

Who Raises their Hand?

When cooperative learning is not used, the most common strategy teachers use to produce active engagement among students is to ask a question and then have students raise their hands to be called upon to answer: Whole Class Question-Answer. But who raises their hands and **who does not?**



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When we use traditional instructional strategies shy, insecure, unmotivated, alienated, and low achieving students often hide — they simply do not raise their hands. With regard to producing active participation, the traditional structure is extremely biased in favour of the high achievers.

We end up with a subgroup of students who often or always participate, and another subgroup of students who **seldom or never participate**. In the traditional classroom, we call most on those students who least need the practice, and we call least on those who most need the practice!

When cooperative learning structures are used, the teacher may ask the same question of students, but does not call on one to respond. Rather the teacher calls on all students to respond, having them engage in structures like **RallyRobin** or **Timed Pair Share**. In the same amount of time that a teacher in the traditional classroom can call on and respond to three or four students, each giving one response, the teacher using cooperative learning structures has **every** student in the class give several answers!

Neurons that fire together wire together.

Neuroplasticity predicts the learning result: To learn is to grow dendrite tracks. *Neurons that fire together wire together*. If we use neuron tracks, we grow them; if we don't, learning does not occur. The results of brain research parallel the results of classroom participation: *Use it or lose it!* In traditional classrooms we stimulate and grow the brains of our higher achievers,

but fail to stimulate and grow the brains of those most in need. With cooperative learning structures in place, we grow all brains.

This analysis partially explains the school achievement gap, the gap between the high achievers and low achievers. Beginning in the early years, low achieving students are less likely to participate and to risk failure in front of the whole class in traditional classrooms that lack a supportive, inclusive class climate.

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Not receiving as much practice or reward, they become even lower achieving, more alienated, and even less likely to participate. So, as they progress through the year groups, lower achieving students in traditional classrooms increasingly leave it to the high achieving students to raise their hands to be called on. With each successive year that passes, our lower achievers progressively drop out psychologically, participating less and less.

Beyond Question-Answer Time

The failure to create engagement among all students in the traditional classroom extends beyond Question-Answer time. During independent practice, students are on their own. With little to no support, they often find repeated worksheet work boring or difficult, and often tune out. In contrast, students in the cooperative learning classroom are placed in teams.

The instructional strategies are designed so that students are on the same side as their teammate; there is a high degree of interaction; everyone is held individually accountable for participating. In engaging CL structures like **Sage-N-Scribe** and **Pairs Compare**, students take turns responding, receiving encouragement and praise, and tutoring if necessary. Students keep each other engaged. It is this greater engagement of all students that best explains the increased excellence and equity that we find. We need only to observe the dramatic and intense engagement among all students to understand the remarkable outcomes of cooperative learning research. Cooperative Learning Structures include 'steps' and conditions that create and encourage full and equal participation for all students. Plus students have the support of their peers. Simply put, cooperative learning engages every student while traditional instruction engages a select few.

Why would we consciously choose to engage just a select few students when we can just as easily engage every mind in the classroom?

References:

Kagan, S. & Kagan, M. *Kagan Cooperative Learning*. San Clemente, CA: Kagan Publishing, 2009.