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Introduction

In the summer of 1991, I attended a conference conducted by Peter Senge, author of *The Fifth Discipline*. During the afternoon session, I had a strong feeling of déjà vu. As Senge instructed our investigation of cause-and-effect patterns in learning organizations, I was reminded of my first introduction to cause-effect analysis with Edwards Deming in 1982. In that program, I first saw the “fishbone” chart as a tool for analyzing problems.

In subsequent years, I understood that the fishbone fitted into a new learning framework called graphic or cognitive organizers. After the fishbone came the concept map (Gabrielle Rico and Tony Buzan). After the concept map came the Venn diagram (Thomas Venn via my daughter’s maths class) and recollections about the defuzzing wheel (Robert Hawley), also called the “web.” From these four initial graphic organizers came the idea for *The Co-operative Think Tank*, the predecessor of this book.

As I work with senior secondary teachers (and beyond) I hear over and over the concerns about the practicality of using graphic organizers when there is “so much content to cover.” Knowing the curricular pressures on secondary school teachers to cover content, I recognize two issues. On the one hand, these teachers are, as many of the “experts” in co-operative learning would agree, confusing the forest with trees. Teachers’ overriding concern about covering the material is blocking their ability to see the potential power of co-operative learning to facilitate greater achievement among their students. For the second part, the co-operative learning “experts” have not provided teachers with tools such as graphic organizers that enable them to make best use of the co-operative learning model.

A discussion with Beau Fly Jones about what she calls “instructional agendas” clarified an idea for me about the connections among required curricular content, co-operative learning, and graphic organizers. In my search for better ways to structure co-operative learning and information processing, I saw for the first time the most important connection among these three agendas. Rather than view each as a stand-alone agenda that somehow had to be squeezed into the already overstuffed daily timetable, I needed to look at the three from an integrated perspective. Usually, we look at integration from a thematic view. We tie different topics or courses around a theme and teach the connections from a content perspective, such as “Australian studies” (literature and history) or “environmental studies” (science, maths, social studies). Why not nest content and thinking patterns within a co-operative learning framework? Hence the “triple-agenda lesson”—a single lesson or unit which integrates the graphic organizers as a tool for promoting thoughtful study of course content in a co-operative learning structure.