

# POD —IDEA Center Notes

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## IDEA Item #18: "Asked students to help each other understand ideas or concepts"

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### Background

Having students help other students learn is a powerful classroom technique. Collaborative learning uses this approach to achieve content-focused and process-oriented goals, both of which are important for college learning success. Research (1) shows that *cooperative learning improves students' achievement, persistence, and attitudes*. Collaboration with fellow learners *increases motivation and helps students take responsibility* for their own and their peers' learning (2, 3, 4). Included among the process-oriented goals achieved by collaboration is the development of marketable skills such as: problem-solving, project management, team-player competencies, communication, and social skills (5). Cooperation is one of the "7 Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education" (6) and well-structured group work and other collaborative activities that ask students to help each other learn pay big dividends in student success.

IDEA Item #18 highly correlates with other teaching methods addressed in the IDEA questionnaire. These include item #1 (displaying a personal interest in students), #2 (helping students answer their own questions), #5 (forming teams or groups to facilitate learning), #7 (explaining the reasons for criticism of student academic performance), #15 (inspiring students to set/achieve challenging goals), and #16 (asking students to share ideas/experiences with others of differing backgrounds). In addition, this method also correlates strongly as a learning strategy with learning objectives related to item #25 (working in a team), item #26 (developing creative capacities), and item #32 (interest in learning more by asking questions/ seeking answers).

### Helpful Hints

Because learning experiences built around student collaboration are not prevalent in lecture-based classrooms (the kinds of classes that predominate in many college experiences), you may not have many models for designing an environment that prompts students to help each other learn. It is also true that your students may not have done much successful collaborative learning. Address learners' inexperience with successful peer involvement in the learning process by *providing an explanation of why this approach works and how your students will benefit*. Students helping each other learn mimics humans' innate learning process, a process for which we are genetically and environmentally engineered. This is enough of an explanation, and a powerful one, to help your students understand *why* peer learning is suitable in the college classroom: their brains are built to learn via collaboration. One of the reasons learning is often difficult in college is precisely because it is not collaborative (see Smith [7] for fascinating reading and plenty of support to convince your students that peer learning works). You can also *share with students the idea that most employers will not lecture for fifty minutes and give a test a week later to determine whether employees have earned paychecks --- your students will do in your classroom what they will be doing on the job as they work in groups, make presentations, tutor each other, etc.* Their future on-the-job learning will mimic their learning in your classroom. This is a powerful convincer for the process. That peer learning skills help make life-long learning easier is an additional convincing argument given the need for future worker-earners to adapt to, and survive in, the workplace.

Next, *describe what the process looks like, what students will do, what outcomes they will produce* within what time frame, and how they will access support and resources during the process. This is the key to successful peer learning, and it requires careful planning on your part.

Some planning tips are: 1) peer learning can take many forms --- *use a variety of approaches* (group work, presentations to the class by teams or individuals, jigsaw technique [8], class discussions in which you solicit alternative explanations from students, etc.); 2) for group work projects, *provide a group charter* for groups to complete in which they specify who will do what, operational guidelines, contact information, deadlines, etc. --- this gives students confidence you know what you are doing and have the ability to help them succeed with peer learning, and it provides one measuring stick against which to assess performance in many areas; 3) *structure* the collaborative learning process so that there are *assessment points throughout* for you and for the students' self- and peer-assessment (this requires that you identify how you and they will know whether they are succeeding in helping each other learn; progress reports, for example, are one way to accomplish this); 4) *support your students* by facilitating and acting as a resource in both content and process, a different role from the implicit possessor/dispenser of knowledge role sometimes assumed by lecturers; and, 5) *celebrate students' inventiveness* as they discover teaching metaphors, techniques, and approaches you may never have considered in your own presentations.

### Assessment Issues

The rules of good formative assessment apply to peer learning (9). Particularly important among these are providing immediate feedback, *frequent feedback*, and feedback that enables students to clearly distinguish between good and bad choices and decisions (3). You can structure such feedback in group work by defining it and the required check point reports each group creates in the group charter. All peer learning demands *careful overview by the instructor* in the form of facilitation and oversight; this is why frequent input from learners is important --- it affords you the chance to ensure that no misinformation or misunderstanding exists. Also, it is extremely important in peer learning activities to provide learners *guidance in the form of solid rubrics* for their output. One successful method is to provide

examples of output meeting varying levels of achievement as defined by the rubrics. Journals and other *ongoing reports* (oral or written) will also keep groups on task and help you to follow their progress.

### References and Resources

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IDEA Paper No. 38: [Enhancing Learning-and More! - Through Cooperative Learning](#), Millis

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