**ED370881 1994-03-00 The Essential**

**Elements of Cooperative Learning in the**

**Classroom. ERIC Digest.**

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Table of Contents

If you're viewing this document online, you can click any of the topics below to link directly to that section.

The Essential Elements of Cooperative Learning in the Classroom. ERIC

Digest...........................................................................2

A CLEAR SET OF SPECIFIC STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOME

OBJECTIVES.............................................................. 3

ALL STUDENTS IN THE GROUP "BUY INTO" THE TARGETED

OUTCOME................................................................. 3

CLEAR AND COMPLETE SET OF TASK-COMPLETION

DIRECTIONS OR......................................................... 3

HETEROGENEOUS GROUPS...............................................3

EQUAL OPPORTUNITY FOR SUCCESS..................................4

POSITIVE INTERDEPENDENCE............................................ 4

FACE-TO-FACE INTERACTION............................................. 4

POSITIVE SOCIAL INTERACTION BEHAVIORS AND ATTITUDES. 4

ACCESS TO MUST-LEARN INFORMATION..............................4

OPPORTUNITIES TO COMPLETE REQUIRED

INFORMATION-PROCESSING TASKS.............................. 5

SUFFICIENT TIME IS SPENT LEARNING.................................5

INDIVIDUAL ACCOUNTABILITY............................................ 5

PUBLIC RECOGNITION AND REWARDS FOR GROUP ACADEMIC

SUCCESS.................................................................. 5

POST-GROUP REFLECTION (OR DEBRIEFING) ON

WITHIN-GROUP BEHAVIORS......................................... 5

REFERENCES AND ERIC RESOURCES................................. 6

ED370881 1994-03-00 The Essential Elements of Cooperative Learning in the

Classroom. ERIC Digest.

Page 1 of 8

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The Essential Elements of Cooperative Learning

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Over the past decade, cooperative learning has emerged as the leading new approach

to classroom instruction. One important reason for its advocacy is that numerous

research studies in K-12 classrooms, in very diverse school settings and across a wide

range of content areas, have revealed that students completing cooperative learning

group tasks tend to have higher academic test scores, higher self-esteem, greater

numbers of positive social skills, fewer stereotypes of individuals of other races or ethnic

groups, and greater comprehension of the content and skills they are studying

(Johnson, Johnson, and Holubec 1993; Slavin 1991; Stahl and VanSickle 1992).

Furthermore, the perspective of students working as "academic loners" in classrooms is

very different from that of students working cooperatively and collaboratively in and as

"cooperative learning academic teams" (see the chapter by Stahl in Stahl and VanSickle

1992).

Even with its increasing popularity, a large majority of the group tasks that teachers use,

even teachers who claim to be using "cooperative learning," continue to be cooperative

group tasks-not cooperative learning group tasks. For instance, nearly all "jigsaw"

activities are not cooperative learning jigsaw activities. Merely because students work in

small groups does not mean that they are cooperating to ensure their own learning and

the learning of all others in their group (Johnson, Johnson, and Holubec 1993). This

emphasis on academic learning success for each individual and all members of the

group is one feature that separates cooperative learning groups from other group tasks

(Slavin 1990).

To be successful in setting up and having students complete group tasks within a

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Page 2 of 8 ED370881 1994-03-00 The Essential Elements of Cooperative Learning in the

Classroom. ERIC Digest.

cooperative learning framework, a number of essential elements or requirements must

be met. The exact number, name, and order of these requirements vary from one

author to another. However, nearly all agree that, in one way or another, the elements

listed below are essential.

A CLEAR SET OF SPECIFIC STUDENT

LEARNING OUTCOME OBJECTIVES

Cooperative learning and cooperative learning groups are means to an end rather than

an end in themselves. Therefore, teachers should begin planning by describing

precisely what students are expected to learn and be able to do on their own well

beyond the end of the group task and curriculum unit. Regardless of whether these

outcomes emphasize academic content, cognitive processing abilities, or skills,

teachers should describe in very unambiguous language the specific knowledge and

abilities students are to acquire and then demonstrate on their own.

ALL STUDENTS IN THE GROUP "BUY INTO"

THE TARGETED OUTCOME

It is not sufficient for teachers to select outcome objectives: students must perceive

these objectives as their own. They must come to comprehend and accept that

everyone in the group needs to master the common set of information and/or skills. In

selected strategies where groups select their own objectives, all members of each

group must accept their academic outcomes as ones they all must achieve.

CLEAR AND COMPLETE SET OF

TASK-COMPLETION DIRECTIONS OR

INSTRUCTIONSTeachers need to state directions or instructions that describe in clear,

precise terms exactly what students are to do, in what order, with what materials, and,

when appropriate, what students are to generate as evidence of their mastery of

targeted content and skills. These directions are given to students BEFORE they

engage in their group learning efforts.

HETEROGENEOUS GROUPS

Teachers should organize the three-, four-, or five-member groups so that students are

mixed as heterogeneously as possible, first according to academic abilities, and then on

the basis of ethnic backgrounds, race, and gender. Students should not be allowed to

form their groups based on friendship or cliques. When groups are maximally

heterogeneous and the other essential elements are met, students tend to interact and

achieve in ways and at levels that are rarely found in other instructional strategies. They

also tend to become tolerant of diverse viewpoints, to consider others' thoughts and

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ED370881 1994-03-00 The Essential Elements of Cooperative Learning in the

Classroom. ERIC Digest.

Page 3 of 8

feelings in depth, and seek more support and clarification of others' positions. (A limited

number of proven cooperative learning strategies allow teachers academically sound

alternatives to maximal heterogeneous groups. If these strategies are not used, then

maximal heterogeneity along the above criteria is needed.)

EQUAL OPPORTUNITY FOR SUCCESS

Every student must believe that he or she has an equal chance of learning the content

and abilities, and earning the group rewards for academic success, regardless of the

group he or she is in. In other words, the student must not feel penalized academically

by being placed in a particular group.

POSITIVE INTERDEPENDENCE.

Teachers must structure learning tasks so that students come to believe that they sink

or swim together--that is, their access to rewards is as a member of an academic team

wherein all members receive a reward or no member does. Essentially, tasks are

structured so that students must depend upon one another for their personal,

teammates', and group's success in completing the assigned tasks and mastering the

targeted content and skills.

FACE-TO-FACE INTERACTION.

Students need to arrange themselves so that they are positioned and postured to face

each other for direct eye-to-eye contact and face-to-face academic conversations using

"12 inch voices."

POSITIVE SOCIAL INTERACTION BEHAVIORS

AND ATTITUDES

Merely because students are placed in groups and expected to use appropriate social

and group skills does not mean students will automatically use these skills. To work

together as a group, students need to engage in such interactive abilities as leadership,

trust-building, conflict-management, constructive criticism, encouragement,

compromise, negotiation, and clarifying. Teachers may need to describe the expected

social interaction behaviors and attitudes of students and to assign particular students

specific roles to ensure that they consciously work on these behaviors in their groups.

ACCESS TO MUST-LEARN INFORMATION

Teachers must structure the tasks so that students have access to and comprehend the

specific information that they must learn. The content focus of learning tasks must be

aligned directly with the specific outcome objectives and the test items that will be used

to measure their academic achievement.

OPPORTUNITIES TO COMPLETE REQUIRED

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Page 4 of 8 ED370881 1994-03-00 The Essential Elements of Cooperative Learning in the

Classroom. ERIC Digest.

INFORMATION-PROCESSING TASKS.

For students to be successful, each must complete a number of internal

information-processing tasks aligned with targeted objectives, such as comprehending,

translating, making connections, assigning meanings, organizing the data, and

assessing the relevancy and uses of the information they study. Assigned group tasks

direct students to complete the relevant internal processing tasks they need to

complete.

SUFFICIENT TIME IS SPENT LEARNING

Each student and group should be provided the amount of time needed to learn the

targeted information and abilities to the extent expected. Without students' spending

sufficient time learning, the academic benefits of cooperative learning will be limited

(Stahl 1992). (Many of the positive affective, social skills and attitudes, and academic

benefits of cooperative learning tend to emerge and be retained only after students

have spent four or more weeks together in the same heterogeneous group.)

INDIVIDUAL ACCOUNTABILITY

The reasons why teachers put students in cooperative learning groups is so all students

can achieve higher academic success individually than were they to study alone.

Consequently, each must be held individually responsible and accountable for doing his

or her own share of the work and for learning what has been targeted to be learned.

Therefore, each student must be formally and individually tested to determine the extent

to which he or she has mastered and retained the targeted academic content and

abilities.

PUBLIC RECOGNITION AND REWARDS FOR

GROUP ACADEMIC SUCCESS

Only members of groups who meet or surpass high levels of academic achievement

receive ample rewards within formal public settings. The specific awards must be

something valued by the students.

POST-GROUP REFLECTION (OR DEBRIEFING)

ON WITHIN-GROUP BEHAVIORS

Students spend time after the group tasks have been completed to systematically reflect

upon how they worked together as a team in such areas as (a) how well they achieved

their group goals, (b) how they helped each other comprehend the content, resources,

and task procedures, (c) how they used positive behaviors and attitudes to enable each

individual and the entire group as a group to be successful, and (d) what they need to

do next time to make their groups even more successful.

Every one of the preceding elements does not have to be used every time the teacher

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ED370881 1994-03-00 The Essential Elements of Cooperative Learning in the

Classroom. ERIC Digest.

Page 5 of 8

assigns students to work in groups. However, teachers who fail to include these

requirements report far more difficulties with their students and their group activities,

and far less student academic achievement gains than do teachers who meet them. As

a general rule, unless a well-researched strategy is used that allows for an alternative to

one or more of these elements, teachers serious about implementing effective

cooperative learning activities need to ensure that these requirements are met for each

cooperative learning strategy they use--otherwise they are using structured cooperative

groups. More importantly, unless these elements are used frequently and correctly,

teachers should not expect the many positive long-term results of cooperative learning

that can be achieved.

REFERENCES AND ERIC RESOURCES

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Page 6 of 8 ED370881 1994-03-00 The Essential Elements of Cooperative Learning in the

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Page 7 of 8

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Page 8 of 8 ED370881 1994-03-00 The Essential Elements of Cooperative Learning in the

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