

Promoting Student Comprehension with Cooperative Learning

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“The homework for tonight is to read Chapter 5.” The class’s communal sigh of antipathy can be even more frustrating to teachers than the next day’s lack of response to the assignment. How many students actually do assigned reading? One study, covering the last 25 years, reports that undergraduates in college complete about 30 percent of assigned work. Would it be surprising—in these days of DVRs, Internet, texting, email, and video games—if high school and middle school students’ homework completion rates were even less? What are teachers to do?

Comprehension strategies, such as cooperative learning and differentiated instruction, can help students better understand social studies texts, historical documents, and other substantive materials. Becoming competent, independent readers and thinkers requires practice that the following activities provide. By integrating these proven methods, teachers can help the diverse learners in their classrooms to advance.

To demonstrate various methods, I will use the historical theme of civil rights, but any topic can be substituted. These activities have students delving into assigned readings through discussion, analysis, interpretation, and evaluation while supporting and challenging all learners and keeping them actively engaged.

Cooperative Learning and Differentiated Instructions

Cooperative groups engage students socially, challenge them cognitively, and integrate cooperative and independent skills. To begin, organize students into heterogeneous groups of four or five, balancing strong readers, quick learners,

the behaviorally challenged, and those who struggle or learn best with positive role models. These teams are cooperative in nature and can also integrate aspects of Howard Gardner’s multiple intelligence theory, placing those who are strong in verbal linguistic skills with tactile or spatial learners, for example, or those who enjoy organizing information using charts or graphs with those who have difficulty picking out important text clues. Organizing groups carefully is time well spent and presupposes that teachers have an understanding of student skills, interests, and abilities.

While much teacher assessment is done informally through observation, discussions, or surveys, and formally through quizzes and tests, the best cooperative grouping requires teachers who know their students.¹ Also, while administrators across the country suggest differentiating instruction, some teachers need practice. Tracey Hall, Nicole Strangman, and Anne Meyer offer a useful review as well as helpful examples in their article, “Differentiated Instruction and Implications for UDL Implementation.”²

My own learning curve involved 14-year-old Lucy, who had serious behavior problems and whose one “traditional class” per day was mine. Her language, gestures, and lack of social skills were a teacher’s nightmare, but her intelligence, creativity, and clandestine desire to succeed were manna to an educator who longed to nurture growth. Once Lucy understood the rules of cooperative groups and was teamed with mature students who could ignore her worst behaviors and support her best, she became a cherished partner. Her naked honesty, atypical approach, and remarkable cleverness were appreciated, perhaps for the first time in her school history.

Cooperative learning and differentiated instruction present opportunities for all our “Lucys,” while allowing more privileged youngsters to stretch both academically and socially in unique ways. While her journey to June that year was bumpy for both of us, she succeeded beyond all expectations, especially hers.

Once carefully grouped, teachers can assign specific roles to each student. The suggested task list that follows is easily adapted to accommodate various assignments. Depending on the nature of the class and groups, as well as the complexity of the reading, teachers either direct appropriate tasks to individuals or let group members select from a list of activities. All tasks involve breaking down the assignment and dissecting it for

particular elements. Best of all, students stay enthusiastically engaged. English Language Learners, advanced readers, and struggling students all benefit.

For purposes of example only, I am using the American civil rights movement, but all activities support a variety of genres and topics.

1. Find and define a list (10–25) of key social studies vocabulary words from the reading (e.g., segregation, Jim Crow laws, integration, NAACP, separate but equal, Freedom Riders, civil rights, civil disobedience, SNCC).

2. Create a 10-question quiz utilizing important concepts found in the reading. Be sure to include a variety of questions such as the following:

- *Questions that require **understanding** of facts (example: Define and give an example of Jim Crow laws.)*
- *Questions that require **interpretation of material** (example: How is the United States different since the Supreme Court case of **Plessy vs. Ferguson**?)*
- *Questions that require **informed opinion** (examples: Explain why a person or event from this period inspired, intrigued, shocked, or puzzled you? How did other groups benefit from the civil rights law—e.g., Americans with Disabilities, women?)*
- *Questions that require **analysis**? (Example: In what ways did the civil rights movement make the United States a better country for all its citizens?)*

3. Write a brief skit or dialogue with Martin Luther King, Jr., as the main character. Use details from your reading, including historical facts from his

life and information about actual actions, words, and beliefs. (Possible scenario: King is explaining to his congregation the importance of non-violent activism.)

4. Use a Venn diagram to compare and contrast the views of two Americans who took different sides in the struggle for civil rights.

5. Write a song, rhyme or rap mentioning no fewer than 10 important points from the reading. If you want, adopt familiar melodies of the era such as “We Shall Overcome,” “Blowin’ in the Wind,” “This Little Light of Mine.” Be sure to integrate key vocabulary and be ready to perform!

6. Draw or cut out a series of pictures that concretely or symbolically represent major ideas from the reading. Label the back of each picture with the concept. (Possible examples: a black panther, a bridge (Selma), bus (Rosa Parks). Be ready to quiz other teams to see if they can guess what the pictures represent.

Each team may work on one particular assignment; or individuals or pairs within the group could work together to enable the group to complete two or three of the tasks.

Cooperative Jigsaws

The jigsaw method is another way to use cooperative grouping to explore the reading. Using this technique involves first having a home or base team meet. In that group, each individual is assigned a particular task or role. Then, students from the various groups who have the *same role* break into new groups that meet to become the “experts” for their particular assignment. After working on their particular task together, students return to their original groups to share their findings with original team members. Carefully chosen, these assignments foster deeper understanding. Here are some examples that work well in a jigsaw:

1. Event or Timeline: This group lists in chronological order all of the important

events in a given time period that have to do with the theme or subject. Teachers may want to provide colored markers so groups can color code types of events. (For example, the passage of laws, historical non-violent events, major clashes, etc.)

2. Famous or infamous people from the period: Create a list of major historical characters from the reading, such as Martin Luther King, Jr., Rosa Parks, James Meredith, Medgar Evers, Thurgood Marshall, Fannie Lou Hamer, Malcolm X. Beside each, list 3–5 key words or phrases that are associated with the person. (Hint: When the key words or phrases are read, are peers able to guess the character? Example: assassinated, clergyman, nonviolence, Southern Christian Leadership—for Dr. King.)

3. P (plus), M (minus), Q (questions): This group lists all of the historical information from the chapter or reading that they already knew (the plus list). They then list all of the ideas and concepts that were new to them (the minus list). Finally, they generate a list of 5–10 questions that they have or they think others may have that relate to the reading. (Example: What specific effects did the American civil rights movement have on voter rights for African Americans? What legislative achievements were a direct result of the movement? Summarize in three sentences or less the two sides of the civil rights issue.)

4. Vocabulary: One group can be in charge of key vocabulary. Sometimes, it is helpful for the teacher to provide the list and have students look them up and use them correctly in a sentence, garnering information from the text. Other times, it is best to have students generate the word list. If there is time, rather than simply defining the words or using them correctly in a sentence, students could write a brief news article or creative piece such as a letter or journal that might have been written during the time period. The task requires integrating the words in a context that demonstrates meaning and knowledge of

important historical discourse.

5. Webbing: The job of this group is to create visual maps, linking together critical ideas from the reading. The big picture may include a web with the words “civil rights” in the center and various lines extending from the center that list the main ideas from the passage. It is also possible to ask different teams to work on different webs with the centers having terms such as civil rights legislation, civil right leaders, geographical centers of the movement, etc. Other forms of visual information can be organized by this group on charts or graphs provided by the teachers, such as Venn diagrams for comparison, KWL charts that list what students know, what they want to learn, and, after studying, what they learned. The following websites have excellent free samples of charts and graphs, many provided by teachers: Education Place (www.eduplace.com/graphicorganizer/index.jsp) and TeacherVision (www.teachervision.fen.com/graphic-organizers/printable/6293.html). For students who struggle with more complex texts, this visual breakdown of information is game changing.

6. Outline and Summary: Sometimes an old-fashioned, simple outline or summary of the reading helps students learn how to tackle important concepts. Most students need review about how to use headings, subheadings, and bold face type to gather important details. Working in teams motivates advanced and struggling students to focus on effective strategies, not simply rote learning. I usually provide this group with a How To sheet on outlining and summarizing. This practice is also helpful on high stakes testing days, when students, under stress, must read and interpret information.

7. Context Clues: Some struggling readers are helped by context exercises. Ask groups to write up a passage using language and ideas from the reading, leaving out key words. They must be sure there is enough information in each

sentence to provide adequate clues to inform classmates. Well done, these passages can become a review quiz for the home groups.

With the jigsaw method, it is important to allow students to meet first with a home team to get their assignment before meeting with their “expert group” to delve more deeply into the reading or research. I have found it helpful to create cardboard “roles,” which I save by covering with contact paper. These are then readily available for redistribution with the next challenging reading assignment. Roles might include Clue Creators, Word Masters, Summarizers, and so forth. The cards foster expediency when individuals move into teams, and again, when they return to home groups to share and disseminate findings.

Strategies for more Intrapersonal Learners or Pairs

For those days when teachers prefer to have students work alone or in pairs, the following reading strategies work well. Later, findings can be shared or compared, but these tasks can begin more independently.

1. Key Concepts

The teacher begins with a column of words or phrases from the assigned text (civil rights, 14TH Amendment, prejudice, discrimination, assassination, hate crime, 15TH Amendment, de facto segregation, equality, etc.), asking students to fill out the following information for each word.

- a. What is the dictionary definition of the word?
- b. How is the word important to the reading? Explain the concept of the term in relationship to the text as a whole to demonstrate new understandings.
- c. In what ways can this word be used to demonstrate carry-over learning from the reading? Used in a new

context, vocabulary can become part of one’s fund of information.

This activity is more traditional in its method and allows students a way of working with challenging texts in a methodical fashion. Students can creatively contend with the third question, while still getting the practice and knowledge they need from the first and second question.

2. The Writing-Across-Curriculum movement has many enjoyable and beneficial strategies for comprehending text, while also giving needed practice in some basic writing forms.

- a. Give each student a word or phrase from the chapter and have them write an acrostic in either word, phrase, or complete sentence form. This helps them review material in a way that is particularly effective for those who enjoy puzzle-like activities. For example, a student is given the term “nonviolent resistance” and asked to write the word in a column on the left side of the paper. The student then searches for ideas related to the term and begins the phrase using letters from the term.

N – never uses force

O – offers resistance through peaceful protest

N – noncooperation through symbolic or economic means

V – virtually free of blood and fighting

I – introduced by leaders like King and Gandhi

And on it goes. At all different grade levels, students enjoy this activity. Younger ones often use just a word while others may choose full sentences or even create rhymes. While the activity can begin independently, it also works well in a Think-Pair-Share format where students work alone for about 10 minutes,

then pair up with a classmate to combine ideas, then share with the entire class. The final sharing serves as a review of the material.

b. In the same way, using the sentence stem “The key point to remember in this text is...” as a starter also helps review the text. In this method, students begin and end with the same sentence stem, but they go on to list 4–6 points from the reading that each found to be important. Here is an example:

1. **The important thing about the civil rights movement is ... “it changed the lives of many Americans.”** (Quoted material in that sentence would be student generated, as would be the following four phrases.)

2. *Men and women of all races and creeds fought for their beliefs in different ways;*
3. *Laws were not only passed but enforced across the country;*
4. *Some folks became famous, some died anonymously, but many contributed to the cause.*
5. *Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, Jr., Eldridge Cleaver and James Meredith played different but important roles.*

Return to 1. The important thing about the civil rights movement is ... “it changed the lives of many Americans.”

Because students do this alone or in pairs and then read their work to the class, most of the key points in the reading are discussed in ways that support comprehension and retention. All ideas contribute to the class’s understanding as a whole

in a review that promotes contribution and participation from all.

Other Ways to Review the Reading

1. Prepare a civil rights-era newspaper edition with headline stories, editorials, obituaries, personal interest stories, church meetings for social activism, political cartoons and other information that draws student interest.

2. Create a short book for younger readers, highlighting inspirational figures or telling key stories about the March in Selma, peaceful resistance, social activism, and so on.

3. Compile an “encyclopedia” of important people, events and dates or a dictionary of terms. It is easy to create e-books that can be shared online or paper books that can become part of the classroom library or displays.

In the twenty-first century, classroom teachers must compete with all kinds of media for students’ attention, so reading for understanding, especially historical documents and texts, can get short shrift. Using cooperative techniques and creative strategies to delve into texts and teach reading for understanding benefits students socially, academically, and long term. 📖

Notes

1. See “Cooperative Learning,” posted by Kennesaw University at <http://edtech.kennesaw.edu/intech/cooperativelearning.htm#why> for a quick review.
2. Tracey Hall, Nicole Strangman, and Anne Meyer, “Differentiated Instruction and Implications for UDL Implementation,” National Center on Accessible Instructional Materials, http://aim.cast.org/learn/historyarchive/backgroundpapers/differentiated_instruction_udl.

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