

Collaborative learning



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What's the idea?

In the right context, and well planned, collaborative learning (or group work) can be an effective activity to complement direct teacher instruction.

What does it mean?

Learning to work collaboratively to solve problems, come to a consensus or create a group performance/presentation is an important academic and social skill, which needs to be taught explicitly.

Collaborative learning is best used to complement teacher-led instruction. Group work is not suitable for all situations: where the priority is that students learn specific information to a required level of rigour or depth, for example, direct teacher instruction will usually prove more effective than collaborative approaches.

In scenarios where it may help groups achieve more than they could as individuals – for example, by evaluating evidence through extended discussion or

solving a problem – group work can yield positive outcomes.

What are the implications for teachers?

Explicitly teach students how to be effective as a group. At first, this may be the learning outcome. Assign specific group roles and help students understand how to be inclusive and work together. For example, teach students strategies to avoid becoming too dominant or too passive (see Kagan's (2007) 'hogs or logs'). Once positive group dynamics are in place, content-driven (knowledge-based) objectives can be explored.

Do not allow students to self-select into groups. Decide who will work with who in advance, carefully considering ability, behaviour, prior knowledge and confidence. Vary the group dynamics and use your observation to inform future group planning.

Consider the size of groups too. For example, a group size of three may

result in one student becoming a 'passenger' who is left behind by an active pair. All students should feel able to contribute and play an active role.

Ensure that students are equipped with the necessary prior knowledge to effectively complete the task in a group. Be aware that lower-attaining students may need more support or input from you. Think about how you can provide this without singling them out, for example, by providing an optional 'help-sheet' that you can offer subtly to those who need it the most.

In some subjects, collaborative learning is the norm. Try to observe colleagues in drama, PE and music lessons, for example, to see how teachers naturally incorporate group work into lessons and how students effectively manage their group roles and dynamics.

WANT TO KNOW MORE?

» Kagan S (2007) The two dimensions of positive interdependence. Kagan Online Magazine. Available at: www.KaganOnline.com (accessed 30 May 2019).

» Sherrington T (2017) *The Learning Rainforest*. Suffolk, UK: John Catt Educational Ltd.