

Tips for Collaborative Learning in the Classroom

Collaborative learning is an excellent learning tool, but it isn't always easy. Here are a few tips for managing collaborative learning in the classroom.

1. Explain the value.

Group work is new to some students. Make sure you explain the value in working together. Better yet, *ask students* to explain the value of group work. My students most frequent responses are "I can learn from my classmates" "It's fun to teach someone." "We get more practice speaking and listening."

2. Solve logistics.

Students won't move unless they have a free space to move into. Tell students to clear their desks of papers and hang their jackets on hooks rather than on the back of their chair. If possible, make sure there are a few empty chairs in the room to facilitate movement.

3. Vary the grouping.

Everyone wants to stick to the comfort zone and work with the people they know best, but to build community and strengthen classroom culture, give students opportunities to work with everyone else in the classroom.

Also, remember to vary group size. Each size group has a different social dynamic. Large groups require more communication and more negotiation than small groups. Pair work is the simplest model but it's not as challenging or enriching.

4. Provide language support.

Group work requires all sorts of language that might not be in the book. This is the language of turn-taking, clarifying, and making suggestions. Explicitly teach these gambits before students get into groups, so everyone is equipped with the language skills to work together. For example:

How about you? (Turn taking)
Excuse me. What did you say? (Clarifying)

5. Establish an outcome.

Make sure the group work results in a product. This could be: answers written on the board; an informational poster or booklet; a class presentation; a simple debriefing of the group discussion; or a test administered by the teacher which grades the group by its members' average.