



# Professional Development **Fact Sheet** **No.6** COOPERATIVE LEARNING

## What Is Cooperative Learning?

Cooperative learning is an instructional approach in which learners work in groups to accomplish a shared task. The tasks are completed within a specified time limit.

Educators use cooperative learning strategies to foster a collaborative learning environment and to create opportunities for students to build rapport with each other while working toward common team objectives. This fact sheet describes the benefits of cooperative learning for students, and provides suggestions for incorporating cooperative learning into teaching and learning.

## How Can Students Benefit from Cooperative Learning?

Cooperative learning prepares learners to work in teams, which is increasingly required in the workplace and in the community. The following are skills that students practice and learn by participating in cooperative learning activities.

1. **Interaction.** The interactions learners have with each other build interpersonal skills, such as listening, politely interrupting, expressing ideas, raising questions, disagreeing, paraphrasing, negotiating, and asking for help.
2. **Interdependence.** Learners must depend on one another to accomplish a common objective. Each group member has specific tasks to complete, and successful completion of each member's tasks results in attaining the overall group objective.
3. **Accountability.** Successful completion of a cooperative learning task is highly dependent on the accountability of every individual group member. All learners are responsible for mastering the content inherent in their tasks so that they can contribute meaningfully to the overall group task(s).
4. **Team Spirit.** Engaging in cooperative learning builds a sense of team spirit. To complete tasks as a team, learners must learn to work together.

For adult English learners, cooperative learning offers opportunities to practice conversational skills. In the traditional classroom, where whole-group instruction is the norm, opportunities for individual learners to practice speaking English are often limited. With cooperative learning activities, learners have greater opportunities for verbal interaction because they work with one another in small groups. Learners who practice speaking English gain fluency and comprehension more readily than when they only listen to the teacher model accurate speech (Kagan, 1995).

For adult basic education (ABE) and adult secondary education (ASE) learners, cooperative learning provides a chance for learners to explain their thinking processes, as in solving mathematics problems. Working in a group to solve a math problem, learners can think aloud and negotiate their logic and

the sequence for problem-solving. Cooperative learning encourages the use of critical thinking and reasoning skills.

## How Can Teachers Incorporate Cooperative Learning into Teaching and Learning?

Before initiating cooperative learning activities, the teacher states the benefits, so that learners understand the importance of working together and its application to the workplace and other situations they encounter every day. The teacher must set clear objectives for learners engaging in the activity, explain the sequence of activities, and model steps for learners before asking them to begin the activity. The teacher should avoid introducing new material at this point, instead reviewing material the class has learned previously.

Teachers can group learners randomly, asking learners to count off into groups of three or four, or they can group them in different ways, e.g., by gender, proficiency level, native language, or cultural background. The ideal group has no more than three or four members. Teachers can ask students to form mixed-gender groups, thereby ensuring that each group has an equal number of men and women, or they can group learners together who speak different languages. Research shows that cross-ability groups, i.e., groups of learners with different skill levels, perform better than same-ability groups (Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001). As a result, teachers may find it helpful to group learners in cross-ability teams, e.g., intermediate and advanced English conversational groups.

The following describes cooperative learning activities appropriate for adult English learners as well as ASE learners. These activities are adapted from the following sources: Kagan Publishing, <http://www.kaganonline.com>; The Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, <http://www.sedl.org/scimath/compass/v01n02/1.html>; and *ESL Techniques: Cooperative Learning*, produced by Longman (1993).

- **Roundtable or Assembly Line.** Teachers can use activities such as Roundtable or Assembly Line with English learners. For example, team members work on an assembly line to create a list of places to apply for a job. The objective is to brainstorm and generate a list from a large number of responses to a question the teacher has posed. This activity allows every group member to practice speaking, listening, and writing while contributing at least one item to the list. First, the group discusses the field of work, such as the medical field or hotel management. Then, one team member starts a list with one item, such as nurse. The learner passes the list to the next team member, who adds another item to the list. Learners repeat this process until there are no more responses. The list should circulate throughout the group at least once to ensure that every team member has had a chance to contribute. The team can negotiate the items. With beginning-level English as a second language (ESL) classes, teachers may need to facilitate a whole-class

discussion of jobs before the team activity and provide pictures of the items to each team, rather than asking groups to write lists.

- **Think-Pair-Share.** In a Think-Pair-Share activity, the objective is for learners to practice speaking and listening to each other. Teachers can ask a question, such as *What kinds of news articles or books do you like to read?* Learners first *think* individually about the question and their responses. Then they *partner* with another learner and each *shares* his/her responses. After the pairs discuss their favorite kinds of materials, the teacher invites learners to volunteer to summarize their pair's responses for the entire class.

Teachers can also use the above cooperative learning activities for ASE classes. Other cooperative learning activities include Jigsaw, Survey, and Numbered Heads Together.

- **Jigsaw.** Jigsaw is a useful activity when there is a lot of content to be learned or when it is fairly dense. The idea is to divide the content among small groups of learners and have each group read about and become expert on one piece of the content, and then plan a presentation to share their knowledge with the other groups. In this way, each group holds a piece of the jigsaw puzzle, and putting the pieces together provides the whole picture. In a jigsaw activity, learners share the responsibility of learning and teaching among themselves, rather than having the teacher provide direct instruction. For example, the teacher can divide a reading on the federal government into four parts: (1) executive branch, (2) legislative branch, (3) judicial branch, and (4) presidential elections. Learners, in their *home teams* of four members each, count off one to four. One member then moves to group 1, which will read about the executive branch. The second member joins group 2 to discuss the legislative branch. The third member moves to group 3 to learn about the judicial branch, and so on. The new groups are now the *expert teams*, each responsible for learning about a specific piece of the content and for preparing a presentation on it. Members of each expert team then return to their home teams to share his/her piece of the puzzle and answer any questions. Following all experts' presentations, each home team now has the total picture. In this example, each home team has an understanding of the four parts of the federal government.
- **Survey.** Surveys can help learners become acquainted with each other. The objective is to gather information about different classmates and present a summary about the composition of the class. Learners can brainstorm a list of questions to ask classmates, and, in this way, they learn names, favorite actors, personal goals, hobbies, etc. Learners work in pairs or in groups to collect the information from their classmates and record responses on a chart. Teachers may ask pairs or groups to present a summary of the chart to the whole class.
- **Numbered Heads Together.** In this activity, learners work together in teams to review previously taught information and recall answers. For example, in reviewing a science lesson on plants, the teacher can divide learners into groups of four and assign a number, from one to four, to each team member. The teacher then asks a question about the content and each team discusses possible answers. The teacher then calls out a number, from one to four, and the learners with that number take turns

answering the question. A variation on this is to call a number from one team to answer the question, and then have the other team's representative indicate agreement or disagreement by giving a *thumbs up* or *thumbs down* to the response.

**Evaluating Cooperative Learning.** The teacher must clearly state the criteria for evaluating cooperative learning activities at the beginning of the activity. Learners generally enjoy helping the teacher brainstorm evaluation criteria and contributing to questionnaires and rubrics for the evaluation. Criteria can include making gains in content knowledge, improving interpersonal skills, and meeting the team objectives.

Following group work, teachers should allocate time for learners to debrief on the process. Learners can discuss whether their group met each objective and whether and how the cooperative learning process contributed to achieving the team's overall goal. Possible discussion questions for learners include *Did you rely on each other rather than the teacher?* and *What did your teammates do well?* Debriefing helps learners develop interpersonal skills.

Cooperative learning allows students to depend on and learn from one another. Teachers can use this instructional approach to prepare a community of learners who will encounter everyday work and life situations.

### What Additional Resources on Cooperative Learning Are Available?

Some selected resources and references listed below were originally developed for K-12 teachers; however, educators can use or adapt the activities with adult learners.

Kagan, S. (1995). *We can talk: Cooperative learning in the elementary ESL classroom*. Retrieved March 21, 2008, from <http://www.cal.org/resources/digest/kagan001.html>

Marzano, R. J., Pickering, D. J., & Pollock, J. E. (2001). *Classroom instruction that works: Research-based strategies for increasing student achievement*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

McMullin, M., & Carney, D. (1993). *Cooperative learning ESL techniques*. Teacher training through video. White Plains, N.Y.: Longman.

Thirteen Ed Online. *Concept to classroom: Cooperative and collaborative learning*. Retrieved September 10, 2009, from <http://www.thirteen.org/edonline/concept2class/coopcollab/index.html>

The Cooperative Learning Center at the University of Minnesota. Retrieved September 18, 2008, from <http://www.co-operation.org/>

Walker Teaching Resource Center at the University of Tennessee, Chattanooga. *Cooperative Learning*. Retrieved September 18, 2008, from <http://www.utc.edu/Administration/WalkerTeachingResourceCenter/FacultyDevelopment/CooperativeLearning/index.html>

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