

Guidelines for Collaborative Learning

Since this text is structured on the theory and methodology of collaborative learning, I would like to offer the following guidelines, taken from Elizabeth G. Cohen, who has researched and written extensively on this subject. (Cohen is a professor of education and director of the Program for Complex Instruction at Stanford University.)

Cohen describes groupwork as “a superior technique for conceptual learning, for creative problem solving, and for increasing oral language proficiency.”¹ The technique is particularly effective in ESL classrooms. According to Cohen: “My own research and experience support the conclusion that cooperative learning can help teachers teach to a very high level in academically, linguistically, and culturally diverse classrooms . . . tasks that encourage interaction and tasks in which everyone participates will lead to greater learning gains than tasks in which one person takes over and does the work.”²

However, although interaction and whole group participation can result in successful learning, problems often arise when students with differing abilities, values, and status are placed in the same group. In order to prevent or minimize such problems, Cohen presents a strategy based on the theory of expectation states. She suggests that teachers do the following so students will begin their group work with mixed expectations for competence:

- delegate authority to groups of students and assume the role of a facilitator;
- give explicit instructions to students that group tasks require a variety of abilities, and each person has different abilities that can be useful to the group;
- ask each group member to assume an equal share of the work by contributing in ways that reflect his or her strengths; and
- encourage students to see one another as resources who can provide help.³

Using this strategy will make students feel comfortable and confident about achieving the goals of the various group work assignments in this text. More importantly, it may lessen the likelihood that one or two persons will dominate the group and that the other group members will be passive participants or withdraw entirely. But this method will only work, Cohen stresses, if both teachers and students understand “that intelligence is multidimensional and that the group task does indeed require a variety of abilities.”⁴

I explain the concept of and rationale for group work to the students in the first week of the semester, stressing the following points.

1. Elizabeth G. Cohen, *Designing Groupwork: Strategies for the Heterogeneous Classroom*, 2d ed. (New York: Teachers College Press, Columbia University, 1994), 6.
2. Elizabeth G. Cohen, “Continuing to Cooperate: Prerequisites for Persistence,” *Phi Delta Kappan* 72 (October 1990): 134–35.
3. Cohen, “Continuing to Cooperate,” 135–36.
4. Cohen, “Continuing to Cooperate,” 136.

- The class will be doing group work tasks throughout the semester in order to allow their group work skills time to develop.
- Competition between, not within, teams will be encouraged.
- Each group work task will be done within an established time frame.
- I will play an active role as a facilitator of the group work, checking the students' progress and assisting them with any problems.
- At the end of the semester, I will ask students for an evaluation of how successful they think the group work has been.⁵

Next, I give students a handout listing the ingredients for successful group work and the common problems that occur when people work together. I then assign the students to groups of three or four, and they take part in their first group work task. (See pp. 7–9 for the handout on group work.) This general introduction and class activity familiarize students with the procedures for working in groups. Throughout the semester, I continue to provide a precise explanation of the goals of each group activity in order to facilitate true collaborative learning.

5. Kate Kinsella, "Creating an Enabling Learning Environment for Non-Native Speakers of English," in *Multicultural Course Transformation in Higher Education: A Broader Truth*, edited by Ann Intili Morey and Margie K. Kitano (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1997), 123–24.