

Primer on Cooperative Learning

In order for cooperative learning to work it has to be truly cooperative. Merely seating students together in small groups does not ensure cooperative learning. Even establishing roles is not enough to ensure cooperative learning. Successful cooperative learning situations have a positive interdependence and face-to-face interactions. There are two ways to make cooperative learning work. One is to work from a conceptual standpoint the other by establishing clear roles for the group members. We are going to work with the latter since it is more concrete and quicker to implement. The roles that we outline are tested and work. Feel free to explore other roles that will support the objectives in your classes and the learning needs of your students. We will also model and teach you how to assess your students' understanding and growth in application of cooperative learning skills (Cohen, 1985, *Designing Group Work*).

There are three things that are necessary:

1. A cooperative context must be established
2. Cooperative Skills need to be explicitly taught and reinforced with grades and accountability
3. There must be a system for both peer and individual accountability

Cooperative Context: The teacher must insist and consistently reinforce that when working cooperatively that the theme is “we all sink or swim together.” The key here is *consistency*. Once an exception is made the process begins to fall apart. The teacher must have clear expectations and articulate these to the class—both for the activity and for the group work. Not every lesson or activity is conducive to group work. Research shows that cooperative learning should take place no more than 60-70% of the time. (Johnson, DW and Johnson, RT (1989) *Cooperation and Competition: Theory and Research*)

Teaching Cooperative Skills: It is important for students to see the need for the skill, what the skill is and when to use it. Students must be given time to practice this skill for mastery. To do this requires they receive specific feedback on their application of the skills (Johnson, 1984, *Cooperative Learning*). Group members need time to reflect on how well they are working together toward the shared goals. They need time to develop a sense of trust, acceptance and support of each other (Dishon & O’Leary, 1984, *A Guidebook for Cooperative Learning*).

Accountability: Students must feel the need to be accountable for their own learning, even when working in a group. The group members themselves need to feel accountability to one another. To create individual accountability, students need to be personally responsible for the content discussed in cooperative group work. This can be measured by homework, tests and quizzes. However, an understanding that one group members’ paper or response could be chosen to represent the entire group adds significance to the work done and a spirit of cooperation to ensure that everyone learns. Although this may feel “wrong” to many, the fact is, a student’s peers have a tremendous influence, one that a teacher cannot compete with. This added element of peer accountability is essential to the success of cooperative learning (Schmuck, 1983, *Group Processes in the Classroom*).

Teacher Intervention: If cooperative groups are to become functional, the teacher needs to keep intervention to a minimum. Groups need to depend on one another and not on the teacher. They need to feel that they can successfully accomplish the assigned task. Telling groups that they have the correct answer is counter-productive. Telling them you like their approach, strategy and process will feed back into the group being interdependent. The teacher role becomes one of facilitator. While circulating to groups your time is spent listening to student discourse—jotting things down for assessment purposes, to use for presentation or whole class discussion and to ensure that groups are productively engaged in the learning activity. This provides you opportunity to call the class together if several groups are experiencing difficulty or if there is some thinking or discourse you want to highlight.