Facilitating Small Groups

(after: Ledlow, 1999)

Co-operative Learning

Co-operative Learning is a formal instructional model in which teachers carefully design lessons and activities that are suitable for use by teams. These teams are small, stable, and heterogeneous, and have been adequately prepared for working together.

Climate-setting

Communicate clear expectations to students about co-operative learning on the first day of class.

Rather than telling students that cooperation makes learning fun, demonstrate it. Put students into teams and have them do a simple, well structured co-operative activity. The activity could introduce your course, co-operative learning, or your content.

Personalize the learning environment. People in a learning community know and use each other's first names.

Team Formation

Teams might be self-selected, formed randomly or formed by the instructor, rather than self-selected. They might be large or small, composed of no more than five members. They will be heterogeneous and they will be stable, that is, they will change no more than twice during the semester.

Co-operative skills development

The explicit development of co-operative skills is one of the concepts that distinguish co-operative learning from traditional group work. There are a number of approaches for helping students develop these skills. You may choose to directly teach co-operative skills. For example, students are asked, "What does active listening look like? What does it sound like?" Their answers are recorded and posted in the classroom as a reminder to use the targeted skill when working together on team tasks.

For some tasks, it is useful to assign roles, such as *Taskmaster* (to keep the group on task), *Recorder* (to make sure all ideas and required outputs of the team are recorded), *Gatekeeper* (someone who opens and closes the gate of communication to ensure that students participate equally), *Encourager* (to help the group function smoothly). Depending on the task at hand, you might have a materials monitor, devil's advocate, coach, etc.

Use tasks that are structured in such a way as to foster certain skills or address certain team problems.

Monitor teams and reinforce good skills.

Lesson design

Well designed co-operative learning lessons and assignments give students a specific task, such as solving a problem, creating a model, or comparing and contrasting. To a certain extent, they also provide a set of instructions that describe how students should work together.

It's not co-operative learning if the lesson design does not include the following four principles:

Positive interdependence-- the success of all in the team is linked through goals, materials, or rewards. Students are aware that "we sink or swim together."

Individual accountability –at various points in the process, the instructor can verify that all students are contributing and learning. Often this is accomplished through individual public performance (randomly calling on one student in the team) or requiring individual assignments as part of the team assignment.

Equal participation—the structure of the assignment should be such that all students have to participate, and that there are mechanisms to ensure that the participation is fairly equitable. You may try assigning roles, adding steps to the lesson that require input from all team members, or establishing turn-taking procedures.

Simultaneous interaction – at several points in the lesson, you should ensure that at least more than one student is actively engaged at a time. Adding a step where students work with a partner within the team doubles the amount of participation. Having all students write an individual response before engaging in a team discussion gets all simultaneously involved.

Some strategies for working with small groups

(from Fry, Kettridge, & Marshall, 2003, pp. 98-99)

- *Brainstorm session* – generation of ideas from the group to foster lateral thinking. There is no criticism of ideas until they are logged.

- *Buzz groups* – two or three people are asked to discuss an issue for a few minutes. Comments are usually then shared with the larger group.

- *Cross-over groups* – used for brief discussions then transfers between groups.

- *Fishbowl* – small groups are formed within a large, observation group, followed by discussion and reversal.

- *Free discussion* – topic and direction comes directly from the group; the tutor or leader observes.

- *Open-ended enquiries* – students determine the structure as well as reporting back on outcomes.

- *Peer tutoring* – students learn from one another and teach one another.

- *Problem-based tutorial group* – involves small groups using problem-based learning.

- *Role play* – use of allocated or self-created roles. It is important to facilitate students to enter and come out of roles.

- *Self-help group* – run by and for students; the tutor may be a resource.

- *Paper discussion* – group discussion of a paper presented by a student

- *Simulation/game* – structured experience in real or imaginary roles. Guidelines on the process are important and feedback is critical.

- *Snowballing* – pairs become small groups than larger groups.

- *Step-by-step discussion* – a planned sequence of issues or questions led by a student or the tutor.

- *Structured enquiries* - the tutor provides lightly structured experiments and guidance.

- *Syndicate* – involving mini-project work followed by reporting to the full class.

- *Tutorless group* – the group appoints a leader and may report back; may focus on discussion or completion of some other type of set task.