

## Ep. 028: Cooperation

Most teachers will tell you that group work, done well, is important to student success. But just how do you pull it off?

We're back after a brief break to kick off our summer season talking about cooperative learning. Claire and Jim explore the differences between cooperation and collaboration in the classroom. Claire shares her experience designing group-related learning activities, and she gives us her take on whether it's better to let students pick groups, pick groups for them, or leave it to random chance.

Podcast: <https://prodev.illinoisstate.edu/podcast/2017/ep028.shtml>

### Transcript

JIM: Hi there. I'm Jim.

CLAIRE: And I'm Claire.

JIM: Let's Talk Teaching.

JIM: Welcome to Let's Talk Teaching, a podcast from the Center for Teaching, Learning and Technology here at Illinois State University. I'm Jim Gee, and joining me once again today, our director at CTLT, Dr. Claire Lamonica. Hi, Claire.

CLAIRE: Hi, Jim.

JIM: Hey, welcome to summer.

CLAIRE: Yeah, beautiful outside.

JIM: It is beautiful outside. In fact, I haven't figured out how to record the podcast outside yet. But we will do that one of these days. We can have birds in the background, we can have birds' traffic, actually, they're tearing down one of the apartments next door. So yeah, that whole thing. Hey, today, we are talking about another of the Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education.

CLAIRE: We are principle number two, and that is good practice encourages cooperation amongst students.

JIM: So, I'm one of those instructors who the first thing I think of is well, I just assign up some group work. Done.

CLAIRE: Done. I'm done. Yeah, there you go. I'm guessing it doesn't work quite like that. No, not really. Well. I mean, I think that's where I think that's where all of us start. Yeah, you know, we all start with this sort of vague notion that having students work together would be a good idea. And so, we think of something that we want to happen

in our class was, yeah, I'll have them work on that in groups. And then and then we've got group work. And I think that's kind of the first step. Right? No, that's, I think that realization, that learning is a social Act, is, you know, that's what that's that's the foundation for this Gotcha. And so, once you're there, then you're really ready to take off and try some try some new and different things.

JIM: So, before we get into new and different things, I did want to ask you cooperation. What is the difference between cooperation? And collaboration?

CLAIRE: Yeah, that's a really great question. Because most of us, including sort of experts in the field, conflate those two terms. And I was noticing, actually, in the description, in the booklet about the seven principles, conflates the two terms, right, it talks about cooperation and collaboration as if they were the same thing. And, and they're not. Um, so I guess the easiest way to explain it is that technically, cooperative learning has to do with students working together to learn a body of, of a body of information, or sort of existing knowledge. Okay. And collaboration has to do with students working together to generate something new. So collaboration is a creative act. So, they're technically, they're, they're, they're creating something that hasn't existed before. They may be generating new knowledge, which may be not new for the whole world, but new to them, okay. Sometimes may be new for the whole world. Certainly, if they if you have students writing a paper together, you know, that text that they create has never existed before, could never exist under any other circumstances. So, they're there, they're actually involved in the process of creativity. That's kind of the basic distinction between the two. When we think about cooperative learning, technically, we're talking about a very specific kind of structured activity, okay, designed to help students learn a specific body of knowledge, and incorporating five kinds of key elements that were described originally by some guys named Johnson and Johnson and Smith. Interestingly enough, a long time ago, well, I don't know back in the 90s. So maybe not all that long ago. But those those essential elements are positive interdependence, which means that every person in the group is committed to the success of every other person in the group, they are dependent on each other for for that success, and they realize that, and they realize that the important part yeah, they know that they that's part of the deal. promotive interaction, which means that they, they're committed to the idea of actively supporting and helping each other, okay, so it's not a competitive situation at all. They are invested in Promoting each other's success, individual and group accountability. So, each individual student is held responsible for mastering the content, the knowledge, whatever it is that they're supposed to be learning. But the group is also held accountable for mastering the knowledge as a group and as a group of individuals. So, they're all invested in knowing it as a group, and each of them knowing it individually. And then it also has an element of learning how to work in a group. So, students are consciously working on the development of teamwork skills. So, helping students become better team members, is probably a learning outcome for your class. It's something that you are committed to doing. And you know, and there's, that's a good thing. Because that's, you know, being a good team member is one of those soft skills that employers say that they're looking for in college graduates. And we're all like, oh, how do we do that, but this puts that the development of that ability in the syllabus in the learning outcomes, and then we can say, okay, so part of your part of what we're learning in this course, is how to be

good members of a team. And then that involves the fifth element, which is a certain amount of group processing. So, the group is kind of metacognition about the group process.

JIM: Oh, I see. So, so being aware of how the group is working, as it's working.

CLAIRE: And, you know, learning how to be good team members by thinking about their team membership and the membership of others. And and how the group worked or didn't work based on you know, not just its, its ultimate outcome. Its its deliverable, if you would, but also on whether people really learned and yeah, and whether they learned to play a particular role in a group or whatever, right.

JIM: So, you know, group work is something that we'll be talking about frequently on our on our podcast, we have talked about it before, it's kind of my thing, well, it is kind of your thing, your you mean, you really do know your stuff about it. And it's something I think that a lot of instructors still struggle to get past that basic, it's a group of some you have to give you work on this paper together. Yeah, you know, and, and so you, you went through and listed off a lot of things, and we'll link to some resources that help enumerate that again. So, for our kind of our high altitude view of things today, when you're talking about this idea of, for example, group accountability is something that I've always struggled with when I done group assignments. And this is, again, working in courses that are very regimented in their structure, Genet courses where a group assignment is part of the you know, every instructor gives them a group speech to do, but even then, that whole accountability thing is a bit of a challenge. So how do you how do you get over that without making it a competitive?

CLAIRE: Well, you know, that's, that's part of helping the students learn how to make a group work. Because a group in a, in a, in a cooperative group, or even a collaborative group, students aren't in competition with each other, they are all invested in accomplishing the goals that have been set for the group. And so, they they are accountable as a group for the final product, whatever that is. And each student individually is accountable for contributing to that ultimate product, I see. Um, so and a no and sometimes they're all so I, I have worked with people who, who use very successful who use this idea of cooperative learning very successfully. And tests are taken as a group, you know, students are assigned to work in a group to help each other learn this body of knowledge, whatever we want to call that, and then they take a test together and they, you know, they sink or swim based on their and based on their ability to do that as a group, there always has to be some individual accountability to because we're teaching them to work in group right and so they're not so that you know, they need to understand that the group isn't going to function well without everybody contributing.

JIM: So, and the challenge I've always run into is when when I asked students to grade each other so part of the grade is the in that and that is something that it's either you have someone who's really just had a bad experience. Maybe I don't know exactly what motivates it and they are really harsh, or they've created this sort of Mutually Assured destructive pact. And if you give me good grades, I'll give you good grades. And we've

talked about that a little bit before. So, I, you know, so, and I think it probably has to do, like you said, with more about how the the assignment is structured.

CLAIRE: And how the assessment process is structured. Right. So, um, I was actually reading some sort of recent more recent research on this recently. Wow, wow, yeah. Sticky meta, yeah. And students, students are more satisfied with their group experience when they are given the chance to evaluate each other based on specific criteria that they're all familiar with. Okay. So, when I use, and I tend to use collaborative learning more than than cooperative learning, just because of the nature of my discipline, okay. So when I start a long term, high stakes group project, so my students are going to spend three weeks five weeks longer, however, writing the collaborative production of a text, okay, um, one of the first things we do before they ever start doing their research or doing their writing whatever, is I put them to work establishing the criteria, by which they will evaluate themselves and each other in terms of their group participation. So, they've established the they establish the criteria, and they are, and I hold them accountable for evaluating themselves and their peers using those criteria. So, it might be different criteria in each group, although they don't usually end up turning out to be very different. And they don't know that's what they're doing when they start, right. So, I usually start by saying, hey, spend two minutes writing about, you know, what it takes to be a really great group member, you know, if you were going to devise the perfect member to work within your group, what would that look like? And then I say, okay, now let's take another, you know, 60 to 90 seconds to write about the nightmare group member, you don't want this person in your group. And what they're really doing is your career, what they're really doing is identifying their criteria. So then, and they and then they work together with their group that they're going to work with on this long-term project. And they, they essentially, now may not be a really well-developed rubric, but it's basically, what do we have to do to get an A? What could cause us to get an F? What's good enough? What satisfactory? What's a C code? What does a C contributor look like? And then, you know, the, the B's the DS, they can kind of, you know, fill that out. But yeah, but then, you know, at various points in the project, probably midterm, and then at the end, at least, they use those criteria to evaluate their own work, and to evaluate the work of their peers, but they have to write a justification for me based on those criteria. Okay. So...

Jim

I think that's, I think that's our tip of the day as it No, I really, really because I'm thinking as I'm listening to you talk about this, I'm thinking I'll be teaching again, hopefully this fall, it is going to be more of a it's that performance class. So it's more of a collaborative sort of situation. And I did try one of the big high stakes assignments. We we did, I did have them we as a class came up with how are we going to evaluate this chair, but what I think I want to do is add that portion of okay. We as they reflect upon, okay, what what was the group experience, like? You know, because one of the lessons I tried to impart is to have them appreciate how much time it takes to actually do good performance, despite this podcast. Yeah, how much effort it takes and planning to do this. And...

CLAIRE: Let our secrets out?

JIM: Yeah, I should. Oh, sorry. Did I do that again? We spent weeks right. Anyway, so but the idea being yet no. So, this is this is something I can take away.

CLAIRE: Yeah. Well, good. I'm glad.

JIM: Excellent. So maybe a final question. I'm going to ask you to take off your teacher hat and it's kind of the same hat but take off your teacher hat put back on your and leave my headphones on leave your headphones. No and put on your professional development hat your you know, your your consultation hat. When when people come to you and have issues with any sort of cooperative or collaborative aspect that they're aspiring towards in their teaching. Any any group work problems or anything like that? What are the most common things you hear? And what some of the advice that you give them?

CLAIRE: Well, I think the most frequent thing I hear is that they're getting pushback from their students, their students say they, you know, they don't want to do a group project. They don't like group projects. They don't like being graded on a group project. And I think that's perfectly understandable by the time students get to us at the university level, they have participated in a lot of group projects. And some of those have been very badly designed. And they have resulted in bad experiences. And you know, we we're not dumb animals, we're pretty smart, we learn to avoid, you know, we, we avoid the repetition of bad experiences. So, when they come having had a bad experience, that's, you know, I sort of suggest getting that out of the way also early. So I have another activity that I do, where I say, where I have them, have their students brainstorm a list of bad stuff that happens when you work in a group, you know, so and they talk about, oh, you know, I had this guy who'd never did anything, and he got the same grade, we did you know, or sometimes they'll, they'll say, Well, we have this, this girl in our group, and she wouldn't let anybody do anything, because it was all about her and her grades. So, she just like took over and tried to do the whole thing. They'll come up with a list, those are probably the two most common things, but though they'll come up with a long list, and then and then I put them to work, identifying strategies for dealing with those situations. If this happens in this project, right? What will you do as a group? Now what I did this with ninth graders, they'd say, oh, well go to the teacher. Yeah, thanks a lot that No. And, you know, so the rule was that they had to have three strategies that they could try, before they came to the teacher. And then if none of those strategies work, then they could come to me, and I could intervene or whatever. But so I think just there's something cathartic even about getting those out on the table. And then the idea that you're actually trying to help them identify strategies for overcoming those issues, I think they go into it feeling a lot better.

JIM: So, this will be the final question. And it's a procedural one; what would you recommend, allow students to choose their own groups, assign groups based on some insight that we have as as the instructor as the teacher? Or random.org? You know, and I've done all three, yeah. What do you find works best?

CLAIRE: Well, you know, and the research on that is really mixed. So there, there are some, there's been some research done that said, oh, you should definitely assign groups and

there's other resources as Oh, no, you know, you should definitely let students choose their own groups, I think the key is the kind of group and the purpose of the group. So, I. So, I've done different things at different times. So when, when it's just a zero history, quick, you know, we're gonna do this in class, or if it's gonna work in a group, sometimes I let them you know, and low stakes, zero history, low stakes, I'll say, hey, you know, pick a group, what usually happens is they just turn to the three people closest to them zero and then their group. Sometimes when I'm doing something like that, if my goal is to get them to know each other, big in preparation for a longer to stakes group, then I will put the groups together, trying to make sure that different P everybody works with everybody else, before they go into the situation where they're going to pick people. For a for a long term, high stakes project, I use what I call them a modified socio metric approach. So I have each student, give me the names of if it's going to be a five person group, I say, give me the names of four people in the class you'd like to work with, I am not guaranteeing that your group is going to be you in those four people. But I will guarantee that you and at least one of those people will be in your same group. And so then, I take all of those lists away, and I spread them out all over the dining room table. And I you know, make piles and tear things up and draw lines and things. Oh, wow. And, you know, and then and I come up with a set of groups where everybody is in a group with at least one other person that they identified. Wow. And so, it's very interesting, it seems to work pretty well. Okay. I also what I find when I do that is that they tend to end up in fairly homogenous groups, in terms of grades. So, I'll end up with A's and B's kind of working together and B's and C's kind of working together. And and I think that's a good thing because if I got ski, so, you know, I then there if I put the a's and the F's together, the a's and the DS together, they're going to hate each other and it's going to be a miserable experience for everybody. Because they just don't, they they can't relate but you know, but if I have the a's and the b's working together, you know, the bees will see the A's as somebody they could be in other words, they're close. They're kind of close. It's within their zone of proximal development. Right. So. Okay.

JIM: Wow, that was a great answer to what I thought was just a simple question.

CLAIRE: I bet you thought that was gonna be really short.

JIM: No, no, not at all. I think it's worth taking the time to experience that sort of stuff. I mean, this reinforces to me how little I know about the the thinking behind group work. I think I stumble on success occasionally. But I think, but I think it's stumbling. Also, while you were talking about your dining room table and all that I was having. I was having unpleasant memories. And when I used to have to schedule a department of 35 people, the weekly work schedule, so, hats off to you for doing that.

CLAIRE: Well, I don't do it with a group of with a class of 125 students. And I gotta tell you that.

JIM: And it was- so, and do you, by the way, do you find- in all seriousness, when you do that socio metric, sort of look at it? Do you get? Are they able to name four other people in the class?

CLAIRE: Oh, well, yes. Because I don't ever do a high stakes long term project. That's always within the, within the context of a class that's been designed to build towards that. Okay, so we've done a lot of zero history, row stakes group work. And as I said, I'm trying to get them to know as many other people as I can also, you know, it's all part part of building a learning community. Now I now I have to say, Okay, so here's the caveat. Yeah. I don't typically teach classes that are larger than 30, maybe 40 People at largest, when I teach a writing class, it's going to have 23, when I teach a methods class, it's going to have maybe 25, maybe, you know, so I have not tried this with large lecture groups. Sure. So with large lecture classes.

JIM: Right, so well, and I'm sure we'll explore that topic in a little bit more detail to down the road. In fact, I've been talking to some of our colleagues on campus who, because you and I both-

JIM: You've both talked about me.

JIM: Well, you know, you and I, you and I both have talked before on this on this podcast that we are of that size classes are usually the classes that we teach. I mean, I had 14 this last semester. Yeah, it was a different experience. Yeah, it was great. Don't get me wrong. And not just because it was it's not a matter of workload, it's that we were able to do some things a little bit more, a little differently. But anyway, my hope is that this summer, we'll get some of our colleagues on the Teach larger classes, and they can share their experience.

CLAIRE: Because we've got some people who do great work and those large classrooms.

JIM: Well, Claire, thank you so much.

CLAIRE: Thank you.

JIM: And that's all the time we have for this week's episode of Let's Talk Teaching. You can find out more about our show by going to our website [CTLT.IllinoisState.edu](http://CTLT.IllinoisState.edu) and click on the podcast link in the corner of the page. For Claire Lamonica and all of my colleagues here at the Center for Teaching, Learning and Technology, until we talk again, Happy Teaching!