide the poster into thirds, and then draw examples of the three different ways basic shapes can move, known as transformational geometry. While giving the directions to my students, I emphasised that they should work in teams. I



continued to use the word "team" as much as I could

throughout the directions. I finally let the students begin work while I began observing and Dr. Minor began taping. While no group of students started to use a familiar cooperative learning structure to complete the poster, many teams did start sharing the pencils and markers and some teams even made sure every team member had an opportunity to draw a transformation example. I was pleased to see this, since it meant **they were transferring skills from the numerous structures they have used throughout their years at our school.**

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In the end, however, teams completed the task by delegating roles to each team member. One team member was to complete the title, another team member was to draw transformation examples, another was to label the pictures, etc.

After all the teams had finished and Dr. Minor had stopped videoing, I decided to discuss what had just happened with my students. My first question was, "If you were the teacher, what would you have seen students doing or heard students saying?" Students brainstormed a list that included the following: some arguing, some agreeing, some students using correct voice volume and some not, some students leaning in to see what other students were doing and some not, helping, working together, and students doing different jobs.

My next question was, "What part of the poster contained the most opportunity for learning?" All my students quickly said that the content part (the actual examples) was the most important part. Finally I asked, "If your



job was to write the title of the poster, would you have learned very much today?" **I've never heard 21 third graders more silent.**

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The next day, I told my class that we would be doing the exact same activity, but this time we would be using the structure **RoundTable**. I knew I would be what in **Kagan workshops** is known as a "Teacher C," a teacher who uses cooperative learning structures. After the activity, we again made a list of what we saw and heard. Our list included: encouragement, students using correct voices, it was more quiet, students leaning in, inspiring (we have really worked hard on praising each other during structures), and all students doing everything on the poster. I reminded them

that the day before we had decided that the content of the poster contained the most amount of learning. Then I asked, "**Did everyone have a chance at learning today?**" **Everyone responded "Yes!"** Next I asked, "If you were the teacher, which way would you want your class to complete the assignment?" Everyone agreed that **using the structure ensured the most learning for all**, plus it had the added bonus of allowing students to practice their social skills at the same time. Finally I asked which way they, as students, would rather complete the activity. All but one student responded that they liked the structure more. When asked why, students responded that it was quieter and easier to concentrate, there was support if you made a mistake, you had people encouraging you, etc. The answer I liked most was **"you might not really like the job that you get if you only get one job."** At recess that same day, I asked the one student who said he liked the activity more the first day why he felt that way.

He told me that his mom had a saying, "You get what you get and you don't throw a fit." While he later said he did not mind using the structure, he just could not believe students had the nerve to complain about their jobs! He did wholeheartedly agree that from a teacher's perspective, using a structure would best ensure all students a chance at learning.

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These were fascinating activities, and even more fascinating were the discussions that followed. I found it most interesting that my students fooled themselves the first day into thinking that everyone was learning just because there was lots of talking and activity in the room. Many adults are fooled in the same manner. Needless to say, my students certainly now have a **better understanding of why we daily use structures** to ensure that engaged learning for all students occurs.

About the Author

Greg Heinrichs is a Year 3/4 teacher