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To: TEACHING-TOOLBOX@LISTSERV.JMU.EDU
Subject: Teaching Toolbox: Toward Successful Cooperative Learning
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Toward Successful Cooperative Learning **by Michael S. Kirkpatrick**

Many approaches to teaching involve using groups of students working together to engage deeply with material. These approaches are collectively known as “cooperative learning,” though other names (e.g., “collaborative learning,” “group learning,” etc.) are also used. To be successful, cooperative learning needs to be designed to accomplish [five key elements](#). The task must involve *positive interdependence*, requiring students to work together for any individual group member to be successful; if one of the students can do the work on their own, there will be little or no benefit to being in the group. There must be *individual and group accountability*; each person must contribute their fair share, and the group as a whole needs to demonstrate collective success. The group must engage in *face-to-face interactions*, such as testing each other, sharing worksheets, and collaboratively taking notes. Students must develop *teamwork skills*, such as decision-making, trust-building, leadership, and conflict management; furthermore, these skills need to be [explicitly taught, modeled, and cultivated to be successful](#). Finally, there must be *group processing*, in which the students reflect on how to improve their process and maximize each other’s learning; one method for doing so is to have teams complete an early self-evaluation about specific practices, such as how often their meetings lack an agenda or how frequently discussions go off-topic.

There are [many things](#) that instructors can do to facilitate the development of teamwork skills and group processing. Groups should be created to be heterogeneous, aligning the work to be done with a variety of skills. Instructors should especially consider using an initial survey to help identify [differences in students’ approaches](#), striving to balance the number of contributors (those students who focus on the immediate task), collaborators (those who emphasize the overall purpose), communicators (those who encourage positive processes and interpersonal relations), and challengers (those who ask tough questions and push to take risks). When conflicts arise, instructors should introduce students to the idea that groups typically go through four stages ([forming, storming, norming, and performing](#)) and that conflict can be a sign of progress toward successful work.

Instructors also need to emphasize that teamwork skills are abilities that [require practice to develop](#). Students often lack awareness of the necessity and nature of these skills, so instructors should be deliberate in using their language to identify and model specific skills, such as active listening, informally testing others for mastery and understanding, giving and receiving constructive criticism, and labeling behaviors instead of individuals. Instructors should emphasize aiming for consensus (where all voices are respected and ideas integrated) rather than compromise (where dominant majorities can suppress or ignore the contributions of individuals, especially those in the minority). One technique that can help with this process is to have the groups initially establish a written contract of norms for their behavior and expectations; the contract can specify how quickly email responses are expected, how meeting agendas will be set, who will follow up on assigned tasks, and so on.

[Peer evaluation](#) is a critical feature for positive interdependence and accountability, but it can be [detrimental](#) if it is perceived as competitive or zero-sum. To avoid potential problems, the group should do an early (e.g., after 4-6 weeks) self-assessment of the group's functioning to that point (see the forms adapted by [Oakley et al. 2004](#)). While this approach can help most groups to identify and correct problems early, there will typically be some unresolvable conflicts; firing individuals and resigning from a group should be available as a last resort. At that point, it is the individual's responsibility to find a new group. No cooperative learning experience can ever be guaranteed to be successful, but these techniques can help to improve the likelihood.

About the author: Dr. Michael S. Kirkpatrick is an associate professor of Computer Science and a teaching area faculty associate with the Center for Faculty Innovation. He can be reached at kirkpams@jmu.edu.

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