

Essential Elements: What Makes It Work?
(from "Approaches to Implementing Cooperative Learning",
by David W. Johnson and Roger T. Johnson)

Teachers need to master the essential elements of cooperation for at least two reasons. First, teachers need to tailor cooperative learning to their unique instructional needs, circumstances, curricula, subject areas, and students. Second, teachers need to diagnose the problems some students may have in working together and intervene to increase the effectiveness of the student learning groups.

Simply placing students in groups and telling them to work together does not in and of itself result in cooperative efforts. There are many ways in which group efforts may go wrong. Seating students together can result in competition at close quarters or individualistic efforts with talking. The essential elements of cooperation need to be understood if teachers are to be trained to implement cooperative learning successfully. Teachers need enough training and practice on the essential elements of cooperation to become educational engineers who can take their existing lessons, curricula, and courses and structure them cooperatively.

When teachers have real expertise in using cooperative learning, they will structure five essential elements into instructional activities. Well-structured cooperative learning lessons are differentiated from poorly structured ones on the basis of these elements. These essential elements, furthermore, should be carefully structured within all levels of cooperative efforts. Each learning group is a cooperative effort, but so is the class as a whole, the school, the teaching team, and the school district. The five essential elements are as follows.

1. *Positive interdependence*: The heart of cooperative learning is positive interdependence. Students must believe that they sink or swim together. Within every cooperative lesson, positive goal interdependence must be established through mutual learning goals (learn the assigned material and make sure that all members of your group learn the assigned material). In order to strengthen positive interdependence, joint rewards (if all members of your group score 90 percent correct or better on the test, each will receive 5 bonus points), divided resources (giving each group member a part of the total information required to complete an assignment), and complementary roles (reader, checker, encourager, elaborator) may also be used.

2. *Face-to-face promotive interaction*: Once a teacher establishes positive interdependence, he or she must ensure that students interact to help each other accomplish the task and promote each other's success. Students are expected to discuss what they are learning, explain to each other how to solve the assigned problems or complete the assignments, and provide each other with help, assistance, support, and encouragement. Silent students are uninvolved students

who are not contributing to the learning of others as well as themselves. Promoting each other's success results in both higher achievement and in getting to know each other on a personal as well as a professional level.

3. *Individual accountability*: The purpose of cooperative learning groups is to make each member a stronger individual in his or her right. Students learn together so that they can subsequently perform higher as individuals. To ensure that each member is strengthened, students are held individually accountable to do their share of the work. The performance of each individual student is assessed and the results given back to the group and the individual. It is important that the group knows who needs more assistance, support, and encouragement in completing the assignment. It is also important that group members know that they cannot "hitchhike" on the work of others.

4. *Social skills*: Contributing to the success of a cooperative effort requires interpersonal and small group skills. Placing socially unskilled individuals in a group and telling them to cooperate does not guarantee that they will be able to do so effectively. Persons must be taught the social skills for high-quality collaboration and be motivated to use them. Leadership, decision-making, trust-building, communication, and conflict-management skills have to be taught just as purposefully and precisely as academic skills.

5. *Group processing*: Teachers need to ensure that members of each cooperative learning group discuss how well they are achieving their goals and maintaining effective working relationships. Groups need to describe what member actions are helpful and unhelpful and make decisions about what behaviors to continue or change. Such processing (a) enables learning groups to focus on group maintenance, (b) facilitates the learning of social skills, (c) ensures that members receive feedback on their participation, and (d) reminds students to practice collaborative skills consistently. Some of the keys to successful processing are allowing sufficient time for it to take place, making it specific rather than vague, maintaining student involvement in processing, reminding students to use their social skills while they process, and ensuring that clear expectations as to the purpose of processing have been communicated.

Conceptual understanding and skillful use of cooperative learning are two sides of the coin of expertise. Theory is the cutting edge of practice. It is the development of conceptual understanding of how to teach that allows true teaching genius to be expressed. It is because of the complexity and promise of conceptually understanding of cooperative learning that makes fidelity in implementing the elements of cooperative learning essential. Once the essential elements are clearly understood and mastered, teachers can fine-tune and adapt cooperative learning to their specific circumstances, needs, and students.