

**Culturally Relevant Instruction**  
***Structured Small Cooperative Learning***  
September 15, 2005

Educational research directed at working with diverse learners is replete with studies identifying best practices for closing the achievement gaps that persist by race/ethnicity, socio-economics, language, and disability. Fortunately for practitioners, there is considerable agreement on the practices that improve the academic performance of students from groups who have traditionally underachieved. References to culturally responsive instruction are a mainstay in the research on strategies for closing the achievement gap. Shade, Kelly, and Oberg (1997) suggest that culturally responsive instruction is not just the educational soup du jour and can not be dismissed as “just good teaching.” Culturally responsive instruction refers to school and classroom practices, behaviors, and structures that recognize, affirm, and value the cultural experience, background, and reality of students. Culturally relevant instruction capitalizes on the knowledge that students bring to school and connects existing knowledge to what students are learning in school. Culturally relevant instruction is characterized by high teacher expectations, high teacher efficacy, and caring relationships between the teacher and the students, and among students.

Research has consistently endorsed the use of structured cooperative learning as a major strategy for implementing culturally responsive instruction. Cooperative learning provides students with opportunities to learn in meaningful, purposeful, and interesting ways, build self-esteem and self-confidence, and develop academic and social skills.

Decades of research on the effects of structured cooperative learning have demonstrated the following benefits for students:

- Improved academic achievement, especially for lower achieving students. Higher achieving students perform as well or better in cooperative groups
- Increased retention of content through more rehearsal of information during group discussions
- Greater perspective taking through the promotion of more accurate communication of information, more attentiveness to the ideas of others, and a greater willingness to be influenced by the ideas and information of others
- Greater use of higher level cognitive thinking skills and use of higher quality cognitive strategies for learning
- More positive cross-ethnic friendships and heterogeneous relationships
- Increased intrinsic motivation to learn and better attitudes toward school
- Greater use of collaborative skills as students learn to manage the inevitable conflicts that arise among ideas, opinions, perspectives, and experiences of group members.
- Higher self-esteem develops as students feel connected, cared about, and contributing to the group learning process.

How is cooperative learning different from traditional small group work? The chart below describes the major differences between the two types of group instruction.

Cooperative Learning	Traditional Small Groups
Heterogeneous groups	Homogeneous groups
Positive interdependence of group members needed to complete the task	No positive interdependence required to complete the task
Individual group members are accountable for their own learning as well as the learning of group members	Individual members are responsible only for their own learning
Dual focus on successful completion of the task and maintaining effective collaborative relationships	Single focus on successful completion of the task
Collaborative and social skills are explicitly taught	Collaborative and social skills are assumed
Groups regularly process the effectiveness of their learning and their collaboration	No regular group processing occurs
Competition between small groups is discouraged	Competition between small groups occurs

This year the ListServ will provide readers with tips for implementing specific cooperative learning structures. The October tip will feature variations of the Think-Pair-Share strategy. Subsequent tips will describe Boggle, Teammates Consult, Pairs Check, Team Word Webbing, Color Coded Coop, and the Last Word.