

The Newsletter of The Cooperative Learning Institute
Volume 15 • Issue 1 February, 2000

The Cooperative Link Cooperative Learning
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Take Time For Group Processing

An essential component of cooperative learning is group processing. Effective group work is influenced by whether or not groups periodically reflect on how well they are functioning and plan how to improve their work processes. Group processing exists when members reflect on members' interaction to clarify and improve efforts to achieve the group's goals and maintain effective working relationships by (a) describing what member actions were helpful and unhelpful and (b) making decisions about what actions to continue or change. Groups need specific time to describe what member actions are helpful and unhelpful and make decisions about what behaviors to continue or change. The purposes of group processing are to:

1. Improve continuously the quality of the group's taskwork and teamwork.
2. Increase individual accountability by focusing attention on each member's responsible and skillful actions to learn and to help groupmates learn.
3. Streamline the learning process to make it simpler (reducing complexity).
4. Eliminate unskilled and inappropriate actions (error-proofing the process).

There are four parts to group processing.

1. Feedback: Ensure each student, group, and class receives (and gives) feedback on the effectiveness of taskwork and teamwork.
2. Reflection: Ensure students analyze and reflect on the feedback they receive.
3. Improvement Goals: Help individuals and groups set goals for improving the quality of their work.
4. Celebration: Encourage the celebration of members' hard work and the group's success.

Step One: Giving And Receiving Feedback

To begin group processing, you ensure that learning groups and individual students receive feedback. Feedback is information on actual performance that individuals compare with criteria for ideal performance. Feedback is based on the information the teacher and students collect while monitoring the learning groups. When feedback is given skillfully, it generates energy, directs the energy toward constructive action, and transforms the energy into action towards improving the performance of the teamwork skills.

Giving Personal Feedback In A Helpful, Non Threatening Way

1. Focus feedback on behavior (not on personality traits).
2. Be descriptive (not judgmental).
3. Be specific and concrete (not general or abstract).
4. Make feedback immediate (not delayed).
5. Focus on positive actions (not negative ones).
6. Present feedback in a visual (such as a graph or chart) as well as auditory fashion (not just spoken words alone).

Step Two: Reflecting On And Analyzing Feedback

You take the second step in structuring group processing when you have students reflect on and analyze the group session they have just completed to discover what helped and what hindered the quality of learning and whether specific behaviors had a positive or negative effect. Varying the procedures for analyzing and reflecting on the data collected about members' interactions keep group processing vital and interesting. Ways of doing so include having each group:

1. Plot in a chart the data on members' interaction.
2. Do a mind-map representing the secrets to his or her success.
3. Rate themselves on a series of dimensions on a bar chart.
4. Give each member 60 seconds to identify three things other members did to help groupmates learn.
5. Discuss the effective use of teamwork skills by members ("How did other group members encourage participation?" "How did other group members check for understanding?"). Each group member gives his or her response and then consensus is achieved through discussion.

Processing Quickies

1. Three things the group did well in working together...
2. Our group is really good at...
3. Words describing our group are...
4. Actions that helped the group were...
5. Next time we will be better at...
6. One thing the group can improve is...

Step Three: Setting Goals For Improved Functioning

You take the third step in structuring group processing when you encourage students to set improvement goals. After analyzing the observational and self-assessment data, reflecting on its meaning, and giving each other feedback, group members set improvement goals specifying how they will act more skillfully in the next group session. Students should publicly announce the behavior they plan to increase. They should write the goal down and review it at the beginning of the next group session. Goal setting is the link between how students did today and how well they will do tomorrow. Goal setting can have a powerful impact on students' behavior as there is a sense of ownership of and commitment to actions that a student has decided to engage in (as opposed to assigned behaviors). Some procedures for goal setting are:

1. Have students set specific behavioral goals for the next group session. Have each student pick a specific social skill to use more effectively (an "I" focus) and/or have the group reach consensus about which collaborative skill all group members will practice in the next session (a "we" focus). The group can be required to hand in a written statement specifying which social skill each member is going to emphasize during the next work session.
2. In a whole-class processing session, ask each group to agree on one conclusion to the statement, "Our group could do better on social skills by...", and tell their answer to the entire class. You write the answers on the board under the title "goals." At the beginning of the next cooperative learning lesson, you publicly read over the goal statements and remind students what they agreed to work on during this session.
3. Have each student write an answer to one of the following questions before the next cooperative learning session:
 - a. "Something I plan to do differently next time to help my group is..."
 - b. "The social skill I want to use next time is..."
 - c. "I can help my group next time by..."
 - d. "Two things I will do to help my group next time are..."
 - e. "One social skill I will practice more consistently next time is..."
4. As an optional activity, have students plan where, outside of class, they can apply the social skills they are learning in class. Ask them to make connections between the cooperative learning groups and the rest of their lives. Have them specify times in the hallway, playground, home, church, or community where they can use the same social skills they are learning in class. Both "I" and "we" focuses are useful.

Step Four: Celebrating

You take the fourth step in structuring group processing when you have group members celebrate their success and members' efforts to learn. Group processing ends with students celebrating their hard work and the success of their cooperative learning group.

Celebrations are key to encouraging students to persist in their efforts to learn (Johnson & Johnson, 1993). Long-term, hard, persistent efforts to learn come more from the heart than from the head. Being recognized for efforts to learn and to contribute to groupmates' learning reaches the heart more effectively than do grades or tangible rewards. Both small-group and whole-class celebrations should take place. Small group processing provides the means to celebrate the success of the group and reinforce the positive behaviors of group members. Individual efforts that contribute to the group's success are recognized and encouraged. Members' actions aimed at helping groupmates learn are perceived, respected, and recognized. It is feeling successful, appreciated, and respected that builds commitment to learning, enthusiasm about working in cooperative groups, and a sense of self-efficacy about subject-matter mastery and working cooperatively with classmates.

Obstacles To Group Processing

1. Not leaving enough time for group processing.
2. Letting students stay vague in their processing.
3. Letting students stay uninvolved in processing.
4. Students lack the needed social skills.
5. Processing is superficial and incomplete.