

# Peer Learning

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With such high competition for acceptance rates into colleges and few jobs available, being an independent learner is a necessity. One of the ways that teachers can help encourage students to become independent learners is to incorporate peer learning into the classroom. This allows students the opportunity to solve problems with their peers instead of relying on their teachers for answers. Peer learning has been proven to improve grades, and boost the confidence and attitudes of the students by allowing them to work together, as a team, to actively solve problems.

One of the main issues associated with peer learning, is ensuring that students are working together, and not letting the people who understand the material, do all the work. Incorporating peer learning effectively is a very difficult task; it must be strategically planned to optimize student learning for everyone in the group, and differentiate between what is being taught and what is being learned (Cooper, 2002). Group work must be designed to encourage student learning, and in depth thinking, instead of using it as a time to relax and just communicate. In the article "*Productive Helping in Cooperative Groups*," Webb states that there are four areas where teachers can help encourage the productivity and learning of everyone in the group.

The first area is to establish positive norms for group work. Webb suggests that teachers create positive group atmospheres that students feel comfortable contributing to by providing elaborated help instead of just answers, and focusing on understanding concepts instead of memorizing procedures (Webb, 2002). At the University of North Carolina in Charlotte, the Chemistry department recruited peer learning coaches to provide the proper atmosphere for small groups in their chemistry classes. The learning coaches did not act as tutors, but rather as guides to their classmates. They encouraged students to actively think and solve their way

through the problem instead of doing exactly what was told to them by the professor. They also helped guide the group by making sure that each of the students were participating in discussion, challenging peer opinions without causing confrontation, and keeping students on track. Having these learning coaches actually increased the student's confidence which resulted in higher grades in class, and on exams (Popejoy & Asala, 2013).

Second, was to structure the tasks in ways that supported learning and understanding. In order to do this, Webb suggested that teachers provide fewer problems and allow more time to complete the given assignment. This would prevent groups from feeling rushed during the assignment, allowing students to actively work through the problems instead of cheating off of their fellow classmates. Teachers also should avoid giving rewards, based on group performance, because it only encourages students who don't understand the material to copy off of others who do (Webb, 2002). In the University of Geneva's research "*Competitive conflict regulation and informational dependence in peer learning*," they found that having student work that was identical to one another caused more confrontation than it did successful learning. By having work that was identical to one another, students often had opposing viewpoints, payed less attention, and took fewer notes. However, when working together on work that was different, yet contained a lot of the same ideas and principles, they critically analyzed and worked together (Buchs, Pulfrey, Gabarrot, and Butera, 2010).

The third area is to model desired behaviors by helping the students understand their misconceptions about the problem; teachers should try to discover the root of their misconception, and then provide explanations to address it (Webb, 2002). The activities should challenge pre-existing notions about a certain topic, and allow students to work through the

problem together to provide a deeper understanding about why their ideas were right or wrong (Cooper, 2002). After the students have tried to solve their misconceptions, on their own, and are still unable to solve it, the teacher should then step in to provide an explanation.

Finally, the fourth area is to monitor group work by making sure that the students are not excluding anyone and are working together actively. They should also listen to the explanations the groups are giving, and help redirect them, if they are getting off track (Webb, 2002). Teachers should ensure that conflict is not occurring in the group work; answer any questions students have, and watch for excessive talking.

Peer learning is an effective tool that can help ensure the success of all students in the classroom, boost their confidence, and encourage students to become independent learners. Activities involving group work must be carefully designed, to enhance learning, and must not be used as an opportunity to relax. Teachers must play an active role to help maintain the students learning by creating a positive work environment, structuring activities to enhance learning, model desired behaviors, and monitoring group work.

## References

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