



# Cooperative Learning versus Traditional Learning Settings

Recently, there have been serious attempts by Ministry of Education to improve the teaching system in our schools in Palestine . The aim is to shift the learning setting from a competitive a classroom to a cooperative one. To achieve this aim, several training courses in cooperative learning have been delivered to the teachers. It is known that the typical classroom in our schools is generally teacher- centered. Teacher's talking time is about 80%, and the students only talk 20% of the time. Students are usually told "Keep your eyes on your work. Do not share. Do not compare. Do not talk. Do not help. ..." and other commands and prohibitions. Ellis (1990 ) states that the competitive approach in teaching is contrary to the basic human need to belong. It also ignores the need for personal importance. How can you feel important if you are working alone? Who recognizes you? Who talks to you? Most people feel important only as members of a team. No one can deny that each individual needs emotional support. For example, when things go particularly well, it helps to have someone to cheer your success. You also need someone to encourage you when you run into difficulty. Such encouragement support, confidence and access can be only obtained in a cooperative classroom.

In the competitive classrooms, the motto of the students is "if you win, I lose, if I win, you lose" students usually compete with each other for scarce resource, grades, teacher recognition and prizes, prized jobs and others things which motivate students to work. Students see each other as obstacles rather than as sources of help and support. High achieving students usually worry about whether they can continue to outshine every one else. Each one of them always hopes that someone else will get an answer wrong, so that he will have a chance to be called on and be right. Average students don't have any opportunity to shine in the competitive setting. Consequently , they don't act out to get attention. Low achievers lose confidence and self esteem in each environment , and they also hate other students.

On the other hand, in a cooperative classroom students

can count on their classmates to help when they need help, listen when they have something to contribute, and celebrate their accomplishments. The teacher isn't the major source of information, but the students are also important and valuable source of knowledge . The motto of the students is "we sink or swim together. Roger et al (1992) defines cooperative learning as a group learning activity organized so that learning is dependent on the socially structured exchange of information between learners in groups, in which each learner is held accountable for his or her learning and motivated to increase the learning of others.

Positive interdependent is one of the major advantages and key elements of cooperative learning. It usually occurs when the gains for one individual are associated with the gains of others. In other words, when one student



QUESTIONS	ANSWERS
Name of the building	
Where is it?	
When was it built?	
Who decided to built it?	
How long did it take to build it?	
Why is it interesting?	
Is it in a good or bad state?	

## Organizational Information

The project presented here is a kind of suggestion that can be adapted to the curriculum, to different class levels and needs.

Here I presented a complex project, but I believe it can give some suggestions on how to create shorter and less complicated works if needed.

Teachers can cooperate in order to establish research methods, times, resources, materials, invitation of professionals (for example, inviting an architect, a representative of the Municipality or of a cultural organization).

It needs to be approached in a gradual way, so students can first learn the method how to research and then organize the information collected.

It can be lead during the whole school year and adapted to different classes, who can also cooperate together.

## Before Starting > Suggestions

Following are some suggestions about organizing the groups, research methods, activities and how to collect the final material.

The words in *Italics* refer directly to the students, to suggest a way to present the required work.

### Organizing the groups

Teachers who are part of the project can meet together to show the classroom or classrooms how the project works and to see the reaction of the students.

After this initial presentation, teachers will organize the groups.

First divide the groups into 2 macro-areas: the “present time” (to write the map) and “past time” (to write the guide) of the town. Then subgroups can be created according to the scope of the project and the students involved.

Teachers will provide students with photocopies of the

map of the town and study it together to organize the work. They should also assign times, deadlines and methods on how to collect, organize and display the information.

The project will be divided into two stages:

1. collecting information and materials (pictures, map, brochures, etc.)
2. creating the map and writing the articles for the guide

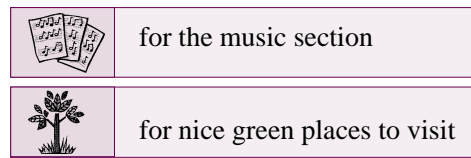
### Publishing the map

This is a fundamental step, because we want our work to be shown and used!

As mentioned before, there are different ways to edit and organize the material:

1. Teachers can help student to create a first draft of the map, including the information pages about the present time, pictures and a map of the area. Then it can be photocopied and distributed to the school students, families and Municipality.
2. A second possibility is that of creating a large paper where collecting the work and showing it to other classes or in other schools.

Art teacher can help students to design icons for their town guide, for example:



Credits: this project is an elaboration of an idea from the Reading International Solidarity Center (“Global Reading”) conducted in the town of Reading, UK and in other European countries such as Italy and Spain <http://www.risc.org.uk>

**Silvia Xillo**

Student of the Intercultural Studies Master  
University of Padova - Italy



- **Musical**> Explore different sounds and musical traditions: are there places where there are concerts? Which musicians are featured? Find out names and programs or go to a music shop and see what kind of music they have.
- **Religious**> Find out more about Mosques and Churches, how many religious groups there are in town, where the religious buildings are, when and at what time they make religious services, etc.
- **Entertainment & Food**> Find out programs of cinemas and theatres, where movies are produced and how they are shown (dubbed or with subtitles, etc.).  
In any town there are different food traditions, find out what and where: Arabic, Italian, French, Chinese...everywhere there are different tastes and shapes.
- **Services**> Municipality, hospitals, travel agencies, public offices, post offices, taxis, internet cafés...write down all the services you think would be useful for you and your friends.
- **Your opinion about the town**> Collect pictures and descriptions of places you consider most interesting to visit. You can interview your friends and add their personal impressions about the town, what they like most and what they find negative, with the help of the language teacher.

For example:

Nahed: "I'd like there were more places for children to play outside...".

## THE GUIDE

This activity will be the writing of a guide collecting articles written with the help of the language teacher.

The teacher can ask students to collect information to write short articles focusing on some aspects of the past life of the town and its people, so they can be attached with the map in a special guide about the historical and cultural background of the town.

- **Historical**> Write the history of the town and surrounding villages: when it was built, how many people lived there before and how many live there now, find out old pictures of the town. You may also focus on specific places of the town (such as the old town area) or write an article about the "suq".
- **Artistic**> Find out if there are symbols that represent the town, where you can find them, what do they represent (for example the star of the Hisham's palace in Jericho or the olive tree of Ramallah).
- **Geographical**> Take an old and a new map and compare them. Which are the new places, where are the most populated areas?

- **Literature**> Ask your grandparents or elderly neighbors to describe how the town looked like when they were children. Collect their stories and write them down with their help. Listen for "old words" you have never heard: it would be interesting to bring them to life again and understand their meaning!
- **Cultural**> Is there a famous person from your town? Ask your parents or teachers and they will help you to find out information about his/her life.
- **Food & drinks**> Where does a particular food come from? Choose a dish you like and write a short article about its history (for example, about "Kaik", which is an ancient kind of bread) or discover the different countries where coffee is produced and discover different ways to make it.

A way to simplify and coordinate the students' work is to provide them with tables with specific questions, so they will have a method of collecting information.

For example, for what concerns the collection of the information on an artistic building, students can be given a photocopy with these questions:



## THE MAP

This is a graphic example of how the MAP could be organized and displayed:

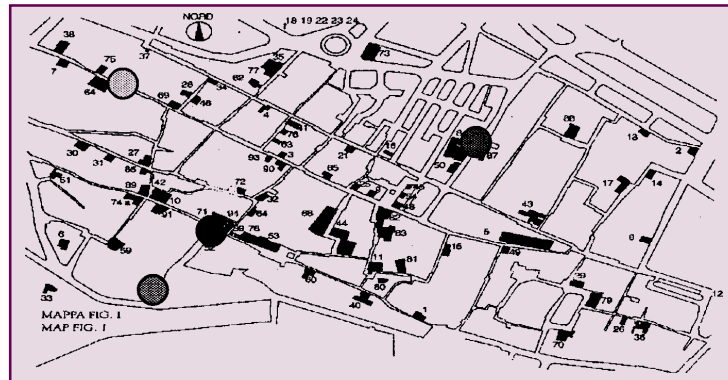
Insert the legend here, with different colors for each section:

- Historical sites
- Religious: Mosques, Churches.
- Green places: parks, outdoor activities, etc.
- Artistic/cultural places: museums, library, schools, Cultural Foundations, etc.

Other sections can be added, such as amusements (cinemas, theatres, concerts, etc.) and services

Insert  
descriptions  
of historical  
places

Insert  
descriptions  
of green  
places



Insert  
descriptions  
religious  
sites

Insert  
descriptions of  
artistic/cultural  
places

Here students can write short paragraphs with useful information about the town and the services offered:

- **Geographical information**> Describe the town, number of inhabitants, economic activities, discover the richness of the environment, which are the nicest places to see outside the town, if there are parks or green areas where children can play. Also stress the conditions of these places, if they are clean or if there are enough facilities for children.
- **Linguistic**> Discover the meaning of the name of the town, the languages spoken by the people, the foreign words used to indicate special places (for example Internet Cafés, boutique, etc.).  
Find out if there are Foreign Cultural Centers which organize language courses, discover what, when and where. Find out if they provide scholarship to students who want to study abroad.
- **Cultural**> Discover the cultural organizations in town, find out how they work and what kind of activities they organize. Collect the names of the schools, colleges and universities.
- **Artistic**> Put on your map the building, museums and monuments you find most interesting to see. Collect information on their history, their present state (if they need renovation or not), if you need a ticket to visit them and visiting hours.



how to connect knowledge. History, geography, language, English, art, science can be seen as a unified subject to be discovered and connected in a personal and creative way.

- **Cooperative & Interactive**> Students are meant to work together in groups, to avoid competitiveness and foster cooperation. The basic idea is that each student is fundamental in creating a rich and complex project.

Students should work together at school but also by themselves at home, asking people, relatives, friends or going to the library to gather information to broader the projects. The role of the family and especially the elderly is essential to help students to collect information about the town in the past time.

- **Playful**> The research method should take advantage of the importance of play. Students can be told the project is a “treasure map”, in order to make them curious and willing to play in order to learn.
- **Shared**> The work produced can be presented to other classes and schools, in order to create a network of experiences, with alternative paths and things to see in their town.
- **Critique**> The project will give space to questions, doubts, ideas of the students, so to create a debate in the classroom about the way they live in the town, how they see it, the impact between life styles and environment.
- **Visual**> The material collected should be expanded onto large papers which can be put on the school’s walls to be shared with different classes and schools.

The work can be the production of a map and/or of a guide, according to two concepts of time or macro-areas:

