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Fishbowls, Creative Controversy, Talking Chips: Exploring Literature Cooperatively

Lynda Baloche, Marilyn Lee Mauger, Therese M. Willis,
Joseph R. Filinuk, and Barbara V. Michalsky

The Fishbowl

Terry's eleventh-grade English class is studying *Macbeth*. The chairs in the classroom are arranged in a "fishbowl"—two circles, one inside the other. As students enter the room, she assigns them to one of these circles. Terry gives the students in the inner circle about eight minutes to discuss the statement "Men who have been violent on the battlefield may come home to act like criminals in time of peace" and relate it to both *Macbeth* and contemporary life. Prior to class, students have responded to this statement in their journals. They welcome the opportunity to share their thoughts. Conversation is lively. The ground rules—"state an idea and support it with evidence," "agree with a speaker and add additional evidence," and "disagree with a speaker and offer evidence,"—help insure an informed discussion.

Meanwhile, each student in the outer circle spends these eight minutes listening to the discussion and noting the interactions of one assigned classmate, or "fish," in the inner circle. To assist the observation, Terry gives each of the students in the outer circle a worksheet. Throughout the discussion, students tally each time their "fish" contributes an idea, describes feelings, paraphrases, expresses support or acceptance, encourages others to contribute, summarizes, relieves tension by joking, or gives direction to the group's work. Students in the inner circle treat each other courteously. One hears, "Sue, would you like to add something else to that idea?" "Matt, what do you think about that?" "David, that's an excellent point."

Smiles flash as the observers refer to their sheets and describe how partners focused the discussion, summarized, or contributed a particularly complex idea. Their positive, enthusiastic acknowledgment of peers has a certain magical quality. Then, students exchange seats—those formerly in the inner circle now observe; those in the outer circle now take their turn to discuss a second focus statement. Another round of intense, informed discussion and observation takes place.

At the conclusion of the class, Terry asks students to reflect on the fishbowl as a discussion technique. "People learn to listen to what others have to say. People learn to probe out more from others." "It's an open debate atmosphere that we should have more of in classes." "Group dynamics is a great thing for high-school students to learn. The best part of this fishbowl is a controlled free-for-all—a spontaneous explosion of ideas with nothing held back—exciting and argumentative."

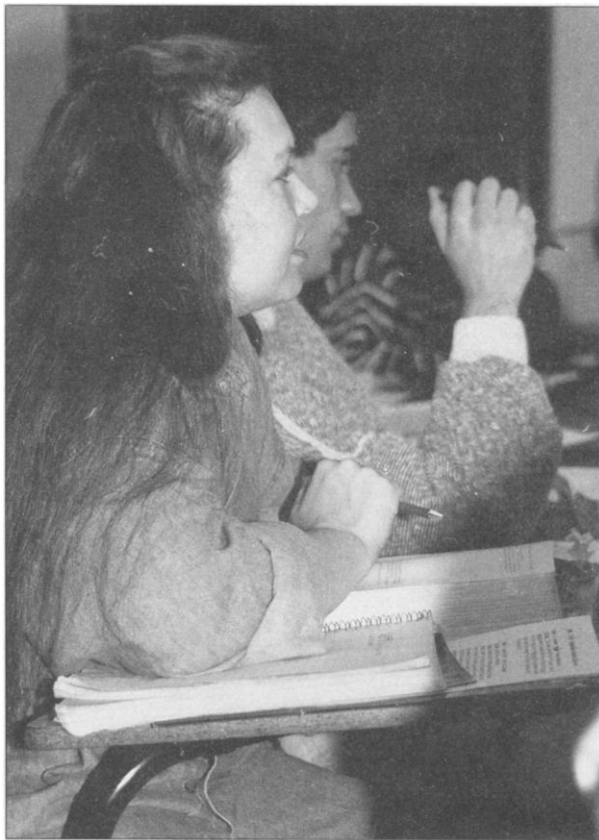
Creative Controversy

Down the hall, Marilyn's tenth-grade class is studying Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*. She has decided to use the creative-controversy model of David and Roger Johnson (1992) to help her students explore the dilemma that John Proctor faces in Act IV. Should Proctor, following Reverend Hale's theory, give a false confession to witchcraft, and live, or should Proctor refuse to confess and be hanged?

Marilyn divides her class into groups of four. Within these groups, students are divided into pairs. One pair will build a case to support Proctor's position to die rather than make a false confession; the other pair will support Hale's view that

it is better to give a false confession and live. At home, students use the text to gather evidence to support their positions and the following day work in their pairs to integrate ideas and evidence into a coherent position. Next, Marilyn asks each pair to separate and consult with members of different pairs who have prepared the same position. Students then return to their partners and work to assimilate the new ideas they have gleaned from classmates.

The following day, in their groups of four, students present their positions. Each pair, in turn, presents its position while the other pair takes



notes. Following this initial exposition, pairs ask clarifying questions, point out weaknesses, ask for justification and further evidence, and openly challenge “opponents.” Book pages fly, bodies lean forward, and voices are raised in earnest excitement.

Following this intense discussion, each pair withdraws to prepare for what might be the most interesting and challenging phase of this creative controversy—perspective reversal. Pairs who supported Proctor’s decision must now support Hale’s view; those who supported Hale must now support

Proctor. Notes taken in the original exposition of positions serve as the base for discussion, but now each pair adds at least two new pieces of evidence to its argument.

The next day, both teams present these new positions. Then, determining the relative merits of each side, they drop advocacy and strive to reach a consensus that supports the view of either Proctor or Hale. Each foursome reports its decision to the class. Groups use oral presentations, written statements, and visual displays. They have been asked to show both the relative weakness of the position rejected as well as the strengths of their own position. Thus, students gain confidence in arriving at decisions, since they recognize, rather than dismiss, merits of the opposition. In this way, each group will be empowered, when confronted with disparate information and feelings, to work cooperatively with others for informed judgments. Using creative controversy, students don’t just recall information in *The Crucible*; they apply it to the large questions of the text—and their own lives.

When asked, students in Marilyn’s class are eager to describe their experience with creative controversy. “Being in a group helps because there are facts which one person could never think of, and by working together and switching opinions, more understanding can be achieved.” “It was much more helpful to hear the views of classmates rather than just listen to the teacher.” “I thought the activity was good because we could discuss with our friends how we felt about moral issues.”

Cooperative Groups for Literature Discussion

While Terry’s class discusses *Macbeth* and Marilyn’s class tries to come to grips with the central dilemma in *The Crucible*, Joe’s tenth-grade class is studying Pat Conroy’s *Prince of Tides*. They will spend a total of four different class periods discussing this powerful novel. On the second day of discussion, students come prepared to share a memorable passage and to discuss a particularly despicable act of cruelty or violence from Chapters 8–17. They sit comfortably in groups of four around tables.

Students are assigned roles: *moderators* ensure that members stay on task and discuss quietly; *encouragers* ensure that everyone has an opportunity to share ideas; *recorders* take notes and present copies of these notes to each group member; *summarizers* use the recorder’s notes to review main points at the conclusion of the discussion.

Group members listen with the kind of earnest attention that suggests they really do want to know why individuals have selected their passages and why a particular act of violence is so disturbing. It is touching to listen as group members explain their choices and share their personal views about the importance of family, growing up, trust, and honesty. At the conclusion of class, Joe asks students to reflect and share within the group one idea that helped them deepen their understanding of the novel.

Joe is excited about using cooperative groups to facilitate literature discussion. "I have found cooperative activity most beneficial as a way of discussing literature. No matter how good I think my prompts are, I always encounter silence when I ask a question about a novel, poem, play. No one wants to take public risks. So much class time is consumed in trying to drag out responses from one or two students; however, if I group students, the result is miraculous. They derive the same benefits—on their own, and in less time."

The Elements of Cooperative Learning

Terry, Marilyn, and Joe regularly use cooperative learning—especially the cooperative-learning model of the Johnsons—to provide their students with opportunities for discussion and peer cooperation. Many positive outcomes have been linked with the kinds of meaningful collaboration that students in these classes experience: positive peer relationships, positive patterns of interaction, and enhanced learning (Johnson and Johnson 1983a, 1983b; Johnson, Johnson, and Holubec 1991). It is to this model that we now turn to understand better how Terry, Marilyn, and Joe structure cooperative-learning opportunities in their classrooms.

According to Johnson, Johnson, and Holubec (1991), five basic elements should be included in a lesson if it is to be truly cooperative: positive interdependence, face-to-face promotive interaction, individual accountability, interpersonal and small-group skills, and group processing.

Positive Interdependence

Positive interdependence is the perception that students and their work are linked for their mutual benefit. It creates a climate in which small groups of students work together to maximize learning. The Johnsons have identified nine basic types of positive interdependence: goal, celebration or reward, resource, role, task, fantasy, outside enemy,

environmental, and identity. Several authors (Bennett, Rolheiser-Bennet, and Stevahn 1991; Dishon and O'Leary 1984; Johnson, Johnson, and Holubec 1991) have written extensively about this concept and offer many practical suggestions for structuring positive interdependence into lessons.

Goal interdependence is fundamental to the cooperative classroom. All three teachers use other types of positive interdependence as well. Marilyn and Joe ask their students to share resources. In Marilyn's class, students share notes—both with their partners and with team members supporting the opposite viewpoint—and the art supplies used to illustrate their decisions regarding Proctor's fate. Students benefit from shared sets of notes in Joe's class as well. Terry provides students with opportunities to assume both speaker and observer *roles* within a single class period. Joe regularly assigns and rotates functional roles in an effort to ensure that each group runs smoothly. When Marilyn's students present the positions of Hale and Proctor, they often do so "in character," adding an element of *fantasy* to their work. Terry carefully arranges her room in concentric circles, and Joe uses tables to structure the physical *environment*. Joe's students have created an *identity* for their work groups by inventing amusing names and taping these names to their work tables.

Earlier in the year, Joe's students read Tennessee Williams' *Glass Menagerie*. Joe then assigned each student to read one of five additional plays. In "jigsaw" groups of five, students presented their plays and discussed similarities in plot, character, setting, and theme. This is another example of how resource interdependence might be structured in the classroom.

Face-to-Face Promotive Interaction

"Cooperative learning requires face-to-face interaction. . . . It is the interaction patterns and verbal interchange among children promoted by the positive interdependence that affect education outcomes." (Johnson, Johnson, and Holubec 1991, 1:11) Teachers make many decisions that influence both the quantity and quality of these face-to-face interactions. For instance, teachers must decide how many students will be in a group, how groups will be assigned, and how long groups will stay together.

In general, groups should be kept small. Terry, for instance, used pairs for intensive observation, Marilyn had partners work together to prepare and

present positions, and Joe used groups of four in discussions. All three teachers decided which students would work together. Most often these decisions are based on principles of heterogeneity—if not heterogeneity by ability, then heterogeneity by gender, social status, ethnic or economic background, learning styles, content preferences, and the like. The teachers also decided how long groups would remain together. Terry's class stayed in their two large groups for just one day. Marilyn's students worked in the same twosomes and foursomes for almost a week. Joe's students remain with the same groups for the entire time it takes to discuss a novel or play.

Marilyn says, "I love the depth I can explore in writing and literature just by varying the number of students working on an activity. How I can slow down or accelerate the pace, how students are able to zero in on one area of the lesson by practicing or discussing with one other student. How I can culminate a lesson with all groups reacting to each other."

Individual Accountability

Within the cooperative structure, teachers need to structure individual accountability to ensure that all students contribute and that each student can individually apply some procedure or knowledge learned as a group member.

Terry, Marilyn, and Joe all build opportunities for informal individual assessments into their daily activities. They have each instructed students to prepare individual notes before they work together in groups, and, periodically all three review these notes to ensure that each student contributes thoughtful work. To keep students actively engaged in group discussions, all the teachers occasionally call on individual students to summarize.

Interpersonal and Small-Group Skills

Merely placing students in a group and telling them to work together does not mean that they can and will do so. The skills needed to work together productively—the skills of collaboration—do not just appear when they are needed, but must be identified and practiced within the context of meaningful academic work. Role playing, simulations, and examples from literature or film can be used to sensitize students to the importance of their interactional skills.

Chris, a teacher who works with Terry, Marilyn, and Joe, has used an effective variation on the



fishbowl technique with her ninth graders. Early in the year, when students study the play *Twelve Angry Men*, Chris uses detailed observation forms and the movie to help her students analyze behaviors that facilitate or block group decision-making. This study not only helps students understand the play more thoroughly but also makes them aware of their own group behaviors and decision-making abilities throughout the year.

Marilyn's use of creative controversy requires that she and her students target several important, and often difficult, collaborative skills. To be successful, students must be able to listen, ask for clarification, criticize ideas, differentiate positions, and integrate ideas. Marilyn has spent time not only developing these advanced skills in preparation for this activity, but also monitoring and coaching throughout. Structuring creative controversies in the classroom provides students with opportunities to practice crucial, real-life skills.

Joe knows that merely assigning roles such as encourager and summarizer is not enough. Joe spends time discussing these roles with his students, and he regularly reinforces appropriate uses

of these behaviors as he monitors group discussions. On occasion, Joe uses a technique called “talking chips” (Kagan 1992) to ensure that all students in a group share ideas and that no one dominates the conversation. Joe gives students three plastic chips each and instructs them to place one chip in the center of the table each time they talk. Once their chips are gone, students must remain silent until the other people around the table have contributed their ideas and used their chips. To sensitize students to the need for paraphrasing, Joe occasionally uses “paraphrase passport” (Kagan 1992). With this technique, the “ticket” for talking is not a chip but the ability to correctly paraphrase the person who has just spoken. Both techniques encourage students to listen before they speak.

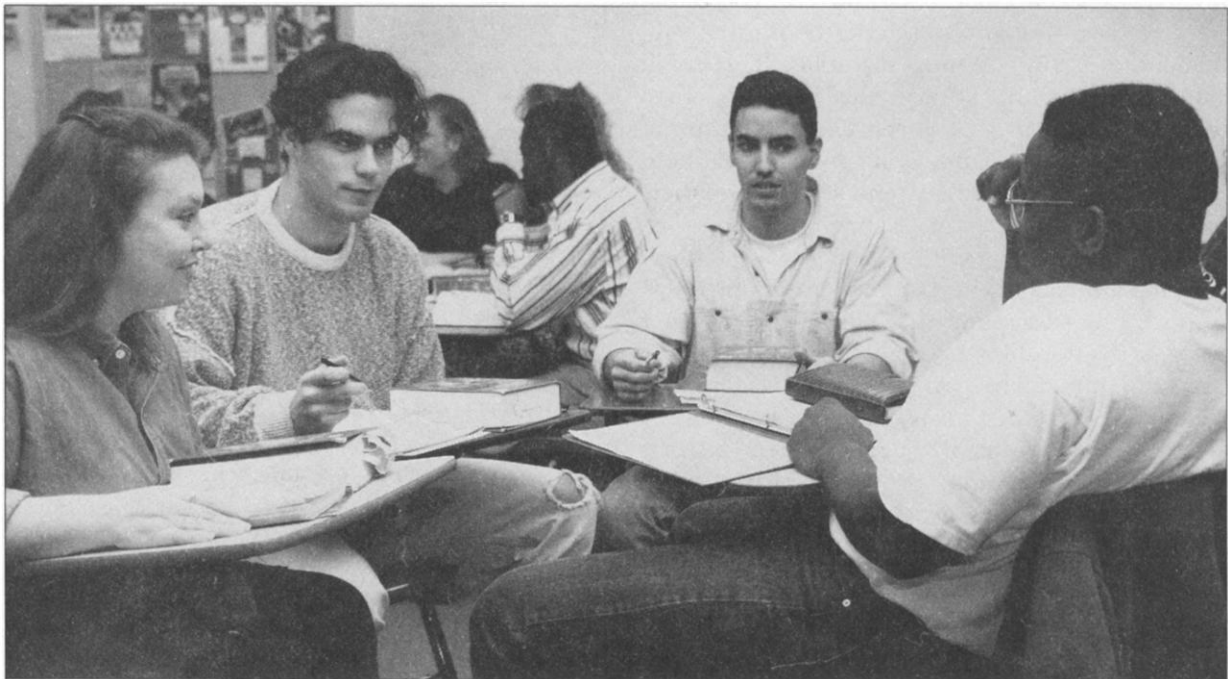
Group Processing

When students work together in groups, it is important that they evaluate not just their progress in achieving academic goals but also the facility with which they are working to build and maintain productive working relationships.

When Terry wants her students to “step back” from *Macbeth* and reflect on the use of the fishbowl, she might ask her students to “Consider two places, other than your group, where you can learn about yourself by asking for feedback from a friend,” or to “Name one skill that you can try to use more

often to help your group work effectively.” Terry also shares her own data, both the ideas the students have discussed and the kinds of interactional skills they have used. Because she takes the time to record her observations, her feedback is specific, detailed, and relevant.

While the students in Marilyn’s and Joe’s classes are preparing their positions and discussing their reading, Marilyn and Joe move about their classrooms and monitor not just the content of the discussion but also the process. On occasion they introduce a comment, perhaps to help a group clarify a procedure, or to help a group focus more carefully on an idea or to help ensure that the ideas of all individuals are receiving careful attention. Joe spends about five minutes with each group, quietly listening and collecting data about the discussions. At the conclusion of the class, before Joe shares his observations, he asks students to reflect on their discussion and to share what helped them to deepen their understanding. Joe might say, “Turn to the person on your left and tell them one thing they contributed today that helped deepen your understanding of the main character’s conflict.” At intervals throughout the creative controversy, Marilyn might ask her students, “On a scale of one to seven, how well did today’s discussion help you understand Proctor’s motives?” or she might tell them “List one thing you, as an individ-



ual, did today that helped your group move towards consensus.”

The Implementation of Cooperative Learning

Terry, Marilyn, Joe, and Barbara, the Language Arts Supervisor, have all participated in formal staff development in cooperative learning. Their district's interest in cooperative learning began about four years ago as a teacher-inspired innovation, when Marilyn and Terry, while reading *Circles of Learning* (Johnson et al. 1984), discovered the cooperative learning model. Staff development in cooperative learning, sponsored by the school district and conducted mostly by Lynda, has subsequently been based on this model, which invites teacher “ownership” and adaptation.

Terry, Marilyn, Joe, and Barbara share desk and work space in the Humanities Center and are able to share ideas and solve problems on a regular and informal basis. Marilyn and Terry participate voluntarily in a collegial circle, meeting about once a month to coach and informally observe each other's teaching. All the teachers invite Barbara into their classes quite frequently—as an extra pair of eyes and ears, as a resource, as a coach, and as a cheerleader. Barbara sometimes completes a form designed specifically for use with cooperative lessons that focuses her observation and helps the teachers reflect on the cooperative-learning model. With enthusiastic support from the superintendent, Barbara subscribes to the *Cooperative Learning* magazine and purchases books that supplement the core training materials. This small cooperative-learning library, plus frequent cross-discipline meetings that Barbara organizes to encourage faculty problem-solving and sharing, help the teachers and Barbara extend and expand their knowledge and further “take charge” of their own professional development.

Well-planned staff development, administrative support, cross-discipline sharing, and nourishing collegial relationships have all contributed to the successful implementation of cooperative learning not only in Terry's, Marilyn's, and Joe's classes but also in many classes throughout their district. Through open sharing, problem solving, additional study—and even article writing—the potential satisfaction is high for teachers and students alike.

Joe, who has begun his careful implementation of cooperative learning just this year, says, “I am committed to following through and creating an

even more cooperative classroom next year.” Marilyn, enjoying the level of student involvement in her classes, believes that “involvement is the key to learning.” Terry notes, “In the cooperative classroom my work is different. I'm more involved, and it's work I want to do. No longer am I expected to be the expert, correcting or rewarding my students; instead, I am an encourager, a facilitator.”

Students assess their work this way: “Through groups, students can learn new angles or approaches that might escape them if they were working independently.” “I enjoy seeing someone's face light up when I explain an idea he or she never considered.” “I love the discussion that cooperative work in English class breeds. Whether we're teaching each other about poetry in groups of three or arguing Raskolnikov's guilt, the exchange of ideas and quick thinking lead to discussion and ‘deep thought’ outside the classroom.” “When a teacher hands over the power of teaching to us, we learn more, we are more interested and motivated. My experiences in cooperative learning are good ones.”

We agree.

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