

Collaborative Learning

Collaborative learning emphasizes the importance of interaction and individual student accountability. Activities designed for collaborative learning require students to learn to work together and to be responsible for the knowledge gained by their teammates and his or her self. In order for collaborative learning to be effective, five elements must be present:

1. **Positive interdependence.** The group is only as strong as it's weakest link; to the extent that the group succeeds, the individual succeeds. Thus, students are motivated to help each other be successful in accomplishing the goals of the group.
2. **Promote interaction.** Students need to actively help and support one another. This involves the sharing of resources and encouragement.
3. **Individual and group accountability.** Each member of the group is accountable for contributing to the group's larger goal. Although the group as a whole is accountable for the group's goals, each student is assessed individually.
4. **Development of teamwork skills.** In addition to learning the subject matter presented in the course, students are also expected to learn interpersonal and small group skills. In collaborative learning, teamwork skills are equally important as academic skills.
5. **Group processing.** Evaluation group productively is essential to this teaching model. Assessment of what member actions are helpful and unhelpful allows students to make decisions about what needs to be changed within the group.

Research has shown that positive contributions are made to a student's college experience when they are involved in interactive, collaborative learning in the classroom. Group learning contributes to content mastery, problem solving, critical thinking, as well as the development of interpersonal and communication skills.

University 101 is the perfect class environment for utilizing the collaborative learning model. By providing opportunities for group interaction and work, students are learning skills that are essential not only to college academic and social success, but they are developing characteristics that are valued components of careers and citizenship.

Tips for Utilizing Collaborative Learning:

According to teachers who have used this model in their classrooms...

- First and foremost, explain why group work is relevant. It is important that students do not view their collaborative learning experience as simply "busy work".

- The optimal size for in-class groups is four to five students, at least at the beginning of the term. Keep groups in the same classroom, if possible.
- Much care must be given to developing a task that will be assigned to a group. Clarity and structure in the assignment are essential elements (however, later in the semester, when groups are more familiar with the structure of group projects, less structure can be given). When developing a task, also keep in mind the amount of time allotted to complete task, how it coincides with the learning objectives of the course, and what the product of the task will be. Also, ask questions that have more than one answer, making for more interesting discussion when the small groups report their results to the entire class.
- Activities should give students time to reflect, to challenge their peers, or to solve a problem within the group, such as group members who control the conversation or students who do not contribute enough to the dialogue.
- Students claim that their best group experiences were in groups that they had been assigned to by the instructor. Create diverse groups, allowing students who may not know each other or have not worked together previously to form a bond.
- Students appreciate both sitting with their groups during regular class time, and also having time during the class period to meet as a group.
- Have each group create team contracts that note each member's commitment to attending all sessions and group meetings, rules for communication and constructive feedback, etc., and have all group members sign this document.

Adapted from Cross, K.P. (February 2000). Collaborative Learning 101. *The Cross Papers, Number 4*. League for Innovation in the Community College.

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