

# Increasing Knowledge and Empathy of Family Issues

## Using Cooperative Learning Groups

Debra Daehn Zellmer, MSW, CISW, ACSW

Associate Professor, Social Work Program Director

Viterbo University 900 Viterbo Dr., La Crosse, WI 54601 Email: ddzellmer@viterbo.edu

### Abstract

An active learning process was developed in which students worked collaboratively to pool knowledge obtained through individual research and taught each other. This resulted in a series of collaborative group assignments that built on one another to increase depth and breadth of learning, empathy and critical thinking. The use of collaborative learning groups was highly successful not only in increasing student learning but also student engagement and “buy in” to the educational process.

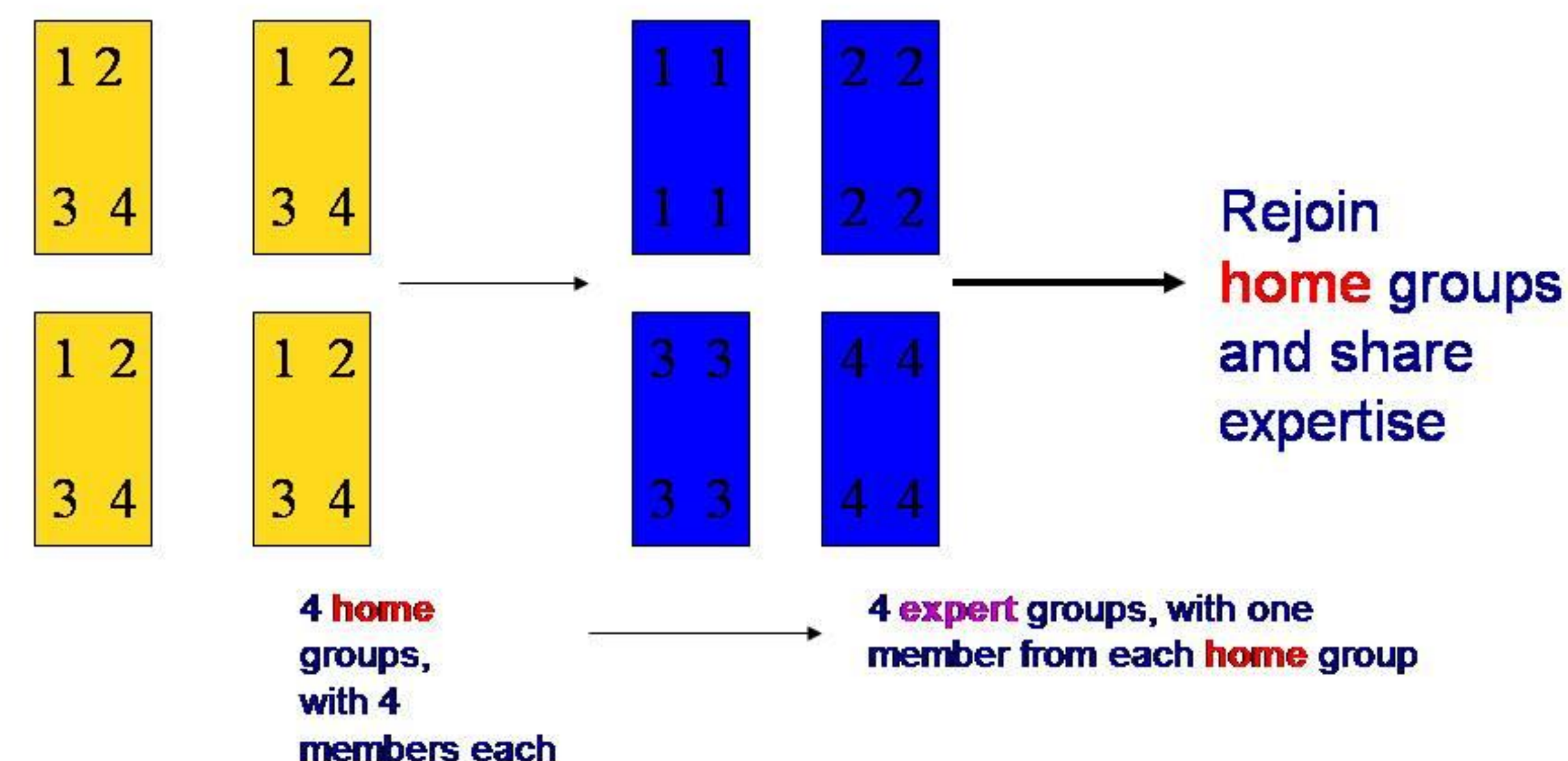
### Introduction

Cooperative learning groups, where students work in small groups to help one another master academic material, is a highly productive instructional technique (Slavin, 1991; Johnson, Johnson & Smith, 1991; Harmin, 1994). Characteristics of effective cooperative learning groups include fixed membership of 4 or fewer students, duration of a few days to a few weeks and well-defined tasks. Individual accountability and group goals increase the effectiveness of this learning strategy. That is, groups must work to achieve some goal or reward and the success of the group is contingent on the learning of each individual group member. The instructor’s role involves specifying lesson objectives, placing students in groups, teaching concepts necessary to complete the task(s) and structuring assignments to create positive interdependence, individual accountability and inter-group cooperation (Johnson, Johnson & Smith, 1991).

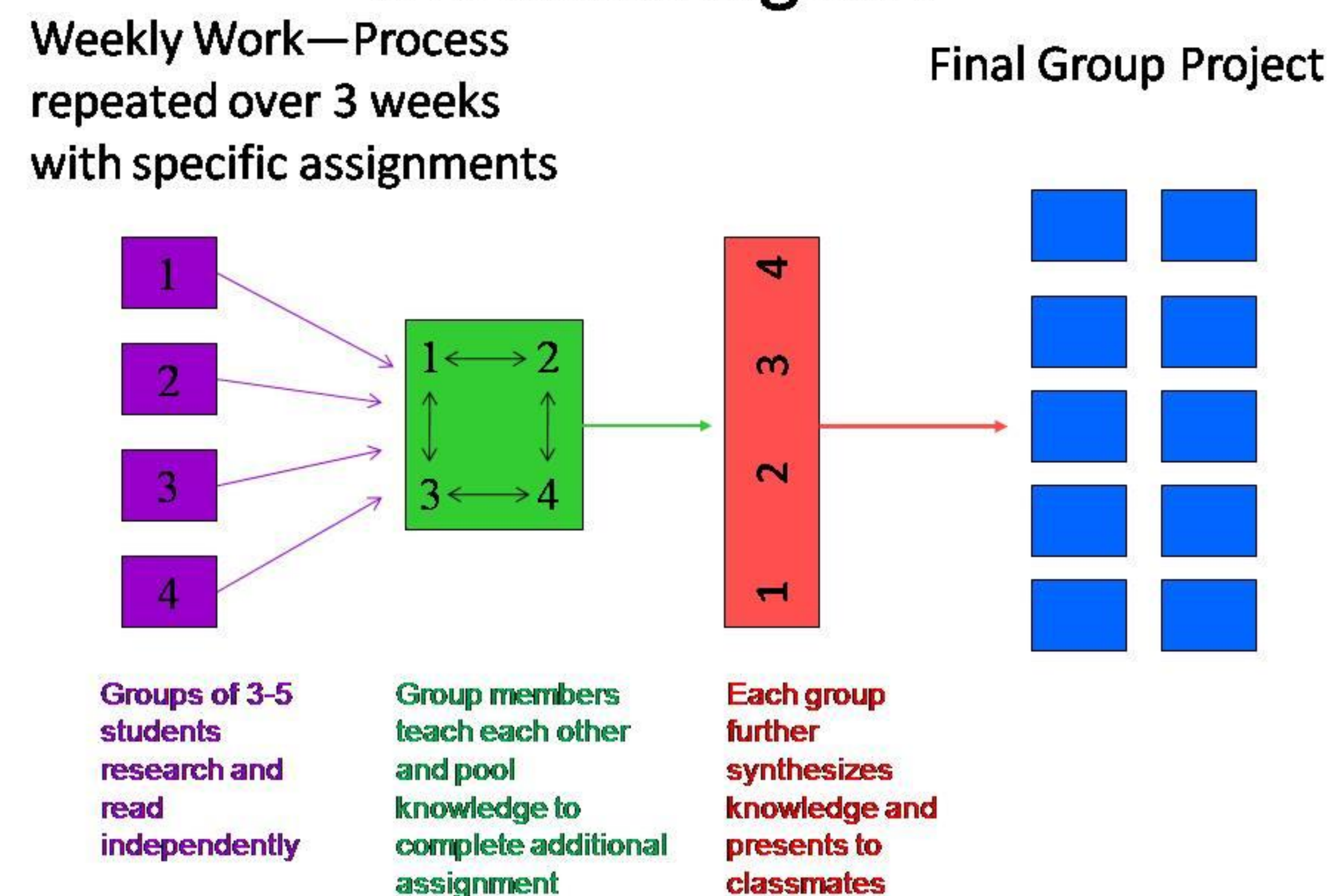
### Method

A modified Jigsaw method, first developed by Elliot Aronson and colleagues (1978) was used. Students were assigned to groups for a series of individual and group assignments over a 7-week period. A common social challenge that might lead a family to seek the assistance of a social worker (i.e. alcoholism, family violence, family member with schizophrenia) was assigned to each group. Individual work was completed outside of class but group work was done in class. Four collaborative assignments were created that led students to develop knowledge related to the challenge, understand the impact of this challenge on family dynamics and development, and investigate appropriate evidence based interventions.

### Traditional Jigsaw



### Modified Jigsaw



### Method continued

Parallel to these cognitive exercises, groups were directed to “create” a family facing this challenge and each group member to identify with a specific family member. All subsequent individual assignments were then related to the perspective of the family member they identified with. Weekly assignments were structured such that students did research individually on different topics and taught that information to others in their group. Then the group had to integrate that knowledge to accomplish a group task related to making an intervention plan appropriate for this family. The final group assignment was to teach other members of the class what they had learned about families experiencing these various challenges. Students received grades on their individual work but work of the group was graded collectively.

### Results

#### Knowledge students obtained:

- Knowledge about a specific challenge a family might face. The topics selected by the instructor included alcoholism, domestic violence and family member with Schizophrenia.
- Knowledge regarding the impact that these problems/challenges might have on normal family life cycle and family relationships.
- Knowledge of best practice family interventions recommend for these family problems based on empirical evidence.
- Insight and empathy into how a specific family member might feel and experience this struggle within their family.

#### Skills students obtained:

- Skills in working together in a group.
- Skills in searching the literature for empirically based research related to the topic.
- Refined presentation skills.
- Skills in creating an annotated bibliography.
- Skills in developing an Eco-Map for family assessment.

### Conclusion

The use of collaborative learning groups facilitated higher level learning as students had to teach what they had researched to others and then synthesize that material to complete a group task. Student “buy in” was increased by having them emotionally engage and take ownership for their learning by having the groups “create” a family and identify with individual family members. It became important to each group member to have others in the “family” understand their perspective. Application of knowledge to the unique circumstances of “their” family in a group setting closely parallels peer supervision found in actual social work practice. Student reported on evaluations that they learned a great deal from working in groups and found the groups to be enjoyable.