

## A brief introduction to collaborative learning

### What is collaborative learning? An overview

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Collaborative learning is based on the view that knowledge is constructed socially, between people. When we think of collaborative learning, we can imagine students of varying ability levels working together in pairs or in groups to discuss concepts and solve problems to meet an academic goal. Collaborative learning consists of exercises and activities through which students develop knowledge by interacting with each other.

### Is collaborative learning effective?

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Research shows that collaborative learning that is active, social, engaging, and student-led can lead to deeper learning. The Cornell University Center for Teaching Innovation notes that some of the benefits of collaborative learning include:

- Advancement of higher-level thinking, oral communication, self-management, and leadership skills.
- Increase in student responsibility for their learning.
- Exposure to diverse perspectives, leading to increased understanding of those perspectives and ideas.
- Preparation for real life social and employment situations, as there is an increase in the desire for teamwork in the workforce.

Collaborative learning enables students to engage more deeply with the material and learn from each other. Research demonstrates that in tests and exams, students were better able to recall material discussed in collaborative learning settings than material that was not learned through collaboration (Rau & Heyl, 1990). These peer relationships can also motivate students in learning activities (Wentzel & Watkins, 2002).

### When/ how should collaborative learning be used in the classroom?

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Many teachers have used the “think-pair-share” model of collaborative learning in their classrooms, but there are many other activities that apply collaborative learning in the classroom, including:

- “Stump your partner” in which students take a minute to create a challenging question based on the lecture content up to that point, and then pose the question to the person sitting next to them.
- “Turn-and-talk” in which the teacher pauses the lecture to allow students to turn and talk to each other to compare notes and ask clarifying questions. The teacher can then invite the class to ask a few questions among the entire class.
- “Fishbowl debate” in which students are in groups of three, and assigned a role for a debate. One person one position on a topic for debate, a second person takes the opposite position, and the final in the middle takes notes and decides which side is the most convincing and provides an argument for his or her choice. Students then share out with the class by summarizing their discussions.

Creating a collaborative learning activity does require some more preparation and planning on behalf of teachers. Before having your students engage in these activities, consider the classroom dynamics. What will be most conducive for all students to learn? It may be helpful to do team building and icebreaker activities early in the school year. It is also important to think about how groups will be formed, and try to arrange groups that include “experts” in different areas, so the groups include students with a mix of abilities. In order for students to gain the most out of the group work experience, choose assignment topics or tasks that are related to the real world, and can be connected to students’ lives.

In today's digital age, it is not surprising that collaborative learning can be enhanced by technology. Computer-supported collaborative learning (CSCL) promotes students' collaboration. In higher education, for example, collaborative resources such as Wikis, and Google Documents, enable students to write and work on the same document simultaneously.

## References

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