

## **COOPERATIVE LEARNING**

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**Cooperative learning** is a teaching method where students of mixed levels of ability are arranged into groups and rewarded according to the group's success, rather than the success of an individual member. Cooperative learning structures have been in and out of favor in American education since the early 1900s, when they were introduced by the American education reformer John Dewey. Cooperative learning is sometimes thought of simply as 'group work,' but groups of students working together might not be working collaboratively.

### **Elements of Cooperative Learning**

#### **Face-to-Face Interaction**

Students are promoting each others' learning through face-to-face activities where they discuss and explain assignment topics with each other.

#### **Positive Interdependence**

Students have the sense that they're 'in this together,' feeling that each member's individual effort will not only help him, but the whole group. The grade of each student is dependent upon the effort of other group members.

**Individual and group accountability.** Give an individual test to each student or randomly examine students orally. Plan time to observe a group, and record the frequency with which each member contributes to the group's work. Invite students to teach what they learn to someone else. Ask group members to discuss how well they're achieving their goals or how they're maintaining effective working relationships. Help students make decisions about what behaviors to continue, what to change, and what to eliminate.

#### **Group Processing**

Students are given a means for analyzing their group for how well the group has learned, and whether or not collaborative skills are being used.

#### **Collaborative Skills**

Students learn not only the subject matter, but interpersonal skills and how to work in teams. Students are taught skills of communication, leadership, and conflict management during the early stages of cooperative learning sessions.

**Heterogeneous groups.** Groups should be comprised of three, four, or five members. Mix the membership within a group according to academic abilities, ethnic backgrounds, race, and gender. It's also important that groups not be arranged according to friendships or cliques.

**Clear directions and/or instructions.** Be sure to state the directions or instructions in clear, precise terms. Let your students know exactly what they are to do. When appropriate, inform them what they are to generate as evidence of their mastery of the material. You must share these directions with students before they engage in cooperative learning activities.

**Equal opportunity for success.** Be sure every student knows that she or he has an equal chance of learning the material. Inform every student that she or he can help the group earn rewards for academic success. Be sure students understand that there's absolutely no academic penalty for being placed in a particular group.

**A clear set of learning objectives.** You must describe exactly what students are expected to learn. Let students know that cooperative learning groups are a means to an end rather than an end in itself. Do not use ambiguous language; describe precisely what students will learn or the knowledge they will gain.

**Sufficient time.** Be sure you have sufficient time to learn the targeted information. Groups should stay together until the designated subject matter is learned.

Cooperative learning changes students' and teachers' roles in classrooms. The ownership of teaching and learning is shared by groups of students, and is no longer the sole responsibility of the teacher. The authority of setting goals, assessing learning, and facilitating learning is shared by all. Students have more opportunities to actively participate in their learning, question and challenge each other, share and discuss their ideas, and internalize their learning. Along with improving academic learning, cooperative learning helps students engage in thoughtful discourse and examine different perspectives, and it has been proven to increase students' self-esteem, motivation, and empathy.

Some challenges of using cooperative learning include releasing the control of learning, managing noise levels, resolving conflicts, and assessing student learning. Carefully structured activities can help students learn the skills to work together successfully, and structured discussion and reflection on group process can help avoid some problems.

### **Why Is It Important?**

Other researchers report that cooperation typically results in higher group and individual achievement, healthier relationships with peers, more metacognition, and greater psychological health and self-esteem (Johnson and Johnson 1989).

When implemented well, cooperative learning encourages achievement, student discussion, active learning, student confidence, and motivation.

The skills students develop while collaborating with others are different from the skills students develop while working independently.

Using cooperative groups to accomplish academic tasks not only provides opportunities for students to develop interpersonal skills but also gives them authentic experiences that will help them be successful in their future careers.

### **How Can You Make It Happen?**

#### ***Beginning to Work in Groups***

In classrooms where students are not familiar with working together in small groups, start with short, highly-structured activities. It will take time to develop a respectful and safe classroom community. Successful cooperative groups depend on students who respect each other, listen to one another, and feel safe enough to share their thoughts and feelings. You can help students learn the skills needed to work in groups by starting with short, structured lessons aimed at fostering turn-taking, involving all students in the discussion, and clarifying the roles, rights, and responsibilities of group members.

One way to introduce cooperative groups is to work with one group to get started, and allow the rest of the students to watch the group as they engage in a discussion. Intervene when necessary

to keep the thoughtful discussion going. With the large group, discuss effective strategies that the small group is using or should be using to continue and expand the discussion.

When beginning to use cooperative learning with students, it is also important to establish team norms. Team norms are guidelines or rules governing how group members agree to work together. Norms for working in groups tend to be very different from traditional classroom norms. For example, in a traditional classroom, students complete their own work. In cooperative classrooms, students work with others to complete tasks. Have students discuss and develop the norms that they will follow during group work. Team norms, if designed well, can help to create a safe and supportive atmosphere.

Some examples of team norms include:

- We always treat one another with respect.
- We always encourage new ideas and value the consideration of all suggestions.
- We always justify our opinions to the team.
- We always make decisions as a team.

## **Preparation**

Students should be grouped for instruction to maximize opportunities to learn, and the type of grouping can produce different results based on the circumstances. Establish groups using a variety of criteria, such as social skills, academic skills, student interests, and instructional objectives.

Select the academic and collaborative objectives. For example, "Students will present their opinion of a candidate, supported with facts. Students will work cooperatively in groups of four, taking turns when talking."

Teachers should model positive interpersonal skills, have students practice the skills, and encourage the students to reflect on how effectively they are performing the skills.

## **Instruction**

Once groups have been determined, the most important phase begins. Instruction should be based on solid content, with grouping used to enhance and customize student learning. Students should understand the objectives, instructional tasks, and criteria for success. Review and assign student roles in order to smooth the transition to cooperative learning groups. During instruction, monitor groups and reinforce collaborative behaviors, conduct observations, assess social skills, or interview students.

## **Assessment**

After instruction, assessments may include paper and pencil achievement tests and/or measures of actual student performance or group products. Develop a way to assess both group and individual accountability. After working in groups, students should engage in group processing activities where they discuss the interpersonal skills that influence their effectiveness in working together.

Be sure to schedule a time for students to explain to the class how they completed a task or solved a problem, as different groups may have developed different solutions. Explaining their group's process is an important skill for students to develop. In addition, the whole class benefits from the range of ideas from each group.

You will need to decide how students and groups will be made accountable for their learning. In collaborative classrooms, it is often difficult to assign individual grades. Some teachers give "group" grades that each student receives, but this can be problematic if a few students do the majority of the work within a group. Giving each member both an individual and a group grade is another option. Each student can receive a grade for the group task and can be responsible for a subtask, which is graded as well. Some teachers average the academic grade with a "group performance" grade. This makes group interactions and processes as significant as academics. If you are uncomfortable with this, a good solution is to have students complete an individual task after the cooperative learning activity, such as writing a reflection piece about what they learned and how their group worked to complete the task. This may be a preferable way to evaluate students because it can be used as an assessment of student learning, metacognition, and group

processing. Another possibility is to have individual students each complete a final draft of a report that the group has started.

## **Student Roles**

Some tasks are complex and may benefit from clear roles and responsibilities assigned to each student within a group. Create team roles that are simple, clear, and important. Roles that are frivolous, unclear, or too complex may frustrate one or more team members. Some sample roles are:

- **Organizer**—provides the group with the overall process structure
- **Recorder**—writes down important information (e.g., directions or group work)
- **Checker**—Makes sure that all team members understand the concepts and the team's conclusions.
- **Questioner**—generates questions and involves all students
- **Assessor**—evaluates the progress of each work session
- **Encourager**—models and reinforces appropriate social skills
- **Summarizer**: Restates the team's conclusions or answers.
- **Spokesperson**—represents the group and presents group work to rest of the class
- **Timekeeper**—keeps group on task and on time
- **Team facilitator**—Moderates discussions, keeps the team on schedule, ensures that work is completed by all, and makes sure that all have the opportunity to participate and learn.
- **Elaborator**—Relates the discussion with prior concepts and knowledge.
- **Research runner**—Gets needed materials and is the liaison between teams and between their team and the instructor.

At the start of a course, consider allowing team members to pick their own roles. As students become more comfortable with teamwork, however, it is a good idea to rotate roles within the teams so that students experience a variety of responsibilities.

## **BENEFITS OF COOPERATIVE LEARNING:**

- **Student achievement.** The effects on student achievement are positive and long-lasting, regardless of grade level or subject matter.
- **Student retention.** Students are more apt to stay in school and not drop out because their contributions are solicited, respected, and celebrated.
- **Improved relations.** One of the most positive benefits is that students who cooperate with each other also tend to understand and like each other more. This is particularly true for members of different ethnic groups. Relationships between students with learning disabilities and other students in the class improve dramatically as well.
- **Improved critical thinking skills.** More opportunities for critical thinking skills are provided, and students show a significant improvement in those thinking skills.
- **Oral communication improvement.** Students improve in their oral communication skills with members of their peer group.
- **Promoted social skills.** Students' social skills are enhanced.
- **Heightened self-esteem.** When students' work is valued by team members, their individual self-esteem and respect escalate dramatically.

## **Disadvantages**

1. It is time consuming for new teachers.
2. Requires adequate facilities and infrastructure.
3. Can create confusion in the classroom.