

# Fifteen Common Mistakes In Using Cooperative Learning — And What To Do About Them

Cooperative educational methods are frequently advocated due, in large part, to the extensive research base supporting their effectiveness. However, they are just as frequently implemented without adequate planning. Here are some suggestions for improving learning within a cooperative framework:

## 1. Group size too large!

It takes a lot of skill for students to manage a group of 4 or more. Instead, keep group size small: 2 or 3 is best. Smaller groups are more effective and take less time.

## 2. Not preparing students to work in cooperative groups.

Explain to students why you are using cooperative learning, do a short cooperative learning activity, then have them explain how it can help them. Initially, do short get-acquainted and review activities.

## 3. Not teaching students appropriate interaction skills.

Ask students to contribute to a class list of appropriate group behaviors. Examples: stay on task, contribute ideas, help others learn, encourage everyone to participate, listen with care, show respect for others. Display the list and remind students to use them. Add to the list as needed.

## 4. Letting students choose their own groups.

We would all choose our friends to work with if given the choice. Friends often get off-task. Students need to develop positive working relationships with all class members. Randomly assign students to groups. Change groups often enough so no-one gets stuck for long periods with a difficult class member.

## 5. Not doing cooperative activities often enough for students to develop cooperative skills.

Have students do something cooperative at each class session to reinforce positive cooperative habits. If nothing else, have them share what they learned with a partner.

## 6. Not planning cooperative lessons with care.

Many teachers confuse group work with cooperative learning. They put students in groups, tell them to work together, and wonder why the groups aren't successful. But cooperative learning groups have five essential elements (positive interdependence, individual accountability, face-to-face promotive interaction, social skills and processing) built carefully into every lesson to teach the students to learn well together. Learn how to include them in each cooperative lesson.

## 7. Assuming that cooperative groups can handle complex tasks before learning how to complete simple ones successfully.

Students must be taught how to learn together. Start with short, simple activities and progress to longer and more significant ones as your students are successful. Have frequent class discussions on what helps the groups do well.

## 8. Emphasizing paper or project completion as a group goal.

With completion as the only goal, there's nothing to stop one student from doing the work and the others from "hitchhiking." Assignments should ensure individual accountability is possible (a test taken individually, a class presentation, a follow-up assignment that is completed alone).

**9. An unclear learning goal.**

A clear group learning goal is one whose achievement is easily measured. Example: You are finished when every member in your group can explain the work and/or pass a quiz.

**10. Assuming that students will magically develop needed social skills.**

You must teach them how to coordinate their work with others and keep everyone included in the learning. Do this by helping them see the need for skills, showing them exactly what to do, having them practice under your eagle eye, then giving them feedback and coaching until their cooperative skills are automatic.

**11. Not understanding the power of positive relationships on achievement.**

Start every group session with a get-acquainted or relationship-building question, such as "What is your partner's name, and what's their favorite flavor of ice-cream?" Build in initial success by giving review or easier assignments, then slowly increase the difficulty of the tasks as students gain confidence in their ability to work together.

**12. Not carefully monitoring the groups while they are working.**

This is TEACHING time. Be among the groups - correcting misconceptions, helping students understand, and reinforcing good teamwork skills. Monitor the groups carefully by observing interactions and encouraging appropriate learning and teamwork skills. Help the groups ensure mastery by every student. Keep individuals on their toes by asking them at random to explain their group's work.

**13. Giving group grades.**

Give group grades only when absolutely necessary, absolutely fair for each member, and when you have taught the students how to work together. Assess learning with individual quizzes or papers. Avoid having students grade each other - that can turn into a popularity contest. Have students assess their own learning by comparing what they can do with criteria.

**14. Using Jigsaw with material that is too difficult for individuals to learn.**

The jigsaw technique is one where each student learns part of the material and then teaches it to their group members. If individual students can't learn the material they need to teach, your students are not ready to do jigsaw with that lesson. Instead, use cooperative guided practice and check learning with individual quizzes or assignments.

**15. Assuming that implementing cooperative learning is easy.**

Cooperative learning is complex, procedural learning, like learning to play a new sport. Plan on several years of on-going training and practice in cooperative learning to achieve intuitive, wise use.

*Source: Instructional Innovation Network*