



## Kagan Structures Altered the Way I Teach Forever

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The following is a report of my firsthand experience learning **Kagan Structures** and putting them into action in my own classroom. I am a classroom practitioner working with children aged 4-11 in a mainstream school. The school is designated to integrate children with a physical disability into mainstream. My school is in the North West of England just South of Manchester.

### The Day My Life Changed

Before that day, I regularly experienced the glazed eyes of students who were experiencing low energy level dips which were part and parcel of students sitting quietly for prolonged periods. But that was before.

In July of 2002, I was fortunate enough to have the opportunity to attend the **Learning Brain Expo** in San Antonio, Texas, USA. Whilst there, I attended a half day lecture by **Dr. Spencer Kagan**. The lecture was titled; *Kagan Brain Friendly Instructional Structures*. My first reaction was one of awe. The workshop was very informative and extremely motivational. It was what I had been waiting to discover my entire teaching career. I was so moved by the presentation and was instantly eager to get back to my students to put into practice what I had learned. In my 13 years of teaching, attending workshops and training **this has been the ONLY information I have received that I know I will use until I retire**. I also knew that the very act of attending the workshop had altered my life's direction from that moment on!

The summer holidays seemed to drag. I couldn't wait to get back into my class and try out the structures. During the summer break, I had time to reflect as well as read from cover to cover, **Cooperative Learning** by **Dr. Spencer Kagan**. This further enhanced my knowledge of structures and gave me time to plan how I was to implement them into my class teaching.

### Impressive Results Immediately

**Kagan Structures** have indeed transformed my classroom and the way I teach. With clearly defined, repeatable steps, the structures were easy-to-learn and easy-to-use. I immediately found them to be ideal for increasing academic gains. These gains were happening far more quickly and far more thoroughly than with the "traditional" classroom methods I was using before. Part of the reason the **Kagan Structures** are so successful is because they are so brain compatible. By using the structures regularly, it is easy to create an environment of safety that enhances learning and learning-to-learn skills. Without changing what is taught, the **Kagan Structures** transform how content is taught.

Along with the academic gains, I also found that the **Kagan Structures** developed and enhanced thinking skills, emotional intelligence, social skills, teamwork skills, and character. By working together through these structures, students skills such as respect, cooperation, kindness, effort, honesty, and leadership skills were all improving drastically.

From my perspective as a classroom teacher, the change was relatively easy. From the perspective of the students in my class, the change meant that class was far more engaging; students developed a greater liking for school, their classmates, themselves and others and also the process of learning itself. It is quite clear that **Kagan Structures** align instruction with what is known about how students best learn and retain information.

### Back to School for Structures

Since that initial half-day training with Dr. Kagan, I have taken two more courses in Cooperative Learning: the 5-day **Structures for Success**, and the 6-day **Training for Trainers**. I have also invested a lot of time, which I have enjoyed immensely, reading and researching Cooperative Learning and taking part in many online discussions with National Kagan trainers and Spencer Kagan himself.

As I learn each new **Kagan Structure**, I am prepared to actively engage students in an infinite number of activities because the cooperative structures are content free. Cooperative structures are infinitely "reusable" over and over. A few of my favorite **Kagan Structures** are:



- RallyRobin
- Timed Pair Share
- Numbered Heads Together

Before structures, my teaching style was traditional “chalk and talk.” I would use whole-class question-answer. Providing sufficient oral language development for each student was simply not possible because of time constraints. **Structures promote more learning in each valuable minute of class time.** Now, in my cooperative learning lessons all pupils get to have their say. All good learning has a social base. The students often learn more by interacting with peers than learning by any other means.

I have found that when a student is in a cooperative classroom he/she becomes far more engaged. For instance, I have a child in my class who has Cerebral Palsy. Previously, he found it difficult to build relations. When he was assigned to work in a group, he often ended up working solo. This was due to the slow patterns of his speech and the fact that he found it hard to gain a platform to put forward his ideas before the others had moved on. Now, his turn is structured into the interaction. He shares either with a partner or with the team. His partner names an item, and then he has his turn. At first he was hesitant, but his partner patiently waited. A social skill developed with other students. When he named an item his partner smiled. Each time it was his turn he was receiving encouragement and support from his partner. This student had a Learning Support Assistant who was overwhelmed with the progress he made in such a short space of time. Further, because he is engaged, he listens to the items his partner is naming and he is learning both content and language skills. His confidence has increased dramatically. His speech has improved and quickened. And his liking for school has been boosted enormously.

### Structures Are Not Group Work

I have found that merely telling students to work together and help one another is wishful thinking. This is the essence of group work as little cooperation actually results. Children are often “hogs” or “logs.” The hogs are the dominant students who take over, leaving very little time for others to be active learners. The logs are usually the least able or shy students, the very students who would benefit most from taking a more active approach to their learning, who sit back and get a free ride resulting in little hands-on involvement and little overt learning as a consequence.

Cooperative structures ensure success by structuring for desired outcomes. Structures are designed to give students specific roles. Cooperation is built in by limiting either the materials available or the time each student has. The Cooperative structures are designed to efficiently produce engagement, positive social interactions, and achievement because they incorporate four basic principles, the **PIES** principles:

### PIES

**P - Positive Interdependence**

**I - Individual Accountability**

**E - Equal Participation**

**S - Simultaneous Interaction**



**Positive Interdependence.** With Positive Interdependence in place, students support and pull for each other. They soon realize they need to do their part and also rely on others. When I use the structure **RallyRobin**, students experience themselves as on the same side as each other rather than pitted one against another. They have a common goal. Each hopes their partner comes up with good answers, knowing a gain for one is a gain for the other. Sharing, caring, verbal skills, and listening skills are enhanced as a result.



**Individual Accountability.** Individual Accountability is holding students accountable for doing their part. Each student is required to repeatedly respond on their own publicly, creating engagement and learning. They know they cannot daydream because using the structures I will often hold them accountable. (No logs!)



**Equal Participation.** With Equal Participation, students learn to take turns. Because students are taking turns in pairs, each student in the class participates about equally. As a traditional teacher, I would often call on students who would raise their hands. Some would wave wildly making “pick-me-noises” whilst others would never raise their hands. Although I felt skilled in raising the level of participation, it was often participation by some and little or no participation by others no matter how hard I tried. By engaging only the most knowledgeable, (often like ‘Who Wants To Be A Millionaire’ fastest finger first) the most skilful, or those who most seek attention, what happened with the rest of the class? Disengagement? Apathy? Boredom? **Kagan Structures** are carefully designed to create equal participation. Using the **Kagan Structures**, it has been so easy to have all my students interacting and engaged without leaving any of the students behind. I have found that **when it comes to learning, students “Use it or lose it!”**



**Simultaneous Interaction.** Previously, just one student in my class was active at a time as when we did Whole Class Q/A. Meanwhile, the others were passive and silent. Now I use structures like **RallyRobin** so that at any one moment in my class, half the students in my class are overtly active naming answers. Retention is now greatly enhanced because in **RallyRobin** each student has to give his/her own answers.

## The Benefits of Kagan Structures

By using **Kagan Structures** as a regular part of my class teaching, I am able to keep the threat low and keep the energy high. Before, I regularly experienced the 'glazed-eyes' of the student's who were experiencing low energy level dips which were part and parcel of students sitting quietly for prolonged periods. **Kagan Structures** are very active. **Kagan Structures** include movement, interaction among students, and hands-on learning. Students get out of their seats and move in the classroom. I intersperse regular brain breaks and moments to diffuse their learning.

Cooperation rather than competition, which is important for learning, shines through at all times. Students are encouraged to help each other in any way they can. At various times throughout lessons everyone is either a 'student' or a 'teacher' simultaneously. **I have re-discovered the joy of learning for myself** and act as a learner role model rather than a dispenser of information.

Once I have learned a structure (to learn each new one in depth takes approximately 45 minutes), using the structures requires little or no extra preparation time. In fact, it has helped to reduce my workload as a teacher.

Seeing the level of involvement of students in my class when **Kagan Structures** are used, it comes as no mystery why all students are making dramatic academic and social gains. Here are some main social benefits I've seen:

- Students stay on task and are less disruptive
- Students are more responsible for themselves and respectful toward others
- Students are more capable of taking the other's perspective; they are more empathetic
- Students are more cooperative and courteous toward the teacher and each other
- Students feel more relaxed and secure in the classroom
- Students possess a higher self-esteem

Here are main academic benefits I've witnessed:

- Students score better on tests
- Students retain more
- Students develop thinking skills
- Students explore the curriculum in greater depth
- Students develop communication skills
- Students' learning styles are more successfully addressed
- Students receive more instantaneous feedback



## Creating an Inclusive Classroom

Cooperative Learning helps in creating the inclusive classroom. It allows students to contribute in a way that can make them feel significant. Through lots of teambuilding and classbuilding structures and activities, **the classroom has become a caring community** in which each student feels known, accepted and appreciated. With structures, I have learned special adaptations for the range of special need students. This makes learning more fun for everyone. They have helped me to establish a classroom environment where everyone wants to be! **Kagan Structures** have helped me to 'turn around' my difficult students and reduce discipline problems.

## Looking Back and Looking Forward

For me, **Kagan Structures** have made teaching and learning more fun, more engaging, and more successful. They have transformed life in my classroom, and indeed out of the classroom, in numerous positive ways. **Kagan Structures** have helped me to respond to the most pressing educational needs by responding to the student as a whole. They have helped me to focus on the success of all students. They have helped me to accommodate different learning styles, whilst making learning fun rather than serious and overbearing. Cooperative Learning Structures are helping me develop higher-level thinking, deliver the embedded curriculum and develop character and team working skills—the very skills students need if they are to be successful in the fast-changing world of the future. All of this change has been at a pace that I have found relaxed and comfortable. I am now looking forward to my next step and training as a **Kagan Cooperative Learning Structures District Trainer**. If I am successful in this endeavor, I will be ready to share these proven learning strategies with other teaching professionals within my network of schools.