



## Tips for Climate Setting in Cooperative Learning Classrooms

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For cooperative learning to work optimally, Solomon, Davidson, and Solomon suggest that the whole class, *not just the team*, should become a community of learners, “a united, interdependent, mutually supportive and cohesive unit, motivated to work, study, teach, and learn together” (1992, pp. 51-52). Kagan similarly refers to building the *will* to cooperate as one of the key concepts for successful cooperative learning (1992, p. 4:2). But, while many of my students are enthused about the opportunity to learn with and from their peers, it is not uncommon for me to encounter students who are reluctant to participate in any sort of group activities.

So how does one take a class of students whose feelings about cooperative learning range from love through indifference to downright hostility and turn them into a community of learners? The first (but by no means the only) step is to work on creating a class climate that encourages cooperation. Listed below are some strategies that have worked well for me. Try those that seem to fit your needs and teaching style; adapt or disregard those that don't. I'd also recommend that you read more on this complex subject (references and suggested books are included at the end) and talk with other faculty members about their experiences.

### Communicate Clear Expectations On the First Day of Class

I recommend that you inform students that you plan to use cooperative learning, why you use it, and what it means to them. Will they be graded on class participation? What happens if they come to class unprepared? It's particularly important to let students know about your policies on group grades. (Incidentally, I find that my students' anxiety about cooperative learning greatly diminishes when they find out that I rarely use group grades.) It's also a good idea to acknowledge that some people would prefer to work alone, and to point out the activities and assignments they'll be working on independently. Typically, I stress the information in my syllabus that relates to participation and homework points. I also include a statement about CL, like this:

Learning is a constructive process, i. e., in order to learn, you must take in new information and process it in light of your previous knowledge and experiences to construct new meanings. Individual reading, reflection, and writing, are important to learning, but I believe that discussion, debate and analysis of new ideas with your peers is even more critical.... Cooperative learning has been repeatedly shown to increase student learning, to enhance critical thinking skills, to improve communication skills, and to increase student satisfaction with classes in which it is used. Students who have taken my classes in the past have reported that they appreciated having a chance to get to know other students and develop relationships that have enriched their academic and personal lives.

## **Provide an Engaging, Easily Accomplished Cooperative Learning Activity Right Away**

I think we set the tone for our classes in the first few minutes on the first day. So, rather than telling students that cooperation makes learning more enjoyable, demonstrate it. Put students into teams and have them do a simple, well-structured cooperative activity. The activity could introduce your course, cooperative learning, or your content. For example, a great idea for your first day of class is the *Syllabus Jigsaw*, developed by Brenda Larson of Chandler Gilbert Community College. Brenda puts her students into teams, gives each team member a different page of her syllabus and has them look for the answers to questions about the course. She reports that they remember much more about the syllabus than when she lectured to them, and they're able to preview her favorite cooperative learning technique, *Jigsaw*.

## **Develop Class and/or Team Groundrules**

After a few days of experiencing CL in your class, have your students develop a "Code of Cooperation" or a set of groundrules that will enhance their teamwork. I often have them develop rules within their teams, then make a master list for the class. Many of the rules they come up with are identical to rules I would have chosen (e.g., "Come to class prepared and willing to participate" or "Criticize ideas, not, people."), but I think that people are more invested in rules that they develop themselves.

## **Personalize the Learning Environment**

People in a learning community know and use each other's first names. Name tags or tents work well in large classes. In smaller classes (up to 50 students), try the *Name Game*, developed by Jim Luotto and Edwina Stoll (Department of Communication, DeAnza College): moving clockwise, each student says his or her first name, the names of all students who came before him, and then his/her first name again.

Johnson, Johnson, and Smith (1992, p. 8:10) offer a number of suggestions for personalizing the learning environment. They especially recommend monitoring cooperative learning teams closely, so that you get to know students better and can interact with them more informally than you would in a whole-class setting.

## **Conduct Formal Classbuilding/Climate Setting Activities**

Kagan comments that, in CL classes, "it is important that students see themselves as part of a larger supportive group - the class - not just as members of one small team" (1992, p. 9:1) *Classbuilders* help all students in the class get better acquainted and hopefully, develop that sense of mutual support. Some classbuilders are simple, nonverbal strategies. For example, you might use a thumbs-up or -down poll of the class to compare reactions to an idea. Others are more complicated and lengthy activities, like *Find Someone Who...* In FSW, students must introduce themselves to others in the class with the goal of finding another student with whom they share opinions or characteristics - "Find someone who feels the same way that you do about congressional term limits" or "Find someone who participates in the same sport or form of exercise that you do." Some faculty members do a lot of classbuilders at the beginning, and less as the semester progresses. I'm more inclined to spread them out fairly evenly throughout the semester. Experiment and see what works best for you.

## References

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