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Cooperative Learning Strategies for Teaching about Sub-Saharan Africa

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Cooperative Learning: Objectives and Strategies

Advocates for democratic education embrace cooperative learning as a significant pedagogical instrument to help promote productive citizenship. The National Geography Standards compliment the latter concept and were created to develop productive and responsible citizenship (de Souza and Downs 1994, 9). Although definitions of productive citizenship vary and sometimes appear vague, cooperative learning provides a tangible approach to citizenship education because it builds desirable aspects of good citizenship, such as interpersonal skills and altruism. Research over the last few decades shows the many benefits of cooperative learning, including citizenship education. Yet, many educators do not integrate non-traditional teaching methods for a variety of reasons.

Many educators may worry that their students will become disruptive or that one student may dominate a cooperative activity while the remaining group members become bored, fail to participate and do not learn the concepts. A central problem is that group activities are frequently confused with cooperative learning. The common pitfalls of group projects may be overcome through well-planned and thoughtfully executed cooperative learning exercises. In addition, the advantages of cooperative learning are many and are supported by extensive research.

Slavin (1992) reviewed significant volumes of research that found cooperative classes exhibit significantly higher levels of achievement in comparison to traditional classes. However, Slavin emphasized the importance of team or group goals and individual accountability for cooperative learning to be effective (1992, 22). In other words, when student teams work together to achieve a common goal or to earn rewards and recognition, and individual participation and/or performance is assessed, research demonstrates positive effects upon student achievement (Slavin 1992, 22). Furthermore, research indicates cooperative learning has positive effects upon student retention of information, self-esteem, intrinsic motivation, acceptance of mainstreamed students, enjoyment of school, development of favorable academic peer norms, time on task, and altruism (Slavin 1992, 24; Success for All Foundation 2005, 5).

Many versions of cooperative learning have been created, researched and adapted based on historical and societal changes. The jigsaw strategy is a popular version of cooperative learning that was created by Elliot Aronson in 1971 to assist Austin, TX public school teachers with desegregation (Aronson 2000). Aronson observed teaching methods that reinforced competition and individuality, which did not alleviate any of the tension and hostility that was created from years of distrust, misunderstanding, and competition among the various racial and ethnic groups. As a result, he created the jigsaw technique to replace traditionally competitive teaching methods. Aronson discovered that students in the jigsaw classrooms “expressed less prejudice and negative stereotyping, were more self-confident and reported liking school better than children in the traditional classrooms” (Aronson 2000, 12).

Most models of cooperative learning have foundations similar to Aronson’s jigsaw approach that are based on ideals of promoting interdependence and stronger interpersonal skills. Roger T. Johnson and David W. Johnson also pioneered methodology and research for cooperative learning and call their approach “Learning Together.” Johnson and Johnson (2008) define cooperative learning as a relationship between a group or team of students that requires positive interdependence, interpersonal

skills, individual accountability, significant face-to-face interaction, and processing or reflecting on the team performance.

Positive interdependence relates to the students' understanding that their work is essential, unique, and beneficial to the team, but each member is responsible or individually accountable for his or her task and understands that the team's success requires mutual support. Interpersonal skills, such as communication, trust, and acceptance, are necessary for each member to practice. Teachers should model effective interpersonal skills and coach students how to interact. Through promotive or face-to-face interaction, students effectively assist and encourage each other to be successful in achieving the team's mutual goals. In other words, promotive interaction involves motivating and being motivated to assist, providing feedback, such as constructively challenging the reasoning of members, and positively engaging team members to succeed (Johnson and Johnson 1994).

Other research shows that individual accountability is an imperative component of cooperative learning (VanSickle 1992, 16-20). Thus, teachers need to assess individual contributions, provide feedback to each team, help teams avoid redundant work, and ensure individual responsibility. Suggested approaches to individual accountability include small teams, individual assessments or tests, observations, and presentations by random members. Moreover, each individual should be required to teach another student what he/she learned (Johnson and Johnson 1994).

The final component of cooperative learning is team processing or reflection. Teams should have the time and opportunity to describe and evaluate their performance to facilitate cooperative skills. For example, students could be asked to describe three things that they did well as a team and a few things they could improve (Johnson and Johnson 1994). In addition to team reflection, other significant facets of cooperative learning are modeled in the cooperative learning exercise below.

Realities and Misconceptions of Sub-Saharan Africa: A Cooperative Learning Exercise

The cooperative learning techniques in this exercise challenge students to create learning products to foster a greater understanding of stereotypes and an appreciation for the geographical realities of Sub-Saharan Africa. In particular, students examine stereotypes about people from the Sub-Saharan region. The lessons include a mapping exercise with charts and tables to understand and compare the unique geopolitical and economic characteristics of countries in Sub-Saharan Africa. In addition, student teams confront their own biases and research stereotypes.

Student Levels: Secondary Schools

Objectives as Related to Geography for Life Standards: (see Chapter 7, *Geography for Life: National Geography Standards 1994*, 184-222)

Standard 1: "How to use maps and other geographic representations, tools, and technologies to acquire, process, and report information from a spatial perspective" (1994, 184-185).

Standard 4: "The physical and human characteristics of places" (1994, 190-191).

Standard 10: "The characteristics, distribution, and complexity of Earth's cultural mosaics" (1994, 203-205)

Standard 11: "The Patterns and Networks of Economic Interdependence on Earth's Surface" (1994, 206-207)

Standard 13: "How the Forces of Cooperation and Conflict Among People Influence the Division and Control of Earth's Surface" (1994, 210-211)

Standard 16: "The Changes That Occur in the Meaning, Use, Distribution, and Importance of Resources" (1994, 216-218).

Standard 18: "How to Apply Geography to Interpret the Present and Plan for the Future" (1994, 221-222).

Procedures

Teachers divide the class into heterogeneous teams of 4-5. Teams larger than five members are less likely to be productive. Create the teams by mixing students based on ability level and/or demographic factors, such as gender and cultural background. Reinforce the interdependence necessary to achieve team goals, so students must help all members learn and complete the assignments. Carefully inform the students that they are responsible for their own learning and exhibit the grading rubric to emphasize how they will be assessed. If cooperative learning is new to the class, visit the sites presented below to learn more about useful strategies that help establish procedures and expectations for the activities and for creating a successful cooperative learning classroom environment (see IASCE.net; Abram, et al. 2001):

www.jigsaw.org - Jigsaw Classroom

www.co-operation.org - Cooperative Learning Center at University of Minnesota

www.iasce.net - International Association for the Study of Cooperation in Education

- 1) Share and discuss the learning objectives and assessment rubric (Table 10.1). Emphasize that individual learning, participation, and team member cooperation are assessed.
- 2) Introduce the central concepts of the exercise to the students by explaining that they will be examining stereotypes about Sub-Saharan Africa.
- 3) Generate a class definition of stereotypes. First, ask students to share words or synonyms associated with stereotypes such as: *exaggeration, assumption, generalization, biased image, hearsay, conjecture, distorted opinion, preconceived idea, myth, oversimplified belief, mistaken image*, etc. After discussing the synonyms ask: What separates a stereotype from the preceding words or synonyms? Guide students to learn that stereotypes are directed towards a group of people who share common character traits, but stereotypes fail to account for individual differences or individuality. Share and discuss examples and non-examples of stereotypes with the class. Possible examples that we associate with groups of people are the absent minded professors, nerdy accountants, troublesome or lazy teenagers. Non-examples are the athletic accountant, the smart athlete or the generous teenager. Emphasize the singular context of the preceding non-examples. Ask how stereotypes can be ended or reduced. Focus on the need for accurate and unbiased information. For example, students might suggest researching, evaluating or examining stereotypes and challenging people who use or make them. Definitions of stereotypes can be found at the following website or a dictionary: <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/stereotype>.
- 4) Instruct each team to create a list of potential stereotypes about Sub-Saharan Africa. After sufficient time, solicit student examples and write a common list for students to view on the overhead or board. Discuss, categorize and enhance the list of stereotypes. Consult the following websites for powerful information about African stereotypes.
<http://exploringafrica.matrix.msu.edu/teachers/curriculum/m1/notes.php>
http://www.coe.ohio-state.edu/mmerryfield/global_resources/modules/AfOverviewStereo.htm
The following categories and stereotypes may be included:
 - Gender/Women: Women are not allowed to work, vote and participate in politics.
 - Dress: People from Sub-Saharan Africa do not wear shirts. Also, assumes similar dress for all Africans.
 - Religious Tolerance: Some may believe all Africans are followers of Islam.
 - Economy: Most are poor and undeveloped.
 - Geography: Most live near wild animals.
 - Political: All governments in Sub-Saharan Africa are run by dictators or ruthless tribal leaders.
- 5) This activity requires internet access to compile a country report. Assign each team member a country from Sub-Saharan Africa. Instruct individual students that they are the experts of their

assigned country and they will need to teach the rest of their team what they learn about their country and stereotypes. Remind the class that everyone is accountable as an individual and as a team member. Distribute the following directions and questions to each team. Scaffold learning during the activity with reflective guide questions or suggestions.

- a) Create or print a map of the country assigned and detail the following: population, religion (percentage of population), type of government, and key industries. Maps can be found online through National Geographic at the following URL: <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas> Information about the countries can be found through *The CIA World Factbook* online at <http://www.odci.gov/cia/publications/factbook/index.html>
 - b) Select stereotypes from the previously discussed list and individually research how it relates to your country in categories such as geography, gender, economy, government, etc. For example, do all the women in your country wear head scarves or Hijabs? Use online resources, such as *The CIA World Factbook*, NationMaster.com, and encyclopedias with class textbooks to create relevant charts, graphs, and lists of information that contradict the stereotypes listed earlier. Describe and recreate the charts and graphs. Explain how your country is different from other Sub-Saharan countries and how the stereotypes are wrong.
 - c) List and describe the causes and effects for stereotypes for your country. Describe potential reasons for the stereotypes. What can you do to prevent stereotypes and prejudices?
 - d) Cite all sources of information used.
- 6) After the team members finish their individual research and analysis, instruct them to share and teach the information about their country with the other team members. Assuming the teams have four or five people, each team should have maps with charts and stereotype research from four or five different countries. Each team member should have sufficient time to share what was learned about his/her country and his/her answers to the preceding questions.
 - 7) An additional suggested activity is to have each team create a PowerPoint summary of their findings about stereotypes. The PowerPoint should include summaries based on each country and how the combined information contradicts stereotypes.
 - 8) The final activity involves each team exploring Sub-Saharan African countries through the PBS website: <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/africa/explore/index.html>
After exploring the website, encourage students to take the "Africa Challenge" and answer questions about Africa: <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/africa/challenge.html>
 - 9) Additional Suggested Activity: Research additional articles about Sub-Saharan Africa online. Depending upon the availability of computers, students may work in teams or individually. As a result of constantly changing web sites, be sure to check the web sites before class to ensure that they have not changed in content, design or usefulness.

Materials

- Classroom set of geography textbooks, atlases, encyclopedias, and/or computers with Internet access for each individual.
- Assessment Rubric (Figure 1).
- Computers with Internet access for each team.
- Paper and pencils.
- PowerPoint (optional)

Evaluation

An assessment rubric is provided in Figure 1. In addition, the central concepts should be incorporated into an essay or assessment after the cooperative learning activities. For example, require the students to write an essay about the causes and effects of stereotypes and possible solutions to end them.

Table 10.1 Assessment Rubric for Team Activities. Distribute to students prior to beginning the activities.

	Novice	Acceptable	Expert
Country Maps with Graphs, Charts, & Lists	Graphs, charts & lists are not included or are ineffectively used with the map.	Graphs, charts & lists are used and clarify certain aspects of the map.	Graphs, charts & lists are used effectively and significantly add to the quality of the map.
Individual: Country Stereotype Research Report.	Research is unclear and lacks description of stereotypes. Inadequate reflection about the causes & effects and approaches to prevent stereotypes.	Adequate research and sufficient description of stereotypes. Adequate reflection about the causes & effects and approaches to prevent stereotypes.	Thorough research and description. Thorough and justified reflection about the causes & effects and approaches to prevent stereotypes.
Stereotype Comparisons with other countries.	Comparisons with other countries are unclear and lack description.	Adequate comparisons with other countries and sufficient description.	Clear comparisons with other countries and thorough description.
Team Member Contribution & Cooperation	Inadequate contribution to the team products or refuses to work and negatively impacts team cooperation.	Contributes to the team products on tasks and cooperates with the team.	Effectively contributes to the team products on multiple tasks and positively enhances team cooperation.
References	References are absent or minimal.	The list of references is not sufficient or improperly cited.	References are thorough and properly citation.

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