

Managing In-Class Group Activities¹

The following is a list of some instructor behaviors that contribute significantly to the success of in-class cooperative learning activities.

1. The instructor gave clear directions on what to do during the group activities.
2. The instructor gave clear instructions on how and where groups should form, and what problem they should work on.
3. The instructor set a definite pace for the group work, and gave the groups a definite time frame in which to work.
4. As the groups worked on their problem, the instructor visited each group, and gave suggestions on what approaches they may try.
5. When wrapping up the group exercise, the instructor had the students explain the answers.
6. When concluding a group activity, the instructor briefly listed the vital points that were touched on in that activity.

Specific suggestions for implementing a cooperative activity include

1. The mechanics of starting a group activity:

- Give very clear instructions on what activity you want the students to work on, and what you expect them to produce at the end of the activity. You can help get students focused by writing these instructions on the board, or putting them on an overhead. It is also useful to give them a brief account of the tasks that they will be undertaking in the exercise.
- Immediately ask that one person in each group read the problem out loud to their group.
- Occasionally ask all the groups to do the entire exercise at the blackboard.
- When beginning the group activity, make a quick initial tour of the class to visit each group. If you see off-task behavior, or groups who are not getting underway, reiterate to them exactly what you want them to be doing.

2. Dealing with off-task behavior:

- If you have persistent problems with groups working on their homework during class time, then break the class up into new groups before beginning an in-class group activity. You can break the class up by having them count off, grouping alphabetically, or grouping by birth date.
- Try to be aware of when students are actually working on the activity you have assigned, and when they are doing something else. The following are some ways to encourage groups who are not working on the assigned activity:
 - (a) Ask them which parts of the activity they have managed to work out, and have them explain one of their answers to you.
 - (b) Tell them that you will be calling on their group to supply an answer when you wrap up the group activity.
 - (c) Have their group move to the blackboard to continue their work. They will be more likely to make a serious attempt since their work will be visible to the entire class.
- Plan additional activities for groups who finish the work very quickly. These do not have to be explicitly introduced or wrapped up. In many cases the people who regularly finish early will be very good at recognizing the value of activities for themselves. When you notice people finishing early, simply announce another problem to go on with, and write the reference on the board.

¹Adapted from [38]

3. Time management:

- Communicate, in advance, how long you have decided to spend on a group activity. Simply announce the allotted time before beginning the exercise. Giving the class a definite schedule can motivate them to get on with the activity more quickly.
- If the group activity is a long one with multiple parts, break up the group work into sections. For example, when most groups have finished parts (a) and (b), stop the class and discuss only these parts. When finished, have the students go back to the rest of the problem. This can help slower groups keep up, and it can help maintain the desired pace in the group activities.
- Another idea is to appoint a facilitator in each group who, in addition to participating in the group work, has the additional responsibility of making sure that the group sticks to the schedule.

4. Facilitating the group process:

- Try to be pro-active when the students are assigned a group activity. You could establish ground rules governing what conduct is acceptable during in-class group activities. Take every opportunity to communicate these ground rules to the students, and make it clear that you think it is important for groups to function well in class.
- If you have students move to different parts of the classroom to work, make sure that they sit so that group interaction is possible. Four people facing each other may encourage interaction; four people sitting in a row may not.
- Once again, do not tolerate off-task behavior.
- Do not allow individuals in the class to monopolize your time with individual concerns or issues that are irrelevant to the task you have assigned. Defer questions on grading and assessment to less public forums, or require that students put their questions on grading and assessment in writing.
- Do not get too involved with any one group. Try to get to groups that need your assistance as quickly as you can. If you cannot get to them quickly, you can acknowledge that they are stuck, and promise that you'll be there as soon as you can.
- Look for students who are obviously not working on the assigned activity, and encourage them to cooperate. If you see one person sitting out, ask that person to explain the group's answers to you. Encourage people in groups to compare answers with and to explain their methods for doing the problem to the other people in their group.
- Do not be too directive in your assistance with the mathematics. Encourage the group process by facilitating dialogue among the members. Please note that we are not recommending that you never answer the students' questions. We are, instead, suggesting that you first determine if another student is able to answer.

