COOPERATIVE LEARNING IN THE THEOLOGY CLASSROOM: THE MEXICAN EXPERIENCE

came to cooperative learning much as C. S. Lewis came to faith: a long-lost rebel, "brought in kicking [against the pricks], struggling [against better judgment], resentful [of inevitability], and darting his eyes in every direction for a chance of escape."[1] But truth has conquered,[2] and now, once a true believer, always an evangelist.

Once I was sold on cooperative learning, my enthusiasm soon infected the classrooms of the SDA Theological Seminary in Mexico, where I set out to practice the new technique, making modifications as needed. The subjects I taught varied from "Studies in the Pentateuch" through "Psalms and Wisdom Literature" to "Biblical Archaeology" and "Classical Hebrew," all of which I believe may be better mastered through cooperative learning.[3]

A Sound Rationale

But what does mastery mean? Certainly more than acquiring information, or data bases would be our supreme masters. No teacher worth his or her salt is content with imparting information. Life is more than data, and good teaching must prepare minds and souls for living. In this regard, cooperative learning provides a way to celebrate the biblical dictum, "we are members of one another" (Ephesians 4:25, NASB).[4]

Yet, for all its pluses, cooperative learning is no different from any other innovative classroom technique. All are limited by their requirement for controlled space and the presence of a teacher. Academic exercises connect with real life only as teachers guide and inspire students to work things out on their own. This mirrors the Master Teacher, who blended personal instruction with team assignments involving field work (see Luke 10:1). "The goal," according to Clark Bouton and Beryl Rice, "is for groups to acquire the ability to develop their own learning plans, using the teacher as a resource and consultant."[5] This is how I teach. Rather than describing standard approaches to classroom teamwork, this article will suggest ways that students can work as a unit, without external supervision, to complete a research assignment.

A Positive Context

Based on my teaching experience from elementary through postgraduate levels, in many different subjects and several different countries, I have concluded that the Mexican theology classroom offers a positive context for cooperative learning because of the combination of two factors: (1) the people who populate such classrooms, and (2) what happens when they leave.

Who Comes to Seminary?

The call to ministry is a highly individualistic experience, which can lead to strong personality clashes among gospel ministers. This is not necessarily a matter of human pride. Consider the classic confrontation between Barnabas and Paul over John Mark (Acts 15:36-39). Rather than a display of bigotry or conceit, this conflict reveals a commitment to principle as individually perceived.

Because of the combination of strong personality traits and commitment to mission, ministerial students

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often need significant instruction in the benefits and techniques of working together in teams.

What Happens When They Leave?

Like workers in many areas where the church is growing rapidly, Mexican seminary graduates encounter challenges that will daunt all but the bravest. The conditions they face encourage highly independent behavior and require self-motivation. Distance separates them from pastoral colleagues and central administration. Communication with fellow workers will at times be impossible. Undoubtedly, church administrators in this area have well-laid plans. But the success of those plans will always depend, humanly speaking, on the workers in the field. They must have the training—as early and as much as possible—to discourage them from regarding their planners and strategists as too far removed from ground level to know what is needed or if it is applied. They must commit to working together because they believe in the value of teamwork.

For these reasons, I accompany my classroom practice with "preaching" about the relevance of teamwork to my students' long-term goals. I particularly emphasize the need for cooperation in real-life situations, not merely in controlled space. Though the process has not been painless or error free, I have seen it become gratifying to most if not all of my classes.

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What I Have Attempted

My efforts at cooperative learning can be divided into two parts of apparently unequal weight: (1) team selection, and (2) project assignment through evaluation.

Selecting Teams

This first heading may seem much less important than task assignment, completion, and evaluation. But it has to come first and in practice has taught me more. A good beginning goes a long way toward ensuring a good ending. I have included some of my blunders and improvements in the hope that they will be helpful to others.

At the beginning of the semester, I announce to students that some assignments will require teamwork. (This information is also included in the course outline and class schedules.) Finding out that members of each team always get the same grade is a potential source of major disgruntlement for students, so this gives me time to deal with various questions and objections.

Before I understood the importance of waiting to form teams, late registrants created problems. Some latecomers were assigned belatedly. Others were not placed at all. This left me the quandary of deciding how to grade them.

Late assignees faced resistance from groups that had immediately begun to work together and felt cheated by latecomers who received the same credit as they "which have borne the burden and heat of the day" (see Matthew 20:12, KJV). This was particularly a problem with Model A (see box), since team members tended to get together, divide the assignment into as many parts as there were members, and thereafter work independently. As a consequence, if I discovered unassigned persons late in the semester and stuck them in the last team to report, they often had to do very little. Assigning teams after a few sessions improved Model A, but switching to Model B worked much better. (More about this later.)

A third benefit of waiting to assign teams is allowing students to get acquainted. Bouton and Rice observe that becoming a cohesive and effective unit takes time.[6] Even more fundamentally, it takes time for students to accept the team concept. The notion strikes many individuals as a threat to their privacy, schedules, and final grade. Time and satisfying interaction will reduce resistance in these crucial areas.

Fourth, for those who (like me) can't remember names, it affords some opportunity to get to know class members individually. Establishing a positive climate within the class as a whole contributes much to *esprit de corps* among its subgroups later on. In the end, a few days does not really prove to be a problem.

When students question my reluctance to promptly unleash their investigative energies, I explain that a few lectures will better acquaint them with the subject and prepare them to investigate more intelligently.

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Selecting Captains

Initially, I entertained grave doubts about autocracy, as illustrated by arbitrariness of Model B. But "Random assignment is perhaps the easiest and most effective way to assign students to groups."[7] So now I randomly determine both team composition and leadership. True, my students no longer get to choose the most popular group member as leader, or whimsically nominate the most reluctant candidate. However, arbitrary selection of teams and captains (as in Model B), lets the class know that the principal purpose of the exercise is group work, not recognition, individual administrative skills, or good feelings.

Doing the Work

Until I began to use Model B, teamwork was more theory than reality. Team spirit rarely manifested itself. All that mattered was what happened on presentation day. I could see that I had an exploitative system. My insistence that students learn to work together only made things worse for the conscientious—and better for their less-ambitious colleagues.

To be honest, my reluctance to change had much to do with my own character flaws. Before I was sold on cooperative learning, my chief fear had been that it would hinder individual effort and high achievement. I have since learned that "iron sharpens iron" (Proverbs 27:17), and that "two are better than one because they have a good return for their labor" (Ecclesiastes 4:9). I understand now that "a cord of three strands is not quickly torn apart" (v. 12). Some students suffered unfairly under Model A because I forced them to learn my lesson, even if it was not the one they really needed. I refused requests to reassign less-productive team members, believing those making the request were motivated by a narrow concern for grades. Thus I benefitted the idler, since the diligent ones often did the bulk of the work and gave compilations to their less-ambitious teammates to read on presentation day. Sometimes the results were amusing, as readers, attempting to expound with confidence upon previously unseen material, exposed both their unfamiliarity with the topic and my failed efforts at teaching lessons-for-living.

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Use of Model B changed all that. It stimulated team identification and group spirit and generated a level of enthusiasm never achieved under the earlier approach. The reason is simple: Teammates who play together all season develop a much stronger sense of identity than those who come together for a single game. In assigning only single tasks to teams, I betrayed my reservations about the approach. But team members who know they are in for the long haul "become committed to finding ways to motivate and encourage their groupmates. Problems in working with each other cannot be ignored or waited out."[8] The excitement of group work now produces a quality and creativity I never dreamed possible before discovering that long-

term commitment means as much in academia as in life. After all, what could be better than borrowing lessons-for-living from real life?

When classes of approximately 30 students are divided into teams of four, a single group under Model B has seven performance opportunities instead of just one (as under Model A). In the earlier model, groups mostly concerned themselves with their own project, for it was all they would be evaluated upon. They could be absent or creatively distract themselves during other presentations. Under Model B, each group—and the teacher as well—receives a copy of the finished project. Everyone studies it; the teacher critiques it, lauding its virtues, questioning its apparent inconsistencies, suggesting data adjustments and input from the class; and teams prepare to be quizzed on the subject matter as modified by critique. These quizzes take a variety of forms: Teams select their "champions"; or everyone participates and the totals are divided by the number of team members; or the questions are shared among team members, either self-selected or randomly determined by the teacher. One way or another, the students exhibit seven times as much excitement and perform a good deal more work than under the previous system.

At the same time, the percentage of the final grade determined by cooperative learning exercises remains the same as under Model A. It is important that the grades of conscientious students not be jeopardized even if, by some quirk of fate, a single one of these should be thrown in with a team of totally irresponsible slackers—a hypothetical situation that will take a long time to materialize. Guarding against this farfetched possibility, I limit the cooperative learning portion of final grades to 10 percent of the total evaluation, so that superior students can still earn A's even if their team grade comes out badly.

Instead of a single presentation worth 10 percentage points, each student now has, in addition, seven projects to study. Parents and teachers concerned about adequate coverage of course content can be sure that my students are now more amply served than if I tried to dictate all the information to them.

Reactions From Students

When I asked for student reactions to the team techniques, I received a much greater response from those who had experienced Model B.[9] The variety of affirmations has amazed me. What follows is a random compilation: "It made us think," "it made us work together," ". . . focus on a common objective," "learned more," "made learning easier," "provided a social context for learning," "strengthened companionship," "put pressure on us to study since we would be drilled," "required us to prepare oral responses—especially in front of the teacher," "elicited more participation from the total number of students," "one of the best methods I intend to make use of when I become a teacher," "teaming up is good but grading should be individual too," "fostered sharing of many ideas, many thinking styles," "very good because very dynamic," "can still get better but basically good because of team interchange," "produced different perceptions, deeper insight into a given text," "good way to exploit resources," and "teaches mutual dependency."

Conclusion

Cooperative learning has taught my students many things about themselves and one another. By working together, they have learned to count on each other's strengths and to improve upon each other's weaknesses. Even the disclosure of individual flaws has proved to be a positive experience for them. Increased sensitivity to areas of need offers expanded opportunities for growth.

Also, as I have assigned team projects, I have been able to share with my students, collectively and individually, the significance of teamwork and cooperation for their calling as gospel ministers. Because of the difficulties that gifted individualists have shared with me, I have been better able to highlight the dimension of gospel witness that Jesus emphasized in His final prayer before Gethsemane: "That they all may be one; . . . that the world may believe that thou didst send me" (John 17:21, KJV).

Thus, though my students and I know we have not reached perfection, we are happy about where we are now. We are on the way to mastering a model that illustrates the gospel's harmonizing power. For indeed, educational technique is gospel, too! &

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, Inc., 1955), p. 229.

2. The literature supporting cooperative learning is so compelling that it does not require review here. Arthur Ellis and Jeffrey Fouts, *Research on Educational Innovations* (Princeton Junction, N. J.: Eye on Education Inc., 1993), have called it "one of the biggest, if not the biggest educational innovations of our time" (p. 117). For volumes of particular relevance to tertiary-level education, our present focus, see, for example, the following by David W. Johnson, Roger T. Johnson, and Karl A. Smith: *Cooperative Learning: Increasing College Faculty Instructional Productivity*, ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report No. 4 (Washington, D.C.: The George Washington University, School of Education and Human Development, 1991); and *Active Learning: Cooperation in the College Classroom* (Edina, Minn.: Interaction Book Co., 1991). See also Harvey C. Foyle, ed., *Interactive Learning in the Higher Education Classroom: Collaborative, and Active Learning Strategies*, NEA Professional Library Higher Education Series (Washington, D.C.: National Education Association, 1995).

3. "[C]ooperative and collaborative learning, in any discipline, give students the opportunity to learn [to work together and to learn all through life] by completing the course as designed and by imitating the academic behaviors modeled by the professor." Laura M. Ventimiglia, "Cooperative Learning at the College Level," in Foyle, p. 20.

4. Unless otherwise noted, all Bible texts are from the *New American Standard Bible* © The Lockman Foundation 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977.

5. Clark Bouton and Beryl Rice, "Developing Student Skills and Abilities," in Clark Bouton and Russell Y. Garth, eds., *Learning in Groups*, from the series *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, Kenneth E. Eble, John F. Noonan, eds. (San Francisco: Jossey Bass Inc., Publishers, 1983), p. 33. Educational researchers and practitioners are of course aware of the link between classroom technique and real life. An NEA publication on interactive classroom learning opens with a chapter by David C. Foyle and Michael G. Shafto on real world cooperation, highlighting the value of teamwork to the success of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration Terminal Area Productivity program. See David C. Foyle and Michael G. Shafto, "Teamwork in the Real World," in Foyle, pp. 11-18; and Ventimiglia.

6. Bouton and Rice, p. 34.

7. David W. Johnson, Roger T. Johnson, Edythe J. Holubec, *Cooperative Learning in the Classroom* (Alexandria, Va.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1994), p. 26; also, *The New Circles of Learning: Cooperation in the Classroom and School* (Alexandria, Va.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1994), p. 60.

8. *New Circles*, p. 53.

9. Perhaps because the other was too negative to charitably report upon or perhaps because they mostly remembered the later model?

COMPARISON OF MODELS

Item No.	MODEL A	Item No.	MODEL B
1-a	Teams randomly selected at start of semester.	1-a/b	Teams and captains randomly selected after several class sessions.
1-b	Teams select captains. Projects for semester distributed to all teams.	2	Projects for semester distributed to all teams.
3	Teams present report to class, copy to teacher as per schedule.	3	Teams prepare research report, distribute copies to teacher and other teams, as per class schedule.
4	Teacher responds to class on team report.	4	All teams tested on each team's research report, as per class schedule.
5	Final team evaluation awarded & reported to team; based 50% on report, 50% on presentation.	5	Team evaluation registered on each research report.
		6	Total evaluation recorded (team report plus team response to all reports).
		7	Final evaluation awarded.