

Years ago, in a galaxy far, far away, I was contracted to present a one-day session on cooperative learning for a group of 40 middle school teachers in Oklahoma. I had been a middle school teacher who used cooperative learning in my own ELA classroom and knew the ins and outs of using cooperative strategies with that age group. I was excited.

I typically asked the staff development coordinator what topics they wanted me to address and how they had identified cooperative learning for that day's topic. She assured me that teachers had been involved in identifying the topic for the day.

We started the session with a little background information about my experiences as a middle school teacher. But something felt weird. Maybe it was my years of working with middle school kids, but my "gut" was telling me something was off in the room. Teachers did not look eager to jump into the topic. So, I asked them to do an activity that would help me get to know them a little better.

I asked questions and invited them to stand in different corners of the room depending on their answer. It got them up and moving and talking with each other. Finally, I asked them to stand on left side of the room if cooperative learning had been their choice of topics for the day OR to stand on the right side of the room if someone else had signed them up for the session.

To my shock and astonishment, 39 of the 40 teachers stood on the right side of the room—essentially saying that someone else had assigned them to this session. It wasn't their idea to learn about cooperative learning!

The sole teacher standing by herself on the left side of the room started yelling across the room to her colleagues. She said, "*It was the needs assessment survey you filled out at the beginning of the year. You selected cooperative learning!*"

The group listened. Some looked stunned, some looked bewildered, and some yelled back while shaking their heads, "No way!"

An insight suddenly washed over me like someone threw cold water on me: Needs assessment surveys are usually comprised of a list of ideas identified by a small committee from "hot topics" or new ideas in the field. And teachers usually don't have input into that list. Completing a survey might take less than five minutes, and once the choices are turned in they are forgotten just as quickly.

I vowed, on the spot, to explore and find other ways for teachers to identify professional development topics that would be *meaningful* to them—to identify new strategies or content that they *wanted* and *needed* to learn!