

# **How to Creatively Group Your Students**

## **Cooperative Learning Benefits**

- \* Fosters interdependence
- \* Develops leadership skills
- \* Increases opportunities for meaningful communication
- \* Increases participation of shy students
- \* Fosters respect for diversity
- \* Often produces higher achievement
- \* Develops interpersonal skills
- \* Promotes higher self-esteem
- \* Encourages creativity

## **Basic Elements of Cooperative Learning**

- \* Positive Interdependence
- \* Face-to-Face Interaction
- \* Individual Accountability
- \* Interpersonal and Small Group Skills
- \* Group Processing

## **Things to Remember**

- \* Form groups of 3-5. Five is the most recommended size.
- \* Set clear goals and describe outcomes clearly for the students.
- \* Set a time limit.
- \* Circulate among the students.
- \* Provide time for group processing.

## **Getting Your Students Started: Group Guidelines Activity**

We are familiar with the benefits of cooperative grouping to the field of education: increased interdependence, opportunities for meaningful communication and negotiation of meaning, respect for diversity, and enhancement of interpersonal skills (Cohen, 1986; Cummins, 1981; Kagan, 1985; Nerenz & Knop, 1982; Swain, 1985). However, simply placing students in groups does not guarantee that students will know how to function competently, efficiently, and collaboratively in a group. To facilitate the functioning of groups that will be working together for an extended period of time, have group members spend the first 15 minutes of their first session together developing group guidelines by which their group will abide. Encourage them to also give themselves a group name by which they will be identified.

Give the students chart paper on which to write the guidelines. Have them list as their first guideline: "There will be no freeloaders" and as their last guideline: "Have fun!" From those guidelines, they are to come up with their own ideas. This brainstorming session is very valuable because as they are brainstorming their ideas, they are getting to know each other, discovering their individual strengths, and familiarizing themselves with each other's work ethics. After each group has written its group guidelines, each group is to post the chart paper on a wall. Have each group share with the class their guidelines. This serves to reemphasize the guidelines as well as helps each group realize the semblance of their guidelines to those of the other groups.

# **Basic Elements of Cooperative Learning**

## **Positive Interdependence**

Students must feel that they need each other in order to complete the group's task, that they "sink or swim" together. Some ways to create this feeling are through establishing mutual goals (students must learn the material and make certain group members learn the material), joint rewards (if all group members achieve above a certain percentage on the test, each will receive bonus points), shared materials and information (one paper for each group or each member receives only part of the information needed to do the assignment), and assigned roles (summarizer, encourager of participation, elaborator).

## **Face-To-Face Interaction**

No magic exists in positive interdependence in and of itself. Beneficial educational outcomes are due to the interaction patterns and verbal exchanges that take place among students in carefully structured cooperative learning groups. Oral summarizing, giving and receiving explanations, and elaborating (relating what is being learned to previous learning) are important types of verbal interchanges.

## **Individual Accountability**

Cooperative learning groups are not successful until every member has learned the material or has helped with and understood the assignment. Thus, it is important to frequently stress and assess individual learning so that group members can appropriately support and help each other. Some ways of structuring individual accountability are by giving each group member an individual exam or by randomly selecting one member to give an answer for the entire group.

## **Interpersonal and Small Group Skills**

Students do not come to school with the social skills they need to collaborate effectively with others. So teachers need to teach the appropriate communication, leadership, trust, decision-making, and conflict management skills to students and provide the motivation to use these skills in order for groups to function effectively.

## **Group Processing**

Processing means giving students the time and procedures to analyze how well their groups are functioning and how well they are using the necessary social skills. This processing helps all group members achieve while maintaining effective working relationships among members. Feedback from the teacher and or student observers on how well they observed the groups working may help processing effectiveness.



## Tips for Using Small Groups

1. Make sure the students have the knowledge and skills necessary to do the work. (If they don't, you'll know in a hurry; they won't stick to the task.)
2. Make the instructions to the groups very clear. It is unlikely that the group will be able to follow more than one or two instructions (even clear ones!)
3. Allow enough time to complete the assigned task in the small group. Think creatively about ways to occupy groups that finish ahead of other groups.
4. Form groups consisting of two to five students. Have only two or three when a complicated written product is the intended outcome. Five is probably the optimal upper limit for small group discussion.
5. In striking a balance between independent and cooperative learning, don't force the issue. Use small groups only for tasks calling for cooperative work (i.e., not independent work around a small table).
6. Make small group work a norm in your classroom, not a radical, once-in-a-lifetime departure from "lecture and recite."
7. Think about how your reward /evaluation strategy impacts the use of small groups. Be able to provide group rewards for group efforts.
8. Be explicit in dealing with management issues within the groups. If someone must report back to the class on the group's work, be sure there is a process for selecting the reporter.
9. Be prepared for the noise level that occurs during cooperative learning activities.
10. In forming groups, don't stigmatize students. Heterogeneous groups are usually desirable.
11. By all means circulate and observe/ evaluate what is occurring in the groups. When you stop to visit a group, don't take it over. Think about your role in such a situation.