Cooperative Learning Revisited:

A Way to Address the Standards

Many music class activities and exercises that engage children in cooperative learning can be used for teaching to the National Standards.

BY KIRK KASSNER

At conferences and workshops around the country recently, few teachers report using cooperative-learning techniques in their music classes. Yet, a good deal of literature has documented the value of cooperative learning.[1] Cooperative learning has been the foundation of my teaching for many years, and I have seen wonderful—almost miraculous—benefits from using it, especially when it is used in conjunction with the National Standards for Music Education.[2]

Music educators want students to learn musical skills and concepts, but they also should consider the importance of helping students acquire positive attitudes and skills needed for collaboration, leadership, acceptance of peers, reduction of prejudices, and promotion of the personal value of each student. These extramusical social goals can be achieved while increasing students' musical learning, improving classroom management, and promoting individual accountability by structuring classes in cooperative-learning groups. Cooperative learning is a well-developed system for teaching students in small-group settings. It has three main goals: (a) the enhancement of individual student learning and retention through group work, (b) the development of positive attitudes toward subject matter and toward learning in general, and (c) the development of interpersonal and social problem-solving skills. Music making requires many qualities that are inherent in cooperative learning: positive interdependence, individual accountability, emphasis on tasks, direct teaching of social skills (as they relate to music making), and frequent teacher observation and intervention.

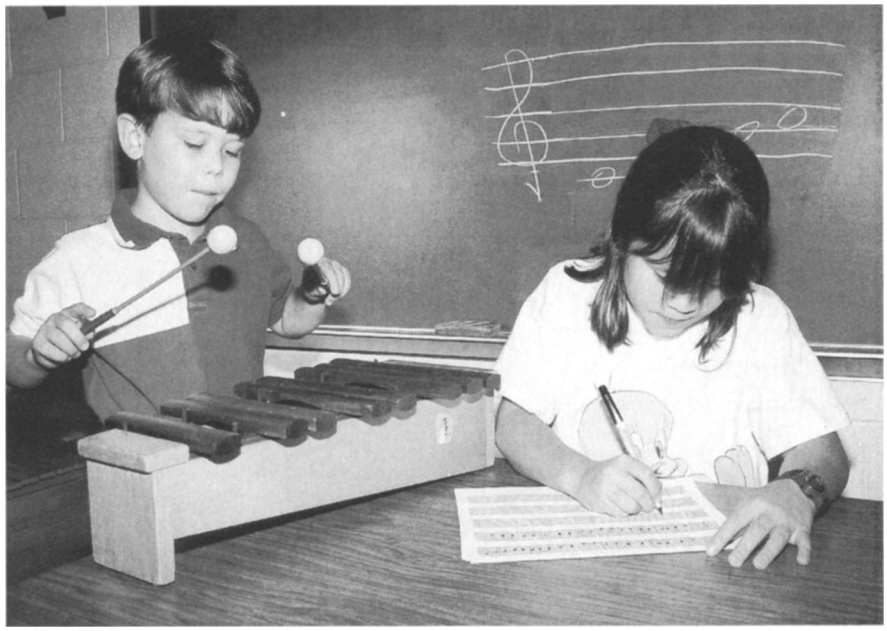

Photo by Jim Kirby.

Each student in a cooperative learning group should have a specific function.

Cooperative learning promotes learning by encouraging students to work together. "Cooperation tends to build up, to support, and to satisfy the need to belong to a group. In an age of interdependence, cooperation becomes a necessity rather than a mere option," according to Jane Kita Cook and Mildred Haipt.[3] David W. Johnson and Roger T. Johnson acknowledge that students "imitate each other's behavior and identify with friends possessing admired competen-

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cies. Through providing models, reinforcement, and direct learning, peers shape a wide variety of social behaviors, attitudes, and perspectives."[4] Cooperative learning encourages students to become involved with subject matter at all levels of Bloom's cognitive taxonomy.[5] In the process of working together, students are required to discuss, explain, interpret, demonstrate, relate, generalize, compare, and justify their understandings.

David Johnson and his colleagues also believe that greater understanding results from group discussion:

> Involved participation in cooperative-learning groups inevitably produces conflicts among the ideas, opinions, conclusions, theories, and information of members. When managed skillfully, such controversies promote increased motivation to achieve, higher achievement and retention of the learned material, and greater depth of understanding.[6]

Additional resources on cooperative learning can be found in the Resources for Using Cooperative Learning sidebar.

Group Formation

What practical matters need to be considered to help music teachers implement cooperative learning? Phyllis Kaplan and Sandra Stauffer's *Cooperative Learning in Music* has some excellent suggestions for setting it up in music classrooms.[7] The formation of groups can be difficult, depending on the makeup of the class, their experience with cooperative learning, and the number of individuals who have difficulties relating to others and/or low interpersonal skills. Having four or five students in a group is best. Fewer creates a group too small to consider divergent points of view, and more can prevent group cohesion and cause some students to retreat to wallflower status. Students of different abilities should be equally distributed in each group. Give each person in the group a specific function: the captain provides overall leadership and speaks for the group, the assistant captain substitutes for the captain when absent, the encourager is the official cheerleader for the group, the timekeeper keeps the group informed of time remaining to finish a task, and the paper handler distributes and collects the group's papers and pencils. Inform students that the groups and roles will be changed every six to seven weeks, so that everyone will have the opportunity to function in each role.

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Cooperative learning is a well-developed system for teaching students in small-group settings.

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One approach to group formation is to allow students to choose their own groups. Require those who want to be captains to find two others willing to be in their group. This eliminates the problematic waste of time when would-be captains lack enough members to form a group. It also identifies and empowers the natural leaders, who can help the teacher keep the others directed toward meaningful musical goals. After each embryonic group of three is established, have the captains choose the remaining unattached students one at a time until all students belong to a group.

When allowing students to form their own groups, it may be necessary to intervene at several points in the process. If past problems have shown that some students should not sit next to each other, list their names on the board and announce that they must belong to separate groups. If one or more students remain unchosen at the end of the selection process, assign students to the groups as you think best or use a chance system (drawing straws, a lottery, or a coin flip). Take this time to talk with students about student selection for groups. This must be done with care and compassion to help students learn to modify their behavior without lowering their self-esteem. Skillful teachers can take this problem and turn it into a valuable learning experience in interpersonal skills.

Some teachers prefer to form groups by chance. One way to accomplish this is to cut colored paper into four small strips for each color and have students draw strips from a hat or box. Another way is to group students by the last four digits of their telephone numbers. Another random method of group formation is to have students count off to six (or however many groups you want), with all the number 1's forming a group, number 2's forming another group, and so on. Diversity within groups is the goal. Group by criteria other than address, I.Q., test scores, birthdays, or any factor that would tend to group students with similar characteristics together. Diversity within the groups is the goal.

Once groups are formed, establish some easy method to keep track of group points, such as written marks, marbles or popsicle sticks in jars or cans, or even a music abacus, as shown in the Music Abacus for Keeping Track of Points sidebar. Establish some structure that gives the team earning the most points some kind of award: (a) privileges, such as lining up first or choosing instruments first next time, (b) recognition, such as having their group's name on a winners' bulletin board, or (c) some tangible reward, such as a stamp impression on their hands. Give modest rewards. Douglas Bartholomew and Peggy Bennett discuss the psychology of rewards at length in their book, *Songworks I: Singing in the Education of Children.*[8] The intrinsic human desire to succeed—the same desire that makes sports competitions so popular—can be used to help students focus their attention, remember what you teach, use higher-level thinking skills, learn that it pays to work effectively with others, and sublimate their own immediate wishes for the good of the group, all while learning music skills and concepts and having fun.

Some teachers may wish to downplay competition between groups and de-emphasize rewards. Cooperative learning can still work without competition and rewards, but student attitudes may appear less enthusiastic. In any case, the teacher must keep clearly in mind that rewards are ancillary—mere gravy on the "meat and potatoes" of the internal motivators that students bring to class within themselves.

As soon as groups are formed, give members tasks that will help gel them into a team. Have the group come up with a short group name and write it on the board. Then play a music game that requires each group to draw on the resources of all of its members.

The National Standards

Any of the nine National Standards can be addressed through cooperative learning in any class setting (general music, band, orchestra, or chorus). For Content Standard 1, "Singing, alone and with others, a varied repertoire of music," introduce a new song and then have the captains lead their groups in practicing the song. Then have each group demonstrate to the class that they can sing it. Have the remainder of the class hold up ten fingers if the group's singing is excellent, one finger if the group at least tried (even if most of the group may have sung "a different melody"), or five fingers if the performance is average or if only half the group learned the song. "Guestimate" the average and award the points. If students deliberately give undeserved low scores to other groups, use this as a teachable moment to discuss fairness and good musical judgment. To reinforce this concept, inform the groups that they will receive a bonus point for their evaluation if most of their group's members are close to your expert opinion.

Learning related to Content Standard 2, "Performing on instruments, alone and with others, a varied repertoire of music," can also take place through cooperative learning. Using Orff instruments (or band and orchestra instruments, guitars, or recorders), everyone can practice a song pattern or ostinato. Captains can watch as the group members play and then choose the best player to send to the front of the room. Ask all the representatives to play together. Award five points to every group whose member plays correctly. Then captains send their next best player, and the process continues until all students have had a chance to represent their group. (This strategy and the one for singing can also be coupled with a discreet assessment in the grade book.)

Resources for Using Cooperative Learning

Bartholomew, Douglas R., and Peggy D. Bennett. *Songworks I: Singing in the Education of Children.* Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1997.

Brandt, R. "On Research and School Organization: A Conversation with Bob Slavin." *Educational Leadership* 46, no. 2 (1988): 22–29.

Campbell, Patricia Shehan, and Carol Scott-Kassner. *Music in Childhood.* New York: Schirmer Books, 1995.

Cook, Jane Kita, and Mildred Haipt. *Thinking with the Whole Brain: An Integrative Teaching/Learning Model (K–8).* Washington, DC: National Education Association, 1986.

Edwards, C., and J. Stout. "Cooperative Learning: The First Year." *Educational Leadership* 47, no. 4 (1989): 38–41.

Friedmann, M. F. "Stimulating Classroom Learning with Small Groups." *Music Educators Journal* 76, no. 2 (1989): 53–56.

Johnson, David W., Roger T. Johnson, Edythe J. Holubec, and Patricia Roy. *Circles of Learning.* Washington, DC: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1984.

Johnson, David W., and Roger T.. Johnson. *Learning Together and Alone: Cooperative, Competitive, and Individualistic Learning.* Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1987.

Kaplan, Phyllis R., and Sandra L. Stauffer, *Cooperative Learning in Music.* Reston, VA: MENC, 1994.

Kassner, Kirk. "Management Systems for Music Teachers." *Music Educators Journal* 82, no. 5 (1996): 34–41.

Kassner, Kirk. "Would Better Questions Enhance Music Learning?" *Music Educators Journal* 84, no. 4 (1998): 29–36.

Slavin, R. E. "Students Motivating Students to Excel: Cooperative Incentives, Cooperative Tasks, and Student Achievement." *The Elementary School Journal* 85, no. 1 (1984): 53–63.

Slavin, R. E. "Research on Cooperative Learning: Consensus and Controversy." *Educational Leadership* 47, no. 4 (1989): 52–54.

Slavin, R. E., N. A. Madden and R. J. Stevens. "Cooperative Learning Models for the 3 R's." *Educational Leadership* 47, no. 4 (1989): 22–28.

For Content Standard 3, "Improvising melodies, variations, and accompaniments," teach the class to play a rhythmic ritornello using unpitched percussion instruments, homemade instruments, or body percussion. Give all of the groups a few minutes to work together to improvise a new pattern that is either similar or contrasting to the ritornello. Have each group perform the ritornello and the new pattern as a rondo. Give groups two points if they can think of something positive to say in their evaluations of other groups' improvisations and one point if they can make a constructive suggestion (note that it may be necessary to deduct points for purely negative or hurtful comments).

For Content Standard 4, "Composing and arranging music within specified guidelines," give all groups an assignment to compose a sound piece beginning and ending on C and lasting sixteen beats (see the strategy suggested in Patricia Shehan Campbell and Carol Scott-Kassner's book, *Music in Childhood*).[9] After allowing time for the students to work on their pieces, have the whole class listen to each group's work. Then discuss and decide the best order for combining the different pieces into one large class work. Give points if students can justify choices with good musical reasons.

To address Content Standard 5, "Reading and notating music," have students read music from a chart or overhead transparency. Depending on the number of pitches in the music, assign a different pitch (with a bell, a pitch on a bar set, a pitched wind instrument, etc.) to each person in a group or pair of groups. Have students read the notation and play the pitches in bell-choir style while others sing the names of the pitches. Build up the arrangement with simple harmonies (a countermelody, chords, ostinatos, etc.) in the same manner. Have each group or group pair read, play, and sing the music for the other groups to evaluate.

For Content Standard 6, "Listening to, analyzing, and describing music," have students listen to a composition in rondo form, such as Kodály's "Viennese Musical Clock." Give each group a set of posters printed with the melodies (in standard notation or in icons) of the introduction, the ritornello (one card for every time the ritornello occurs), and other themes. Challenge each group to arrange the posters in the order that the group members hear the composition unfold. Play the music several times until the captains indicate that they have made final decisions and are ready to report. Collect each poster set and display them in the chalk trays around the room. Play the music enough times to point to each poster-set order. Award points to the groups that describe the sequence of phrases correctly.

Give each group a printed request (see figure 1, Request Form for Bringing Music to Class) to bring a recording of their favorite song to you before the next class (to address Content Standard 7, "Evaluating music and musical performance"). On the request form, specify guidelines that exclude recordings that might get you and the school in trouble: recordings with profane language, glorification of violence, advocacy of drugs, intolerance toward any individual or group of people, and promotion of a specific religion. Also provide room on the request form for students to write what it is in the music that they like. Include prompts for melody, harmony, rhythm, form, expression, and lyrics. Listen to the recordings prior to class and award ten points to every group that brings a recording within the guidelines and one bonus point for every musical rea-

Music Abacus for Keeping Track of Points

1. Draw a staff across the front board near the top, leaving room for group names above the staff. Write the odd numbers one, three, five, seven, and nine next to the staff lines. Write the even numbers two, four, six, and eight in the spaces. See the illustration below.

2. Cut out rounds of magnetic tape and stick them to real pennies, real dimes, and reduced pictures of one-dollar bills.

3. When a student does something that rates a point (answers a question, performs music, etc.), move that student's group's penny button up on the board. When the penny is moved to the top of the staff (ten), put the ten pennies in the bank at the bottom of the staff and move the dime button up. Similarly, on the rare occasions that the dime moves to the top, put the ten dimes in the bank and move the dollar up. This system mirrors math place-values and the monetary system so that students reinforce these essential skills as part of music instruction.

   The advantages of this system are that point earnings can be displayed continuously, points don't have to be written out and tracked, the pace of instruction can be maintained, students learn to count the lines and spaces of the staff, and their math place-value skills are reinforced.

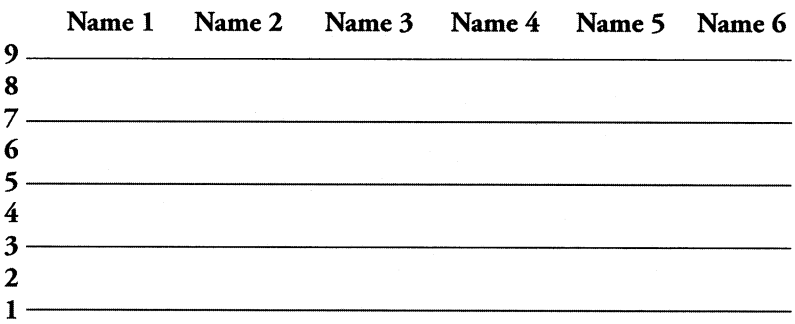

Figure 1. Request form for bringing music to class

Guidelines: No recording may be brought to school containing profane language, glorification of violence, advocacy of drugs, intolerance toward any individual or group of people, or promotion of a specific religion.

Write the name of the recording:_____

Write below what it is in the music that appeals to you:

Melody _____

Harmony _____

Rhythm _____

Form _____

Expression _____

Lyrics _____

Other (specify) _____

son they write on the printed form for liking the piece. During the next class, play the acceptable selections for the class several times. Have captains discuss the selections with their groups and write on paper interesting things they hear in the music (melody, harmony, rhythm, form, expression, style, and lyrics) and things they don't find interesting. In a round-robin discussion, each captain can then share one evaluation idea of the music, and the group receives two points for every "interesting" finding and one point for every "not interesting" finding. Collect their comments on a chart that lists "interesting" and "not interesting" items. Continue the activity until there are no more new findings. Go on to another song and continue the procedure. After several songs, have students prioritize ideas on the chart to come up with universal principles of what makes music interesting or not. This technique can also be used to introduce new music to chorus, band, or orchestra.

For Content Standard 8, "Understanding relationships between music, the other arts, and disciplines outside the arts," play a recording of Debussy's "Des pas sur la neige" several times. Then discuss the mood he was trying to create: quiet, still, soft, and lonely. Challenge students to think of specific musical elements that Debussy used to create the mood, that is, soft dynamics, seeming lack of meter, random pitch patterns, lots of silent spaces between sounds, and solo piano. Have students listen again while looking at two Impressionist paintings, one with a calm, quiet, lonely tone such as Alfred Sisley's *Snow at Louveciennes* (1884) and another with a busy, gregarious, noisy tone such as Renoir's *Luncheon of the Boating Party* (1881).[10] Encourage students to consider what their eyes see and their ears hear and then decide which painting has qualities more like the music. Ask them what elements of the painting convey the same feelings as the music. Award a point to every answer that offers a thoughtful comparison of techniques across both arts. Then ask students to imagine that they have been hired to design dance movements that fit the movement and mood of this music. Turn the lights very low and have students work with their groups experimenting with movements that a dancer might perform. A strobe light and scarves may be useful. Groups that invent suitable movements earn one point for each idea.

To address Content Standard 9, "Understanding music in relation to history and culture," play a recording of "Lift Every Voice and Sing."[11] Have students listen for word clues that indicate the historical and cultural conditions that led to the writing of the lyrics. Have groups sit in circles and whisper ideas to the captain, who writes them on paper while the recording plays again. Ask the captains if they need one more listening or if they are ready to answer and follow their vote. When most captains indicate they have listened enough, have them put their pencils away so that no more writing can take place. In the full class setting, have the captains point to the places on their papers where they wrote anything about slavery. Give one point to every group whose paper has "slavery" or "slaves" on it. In a similar way, give points for other historical or cultural concepts written: tears, blood, rejoicing, liberty, rolling sea, dark past, hope, "let us march on" (which can be tied in to activities for Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Day), and similar terms. Many compositions studied in a choral class can be used in the same way. Band and orchestra literature can also be examined for musical quotations tied to historical and cultural ideas. Bringing out these connections strengthens and broadens students' understanding of the music and can help to improve their interpretation in performance, add to their appreciation of different musics, and increase their respect for music as a powerful means of communicating ideas.

Other Advantages

Cooperative learning can result in greater student understanding, participation, and enjoyment in music classes. It also gives teachers more opportunities to ask intriguing questions, stimulate student thinking, resolve conflicts, and improve student interpersonal relationships and nurturing behaviors.[12] It takes advantage of students' natural tendency to play and work together and puts excitement about learning back into the classroom. Cooperative learning requires more effort from the teacher, but makes classrooms crackle with excitement and the joy of music and learning. If you missed out on cooperative learning when it first became popular in the 1980s, you might want to revisit it now to reinvigorate your teaching and your students' learning.

Notes

1. Mary Friedman, "Stimulating Classroom Learning with Small Groups," *Music Educators Journal* 76, no. 2, (1989), 53–56; Phyllis R. Kaplan and Sandra L. Stauffer, *Cooperative Learning in Music* (Reston, VA: MENC, 1994); and Kirk Kassner,

"Management Systems for Music Teachers," *Music Educators Journal* 82, no. 5, (1996): 34–41.

2. Consortium of National Arts Education Associations, *National Standards for Arts Education: What Every Young American Should Know and Be Able to Do in the Arts* (Reston, VA: MENC, 1994).

3. Jane Kita Cook and Mildred Haipt, *Thinking with the Whole Brain: An Integrative Teaching/Learning Model (K–8)* (Washington, DC: National Education Association, 1986), 25.

4. David W. Johnson and Roger T. Johnson, *Learning Together and Alone: Cooperative, Competitive, and Individualistic Learning* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1987), 25.

5. Benjamin S. Bloom, *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives: The Classification of Educational Goals* (London: Longman Group, 1969).

6. David W. Johnson, Roger T. Johnson, Edythe J. Holubec, and Patricia Roy, *Circles of Learning* (Washington, DC: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1984), 15.

7. Kaplan and Stauffer, *Cooperative Learning in Music.*

8. Douglas R. Bartholomew and Peggy D. Bennett, *Songworks I: Singing in the Education of Children* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1997).

9. Patricia Shehan Campbell and Carol Scott-Kassner, *Music in Childhood* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1995), 385–92.

10. Pierre-Auguste Renoir, *Luncheon of the Boating Party,* in Frank Getlin, *25 Impressionist Masterpieces* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1981), 22; Alfred Sisley, *Snow at Louveciennes,* in Richard Shone, *Sisley* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1992), 98. The original paintings hang in the Phillips Collection, Washington, DC. Prints can be ordered by calling 202-387-2151, ext. 238.

11. MENC, *Get America Singing ... Again!* (Milwaukee, WI: Hal Leonard Corporation, 1996), 28.

12. Kirk Kassner, "Would Better Questions Enhance Music Learning?" *Music Educators Journal* 84, no. 4 (1998): 29–36. ■