Making Collaborative/Cooperative Learning Effective in Classrooms

> Collaborative learning "requires active learning, in which students must engage with course material in ways lecturing alone cannot support. It takes advantage of the notion that teaching is learning and provides a structure for peer teaching. It supports multiple learning styles by adopting a heterogeneous approach (some students write, some discuss, some edit, some listen and synthesize, some move around to gather findings from different peers, etc). Finally, by simply unsettling what students are often used to (e.g., extended lectures with little or no contribution from inactive students), collaborative learning reminds students that learning requires more than listening, and that reminder may be an early step toward metacognition, the practice of thinking about (and recognizing) how we learn."
>
> **https://tltc.umd.edu/instructors/resources/collaborative-learning**

Collaborative learning is an umbrella term. It encompasses classroom approaches where teachers facilitate students learning by working cooperatively to pursue activities in small groups. Among the most discussed formats are Think-pair-share, Problem-based learning (or PBL), Case Studies, Simulations, Peer Teaching, Small group discussion, Peer Editing, and Jigsaw strategies. Descriptions of these are provided on the website of **Teaching & Learning Transformation Center.**

Assignment to a collaborative group may be accomplished by instructors or by students self-forming a group. Groups may be

    (a) homogeneous (students with similar abilities, skills, or other characteristics),

    (b) heterogenous (balanced to represent a range of abilities, skills, or other characteristics), and randomly assigned groupings (possibly drawing from pools of students stratified along a specific dimension).

Time involvement in collaborative groups varies in terms of daily sessions and number of days during a school year.

Studies support the value of collaborative/cooperative learning. Examples of positive outcomes include enhancement of active learning, oral communication, higher-level and critical thinking, and social and leadership skills (Almulla. 2020; Laal & Ghodsi, 2012; Thanh-Pham, 2013; Vega & Terada, 2012).

This brief resource highlights two problems that can arise when collaborative learning is used in the classroom and ways they can be addressed. The problems are designated as *social loafing* and *group conflicts*.

Social Loafing

Social "loafing" is a psychological concept. In general, it tries to capture when someone in a group setting is applying less effort than others toward accomplishing the group's goals (e.g., is "slacking"). Payne & Monk-Turner (2006) report that most students involved in collaborative learning found group work rewarding and valuable but frequently mentioned that the lack of effort by any group members tainted the experience.

Social loafing has been found more likely as the size of a group increases. Large groups make it easier not to participate. They are viewed by some as an opportunity to minimize active involvement; they increase chances of encountering social distractions; they also may be seen as providing fewer opportunities for recognition and accountability.

Group Conflicts

Conflicts can arise during collaborative learning (Lee et al., 2015; DeChurch et al., 2007). These have been categorized as follows:

1. Task-related (e.g., differences in perspectives, ideas, answers)
2. Process or procedure-related (e.g., disagreements about responsibilities of members)
3. Relationship or personality-related emotional (e.g., negative feelings that the students have toward each other)

Of the three, task-related conflicts are the only ones that are viewed as having the potential for any positive impact on collaborative learning. The potential benefits of this type of conflict are attributed to the expectations for students to defend their input and consider what others offer. This task-related "conflict" is intended to result in students building upon each others' input in a way that improves the quality of the team's work.

Addressing Problems Related to Collaborative Learning

In planning collaborative learning,educators need to build in ways to address problems that often arise. In particular, plans must include how best to (a) form and guide groups and (b) monitor and address social loafing and group conflicts.

Group formation and guidance. There are pros and cons to each of the ways groups can be formed. Some students will prefer forming their own groups, but in doing so, they may not include some peers the teacher thinks should be in the group. On the other hand, instructor-formed groups often end up with some students who end up not working well with the others. Whatever method is used, the literatures emphasizes forming smallish groups (e.g., 2-6).

As to guidance, the literature stresses making certain that members understand (a) what they are trying to accomplish, (b) what responsible collaboration entails and what makes it work, and (c) what problems may arise, what causes them, and how to deal with them.

- Dommeyer (2007) suggests that social loafing may be due to such factors as low self-esteem, high expectations of a partner's performance, a dominant partner not allowing others to participate, lack of incentives for participation, and the lack of consequences for not participating.

- Lin and You (2021 report that avoiding process-related conflict involves taking early steps to allocate unambiguously the various tasks and responsibilities that each is expected to perform to enable group success. This can be a problem when students self-form groups.

- Hilton and Phillips (2010) found that collaborative groups did engender conflicts. However, the researchers point out that the conflicts created opportunities for students to learn conflict resolution and other important social skills. One particular positive aspect noted related to instructor- selected groups was that the teacher covered "social, communication, and organizational challenges that groups will need to overcome by exercising or developing team skills." Student self-formed groups were better at scheduling times to meet, had greater equality in participation among students, and were more willing to support their team members. Finally, these investigators reported that whatever method was used to form groups, they all received similar grades on their projects.

- DeChurch and colleagues (2007) report that in teams where the students could trust one another and there was little to no role ambiguity, the link between task-based and relationship-based conflict considerably decreased. They suggest that when group members trust each other, they are less likely to "misinterpret other's intentions and perceive a conflict originally rooted in task differences, as indicative of interpersonal incompatibilities."

Given all the complexities, it has been recommended that teachers learn especially about why problems arise and about using such understanding to plan ways to minimize problems. Here are few strategies that are meant to anticipate and address problems:

>*form groups in ways that maximize the likelihood that the participants will work well together*

(Of course, a problem with this is that it does not put students in a position to learn how to deal with and work with strangers and those they may not like. Even negative relationship-based and process-related conflicts can be beneficial if they are used to teach students how to overcome and deal with conflict.)

>*ask students to write down their specific group responsibilities to share with each other and the teacher*

>*ask students to self-evaluate and problem-solve to address matters such as social loafing and interpersonal conflicts*

>*monitor groups to ensure all are engaged and working collaboratively.*

>*recognize the contribution of each participant*

- Thanh-Pham (2013) notes that one of the challenges to collaborative learning involves bridging the gap between low and high- achieving students. Many high-achieving students feel that they are being held back, while low- achieving students feel like they have no voice and are ignored by their peers. These researchers found that collaboration and less conflict occurred between low and high achievers when the students did a group project compared to when they did a group assessment. Group projects were seen as allowing tasks to be divided in ways that both low-achieving and high-achieving students could contribute meaningfully.

- Dommeyer (2007) suggests using a structured "diary method" for self-evaluation (i.e., students answer questions asking them to rate their group mates' contributions on a scale of one through ten. The questions ask about personal and group member competence, supportiveness, availability, bossiness, being a super worker).

- Payne and Monk-Turner (2006) note that many of the benefits of collaborative learning originate from students navigating the group's dynamics. They recognize that teacher monitoring not only costs a lot of time, but also can counter some of the social benefits of collaborative learning. They stress that if a teacher has to intervene frequently to ensure the group runs smoothly, students will not learn how to work together and deal with problems such as social loafing and group conflicts. They suggest that group members dealing with such matters by themselves can enhance social intelligence and learning to navigate peer relationships and prepare them for functioning effectively in their future workplace.

- DeChurch and colleagues (2007) delineate five different conflict management styles:
  1. Collaborating (high agreeableness, high activeness)
  2. Competing (high activeness, low agreeableness)
  3. Accommodating (low on activeness, high agreeableness)
  4. Avoiding (low on both dimensions)
  5. Compromising (moderate on both dimensions)

  Their research concluded the following:
  >The conflict style one individual uses to resolve a task issue affects the amount of relationship conflict perceived by the partner.
  >Senders who used disagreeable styles to resolve conflict would increase amount of relationship conflict perceived by receiver compared to those who used agreeable styles.
  >Compromising is a popular style but may not actually resolve differences.
  >Competing style has more unresolved task conflict and the highest levels of perceived relationship conflict, yet yielded the same results.
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Concluding Comments

Student engagement is the key to facilitating learning at school, Collaborative group work has long been advocated not only as a process for enhancing engagement, but as facilitating development of a range of knowledge, skills, and attitudes. For example, through well designed and implemented collaborative projects, students are seen as learning to analyze and synthesize problems and situations and as developing critical and higher-order thinking. Collaborating groups also are viewed as enhancing discipline, goal setting, planning, and organization. And, by working in teams, students have the opportunity to strengthen collaborative, social, and communication skills.

Of course, group interactions sometimes result in disagreements and arguments. These are viewed as teachable moments when students learn effective ways not only to resolve such matters, but how to work and grow together and how to minimize future occurrences.

More generally, the desire to feel connected to peers is a major driver of behavior. Sometimes it seems like there is nothing more important to a student than her/his relationship with other students – at least some other students. If a teacher can capitalize on this by establishing and sustaining positive working relationships among classmates, this can facilitate student academic, social, and emotional learning and minimize student misbehavior.

The many forms used for collaborative/cooperative learning can be an integral part of creating positive and authentic interpersonal connections in the classroom. And this can play a major role in a school's efforts to evolve a strong psychological sense of community.

> **A Few Resources**
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> **What is Collaborative Learning? (Short video)**
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> **20 Collaborative Learning Tips And Strategies For Teachers**
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> **Project-Based Learning (PBL) Benefits, Examples & 10 Ideas for Classroom Implementation**
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> **Collaborative Learning Strategies for Fostering Teamwork in the ESL Classroom**

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