

Teaching Tips/Notes



Building Capacity for Cooperation

Cooperative learning is a successful teaching strategy in which small teams use a variety of learning activities to improve their understanding of a subject. Each member of a team is responsible not only for learning what is taught but also for helping teammates learn. Working together in teams and learning cooperatively helps students to capitalize on one another's knowledge, skills, and resources. Five essential elements have been identified as critical components of successful cooperative learning: 1) positive interdependence; 2) individual accountability; 3) promotive interaction; 4) small group skills; and 5) group processing.

Positive interdependence is defined as linking learners together so one cannot succeed unless all group members succeed. Group members must know that they sink or swim together. Individual accountability is created by assessing the work of each individual and through peer assessment of individual contributions to the group effort. Promotive interactions involve group members teaching, encouraging, and questioning each other in a collegial manner. Small group skills involve active listening, sharing resources, and showing mutual respect and appreciation. Group processing is actuated by determining which member actions were helpful and which should be changed.

Cooperative learning has been studied in formal and informal educational and organizational settings around the world and has been found to be an effective means for improving: higher-level reasoning, knowledge transfer, knowledge retention, persistence to succeed, networking relationships and social support (Johnson & Johnson, 2009). Cooperative learning is also an effective means of building an appreciation for the strengths individuals bring to learning and organizational contexts. Cooperative learning methods have also been utilized to reduce intergroup conflict and build interpersonal bridges that tend to reduce prejudice and negative stereotyping (Aronson and Patnoe, 2011). In effect, cooperative learning opportunities create a scaffolding which guides learners' construction of an improved capacity for substantive cooperation.

Table 1 illustrates several practical ways to utilize cooperative learning strategies. When implementing cooperative learning strategies start small and build a culture of cooperation. Teach learners about the five essential elements of cooperative learning and how they can be successful as teams. Cooperative teams should be arranged by the instructor and be composed of three to four individuals. Assignments and tasks should be challenging enough to necessitate that individuals cooperate with their team members in order to be successful. Further time should be given for cooperative groups to debrief amongst themselves and with the instructor. Utilization of both team and individual level assessments will lead to an increase in both individual and shared group accountabilities.

Table 1. A listing of example practical cooperative learning strategies

Strategy	Explanation	Works best for	Benefits
Jig-Saw	Each member of a cooperative group researches one part of a complex question or content area. They then compare their information with learners from other groups assigned to the same question or content. After comparing and learning in their expert group, the members go back to their original group to share what they have learned	Content with three to four parts or facets.	Student gain content knowledge; research skills; presentation skills
Applied Problem	Within cooperative group all members work to consider a problem or given challenge; team members work to identify all known data; team members identify unknown factors/elements. Identifying various important variables and strategies assessment of the data / information and individual learner outcomes.	Applying knowledge/ skills to problems that require teams to analyze and evaluate.	Practice of applied problem and development of problem solving strategies and skills.
Structured Paraphrasing	Each person chooses content/ skills to share with others on their team. Each team member spends 3-4 minutes sharing their knowledge/ ideas. While the other team members are actively listening. The cooperative team then paraphrases what was shared making sure to correct any misunderstandings or mistakes.	To practice using content knowledge and vocabulary to clarify content/ skill understandings	Paraphrasing helps to ensure that team members are understanding content/ skills and that everyone has a chance to be heard
Flash Cards	Cooperative teams create content or skill development flashcards; team members test each other with the flashcards they made, making sure that terms can be used in appropriate ways and contexts.	To learn content in a supportive atmosphere	Helps learners memorize terminology and utilize
Peer Editing	Team members read the written responses of each of their teammates. Team members take notes on the written response (looking for errors and content omissions). Each team members paper is rated and given suggestions for improvement using a rubric; students are then allowed to edit their writing assignment.	Short writing assignments; assignments that will build towards a larger more sophisticated assignment	Team members review content while checking for errors; correcting errors requires higher level of cognitive processing; practicing how to present a case

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