

# RELEARNING HOW TO LEARN

## *Teachers Practice New Models*

BY RITA HENRIQUEZ-ROARK AND WILLIAM H. GREEN

With Susan Earnest, Sonya Eberhart, Linda Horton, Sherry Housley, Phyllis Knight, and Julie Ritterskamp

**A** persistent problem for teachers is how to implement and maintain new instructional practices in the real-world classroom. There is often a problem of follow-up and support for teachers while they learn to implement new strategies. One of the most effective and powerful ways to do this is to organize teachers into small study groups that work collegially and collaboratively. Although the idea of small groups of professionals working together to accomplish a task is not a

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new one, the idea of introducing, reinforcing, and maintaining new practices in very specific ways is probably a novel notion to most teachers and administrators.

A study group consists of four, five, or six teachers who work together to implement new concepts. The group must meet regularly (at least an hour a week or four hours a month) to discuss an instructional focus or agenda and to share failures as well as successes.<sup>1</sup>

Here is an account of a successful effort to solve these kinds of problems, told in large part by the teachers them-

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selves. In this case, Carolina Conference teachers were organized into study groups to learn to teach concept attainment and cooperative techniques.

What has inspired this surge of creativity in schools in the Carolina Conference? What is concept attainment? What other changes in teaching are occurring? How are the students affected? What follows are glimpses into the answers to these questions.

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“Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to our First Annual Fashion Show at Columbia Junior Academy.” Although concept attainment had given us a fresh approach to instruction in the classroom, we had never thought of using it for an assembly on the dress code, so when the principal, Chester Caswell, suggested the topic, we were puzzled—but only for a moment. Ideas began popping almost immediately. This is what concept attainment does for you. It shakes up your thinking and causes creative ideas to flow.

### **Concept Attainment**

Usually, our students’ attitude about discussing the dress code has been one of predictable boredom, but this time there was excitement in the air. In a concept attainment lesson<sup>2</sup> you need a balance of positive and negative examples, although not necessarily the same number of each. The student association had picked 18 model outfits. However, 16 of the 18 models were examples of inappropriate dress, so we quickly had to choose additional models from the audience. (There were more volunteers than we were able to use!)

It was the job of the commentator to impartially describe the outfits. She hadn’t seen all of them beforehand, so she experienced a shock or two. As the commentator described each outfit, the model held up a “yes” or “no” sign to indicate the appropriateness of the clothing. Students remained enthusiastic and involved during the whole presentation. At the end of the exercise, we held a discussion to pull our ideas together. Because of their previous experience with concept attainment, almost every student was familiar with the format.

The first child who raised her hand stated that she didn’t have any idea what was going on. Hesitating momentarily, the commentator nervously continued. (Had we only entertained the group? Taught

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them? Or perhaps done both?) The next student said that he had been involved in a concept attainment lesson and understood the concept, and other students echoed his sentiment. Proceeding to the next raised hand, the commentator listened intently as this student addressed the puzzlement of the first child: “This is a concept attainment lesson on dress-code standards. You need for us to understand what’s acceptable to wear and what’s not. Getting to see what’s appropriate and what’s not has made it much clearer than hearing about it.” We had done it!

A concept attainment lesson is designed to help students grasp an idea by showing them positive and negative examples of the concept—in this case, appropriate dress. The teacher does not tell the students beforehand what the concept is; the students have to determine the attributes of the concept by looking at the positive examples and finding their common characteristics. Several students at Columbia Junior Academy volunteered to be in next year’s show, and the discussion about appropriate dress continued long after the presentation. Obviously, this concept attainment lesson had produced a more positive attitude toward the dress code.

### **Cooperative Learning**

In our December study group, we focused on cooperative learning; specifically, using the jigsaw method.<sup>3</sup> The six participating teachers were divided into three groups of two members each. Each group was given part of a U.S. history chapter with instructions for each group member to become an expert on the material. After allowing time to read, explain, and discuss possible questions and answers, the six teachers were regrouped to form two groups with three members each. Each group had one member who was an “expert” on one

piece of material. Collectively, they knew an entire section. The members then spent time with each expert, sharing their knowledge and making sure the other team members knew as much as they did.

Following the sharing and reinforcement, the groups were given a quiz, with the questions reflecting as many levels of Bloom’s Taxonomy as possible. During the quiz, the group members could not use notes or the textbook. Also, the person who had taught the piece of the section being tested could not answer or prompt the others. This made each person responsible not only for listening attentively, but also for teaching effectively.

The results of the quiz showed that retention of factual material was nearly 100 percent, and that group members were able to analyze and synthesize the information they shared.

### **Enhanced Learning**

The teacher who demonstrated this method to the other study group members had used it successfully many times in her classroom. Her middle-grade students not only showed higher recall of factual material, but also were able to reason from cause to effect, compare the time period being studied with modern-day American politics, and ask questions that became springboards for more research. Above all, the students recognized parallels between what they had been taught in the classroom and their daily lives.

One aspect of cooperative learning that needs to be addressed is the teacher’s willingness to give up his or her “traditional” role, that of lecturer and discussion leader. During cooperative-learning activities, the students take charge of their own learning, and the teacher becomes more of a facilitator or manager. This in no way diminishes the teacher’s effectiveness or importance. Rather, it is one of a variety of strategies teachers can use to accommodate the students’ many different learning styles.

One student summed up the feeling of many of her classmates when she said, “I paid a whole lot more attention to the stuff when I had to make sure I listened to my own self read and also had to make sure the other group members knew it, too. When we shared the responsibility of knowing a whole section, we found we really could learn it and remember it longer, even

for the chapter test?"

## Conclusions

The teachers who have implemented cooperative learning and concept attainment are pleased with the results of using cooperative learning strategies throughout the day. Their students use the social skills to solve problems that arise in work as well as in play.

As the teachers have used cooperative learning successfully in science or social studies, they have become excited about their students' success and enjoyment in learning.

Concept attainment has provided many opportunities for students and teachers alike to feel the thrill of achievement. To watch faces light up, eyes sparkle, and hands wave as the students grasp meaning through the use of concept attainment is pure delight for teachers.

Although it takes more time and effort to plan the lessons using concept attainment and cooperative learning than to

plan traditional textbook-based lessons, many teachers are encouraged by the obvious long-term learning, retention, and the involvement of the students in the learning process.

Experiencing firsthand their students' excitement, success, and involvement stimulates Carolina teachers to use their teaching time more effectively by implementing these teaching strategies. They become almost addicted to the results they observe in their classrooms. "Revitalized is the best word to describe how I feel about my teaching now," one teacher remarked.

The support, encouragement, and instruction provided in study-group sessions have been invaluable in promoting the willingness to try new techniques, the feelings of confidence, and the overall exhilaration. For these teachers, the experience has been renewing and energizing. ✍

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## REFERENCES

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*Members of a teacher study group in the Carolina Conference.*

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