

FIX 6

Don't include group scores in grades; use only individual achievement evidence.

Group scores [grades] are so blatantly unfair that on this basis alone they should never be used.

—Kagan, 1995, p. 69

Grades are broken when they include group scores from work done in cooperative learning groups. The fix is to ensure that all evidence used to determine grades comes from individual evidence of achievement.

Cooperative learning is a very powerful teaching/learning strategy; done well and used appropriately it can lead to significant learning gains and improve attitudes about learning and school. But frequently in cooperative learning situations students are required to produce a group product or presentation for which they receive a group score, which is then recorded for each member of the group. This is an inappropriate practice, as illustrated in the “For Better or Worse” cartoon in Figure 2-3.

In Figure 2-4, Spencer Kagan provides seven specific reasons for opposing group scores (grades). His first four reasons are clearly illustrated in Figure 2-3. The situation depicted is obviously unfair, as one student is receiving “credit” for something she didn’t do; report cards will be “debased” because these students will receive inaccurate grades; this situation would undermine motivation because the next time these students will feel that their effort is of

Figure 2-3 An Example of an Inappropriate Group Scoring Practice



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Figure 2-4 Kagan's Seven Reasons for Opposing Group Scores (Grades)

Group scores (grades)

1. Are no(t) fair
2. Debase report cards
3. Undermine motivation
4. Convey the wrong message
5. Violate individual accountability
6. Are responsible for resistance to cooperative learning
7. May be challenged in court

Source: The data in Figure 2-4 are adapted from “Group Grades Miss the Mark,” by S. Kagan, 1995, *Educational Leadership*, 52(8), pp. 69–70. Adapted by permission of Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

dubious value; and this group score sends the wrong message about the purpose and value of teamwork.

But the two most important reasons why group scores should not be used as part of student grades are reasons 5 and 6. With regard to reason 5, many models of cooperative learning (see, e.g., Gibbs, 2000; Johnson and Johnson, 2004;

Kagan, 1995) have individual accountability as a basic principle in the model. Group scores that become part of individual grade determination violate this principle, meaning the cooperative learning model is being implemented incorrectly. Regarding reason 6, not surprisingly, cooperative learning has encountered parental and student resistance in some schools/districts precisely because of group scoring. In the extreme, parents have taken teachers, principals, schools, and districts to court over this issue. The parents generally have won because judges followed the principle that no student's grade should depend on the achievement (or behavior) of other students. Cooperative learning can be a powerful teaching/learning strategy. We want to help students to be successful learners so we need to have all such powerful strategies available. We do not want to impair any strategy's effectiveness by incorrectly measuring the achievement of students who use it.

There is yet another issue with giving scores for products or performance developed in cooperative learning groups. The strategy is cooperative *learning*, which implies that any activities that occur in groups are learning activities and any assessment of them is best considered formative assessment—to help students improve their knowledge, understanding, and skill(s). Such assessment is for practice and should not produce scores that are part of grade determination. (This issue is the subject of Fix 13.)

Summary

Grades are broken if they involve the use of group scores from cooperative learning or group activities. This is so because the group scores may not accurately reflect the achievement of each student and therefore would be unfair for some members of the group. This problem can be addressed by

recognizing that cooperative learning is essentially a learning activity, *not* an assessment tool. After a class has experienced cooperative learning teachers can then assess students individually to find out what they know, understand, and can do as a result. This individual assessment could involve one or more of the following: “teacher monitoring of [cooperative] activity work; an essay response based on questions formulated during the activity; a class discussion of the questions and responses generated; [or a test] on the content of the questions formulated and responses generated” (Benevino and Snodgrass, 1998, p. 146).

The assessment of individuals within groups begins with setting individual learning goals and involves such procedures as individual tests and products, observing students while working in groups, giving group members a questionnaire to complete, and interviewing group members during group sessions. There is a pattern to classroom life summarized as “*learn it in a group, perform it alone.*”

—Johnson and Johnson, 2004, p. 53, *emphasis added*

