



Kagan Cooperative Learning & Higher Level Teaching Assistants, Teaching Assistants, Paraprofessionals and Classroom Aides



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As a Kagan Trainer and Director of KaganUK I have had the privilege of bringing Dr. Spencer Kagan's visionary ideas in the field of Cooperative Learning to thousands of teachers, lecturers and professors in UK schools and colleges. During the workshops I have delivered over the last twelve years I have also been given another unique opportunity; to work with an army of classroom support staff: Higher Level Teaching Assistants, Teaching Assistants, Learning Support Assistants, Paraprofessionals and Classroom Aides who daily work alongside teachers supporting learning in an increasingly diverse but vital role in UK schools.

This article grew from the numerous conversations I have had with teaching assistants around how they can best use their knowledge and experience of Cooperative Learning to further support teachers and students.

Q: "As a TA should I learn about Kagan Structures? If so, "Where do I begin?"

A: Yes! I think the strongest message I can give for Teaching Assistants is to learn, participate in, and lead Kagan Cooperative Learning structures. You cannot support what you do not understand. It is not enough to just 'hear about' a structure it is essential to have experienced them yourselves 'from the inside' and to have built the rationale why this model of teaching and learning supports **ALL** students both academically and socially.

Start small, get good at one or two simple Kagan Structures such as **RallyRobin** and/or **Timed Pair Share**. Knowing just two simple everyday Kagan structures can make a huge difference in supporting the students and teachers you work with to raise achievement and engagement. Simple structured interaction can help you to take the students you support a very long way simply instead of "calling-on-one" or "turn and talk" in small groups.

RallyRobin



In pairs (pairs could be student + TA), students alternate generating brief oral responses.

Examples:

- List ideas from last lesson.
- List what we need to be ready for a hydro-therapy session.
- Share steps of the experiment.
- Describe events from the story in order.

Timed Pair Share



In pairs, students share with a partner (partner could be the TA) for a predetermined time while the partner listens. Then partners switch roles.

Examples:

- What is the key thing that you learned?
- It could have been better if...

Q: “Will I still be needed if the students are supporting each other?”

A: Again YES! As a teaching assistant working closely alongside a class teacher in either a primary or a secondary school there are plenty of times that you can manage the quick improvement of a Cooperative Learning structure like Fan-n-Pick, Showdown, Match Mine, and Sage and Scribe by participating and being the perfect model of social and management skills. For instance, in Rally Coach, Fan-n-pick, etc. help to read cards, become the ‘partner’, model class ‘norms’ around social and communication skills e.g. praising, coaching etc. TA’s who know how Cooperative Learning structures work and where they break down can quickly assist the teacher by ‘fixing’ them and putting them smoothly back on track.

Listen to what the students are saying during Cooperative Learning structures, monitor what problems they are coping with and give feedback to the teacher. This second pair of adult eyes/ears will quickly help to build capacity for the students to create the class support system versus the traditional classroom where the adults are the sole source of support. Also, regarding formative assessment, a great TA working in a Cooperative Learning class can collect information beyond just academics. A TA can help the teacher assess social skill issues (e.g., to what degree are students working well, are there teambuilding issues that need to be addressed, on what social skill issues do we need to focus). Having a second set of adult eyes in the classroom is incredibly helpful to conducting this type of assessment.

Q: “Can Kagan Cooperative Learning Structures work in small groups or even 1-to-1?”

A: Yes, and what’s more they should be part of the instructional tool box for anyone who ‘teaches’ in any capacity in a school/college. Whether working one-to-one with individual pupils or with a small group Kagan Structures create individual accountability and equal participation. As teachers introduce new material to students, teaching assistants can help to reinforce the lessons by working with individual students or small groups of students and carefully structuring the interaction, for example, they may assist students to learn research skills by helping them to find information for reports using a RallyRead. A TA could model and support a student 1-to-1 using Sage-n-Scribe; analysing a text whilst developing all aspects of inference. Along with higher academic achievement you will quickly see a reduction of the gap between high and low achieving students in your groups and classes. Students will massively improve important social skills, cooperativeness, self-esteem, increased liking for school and learning, which all adds to the overall improved classroom climate.

As a caution, it is tempting as the TA to step in to assist too early in the learning cycle. This can deprive the student(s) you are supporting as well as the other student(s) in that setting the opportunity to develop the much-needed social skills such as tolerance, patience, coaching. For example, as the TA, if we step in too early the student who should be offering support sits back and disengages. The cool thing about Kagan Structures is that they are designed to have students support each other. As TA’s we step in with our support with the best intentions as we are loving, caring people. With the correct level of adult support, and of course it is your professional judgement, the students get many repetitions at important skill sets that will help them in future relationships and with employability skills.

Q: “How else will learning about Kagan Cooperative Learning Structures help me to assist the class teacher I support?”

A: Knowing Kagan Structures such as Quiz Quiz Trade will mean you can facilitate Cooperative Learning in small groups whilst teachers are doing more direct instruction. For example, lead Quiz Quiz Trade with half the class allowing the teacher to better meet the targeted needs of others. This will maximise your overall contribution to supporting learning and behaviour of students in the classroom.

Feedback on formative assessment with academic content, monitor students’ progress, which areas are children struggling in etc. which students need a ‘double dip’ of teaching/coaching? The best teachers and teaching assistants meet regularly to discuss lesson plans and student development. Your input will be invaluable.

Q: “Do Kagan Cooperative Learning Structures work for students who have Special Needs?”

A: Definitely. Gains for students with special educational needs have been well documented in Cooperative Learning classes. Some teaching assistants work only with special education students, these students may have more severe disabilities. TA’s may work with them both in regular classes and in separate classes. This group of students are often better supported when teaching assistants help them understand the material and adapt the information to their learning style using a range of simple Cooperative Learning structures. For e.g. RallyRobin can be performed using picture exchange cards. Even if the student requires ‘hand-over-hand’ help to pick up the card and place it into the frame. As Teaching Assistants help these students with basic needs using structured interaction we very often see dramatically better outcomes across many dimensions, not least self-esteem.

Cooperative Learning structures help all students with teambuilding. This is especially valuable for our most vulnerable students. Structured team and classbuilding activities help the students you are supporting to feel more valued, understood and connected to others whilst feeling psychologically safer. Special needs students are better liked when they are included as part of a team than when they are just another individual in the class. Again, this is where the TA is important; to coach the other students in what to say and do to help the student you are supporting feel welcomed and a full included member of the team.

Q: What is the role of a teaching assistant in a Kagan Cooperative Learning Classroom?

A: It is true, we do have to carefully rethink the role of the TA in Cooperative Learning classrooms from how do we support ‘the child’ we are assigned to, to ‘how can we empower peers with social skill sets’ to provide a more extensive support network beyond just the adults in the classroom.

Sometimes TAs have a particular specialism - for example, they may speak an additional language (which is especially useful when some pupils in the class have that language as their first language). Kagan Structures allow students increased opportunities for language input, output, all in that supportive context (safety = talking/listening in pairs and teams versus calling on one student at a time!).

Many TAs go on to develop their career and become a higher-level teaching assistant (HLTA) or indeed many TAs I have worked with go on to train as teachers themselves. If you’re thinking of going into teaching in the long term an excellent place to start your teaching career would be to truly know and understand how teachers are able to create full engagement by using simple instructional tools like Kagan Structures.

Whether you are an experienced Cooperative Learning teaching assistant or someone just starting out with this model of teaching and learning I hope that this brief article acts as a useful and practical guide, and provides a brief insight into the power of Kagan Structures to raise attainment on a daily basis and make a difference in the lives of students.

With all the positive benefits of Kagan Cooperative Learning for everyone involved, the question is not why Cooperative Learning. The question is why not?

About the Author

Gavin Clowes is Director of KaganUK, an organisation dedicated to bringing Kagan Structures and methods to United Kingdom teachers and schools.

For details on Kagan Institutes, workshops and conferences in the UK go to www.T2TUK.co.uk and www.Kaganonline.com

End Notes

Thank you to Vern Minor for sharing your wisdom and experience as I collected ideas for this article.