

Cooperative Learning

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Essential Elements

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. Five essential elements make up successful cooperative learning:

- 1) **Positive interdependence**—linking learners together so one cannot succeed unless all group members succeed. Group members must know that they sink or swim together;
- 2) **Individual accountability**—holding individuals responsible by assessing the work of each individual through both teacher and peer assessment of individual contributions to the group effort;
- 3) **Promotive interaction**—involving group members in teaching, encouraging, and questioning each other in a collegial manner;
- 4) **Small group skills**—developing active listening, sharing resources, and showing mutual respect among group members; and,
- 5) **Group processing**—determining as a team which member actions were helpful and which should be changed in order to improve future outcomes.

Benefits

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. Cooperative learning methods have also been utilized to reduce intergroup conflict and build interpersonal bridges that tend to reduce prejudice and negative stereotyping. It is an effective means of building an appreciation for the strengths individuals bring to learning and organizations.

Cooperative Learning at Work

A 2015 World Bank-supported train-the-trainer institute and professional development program for agricultural education and training (AET) instructors used cooperative learning strategies to great success.



AET instructors were divided into groups based on subject area, locality and research interests. They were given group learning tasks to be completed through applied problem, jig-saw, and peer editing strategies (see Table). Cooperative activities were debriefed which allowed for clarification and reduction in misconceptions. In evaluations, participants said that by cooperating they were able to: a) learn an exceptional amount; b) achieve higher quality outputs and outcomes; and c) establish more robust collegial networks with other AET instructors.

Implementation

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. Teams should be arranged by the instructor and composed of 3-4 people. Assignments and tasks should be challenging enough to require cooperation for success. Be sure to utilize both team and individual level assessments. See the table below for examples of cooperative learning strategies.

Practical ways to utilize 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	Students gain content knowledge; research skills; presentation skills
Applied Problem	Within cooperative group all members work to solve a given problem; team members identify all known data and unknown factors/elements. Together, they identify 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 team members. Each team member spends 3-4 minutes sharing their knowledge/ ideas while other team members actively listen. The cooperative team members take turns paraphrasing what was shared, correcting 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 and use terminology
Peer Editing	Cooperative team members read each other's written responses to a writing assignment. Team members take notes on the responses (looking for errors and content omissions). Using a rubric, each team member's paper is rated and given suggestions for improvement; students are then allowed to edit their assignments.	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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