

IMAGINE THAT, BABY!: DEVELOPING SOCIAL SKILLS THROUGH MENTAL IMAGERY FOR ENHANCED COOPERATIVE LEARNING

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to present information relative to mental imagery or, as is often referred to, creative visualization. Mental imagery is used successfully in athletics, academics, advertising, and other areas. The author expertly discusses ways to enhance learning.

Do you want to improve the effectiveness of your classroom cooperative learning teams?

If you do, please consider enhancing your students' social interaction skills by employing mental imagery. The use of imagery, sometimes referred to as creative visualization, is the ability to form pictures in one's mind to improve performance (Goetz, Alexander, & Ash, 1992).

Mental imagery is used successfully in athletics, academics, advertising, and other areas. For instance, Jack Nicklaus, perhaps the best professional to ever play golf, advises golfers that they can improve their performance by picturing the flight of the golf ball as it moves from the clubhead to the target (Nicklaus, Bowden, & McQueen, 1981). Wiren, Coop, and Sheehan (1981) stated that the human brain is divided into two hemispheres, left and right, with the right side helping us visualize and create mental images. So if a golfer is trying to successfully make a downhill pitch shot over a bunker, the right brain can help. Before the golfer negotiates the shot, he/she can create a mental image of the ball landing three feet short of the putting surface, taking two short bounces, and trickling slowly down toward the cup.

Academic productivity can also be enhanced by using mental imagery. Gambrell and Bales (1986) reported on a study that was designed to investigate the effects of mental imagery upon the comprehension-monitoring performance of fourth and fifth grade below-average readers. The students were directed to make pictures in their minds of what they read. The results of the study supported the use of mental imagery in helping poor readers monitor their own comprehension.

Also advertisers use imagery to help sell their products. On the ABC *Good Morning America* program (1995), a commercial evoked the use of the following mental image message: *Now if you can see a Jeep Grand Cherokee in your head, you can see it in your driveway.*

An example of creative visualization is found even in children's literature. In **Walk Two Moons**, a Newbery Award book, 13-year-old Salamanca, the main character, tells about the following advice from her mother:

Once my mother said that if you visualize something happening, you can make it happen. For example, if you are about to run a race, you visualize yourself running the race and crossing the finish line first, and presto! When the time comes, it really happens. (Creech, 1994, p. 196)

How Does Mental Imagery Improve Performance?

Mental imagery is a mnemonic device designed to help students learn better (Gage & Berliner, 1988). This technique allows students to see themselves behaving in new ways before they try them out. Developing the power of mental imagery is essential for students whose key models have consistently provided them with behaviors that are ineffective and unacceptable in an academic setting.

Bagley (1987) explained that during our lifetime, most people will spend about four years involved in image production, through dreams, daydreams, and directed imagery. He explained that a normal function of the human brain is to produce mental images, and the most powerful vehicle for change is the image. Furthermore, Bagley stated that imagery has a *can't fail* aspect to it, that it is fun, and that it has an emerging, refueling-of-self component that makes one *feel good*.

Imagery encourages change, thus enabling learners to go beyond the past and present by imagining the future, whether it be the next moment or the next year. Undesirable behavior can be changed and new behavior can be tested (Witmer & Young, 1987).

Two types of mental imagery strategies generally cited are *induced* and *imposed* (Mayer, 1987). In employing *induced* imagery, learners are instructed to generate their own imagery; whereas, in *imposed* imagery, learners are provided the image. Imposed imagery tends to improve performance for younger children, while induced imagery works better for older students. Younger children are not able to generate images independently, but are able to use imagery provided. However, older learners are able to create their own images easier and tend to be distracted by imposed imagery.

By helping students to see themselves in a way that is different from usual, they can be empowered to go beyond what they have previously seen modeled by the central figures in their lives. Consequently, through imagery, students can create a set of behaviors that prove to be productive in cooperative learning activities.

What is the Role of Social Skills in Cooperative Learning?

In order to have effective learning teams in the classroom, building essential social skills in students is paramount (Madden, 1988). The way students interact with each other affects how much they learn. Basic social skills should be taught one or two at a time as needed and should include the following competencies (D'Arcangelo & Kiernan, 1990; Johnson, Johnson, Holubec, & Roy, 1984):

1. Staying with the group.
2. Talking in a normal voice.
3. Keeping your hands to yourself.
4. Taking turns.
5. Involving everyone and using each other's names.
6. Listening accurately to what all group members are saying.
7. Accepting ideas non-judgmentally.

8. Offering help.
9. Resolving conflict.
10. Criticizing ideas, not people.
11. Reaching consensus.

Data collected by observing cooperative learning groups can provide direction on what social skills need to be worked on next using mental imagery exercises. Students need substantial practice to be able to automatically employ desired social skills in cooperative learning groups. This initial practice phase is the use of creative visualization by students with underdeveloped social skills. Slavin (1990) advocated extensive training of students in how to work in groups using a variety of approaches for developing team spirit and cohesiveness.

Experiencing caring and committed relationships keeps students in school. Students must believe they belong, that their friends are in school, and that student membership in school is greatly helped through bonding with classmates (Ward, 1991). As students improve their social skills and learn to work cooperatively, they will be making progress not only toward enhanced learning, but also toward more rewarding, successful, and fulfilling lives (D'Arcangelo & Kiernan, 1990).

What are Effective Procedures of Using Mental Imagery?

Classroom teachers employing cooperative learning may wish to utilize the following suggested mental imagery examples to enhance the basic social skills for increased learning. An example of *imposed* imagery is to ask young students to observe a concrete object, such as an apple. After visually studying the object, the students are directed to close their eyes and recall the specifics of the object. Another practice exercise is to ask the students to close their eyes and recall experiences from their personal lives, such as playing with a family pet or with neighborhood friends (Cecil & Lauritzen, 1994). DeMille (1976) suggested the following game to help students develop skills in the use of mental imagery. The game is read orally to students whose eyes are closed. The slashes indicate pauses in the reading in order to allow time for the students to form the required images. Read to the students the following passage:

We are going to start with one little mouse and see what we can do. Let us imagine that there is a little mouse somewhere in the room. Have him sit up and wave to you. / Have him turn green. / Change his color again. / Have him stand on his hands. / Have him run over to the wall. / Turn him yellow. / Have him say "Hello." / Have him say "Thank you" and then "Goodbye." (DeMille, 1976, p. 211)

One more possibility is to ask students to draw stick cartoons of themselves acting out a specific skill, such as taking turns (Varley, Levin, Severson, & Wolf, 1974).

Four *induced* imagery activities designed for older students are offered by Fugitt (1983) to commit them to positive social behavior while functioning in cooperative learning groups. The first of the activities is entitled "I Will Statements." Students are asked to declare what each will do to positively affect the academic learning in their group. The second activity is more reflective and is called "How does that (the first activity) help you and others work in the team?" The third activity is named "LIBK—Let It Be Known." In this activity, students announce to others that they will use a specific social skill in the learning group. The fourth activity is "The Wise Part Within." This initiative engages the students' inner authority by tapping their "wisdom from within." The students select the best possible choices for positive behavior that they are capable of making while functioning in cooperative learning groups.

The ability to concentrate on images is enhanced by directing students to incorporate the following instructions to further induced imagery (Bagley, 1987; Fugitt, 1983):

1. Find a comfortable position.
2. Close your eyes.
3. Turn your thoughts inward and get rid of interfering or negative thoughts.

4. Begin to relax by concentrating on the following breathing exercise: Take in a deep breath and slowly expel it; repeat this exercise three times.
5. See yourself in the small group setting.
6. Begin focusing on one aspect of social behavior, such as offering help to your group members.
7. Select another social behavior and see yourself doing it, such as encouraging others to participate.
8. Assess your feelings about yourself as a result of helping your group members.
9. Get ready to interact positively in your cooperative learning group.

Bagley (1987) and Fugitt (1983) suggested that students be permitted to follow these instructions in a non-threatening climate where their images are not analyzed or criticized and where the number of distracting variables within the classroom are reduced. These quiet moments of visualization provide students with an opportunity to make positive behavioral choices to affect desirable results when participating in cooperative learning groups.

Using imagery to develop the needed social skills of students holds promise for promoting the effectiveness of classroom cooperative learning teams. Employing creative visualization allows students to imagine themselves growing in a learning setting.

We learn from another television commercial as Dick Vitale (1996), a popular television sportscaster, asks the viewers to imagine themselves in a new Mercury car with the following directive: "Image that, Baby!"

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