

Cooperative Learning &
Social Studies
Towards Excellence & Equity

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Chart of Themes

National Council for Social Studies Curriculum Standards

Civic ideals and practices
Time, continuity and change
People, places and change
Individual development and environment
Individuals, groups and identity
Production, distribution and institutions
Power, authority and consumption
Science, technology and governance
Global connections
Culture

NARRATIVE

1. Geoflash on Europe			✓							
2. Immigration from Latin America			✓						✓	
3. Multiple Intelligences and Metaphors		✓								
4. Christopher Columbus: Was He a Great Man?		✓								
5. Assimilation				✓	✓					✓
6. Globingo and Lobingo			✓	✓					✓	
7. Demonstrating Orographic Rainfall			✓							
8. Teaching about Revolutions		✓					✓			
9. The Underground Railroad		✓		✓			✓			
10. Rhythms of Resistance in Southern Africa			✓				✓		✓	✓
11. Images of the World		✓								
12. Neighborhood Field Study	✓		✓							
13. Reading Strategies										
14. Land and Logging			✓			✓				
15. The Return of Martin Guerre		✓		✓	✓					
16. Current Events Study	✓									
17. Forest Ecology			✓						✓	
19. Economic Field Study of the Parking Lot	✓					✓	✓		✓	✓
20. Analyzing Arguments on Women's Role		✓								
21. On China		✓	✓					✓	✓	✓
22. Cartoon Analysis										
23. Personal and Political Change	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓			
24. Case Studies on Violence and Rebellion							✓			

Foreword

BY DR. SPENCER KAGAN

The single most important function of an educational system in any democracy is to prepare students to fulfill the office of citizen. The wisdom and democratic habits we provide for our students today will determine whether we as a democracy flourish or fail when those students begin to chart our future tomorrow.

There is no more important function we as educators can fulfill than creating an informed, wise, democratic electorate. It rests with us to create the next generation electorate—an electorate committed to preserving a respect for the delicate balance between the will of the majority and the rights of the minority; respectful of the needs and opinions of an increasingly diverse population; willing and able to assume the stewardship of the nation and, together with those of other nations, the planet.

It is one of the greatest ironies and tragedies of our educational system that we come to settle generally and almost exclusively on autocratic classroom structures as methods to prepare students for participation in a democracy! It is a practice destined for failure: What we do, screams louder than what we say.

How can we prepare students to listen to, respect, and weigh a range of opinions, if we rely on classroom instructional strategies in which the teacher does most of the talking? If student-student interaction remains the occasional, exceptional event, we cannot hope to create a generation of students prepared for democracy. How can we prepare students to reach reasoned decisions based on the needs of all if we use classroom structures in which

only the teacher decides what and how to study, how to evaluate the product, and the content of the classroom rules of conduct?

What a missed opportunity! With traditional methods we miss the opportunity to make our classrooms active labs in which to practice the process of democracy.

The traditional approach is absurd not only philosophically, but practically. Let's take one example: Current events. If we want our students to become an informed electorate, we need to have them report often on the events of the day. To that end, the presentation of "current events" is a time honored tradition in schools of every democracy. We attempt to have students read and report and think about the important events of the day so often that it becomes habitual. Unless we create in our students firm habits of reading and thinking about the events of the day, we cannot hope to create the wise, informed electorate of tomorrow.

If we choose the traditional structure for current events, each student in turn stands before the class to present for at least three minutes. Students each receive at least a minute of feedback from teacher and classmates. And then there is another minute of transition while the presenter retires to allow another to take his/her place. Five minutes a student multiplied by the thirty students in our classroom equal 150 minutes—three class periods. If it takes 150 minutes to do a round of current events, we can only have students reporting on current events occasionally, and reading about and thinking about the events of the day will not become habitual among our students. We will have failed in our mission of creating the informed electorate. And how have students spent their time during those three class periods? Three minutes each presenting, one minute each getting feedback, and the remaining 146 minutes waiting their turn! I challenge a talented behavioral engineer to come up with a structure more exquisitely designed to generate apathy and disinterest—qualities that spell doom in a democracy.

If we choose instead one of the many cooperative structures Tom Morton so well describes, the class comes alive. Discussion results. Students actively practice the skills of participants in a democracy. They hone their abilities to weigh competing ideas—abilities that spell a brighter future.

Consider what happens if we replace the traditional structure with a Three-Step Interview. Each student in the class is interviewed about his/her current event, interviews another, and then shares with the team what he/she has learned. The whole process takes less than 10 minutes. Within 10 minutes we accomplish more than with 150 minutes using the traditional approach.

When we adopt the cooperative alternative, how have students spent their time? They divide their time between presenting, listening carefully to others, and representing the point of view of others. They are held accountable for careful, accurate listening. They gain democratic values and skills.

If we are to fulfill our mission as educators in a democracy, we must walk the walk, not just talk the talk. We must restructure our classrooms so democracy is a living, breathing experience—not just words in a text. The alternative to making our classrooms active labs for acquiring democratic skills is to continue with our present autocratic classroom practices—practices which leave our students ill-prepared to shape a democratic future.

And Tom makes it easy. All we need to do is try any of his activities to discover how easily we can unleash the power of the cooperative, democratic alternative. This Canadian scholar and educator is a strong voice welcoming us to come to a more reasonable, responsible alternative. Morton's book provides us with a welcome invitation to make democracy come alive in our classrooms—to align our practices with our values.

The decision is as important as any we face as educators. In the balance hangs our future.

Part 1

INTRODUCTION:

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

That was the pattern of school life—a continuous triumph of the strong over the weak. Virtue consisted in winning: it consisted in being bigger, stronger, handsomer, richer, more popular, more elegant, more unscrupulous than other people—in dominating them, bullying them, making them suffer pain, making them look foolish, getting the better of them in every way.

—George Orwell, *Such Were the Days*, 1947

Orwell paints a horrid image of ruthless student competition, a school yard version of Picasso's *Guernica*. Most teachers would imagine a much more attractive picture of their own school, but many years later in his landmark study, *A Place Called School* (1984), John Goodlad presented a different, but equally unappealing portrait of school life in North America. Two images dominated, a teacher talking at students and students working alone. There was little cohesion or common purpose among class members in many of the hundreds of classrooms Goodlad's team visited. Though students saw social studies topics as potentially exciting, the classes were not. The emotional tone was flat. If this were the painting of classroom life, it would be an amorphous abstract done in beige and grey pastels.

Fortunately, many of the social studies teachers with whom I work are creating more vibrant classroom settings, far removed from either the brutal or the bland. They want classes characterized by lively,

purposeful discussion about important content and issues, classes in which all students are contributing and using their minds well. They want caring classes where all students, regardless of ability or achievement level, are eager and able to learn—classes which value both excellence and equity. These teachers see cooperative learning approaches as their primary colors for painting such classes.

I wish to acknowledge especially the excellent teachers in the **British Columbia Cooperative Learning Association**, the students and teachers at **John Oliver Secondary School**, and **John Myers** of the Toronto Board of Education. **Jeanne Stone** gave useful ideas for revision, **Wendy Staroba Loreen** developed the layout, and **Catherine Hurlbert** formatted this book.

While *Cooperative Learning and Social Studies: A Guide for Secondary and Middle*

School Teachers is based on **Spencer Kagan's** Structural Approach, I also should credit many other cooperative learning researchers, in particular **David** and **Roger Johnson** whose names and spirit appear throughout this guide. The book also reflects the work of **Elizabeth Cohen** and her colleagues at Stanford University who have given both John Myers and I an appreciation of how diversity can work in the classroom through using students' multiple abilities.

Above all, I wish to acknowledge the profound cooperation of my wife, **Rose-Hélène Gagné**, ma compagne de vie, and dedicate the book to her and our daughter **Chloé**.

Tom Morton
Vancouver, 1996



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