



# Teaching Concerns

Newsletter of the Teaching Resource Center for Faculty and Teaching Assistants

Hotel D, 24 East Range (434) 982-2815 trc-uva@virginia.edu <http://www.virginia.edu/~trc/>

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## Cooperative / Collaborative Learning for Active Student Involvement

Common sense, as well as educational research and students' testimonials, tell us that students who get involved with what they study learn more than those who receive information only passively. One of the most successful methods of helping students learn actively is cooperative (or collaborative) learning. During the AIMS of Undergraduate Education Conference presented by the Commonwealth Center for Literary and Cultural Change last April, participating UVa undergraduates enthusiastically promoted cooperative learning. Increasingly, students are coming to recognize that the skills and perspectives engendered by cooperative learning groups are highly beneficial in many professional environments such as business, engineering, and industry.

Karl A. Smith, Associate Professor of Civil and Mineral Engineering at the U. of Minnesota, a vigorous proponent of cooperative learning at the college level, recently offered two workshops at UVa. Presented under the auspices of the Lilly Teaching Fellows Program and the University Assessment Program, these workshops introduced interested faculty and TAs to the benefits and the essential elements of cooperative learning.

Cooperative learning embodies much more than simply having students work in groups; the teacher structures the groups and the activities to include five essentials:

### ESSENTIALS OF COOPERATIVE LEARNING

#### Positive Interdependence

Students realize that what each of them does individually affects the work and success of the others. They "sink or swim together." The teacher structures the work so that students must share information. The instructor may also give group grades to further develop a cooperative ethic.

#### Face-to-Face Promotive Interaction

Students help, encourage, and support each other's efforts to learn because they depend on each other. The teacher also openly encourages students to help each other.

#### Individual Accountability

The teacher assesses each individual's performance; thus although students learn together, they often perform alone.

#### Social Skills

To work effectively together, students learn and use necessary social skills, e.g., leadership, decision-making, trust-building, communication, conflict-management.

#### Group Process

To improve the group process, students analyze how well they are achieving their goals and maintaining effective working relationships. For example, the teacher may say, "Tell the group member to your right what s/he did today to help the group work well."

(From David W. Johnson, Roger T. Johnson,

Karl A. Smith. *Active Learning: Cooperation in the College Classroom*. Edina, MN: Interaction Book Co., 1991, p. 1:19-20.)

When faculty and TAs first hear about cooperative learning, two queries are most frequently voiced: 1) What about students who don't pull their own weight or students who don't work well in groups? 2) What about the honor pledge, with which students normally confirm that they have worked alone? The issue of problematic students typically resolves itself as part of the group process. Sometimes student peer pressure, which can be extreme, makes students responsible to each other.

In any case, the teacher usually assigns new groups throughout the semester, moving the difficult student around; because the teacher is highly involved with the students, s/he knows where the problems are. The apparent problem with the honor pledge can also be resolved within the system: the teacher simply revises the pledge to match the desired effect. For instance, students who peer-edit each others' papers might write, "On this paper, I have neither given nor received aid outside my editing group."

Now experimenting with cooperative learning are UVa faculty and TAs in such departments as Anthropology, Chemistry, Commerce, Educational Leadership and Policy Studies, English, Environmental Sciences, French, German, and History. At the cooperative problem-solving session we held on October 30, about 15 teachers shared their successes and questions and agreed that their ideas and caveats form part of a Tips on Cooperative Learning column that we hope to continue in *Teaching Concerns*.

#### TIPS ON COOPERATIVE LEARNING

— It takes several semesters or even years before cooperative learning works as smoothly as you hope it will the first time you try it.

- Small groups (3-4 students) work best.
- The teacher *must* do a lot of advance planning.
- *A crash-and-burn-and-rise-from-the-flames-story*: If your cooperative learning plan involves having students discuss issues or texts outside of class, you may find that they have trouble starting and/or sustaining a viable discussion. To help them, create a direction sheet for discussions in which you include rules and hints about effective discussion. Depending on your discipline and the task, your direction sheet might note that students must meet for discussion, then at the end of the meeting signing that they agree with the majority opinion or signing their dissent. Either assign a discussion leader, or tell the students how to choose one. Appoint someone to develop an agenda for each meeting.
- Give each student in all groups specific roles; useful roles include "reader," "reporter," "checker," "encourager." Once students know their roles, you can assign tasks, such as discussion leading, to a particular role.
- Make sure that students know that all are to participate equally. Once that guideline is clear, students usually work out conflicts themselves. In extreme cases, you may have to intervene.
- One example of cooperative learning involves having students in each group study different aspects of a literary or historical text they have all read. In this case, you can prepare study guides for the individual groups, suggesting profitable directions for the students to take.

If you would like to share your successes and problems with cooperative learning--or if you would like to learn more about it--please join us for our next problem-solving session on Friday, December 4, 12:00-1:30 p.m., in the Colonnade Hotel Room E-1. You may bring your lunch or purchase it there. The TRC library also contains many articles and books about cooperative/collaborative learning. Please call or come by if you would like to see these.