Collaborative learning involves students working together to solve a problem or complete a task. It’s an active learning strategy that has become quite common in today’s classrooms, and for good reason.

The ability to work well with others as part of a team is the skill that companies most desire among new employees, according to a survey of hiring managers by the National Association of Colleges and Employers. Collaborative learning helps students develop this critical workforce skill.

But even beyond preparing students for the workforce, research suggests that collaborative learning offers a number of important social and academic benefits.

For instance, as students are working collaboratively on an assignment, they must explain their thinking to others in their group, which helps deepen their own understanding of the topic. What’s more, students have an opportunity to learn from their peers and hear other perspectives that further advance their own knowledge. They learn to think critically about these various perspectives, and they tend to retain what they have learned longer than students who work individually. While the benefits of collaborative learning are clear, using this strategy in the classroom can be challenging.

Here are five keys to implementing collaborative learning successfully.
1. BE DELIBERATE IN FORMING STUDENT GROUPS

Allowing students to form their own groups can work well sometimes. But for the best results, teachers should carefully consider how best to arrange students so that groups contain a variety of perspectives.

If everybody thinks alike, there will be no diversity of thought to challenge participants or broaden their point of view. And if everyone performs at the same ability, then it will be harder for students to learn from each other.

In contrast, groups of students with a broad range of skills, interest and abilities can be transformational, because students who are more advanced in a particular skill or concept can help teach others. In the process, all students benefit from this interaction.

Here are some ideas for achieving a healthy balance when grouping students:

• Ask students to rate their level of comfort or ability with the various skills involved in a project, such as research, writing, digital media creation or background knowledge of the topic—and then try to arrange groups that include “experts” in these different areas.

• Ask students where they stand on a particular issue. Pair students with opposing points of view and have them create a voter’s guide on the topic, or otherwise explore the issue from all sides.

• Give students a preliminary assessment. Based on the results, purposefully create groups or pairings with a mix of abilities.

2. SET CLEAR EXPECTATIONS

Make sure all students know what is expected of them, not just in terms of the final project outcome, but also in terms of the process they take to achieve it. For instance, students should understand how they will be evaluated for their contributions to the group, as well as what behaviors are required for successful collaboration.

In outlining a clear task or objective for group work, make sure everyone knows they will sink or swim together. This creates “positive interdependence,” in which the success of each group depends on the participation of all members—and on students helping each other as necessary.

Before putting students into groups, explain your expectations for behavior and the consequences for violating these rules. Stop any inappropriate behavior as soon as you notice it, and be sure to follow through on the consequences. If you have established clear rules for collaborative learning behavior, “then the odds of you having a positive classroom atmosphere are much greater,” says education writer Janelle Cox for TeachHub.

Here are some more tips for setting clear expectations of students:

• Develop scoring rubrics for each project. Consider asking students for their feedback and including some of their ideas in your rubrics, so students are more invested in collaborative learning projects.

• Evaluate students on both their contributions to the group as well as the final product.

• Incorporate peer and self assessment at various points in the project. “This is a good way to check in on the assignment progress as well as the group dynamics,” says Cornell University’s Center for Teaching Innovation.
3. WORK ON COLLABORATION AS A DISCRETE SKILL

Students cannot be expected to know instinctively how to work well with others. This is a skill that needs developing, like any other. And as you would do with any other skill, it’s important to teach the elements of successful collaboration explicitly before having students apply this skill on their own.

The interpersonal skills needed for effective collaboration include listening to others, respecting other people and their opinions, asking clarifying questions, communicating one’s own ideas clearly and concisely, trusting other members of the group, learning how to compromise and managing conflict. Students should know what each of these behaviors involves and how to practice it in their daily interactions.

“Instead of seeing conflict as something that you must immediately step in the middle of and put a stop to, see conflict as an opportunity”

The Association of American Educators (AAE)

Here are some ideas for developing these skills among students:

- Use conflict as a teachable moment. “Instead of seeing conflict as something that you must immediately step in the middle of and put a stop to, see conflict as an opportunity,” says the Association of American Educators (AAE). Help students learn to mediate their own conflicts, providing guidance where necessary, but stopping short of imposing your own solution.

- Model effective collaboration for your students. “Set a good example for collaboration by working with other teachers and faculty members often,” AAE says. “Talk about your planning sessions and your experiences working with other teachers, and allow (students) to experience the rich interdisciplinary results of such collaboration. This way, they will see both the how and the why of collaboration.”
• Give students opportunities to build trust and rapport among their groups through icebreakers and
team-building exercises.

• Reflect with your students after collaborative projects. Spend time wrapping up the task by discussing
not just the project itself, but how students worked together. Highlight both good and bad examples of
the collaboration you saw, always being careful not to embarrass students.

4. HOLD ALL STUDENTS ACCOUNTABLE FOR THEIR WORK

Some students might be inclined to take over for the rest of the group, while others might be content to let
this happen. To ensure that every student is pulling his or her weight, it’s important to create an environment
in which all students are held accountable for doing their fair share of work.

Here are some ways of doing this:

• Have students establish ground rules for their
group. Students can even create a contract for
each member of the group to sign, with
agreed-upon penalties for those who don’t
fulfill their obligations.

• Give students some time at the outset of a
project to create a group work plan that divides
up the responsibilities among members equally.

• Assign roles to each student in a group. For
example, if the task is to create a video, one
student could be in charge of the script, another
could be in charge of the set design, and a
third could be in charge of props and costumes.
If you try this tactic, just make sure you vary
the roles for each student during the course
of the school year, so students have a chance
to experience multiple roles.

• Assign work for students to complete on their
own before bringing it to the group for
discussion or further action.

• Allow students to rate each other’s contributions.
Consider these evaluations when assigning
individual grades, but don’t give them too much
weight in your assessment system. If you use this
idea, make sure you clearly communicate how
peer assessment will influence students’ grades.
Collaborative learning can be noisy and might appear somewhat chaotic at times, with students discussing, debating, sharing and creating in small groups. Teachers must learn to embrace this chaos, as it means students are engaged in active learning. Here are some suggestions to guide you.

• Learn to give up some control. This can be hard for teachers who are used to having students sit quietly while they lecture. But teachers will find that when they give up some control over their classroom, they allow students to take charge of their own learning, which is ultimately what we want for our students—to be self-directed learners. And when teachers talk less, they have more time to listen, observe, and provide feedback to students.

• Set up your classroom to encourage collaborative learning. For students to work together, they must be sitting together. Don’t be afraid to rearrange the furniture to support collaboration. Flexible classroom furnishings, such as desks and tables from Paragon that easily can be arranged into multiple configurations, allow you to create groupings of various sizes and compositions to suit different types of projects throughout the year.
Pay attention to transitions. Learning to give up some degree of control doesn’t mean ceding control of your classroom to students altogether. Your transitions in and out of collaborative learning time are important, because they signal to students when it’s OK to talk with their peers—and when they should be listening to you. Start collaborative lessons by explaining the task and what you’re looking to accomplish, then set students loose on the project. To bring the focus back to you, include a debriefing session at the end. And always make sure that students are following the rules for respectful collaboration while they are engaged in the project itself.

Collaborative learning takes time and effort to lead successfully. But when it’s done well, it provides invaluable learning experiences for students. With the advice contained in this guide, you should be well on your way to creating effective collaborative learning environments that transform classroom instruction.

RESOURCES


