

Cooperative Learning

Cooperative learning (CL) is a student-centered, instructor-facilitated instructional strategy in which a small team of students is responsible for its own learning *and* the learning of all team members. CL is much more than placing students in teams and expecting them to discuss the chapter and then report back to the class. CL holds each of the team members accountable for his or her own and the team's outcomes. Several essential characteristics must be present for a team to be called "cooperative." Even though the instructor structures the majority of the activities, it is the team and each of its members who are responsible for learning. A team must exhibit interdependence; support one another's learning; will hold each other accountable for the team's process and outcomes; exhibit acceptable interpersonal skills and process team dynamics (Johnson and Others, 2003).

Cooperative learning, then, when effectively implemented, can provide students with transferable skills sought after in today's competitive workplace.

The literature shows that students who are given opportunities to work in CL teams are able to learn more quickly and efficiently, are better able to grasp and retain content, and take a more positive stance toward their own learning (Felder & Brent, 2001; Hamilton, 1997; Johnson & Johnson, 1994; D. W; Stahl. 1994). In addition, CL experiences give students the opportunity to collaborate and assume various team-related roles. Cooperative learning, then, when effectively implemented, can provide students with transferable skills sought after in today's competitive workplace.

Getting Started with Cooperative Learning

Although there are different approaches to creating cooperative learning (CL) teams, it is best to consider some characteristics which are essential to their success in the classroom. Ledlow (1999) has identified six areas to help design and develop successful cooperative learning teams: climate-setting, team formation, teambuilding, cooperative skills development, lesson design, and classroom management. The following has been excerpted from both Stahl (1994) and Ledlow (1999). See their works for more complete and detailed information.

Climate Setting

It is important to set an overall tone when using cooperative learning teams and activities in the classroom. Many students enjoy working together on a project or activity while others are not comfortable with or have not worked in teams. Still, other students may "hitchhike" and let other students do all the work. Here are some ways to encourage student buy-in and cooperation in CL teams.

- Illustrate how CL helps build communication, leadership and trust-building skills. Introduce cooperative learning at the beginning of the semester with a structured team activity which involves all students. This will help set the tone for the rest of the semester.
- Provide an opportunity for students to participate in a "practice" CL team at the beginning of the semester so they know what to expect. For example, place students in teams and have them discuss the

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- reasons why they have enrolled in the class; what they might have heard about the way you teach; the course syllabus and expected outcomes, all of which could be discussed as an entire class after the team time is over.
- Communicate clearly how students will be graded and that although much of the work will be accomplished face-to-face and rely on interdependency, some work can be completed individually. Explain that the final project grade will be based on the overall performance of everyone in the team.

Organize the teams rather than allow students to self-select their team members.

Keep teams together for most of the semester to help students get comfortable with one another and build community.

Team Formation

Carefully planned cooperative learning teams can maximize the performance of each team member. The following are some ideas to help you organize students into well-structured teams.

- Organize the teams rather than allow students to self-select their team members. Plan the heterogeneous team to be made up of students who have different skills sets and capabilities. For example, if the team will be required to use specific software, have at least one person in the team who is comfortable using that software. Also arrange the team to include students from different academic majors to provide their unique point of view. Teams can also be organized on the basis of ethnicity, gender or life experiences.
- Arrange teams to be no larger than four to five students. Equal numbers can be useful to pair students within a team to increase participation.
- Keep teams together for most of the semester to help students get comfortable with one another and build a sense of community.
- Use tent cards to help you and the students learn everyone's names.

Teambuilding

Team dynamics should be welcoming, organized and cohesive. Because CL teams can span several weeks or an entire semester, a number of points should be followed to help create and sustain all members of the team.

- Allow students time to get acquainted and build camaraderie. For example, have them decide upon a name for the team, discuss their abilities for specific team roles, or develop a timeline for activities that will take place during their time together.
- Provide realistic and attainable ways for each team member to feel they have the ability to succeed. For example, help place students in team roles in which they are comfortable (assign a strong writer to build the outline or let the less experienced student assume the role of timekeeper). Roles can then be changed as the project progresses to give everyone equal time and experience.

Suggest that the teams develop their own rules of the road or guidelines to help them proceed smoothly through the project.

- Suggest that the teams develop their own *rules of the road or guidelines* to help them proceed smoothly through the project. Each team member should be given a copy of this protocol or

make it available electronically for quick access – a team wiki would be good tool for this.

Cooperative Skills Development

- Give the team a set of well-defined and explicit instructions or guidelines before they begin each team activity so all team members know what is expected of them, their roles, and how they should work within the team.
- Provide ways students will build social skills and behaviors before the team is formed. Social skills include communication (how will the students communicate with one another—face-to-face, online, in a blended format?), leadership (who will be the initial leader and will each member assume the leadership role?), and trust building (in what ways will members build trust within the team and assume an active, caring, and meaningful camaraderie?).

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Lesson Design

Ledlow (1999) recommends four essential principles (**PIES**) when designing cooperative learning lessons: **P**ositive interdependence, **I**ndividual accountability, **E**qual participation, and **S**imultaneous interaction. With these principles in mind, design cooperative learning lessons and activities to also include a specific outcome or task related to course goals and learning objectives.

- Plan well-structured learning objectives for the CL activity and ensure students will be able to complete them in the allotted time.
- Structure learning tasks where students must rely on each another's skills and abilities to succeed. Stress that students are accountable for themselves and the team.

Classroom Management

As with all team work, cooperative learning teams requires careful monitoring to ensure students are on track, each team member is contributing, and the team members are getting along.

- Provide enough time for the students to function as a team where they learn to rely on, cooperate with, and learn from one another. Without adequate time students may become frustrated and not function well as a team.
- Provide clear, written instructions for the overall goal and criteria for each learning objective and activity. Visually-enhanced instructions can help students understand instructions (charts, graphs, diagrams).
- Monitor team work through frequent feedback such as self- and peer-evaluations and team progress reports. Other teams like to

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- hear what their peers are doing so an all-class discussion can provide valuable feedback as well.
- Reward high-achieving teams. Doing this in public encourages further success of that team and other teams to do as well (Stahl, 1994).

Summary

Cooperative learning works well in small and large classes, can be adapted across learning disciplines and can meet the needs of students with diverse learning preferences. Cooperative learning imparts learning through positive interdependence, individual accountability, face-to-face interaction, interpersonal skills, and reflection (Johnson and Johnson (1994).

References

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Selected Resource

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