

When I first started teaching undergraduates, I was discontent with traditional approaches to instruction that treated students as empty vessels to be filled with my knowledge. I wanted to engage students in the subject matter and the learning process of my required courses. More importantly, I hoped to encourage such values as freedom, responsibility, equality, and community among my students. This is difficult to do with traditional approaches to instruction which are authoritarian in structure. I sought a way to teach that reflected my vision of community, one that enables and requires the participation and contributions of all members. This search led me to research, experiment with, and combine two learning theories: contract and cooperative learning. With regard to contract learning, an excellent resource was *Using Learning Contracts: Practical Approaches to Individualizing and Structuring Learning* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1986). This book helped me see that adults learn more deeply and permanently when they have a strong role in the planning and implementing of their learning efforts. Contract learning engages student in the learning process by building a program of study upon the compelling interests and learning objectives of each student. This approach empowers students by placing ownership over what learning takes place with them. The best single resource book on cooperative learning in higher education at the time was *Active Learning: Cooperation in the College Classroom*, by David Johnson, Roger Johnson, and Karl Smith (Edina, MN: Interaction Book Company, 1991). Their contention that, because humans are social, interdependent beings, we learn best in cooperation with one another confirmed my own understanding of the self in community. Traditional approaches to learning are based on a competitive model. But this model does not tap the potential of students to contribute to the learning process. This is especially true at the college level, where students bring diverse experiences, backgrounds, and skill levels to the classroom. Students are almost never encouraged, much less rewarded, for helping each other learn. However, when teachers encourage students to work together and provide incentives for them to learn from one another, students learn better in the vast majority of cases. The pedagogical style I currently use builds upon the strengths of each of these learning theories. People learn best in cooperation with one another. Individual learning may take place between the ears, but the resources one draws upon to make that learning happen come mostly from a cooperative context. Self-direction in learning is still important. People need intrinsic motivation to learn; their learning should be self-fulfilling. However, because learning is a cooperative venture, learners have the potential and the obligation to contribute to the learning of others. In this context, the teacher is not an authority figure, but a colleague and a facilitator of learning. Fostering a classroom environment that both encourages students to recognize and fulfill their responsibilities for one another's learning and respects the rights of each student to have a voice in the learning process is the reason I have adopted a teaching style that combines the strengths of contract and cooperative learning.