

4.4 Cooperative Group Activity

Introduction

Cooperation is working together to accomplish shared goals. Within cooperative learning activities, students pursue learning outcomes that are beneficial to themselves as well as to all other members of the group. This encourages students to work together to maximise their own and each other's learning. Cooperative learning groups do not refer to the use of loosely structured group work in which students might conduct experiments in science classes. Cooperative groups can be so highly structured that the working groups are usually referred to as teams.

'Nothing new that is really interesting comes without collaboration.'

James Watson, co-discoverer of DNA, referenced by 'The Cooperative Link' the newsletter of The Cooperative Learning Institute Vol. 12(1)

Research suggests that **all students** benefit from cooperative group activities. Students who are already successful show small gains in achievement, while students who have previously been unsuccessful typically show enormous gains as a result of cooperative learning. Cooperative grouping lets students organise their learning in a less threatening manner than individual questioning or whole-class discussions. It also prepares students for sharing their ideas with other students.

To establish effective cooperative groups within the classroom, students have to learn how to work with other students, share ideas and analyse information. They need to listen and encourage each other, ask appropriate questions, manage shy or dominant personalities and communicate effectively.

There are many ways to incorporate cooperative structures within your classroom. An easy way to begin is to try out paired work.

Resources

Several blank A4 or A3 sheets

Class set-up

1. Divide students into pairs.
2. Ask each group to develop a resource page for teaching a particular topic. This should take about ten minutes. Both students must create their own copy of the resource.
3. Rearrange the pairs so that each student is now sitting with a different student. Ask them to review their resource page and create a new resource page combining the best ideas from each of their previous pages. This should take about ten minutes. Again, each student must create their own copy.
4. Ask students to discard their original resource page.
5. Rearrange the pairs again and ask one student from each pair to spend five minutes teaching the other student, using the resource page that they have just created. It doesn't really matter who begins. It could just be the student within the pair with the longest hair or the person sitting on the right. After five minutes, the students swap roles so that the other student now uses their resource to teach the topic.

In this activity, the paired teams change three times so a student cannot become too dependant on another student. Each student must become as independent as possible. Furthermore, this activity gives students time to organise their learning, raises their confidence levels and is great for revision.

Another way to incorporate cooperative structures within your classroom is to give each student a distinct role when they are carrying out an activity, such as an experiment or investigation.

Roles could include a

- a) reader who reads and interprets any written instructions;
 - b) motivator who encourages all members of the group to get involved;
 - c) checker who makes sure that all group members understand the work being carried out;
 - d) recorder who writes notes on how the group is performing;
 - e) reporter who reports back key findings to the teacher/whole class;
- and

- f) time-keeper who ensures that all group members work within time limits.

It is the social element offered by cooperative learning that is extremely motivational for students. Cooperative learning is particularly useful for covering parts of the course that do not have experiments or to learn content that students traditionally find tedious.

For more information on cooperative learning, read:

Johnson, R.T. & Johnson, D.W. (1991). *Learning Together and Alone: Cooperative, Competitive, and Individualistic Learning* (3rd ed.). Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.