



COOPERATIVE LEARNING AND THE CATHOLIC FAITH

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To cite this article:

Rooney, A. R., Vermette, P. & Davidson, N. (2023). Cooperative Learning and the Catholic Faith. *Autonomy and Responsibility Journal of Educational Sciences* 8(2). 27-40. DOI: [10.15170/AR.2023.8.2.2](https://doi.org/10.15170/AR.2023.8.2.2).

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.15170/AR.2023.8.2.2>.

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Cooperative Learning and the Catholic Faith

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Cooperative learning (CL) is an educational methodology developed in a secular milieu, yet has strong roots in Western, Catholic, Christian beliefs and affinity with Vincentian (after St. Vincent de Paul) beliefs and expectations about our relationships with the impoverished of all kinds. Recognizing this truth can create a sense of the familiar among CL practitioners and their larger communities. It also places emphasis on the moral and practical aspects of CL in perspective. What is more, culturally, we know that it “feels right” to work with diverse others respectfully and that we are all ultimately engaging in a common project. Using Cooperative Learning turns these beliefs and human intuitions into a daily reality. Cooperative learning research has shown distinct advantages in its application in secular education. These advantages can translate into the realm of Catholic education because the values and practices of cooperative learning are compatible with Catholic education.

Keywords: *Cooperative learning; Catholic Education; Collaboration; Catholic Social Teaching;*

Introduction

Cooperative learning is an educational methodology developed in the secular world. Its roots are in the fields of educational philosophy (Dewey, 1916), constructivism (Vygotsky, 1934, 2012), sociology (Cohen, 1986), and social psychology (with several authors given below). Cooperative learning research has shown distinct advantages in its application in secular education.

Might these advantages translate into the realm of Catholic education? Are the values and practices of cooperative learning compatible with Catholic education? Before addressing these questions, we provide a brief explanation of the nature of cooperative learning and its supporting research.

Cooperative learning

“My humanity is bound up in yours, for we can only be human together.” (Desmond Tutu)

Being human together is at the heart of cooperative learning (CL) as we recognize people need each other to achieve shared goals that no one person can accomplish alone. In cooperative learning, students work together in small groups in a cooperative, mutually supportive manner to learn academic content by accomplishing learning tasks or goals. While doing so, they develop skills in cooperation, teamwork, and conflict resolution.

A teacher using cooperative learning plays an active but not a dominant role. S/he introduces new material for group exploration. S/he circulates among the groups, providing academic or social assistance as needed. The teacher provides academic and social leadership more as a guide on the side than as a “sage on the stage.”

The field of cooperative learning has been developed over the past fifty years. CL has been used successfully with all subject areas and all age groups from kindergarten through graduate school.

Empirical research on CL in education and other disciplines provides an abundance of evidence confirming the numerous ways that people benefit from participating in cooperative endeavors. Specifically, mutual group goals defined by *positive interdependence* — essentially, “*I need you and you need me*” — motivate interpersonal processes that consistently enhance CL outcomes in three broad areas, including (a) achievement and productivity, (b) positive relationships, and (c) psychological well-being. These areas of positive impact encompass a wide variety of benefits such as greater commitment and persistence to achieve, increased academic success and retention of learning, enhanced creativity and problem-solving, higher-order reasoning and critical thinking, more time on task and affirmative attitudes toward tasks, enhanced peer relations and liking of teammates, greater ability to engage in social perspective taking and cope with adversity, and enhanced psychosocial development and social-emotional competence that affect personal well-being (Johnson & Johnson, 2017).

Indeed, numerous positive effects of CL have been demonstrated in more than a thousand research studies around the world. Early extensive research reviews were conducted by Johnson and Johnson (1974, 1989), Sharan (1980, 1990), and Slavin (1980, 1990). Since then, research evidence on a wide variety of factors has continued to accumulate and additional (more recent) reviews on the effectiveness of CL have been published, such as those by Gillies (2014) and Kyndt, et al. (2013).

For a comprehensive view of the field of CL, see the volume entitled *Pioneering Perspectives in Cooperative Learning* edited by Davidson (2021). This volume contains chapters on and mostly by the early originators of CL, providing their unique perspectives. The book presents each of the original CL approaches along with their theoretical foundations, research bases, and classroom procedures. The historical development of CL emerges as the originators describe their approaches to CL, reflect on developments, reveal personal stories, and share anecdotes about their work. A second recent major book entitled “Contemporary Global Perspectives on Cooperative Learning” is edited by

Gillies, Millis, and Davidson (2023). It presents recent research on CL by authors in 16 different countries.

In 2020, the Network for Cooperative Learning Educators and Enthusiasts (NICLEE) was born, launching a new virtual forum devoted to CL, readily accessible around the world via its website (<https://2020niclee.com/>). **NICLEE—an acronym** pronounced “nicely” in English—is intended to evoke images of people everywhere gathering in this virtual space to enjoy friendly, inclusive, supportive, inquisitive interactions on issues, policies, practices, and resources relevant to CL. Simply expressed, the purpose of NICLEE is to connect, support, and sustain CL efforts and innovations worldwide. Further description of NICLEE can be found in an article by Arato, Davidson, Stevahn, and Sharan (2023). (A brief excerpt from the article is included in this Introduction.)

Project on religious and spiritual roots of CL

After fifty-plus years of secular engagement with cooperative learning, Neil finally realized that the key concepts and values of CL have underlying roots in spiritual and religious traditions around the world. To explore this notion, we are assembling a small team of authors who each have some enthusiasm for cooperative practices and personal knowledge of a particular religious or spiritual tradition. The goal is to write a series of articles on the spiritual/religious roots of CL (which might later comprise an edited volume). The traditions would include but not be limited to: Christianity (e.g. Catholicism, Society of Friends, United Church of Christ,); Unitarian/Universalism, Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Johrei, Bahai, Islam, Native American.

To get started with this piece on the spiritual roots of CL, we can look for pertinent quotations including spiritual, ethical, or moral precepts in varied religious or spiritual traditions. We can search for quotes using keywords aligned with cooperation. Here is a starter list of pertinent words. Please feel free to add to it.

- Cooperation, Collaboration, Working together, Interdependence, Mutual support
- Social skills, Teamwork skills
- Equity, Diversity, Social justice
- Peace, Dialogue, Conflict resolution
- Caring, Compassion, Friendship or friendliness, Love

This current paper on cooperative learning and Catholicism is the first of a series on the spiritual/religious roots of CL. In what follows, Aidan and Paul examine Scripture and Catholic theological doctrine to develop their analysis of the connection between CL and the Catholic faith.

Paul and Aidan were longtime colleagues at Niagara University. Over the years they have taught together, learned together, analyzed societal problems together and now bring two perspectives to the question of connecting CL with Christian, Catholic & Vincentian thought. Rooney is a member of the Congregation of the Mission of St. Vincent de Paul (the “Vincentians”), a Roman Catholic priest and now the Executive Vice President for Mission at St. John’s University in New York City. Vermette is a retired secondary teacher educator and CL scholar from Niagara, who has studied various aspects of CL such as its cognitive benefits, its connection to Social and Emotional Learning (SEL), and its impacts on issues of diversity, equity and inclusivity and now, its religious underpinnings. As part of their work on this offering, they spent hours discussing the issues the reader will find here, and

we are using Rooney's expertise to capture Western (largely Roman) Catholic Thought and Vermette's expertise to capture CL Theory.

We have found tremendous moral, theological and religious connections between CL and Catholic thought, and have tried to offer a set of them in the space below. In short, we assert that the practice of CL is consistent with the Christian heritage; its beliefs and structures are embedded in cultural patterns that are familiar, accepted and expected.

The Backdrop: an overview of the role of the Roman Catholic Church since CE 1

To reflect on Christian traditions and the societal milieu in which Western cultural patterns and philosophical beliefs have developed, and which still hold today, one must recognize the following:

- a) the Catholic Church is the root of a 2000-year Christian tradition of reflection on the relationship between faith and reason, or, in more secular language, between religious principles and human-serving practices;
- b) the Jewish scriptures (called the "Old Testament" by Christians) and the New Testament of the Christian Bible provide the theological foundation of Christian belief, and was shaped in its current form in a particular Catholic culture and gave rise to a tradition of moral and ethical reflection during the first four centuries of the common era (C.E.) That pattern of influence has progressed through time and situations and finally emerged as a coherent system of the understanding of justice, and particularly social justice, called Catholic Social Teaching¹. In the authors' shared experience, this system of reflection prompts concrete action in a manner conceptualized by St. Vincent de Paul, a 17th century priest-reformer, and offers a vision of enacting Christianity that is shared by millions world-wide.
- c) Catholic practice, Catholic thought, and Catholic beliefs remain at the center of the thinking that emerged from Western European and American theory and reflective practice, along with the co-development of those traditions in the Orthodox Catholic church, an interaction with the philosophical reflection of medieval Jewish and Islamic thought, reactions to the developments of the Protestant Reformation 500 years ago, and finally, the powerful influence of the European Enlightenment.
- d) well-known assertions drawn from the Bible and shared by Christians of all traditions have passed into common expressions of the English-speaking world as seen in examples such as "thy brother's keeper" (Genesis 4:9), "bear one another's burdens" (Galatians 6:2), and "do unto other as you would have them do unto you (Luke 6:31), and similar thoughts found in such stories as the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) and the criteria for judgment found in the twenty-fifth chapter of the Gospel of Matthew.

A clear, observable trajectory of moral thought about the nature of the human person and what is their "due" becomes clear. Following this trajectory of development seen in the above examples, from its roots in the dictates of the Jewish scriptures, through St. Paul's Letter to the Galatians and then in the Gospels of Luke and Matthew, something startling emerges for those who profess Christian faith. A moral code in which our individualities

1 For the most complete and authoritative treatment, see The Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church (2004), found at https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/just-peace/documents/rc_pc_justpeace_doc_20060526_compendio-dott-soc_en.html

are measured by our actions toward our neighbors, becomes complemented by what the third story of the Matthean triptych (Matthew 25: 31-46) teaches: our responsibility to our neighbor is not simply a moral and ethical concern. It is an encounter with Christ. Catholicism, and by extension cultures with European roots and ties, has been built on messages of collaboration, community and equity, as well as the following of the moral dictates of what is seen by believers as God's word. But more so, it is imbued with a sense of reverence for the truest nature of the other.

Contemporary CL: Tenets of Cooperative Learning

Given that brief historical and sociological glimpse at Western culture & history since CE 1, let us briefly reflect on the basic tenets of Cooperative Learning, understanding that most readers have long digested these underlying structures and will find these tenets at least somewhat redundant. (see Davidson, 2022, for further elaboration on the common features of various manifestations of CL theory in operation).

It is our intent to use the rest of our article to more closely examine some of these tenets in light of Catholic beliefs.

1. Students function interdependently, generally in groups of size 2-4. They are not solitary individuals situated in a collective but are teams of interactive and responsive individuals.
2. Social interactions within the whole class and within the small groups are designed to follow those patterns of the mainstream expectations of the organization (school) and society (cultural norms). These expectations are consistent with commonly expected interpersonal and moral norms of the Euro-derived cultures, for example: showing respect to teachers and peers, cooperating with others, listening with attention, etc.
3. The norms mentioned in #2 above are expected, culturally relevant, and are taught and assessed in practice. They are aligned with the normalized cultural expectations of society and have a heavy "moral" basis, (as do societal laws).
4. A sense of community within the classroom is intentionally built and reinforced and reveals a structure in which each human being matters, and the dignity of personhood is inviolable.
5. Leadership is found in these situations at both the level of student interaction, which is largely locally controlled, and at the adult responsibility level. In the latter, teachers own their responsibilities to instruct, inform, and assess actions. In the former, at the student level, leadership is situationally brought by students working in the teamed structure. Student leadership is a necessary factor in group success and generally follows an expectation of a "servant leadership" model (Greenleaf, 1979).

How does Cooperative Learning align with Catholic/Vincentian morality?

Question #1: How is the nature of the CL classroom reflective of Catholic traditions and beliefs?

1. The classroom is not simply made up of a large group of unconnected learners but is best seen as a small interdependent community, a series of potential networks of learners. The Church recognizes that the universe of souls conducts its daily business in much smaller communities, ones in which responsibilities to others is central.

Families, neighborhoods, cities, as well as organizations, friendships, and “clubs” all accept and attempt to follow what can be seen as a Christian pattern of fellowship, mutuality, and interpersonal interaction.

2. As such an entity, each student in the group has been recognized as worthy of respect AND seen as an important cog in the overall operation of the society. Human dignity is a major feature of Christian thought and its manifestations in both the classroom and the culture is recognized, valued and reinforced.
3. Learning activities in a CL class are often conducted in groups of size 2-4, where each must contribute and be supportive of others. For each one to be successful, all must be successful. Opportunities for face-to-face interaction must be plentiful, follow powerful protocols supporting respect, inclusivity and equity; and the affective and cognitive outcomes are perceived as belonging to the effort of all to help all. Once again, the notion of a bonded community offered by the Church is reflected in daily activities.

Question #2: Why should an individual (student) treat others with respect, care about them and work with them in a productive fashion?

1. The Catholic Church proclaims that there is an inalienable human dignity in every one of us and that we are morally obligated to treat others respectfully and to assist them. The contemporary educational commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion should take place at the level of a respectful and inclusive interaction within a group of students in a CL classroom.
2. We are in solidarity with others -- we cannot avoid this truth -- and therefore we “ought” to help them. This is a moral, rather than a civic, “ought”: it is not simply a transactional practice, but an obligation derived from a consequent sense of duty that is consistent with Christian morality.
3. As a moral being, one has responsibilities to others and the promotion of the common good (which is the overriding principle of Catholic Social Teaching). One’s actions are not simply his or her own, but part of a network of connected actions. The bumper sticker slogan reading “We are all in This Together” is literally, socially, emotionally, physically, and morally an inescapable TRUTH of what it means to be a human being in community at any level from local to global.
4. Others in one’s group (students) may be “impoverished” in some way (lack of knowledge, lack of material goods, lack of social support, lack of drive or ability, lack of a sense of belonging and/or of self-respect). Associates (fellow students) are in a position to help rectify that situation. That is why the work of equity and inclusion is native to Catholic thought and NOT an importation from secular thought.
5. When directly asked, Fr. Rooney was blunt and clear: “Educational practices that are “moral” in the Catholic and Vincentian sense, are ones that (a) say YES to the dignity of the individual all the time (b) encourage collaborative and participatory action in contributing to the common good of the community and (c) which foster the rights and responsibilities of each person.” These are consistent components of Cooperative Learning philosophy and theory and are deeply rooted in Christian morality.

Question #3: Why must learners work in groups?

1. While the (peer) community clearly affects individuals, the reverse is true as well: individuals affect society. A collaborative philosophy produces more positive outcomes than does either a competitive one or an individual approach. (A mountain

of research from Johnson & Johnson shows this: see, for example, Johnson & Johnson, (2009) for a comprehensive overview.) Moreover, these positive outcomes are both cognitive and affective in nature: CL makes smarter people who are also “better” people (Vermette & Kline, 2017).

2. Catholic Social Teaching insists on the principle of subsidiarity: that social decisions should be made (a) at the simplest level at which they have an effect (b) by those in association with each other and (c) that those decisions should be made by those who are impacted by the decisions. CL relies on both leadership and authority functioning at the group level in all that pertains to it as group.
3. Clearly, the global community is “heterogeneous” in nature, yet there is a Common Good that permeates aspects of each life on earth: we really are all in this together! The commonality of being human, makes us all equal: the Church says that we all equal in the eyes of God. (The USA as a political entity suggests that we are equal under the law and have inalienable rights given by the “Creator”. This sense, drawn from Christian theology, is an enormously important cultural standard.) Thus, heterogeneity within a small team (of 4 students) is a way to turn human similarities into strengths while still allowing the many diversities amongst the learners to also become strengths and enrich the opportunities of each member to grow, to learn, to flourish and to embrace new relationships.
4. While it may seem obvious, we think one more point should be reinforced in this section. A command of Jesus is “love thy neighbor” and historically, reflecting on the parable of the Good Samaritan, the Church posits the widest answer to the question raised in the parable, “But who is my neighbor?” Cooperative Learning theory suggests that every classmate in a 3rd or 11th grade class is one’s “neighbor”; we ask youngsters to work respectfully and care about these others not necessarily by choice but by duty. One cannot easily show love to a neighbor that s/he hasn’t met, hasn’t worked with in face-to-face interaction, and who only knows from a distance. Teachers should construct these groups purposefully, help students develop the skills to work effectively in pluralist structures, and expect that these in-class life experiences will produce positive benefits for each one involved. Imagine if our classroom activity was informed by the story of Cain and Abel (Genesis 4). The true answer to Abel’s question “Am I my brother’s keeper?” which, remember, is a question provoked by shame and results in Abel hiding from the very source of his life, is “Of course I am!” and an adequate CL response would be formed by a desire to love thy teammates, cherish thy teammates, appreciate thy teammates, or care for thy teammates, depending on what degree of caring students can accept. The goal in this scenario is to help a student overcome shame, or whatever is holding them back from full participation.

Question #4: Why should there be both individual and group accountability?

1. The Catholic faith revolves around an understanding that one is responsible and accountable for one’s own behavior, decisions and intentions. Traditional schooling certainly aligns its standard accountability measures (i.e., grading practices) with that aspect of Christianity. Yet, the promise of this faith and the promise of Cooperative Learning Theory is that non-competitive collaboration is also a key part of the assessment of an individual. The good of the community requires contributions from its members: there is rarely (if ever) a chance to assess one’s actions without reference to the good of the group. In competitive athletics, the entire team wins or loses together, while individual contributions are also noted.

2. "What you do for the least of these, you do to me (Matthew 25)" was a call by the Gospels for measuring an individual's "worth" as a person. The key concept here is the facilitation of contribution: while both the capitalist spirit and the narcissistic trends felt in modern society suggest otherwise, the cultural reality today is that one does have obligations to the larger community, and participation by all is the responsibility of those in power (in the classroom, this is the teacher).
3. Many students today are already members of "groups" built within schooling: sports teams, drama clubs, student governments, Honor Societies, Tech clubs, Future Teachers club, Junior Achievement groups etc. Parents, families and friends want students to be "in these groups" (not "on them") suggesting that they see growth opportunities and possibilities sparked by efforts within such organizations that would not otherwise appear. Moreover, in many ways these collective associations are rightly seen as promoting the common good. We ask, "if groups are seen as strengths with school, why not within classrooms?" Our answer is to use Cooperative Learning teams within the classroom for the same reasons we advocate for what are often called "extra-curricular activities.
4. Group accountability already exists in societal structures: students should learn that doing for others is also doing for self and develop their ability to see the inclusive nature of a sense of community. These lessons, moral in nature and promoted by Christian beliefs, are best learned in cooperative group work.

Question #5: What does leadership look like in the CL classroom?

We conceptualize leadership as "a set of moral actions taken by a person to involve others (1) in the completion of a desirable task or project, (2) in the meeting of a commonly held goal, (3) in the development of others' skills and/or knowledge or (4) in the promotion of the common good. Seen this way, we support a "servant leadership" approach, often associated with the scholarly work of John Greenleaf. Interestingly, Greenleaf himself saw Jesus as the epitome of a leader and his theory was developed using Jesus' pronouncements and behaviors as the framework for his adaptations to secular structures found in Business, Politics, and other organizations.

Servant leadership is found in the actions of both teachers and students in the CL classroom. Teachers have authority and responsibilities yet must work through the efforts of each student to reach their goals and to experience successes. Likewise, if students are persuaded to accept the notion that for "one to succeed all must succeed" -- as suggested by CL Theory -- then leadership is needed at the most local level, where the learning interactions take place. It will be eminently facilitative until collaboration and true partnership emerge as partnership. Leadership, as a contextual function inheres in each contributor. It is not rooted in individual personhood, a title or a social status but on the needs of a group at each particular juncture. Leadership is thus fluid, changes hands by the situation, and divided as needed. It is also self-critical. It asks constantly, "How well are we working together, and how well are we achieving our learning goals?" We cannot help but note that this can be seen as reflected in the earliest of Christian scriptures (see especially the First Letter to the Corinthians, Chapter 12. More on that below.): it is not limited to a few. This philosophical perspective is now intuitively pervasive in Euro-derived culture, has biblical roots, and is consistent with the importance of the individual's self-worth and human dignity and his or her duties to the rest of society.

In closing this section on which concentrates on leadership, we feel compelled to extend our discussion to understanding the active relationships that can be observed in CL situations. What emerges, in practice, a form of community. It manifests as partnership,

hence our earlier emphasis on collaboration and subsidiarity. While leadership, as activity, still functions in an ongoing group, some members may be perceived to be more influential/powerful than others. One's influence can vary depending on the task, how it is structured, the soundness of the ideas, and the clarity with which members express their ideas. Membership in a student team has a given expectation of equality that manifests itself across a variety of problems, task completions, and opportunities. Once again, the principle of subsidiarity applies: those closest to the situation (or solution) have both the opportunity to contribute and the responsibility to share ownership of the final product. When working in cooperative learning teams, power and obligations are diffused across all members. To summarize, leadership is no longer a personal trait, it is a function that may be exercised by a member, by exercising power (influence), and is facilitative rather than dominant.

Connecting Christianity to CL in a few selected words

While we admit that we may have tried to reduce Christian, Catholic, and Vincentian perspective to a few pages, we hope to have opened up an avenue for reflection and further inquiry in the reader. This perspective is the shared culture of the authors, and because of that, we affirm the same for many other religious traditions, and most certainly, the Abrahamic religions with whom our culture shares so much.

Educators know that much of effective schooling is (1) built on culturally relevant beliefs, (2) relies on moral norms for its operation, and (3) seeks both individual growth (affective and cognitive) and the promotion of the common good in its outcomes. We also know that formal use of Cooperative Learning is directly tied to these three factors. We also recognize that these factors are "baked into" the Western Christian heritage (the Eastern Christian tradition is another matter).

Instead of summarizing the path our brief journey and integrative examination has taken, we wish to consolidate a few of these ideas by offering some famous and well-known biblical passages that are aligned with effective CL practice.

The necessary contribution of all members of the community

For just as the body is one and has many members and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it with Christ. For one in Spirit, we are all baptized into body - Jews or Greeks, slaves or free - and all were made to drink of one Spirit. For the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot should say "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body, that would not make me any less a part of the body. And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body that would not make it any less a part of the body" (1 Corinthians 12: 12-27.)² Leadership is shared and requires full and intentional participation.

The sacredness of those we are teaching

He will separate people from one another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on his right, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the Kingdom

2 All scripture citations are taken from the ESV® Study Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), Copyright © 2008 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food. I was thirsty and you gave me drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me. I was naked and you clothed me. I was sick and you visited me. I was in prison and you came to me." Then the righteous will answer him, saying, "Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you or thirsty and give you a drink? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you? And the King will answer them, Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers or sisters, you did it to me" (Matthew 25: 32a-40). Translated to a Cooperative Learning classroom, these encounters take on new, concrete meanings. I was thirsty for knowledge, and you gave me ideas. I was a stranger and you welcomed me. I was hopelessly stuck and you gave me a clue to get started. I was lost in confusion and you gave me a clear explanation. I was going in a wrong direction and you helped to correct my course and get me back on track.

The universality of human dignity

"Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" The expert in the law replied, "The one who had mercy on him." Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise." (Luke 10: 36-37)"

As we consider these principles through the prism of student-to-student interaction in a CL classroom, we can easily recognize their applicability. Each of them reflects the "sacredness" of each learner. When we directly assist others, we are promoting Jesus's message and recognizing the divine in each other. So, then, what does it mean, as in the story of the Good Samaritan, to be someone who "showed mercy"? Truly, in the cooperative classroom where this awareness has developed and is in play, "Mercy and truth have met together;" (Psalms 85:10a) we have recognized the sacredness of the other and given them what reverence demands: the permission to become their best selves and to contribute that to a common effort, each student and teacher freeing the gifts of the other. As simple as it seems, from the Cooperative Learning perspective, showing "mercy" to a teammate could take many forms, including these specific (hypothetical) ones:

- 5th grader Rosalyn tells teammate Francis that it is ok that he messed up his part of the project and that everyone on the team will help him do better next time;
- 11th grader Jasmine offers to help an overloaded teammate, Harris, complete his section of the project. She tells him, "We are in this together. You are not alone here. Let me help now as I can and maybe you can help others in the future."
- First grader Seth kneels next to a crying partner, Ahmed, and tells him: "I feel sorry for you about your dog." Seth then begins crying as well and Ahmed offers him a Kleenex.
- 8th grader Margo is hugging her teammate, Linda. Margo whispers, "we all make mistakes...and you did apologize. I will walk with you to next period."

Cooperation for success

“As long as Moses held up his hands, the Israelites were winning, but whenever he lowered his hands, the Amalekites were winning. When Moses’ hands grew tired, they took a stone and put it under him and he sat on it. Aaron and Hur held his hands up – one on one side, one on the other – so that his hands remained steady till sunset.”
(Exodus 17: 11-12)

From the Cooperative Learning perspective, “holding up one’s teammates” is similar to the “showing mercy” items offered above. But this image answers the question, what do I do when my teammates are experiencing various types of exclusion that could be overcome by generosity of spirit, so that the whole team can keep “winning. Here we offer two additional, simple examples:

- 12th graders Jackson, Monroe and Neil *literally* step back to allow the fourth member of their team, Jacinta, to be in front of them where she receives the accolades from the school principal for their effort in designing a service project for the community.
- With the rest of the three student teams spread around the room, 3rd graders Lance and Audrey help their teammate Kendall leave his wheelchair and lift him on their shoulders so he can join in the signing of the song they created about the story they read.

In this next brief consideration, we have chosen several quotations from the contemporary servant of the impoverished, Saint (Mother) Teresa of Kolkata, to bring Catholic thinking into the late 20th century.

1. “The most terrible poverty is loneliness and the feeling of being unloved”. We include this assertion for its timeliness. Today, childhood is a dangerous place for children. Gun violence is the leading cause of death among children in the US. Prescription and illegal drugs are staples of many communities (and schools). There are enormous amounts of anxiety, depression, entitlement, anomie, and fear. (Yes, Covid and remote learning have drastically changed childhood culture). Feeling isolated and alone and afraid is a terrible state of being when children of all ages need positive peer experiences, face-to-face interaction, and an emotionally safe space. Cooperative Learning classrooms offer hope against this type of poverty of the spirit. Building and sustaining positive relationships are both a process and a product of CL.
2. “I can do things you cannot; you can do things I cannot. Together, we can do great things”. We see this quotation as obviously supportive of collaboration and teamwork. The very act of working together utilizes individual strengths to promote the common good and improve the quality of the product created. Teamwork calls for integrating diverse sets of skills owned by different contributors and makes a positive impact. All of us are smarter than any one of us.
3. “A life not lived for others is not a life.” While egocentrism, narcissism, and selfishness seem to be increasingly common 21st-century American traits, youngsters need to experience and understand the importance of others and their obligations toward them. Freedom, a widely shared American value, is not license; it is embodied in the right to decide for oneself. However, that right is always tempered by limitations and by the common good, embedded in the lives of classmates and their

realities. No single student does their schooling independently of others, and “doing for others” and “living for others” enriches the individual experience and strengthens the social network. Children need to consider their actions in light of those of others and grant that interdependence is the real nature of the community.

Take a moment and examine the distinction between living *for* others and *with* others in the context of the Cooperative Classroom. The traditional classroom expects students to tolerate and handle the actions of others; those that they are *with*. The CL classroom expects students to promote, respect, assist and contribute to the well-being of the rest of the class community (and the team): this suggests that their actions are *for* the common good, *for* the others in their school lives. This certainly appears to the authors to be a substantial difference.

In a final consideration we wish the reader to hear several thoughts from Saint Vincent de Paul, the patron of Niagara University, his collaborator, Saint Louise de Marillac (both ecclesial reformers of 17th century France) and their “spiritual son”, Antoine Frederic Ozanam, who founded the Society of St. Vincent de Paul as a twenty-year-old university student. They are our principal “Vincentian” link to Catholic, Christian beliefs. As noted above, we find direct connections between their words and the philosophical context that undergirds Cooperative Learning theory.

On Collaboration

If God were pleased to give his support and adaptation to each individual, what great union and advantages would this procure for the entire body because we would regard the interest of others as our own (Vincent De Paul).

On respecting the dignity of persons

All must be done with gentleness of heart and humility, as we consider the interests of those with whom we are working rather than our own (Louise de Marillac)

On the necessity of peaceful, loving means to all ends

The question which is agitating the world today is a social one. It is a struggle between those who have nothing and those who have too much. It is a violent clash of opulence and poverty which is shaking the ground under our feet. Our duty as Christians is to throw ourselves between these two camps in order to accomplish by love, what justice alone cannot do. (Antoine Frederic Ozanam).

Summary

In summary, as the reader now knows, the authors’ collaborative journey has been going on for over a decade, but its highlight may be found in a March 2023 conversation between Vermette and Rooney in which Rooney summed up what the Vincentian conception of an ideal educational practice would look like by saying that such a practice would revolve around 3 factors:

1. the practice continuously says YES to the dignity of every person in the community;
2. in operation, the practice would encourage collaboration and participation amongst the learners;
3. the practice would consistently emphasize a mix of individual rights and responsibilities.

Clearly, modern Cooperative Learning Theory has strong roots in Catholic, Christian beliefs and affinity with Vincentian beliefs and expectations about our relationships with the impoverished of all kinds. Recognizing this truth creates a sense of the familiar amongst CL practitioners and their larger communities. It also places the emphasis on the “moral” AND “practical” aspects of CL in perspective: culturally, we know that it “feels right” to work with diverse others respectfully and that “we are all in this together”. Using Cooperative Learning turns these cultural/biblical sayings into a daily reality. The theory and practice of Cooperative Learning are fully compatible with the Catholic faith.

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