Using Cooperative Learning in the classroom

Cooperative learning can be used across a wide range of classroom settings ranging from small to large lectures, as well as in online classes.

Exercises can be of different levels of complexity:

- Low: less than 15 minutes, simple and informal, in class;
- Medium: 1 to 2 meeting sessions, more formal, in or out of class;
- High: complex, formal, in and out of class.

To create an environment in which cooperative learning can take place, three things are necessary. First individuals need to feel challenged; secondly, groups need to be small enough that everyone can contribute. Third, the task must be clearly defined.

At the beginning, the facilitator designs meaningful tasks that require active participation of each learner in the group toward a common end. As groups work on tasks, he/she has to move from group to group to monitor the learning process. He/she also provides learners with on-going feedback and assessments on the group's progress.

Instructions

- The facilitator establishes the specific cooperative learning technique to be used and lays the foundation for effective group work;
- The facilitator sets up groups of 3 to 5 people. In larger groups, it is difficult to keep everyone involved. Each group should reflect a mix of diverse skills, background and experiences so that each individual brings his/her strengths and the learning process benefits from a diversity of perspectives;
- Group members share responsibilities, including the commitment to attend, prepare and be on time; avoid personal criticism and take responsibility for a share of the tasks.
- The facilitator assigns tasks to the groups and explains what the criteria are for success (e.g. goals, define how often and with what means you will communicate, evaluate progress, make decisions and resolve conflicts…);
- The facilitator or an assistant facilitator begins by facilitating discussion and suggesting alternatives but does not impose solutions on the team;
- The facilitator monitors the group work, collects observation data, gives immediate feedback…;
- Once the group finishes the task, the work should be assessed by both the facilitator and group;
- Groups are asked to rate their own performance and set goals for themselves to improve their cooperative work.

Example of class activities:

Cooperative learning techniques can be categorized by the skills that each enhances, e.g. discussion, reciprocal teaching, graphic organization, writing and problem solving.

Discussion: communicating effectively
Think-pair- share: learners reflect on a question posed and then practice sharing and receiving potential solutions.
Three-step interview: learners are first paired and take turns interviewing each other using a series of questions provided by the facilitator. Peers then match up and learners introduce their original partner.

Reciprocal teaching: explaining, providing feedback, understanding different perspectives
Jigsaw: learners are responsible for teaching each other material. Each member is assigned a part of a reading/material becoming the expert of the area. "Experts" from different groups meet together to discuss their areas. They then return to their teams and take turns teaching.
Note-taking pairs: learners are required to summarise their understanding of a subject based on notes taken. Feedback from their partners provides learners the opportunity to find critical gaps in their written records.

Graphic organization: discovering patterns and relationships
Group grid: learners practice organizing and classifying information in a table.
Sequence chain: learners are provided with items to be organized and provide a visual representation of a series of events, actions, roles or decisions.

Writing: organizing and synthesizing information
Peer editing: learners are paired up at the beginning of the task and provide feedback throughout the process.
Dyadic essays: learners develop an essay question and model answer based on assigned reading. They then exchange essay questions and write a spontaneous answer essay. Learners then pair up, compare and contrast the model answer and the spontaneously generated answer.

Problem solving: developing strategies and analysis
Send-a-problem: learners participate in a series of problem solving rounds and contribute their solution. After a number or rounds, learners are asked to develop a solution developed by their peers, evaluate the answer and develop a final solution.
Three-stay, one –stray: learners periodically take a break from their work and send one group member to another group to describe their progress. The role of the group is to gain information and alternative perspectives by listening and sharing. The number of times the group sends a representative to another group depends on the level of complexity of the problem.

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Cons and weaknesses of Cooperative Learning

Critics of this technique often point to problems related to vague objectives and avoidance of teaching.
Dividing the class into small groups can mean that the teacher avoids taking responsibility.
Other weaknesses are related to the fact that making members of the group responsible for each other's learning can place too great burden on some students. The result is often that stronger students are left to teach weaker students and do most of the work.

On the other hand, a list of recommendations is available below to help trainers address issues:

Identify clear questions at the outset;
Resolve small-groups conflicts as soon as they arise and show learners how to prevent a trouble in the future;
Create rubrics at the beginning of any assignment and use them for guiding the learning process;
Help learners reflect on their progress on a regular basis;

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