



Strategies for Helping Students Develop Team Skills

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Team skills development is one of the concepts that distinguish cooperative learning from traditional group work. There are a number of approaches for helping students develop these skills.

Directly Teaching Cooperative Skills

Solomon, Davidson, & Solomon (1993) recommend selecting a skill, such as active listening, and leading students through a “Seven Step Process” to help students master it. The seven steps are:

1. State the rationale for teaching the relationship skill.
2. Describe or define the relationship skill.
3. Model or demonstrate the relationship skill.
4. Invite learners to identify the indicators of the relationship skill.
5. Guided practice with constructive feedback.
6. Reflection on practice and application of the relationship skill.
7. Independent practice.

David and Roger Johnson use a T-Chart to have students brainstorm the non-verbal and verbal components of a particular social skill (see below). For example, students are asked, “What does active listening look like? What does it sound like?” Their answers are recorded and posted in the classroom as a reminder to use the targeted skill when working together on team tasks. For example,

Team Skill: Active Listening

Looks Like	Sounds Like
leaning in nodding eyes on the person speaking, etc.	one voice at a time “Could you say more about that?” paraphrasing, etc.

Assigning Roles With Gambits

Let’s say I’m teaching a biology lab and my students are working in teams. Lately I’ve noticed that they’re not finishing on time, that in several groups one person is dominating, and that some of the teams have turned in very superficial reports. A good leader would keep the team on task, check the quality of the report, and make sure everyone participates. Rather than having one person try to oversee all of these functions, I will distribute them among the team members. I’ll use a **Taskmaster** and a **Recorder** to enhance task performance and a

Gatekeeper and **Encourager** to help the group function smoothly. I'll also give them some gambits (helpful verbal and nonverbal cues) to go along with their role. My role assignments might look like this:

Team Member#	Role & Gambits
1	Gatekeeper <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Thanks for your input. Can we get another opinion now?• We haven't heard from you yet.
2	Recorder <ul style="list-style-type: none">• I think we need more detail here.• Let me read this back to you to make sure it's accurate.
3	Taskmaster <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Let's get back to the main point and come to a decision.• I think we need to pick up the pace - only five minutes left.
4	Encourager <ul style="list-style-type: none">• That's a great answer.• Let's think hard. I'm sure we can figure this out.

For a different kind of assignment, I might use different roles (e. g., materials monitor, devil's advocate, coach, etc.). It's important to talk to your students about why you assign roles and to rotate the roles on a regular basis. This gives all students a chance to practice their leadership skills and adds structure to your cooperative assignment.

Using Cooperative Learning Structures

Spencer Kagan recommends the use cooperative learning *structures*¹ themselves to foster certain social skills. For example, if you find that one person is contributing all the answers when a team is asked to brainstorm a list you might use the structure *Roundrobin*. In *Roundrobin*, students in a team each contribute one answer at a time, in a consecutive fashion, until all ideas are exhausted or until time is up. It provides a means of structuring for turn-taking and equal participation.

If you find that students have a tendency to only listen to one or two team members' ideas when solving a problem you might use the structure *Formulate-Share-Listen-Create* by Johnson, Johnson, and Smith. In this structure students must each formulate an answer individually, listen to all answers and then create a new answer that incorporates the best of all the ideas. Obviously, it also promotes active listening.

If you find that students are not prepared well and their team discussions about out of class readings are superficial, you might assign each team member different readings and have

¹A structure is "a content-free way of organizing the interaction of individuals in the classroom." Examples of structures include: *Think-Pair Share*, *Pairs Check*, or *Formulate Share Listen Create*.

them teach each other, as in a *Jigsaw* (developed by Eliot Aronson). Having to teach material to their teammates means that students will study the material in greater depth and be better prepared to discuss or solve problems based upon the readings.

Using Monitoring and Reinforcement

It's always important to monitor your cooperative learning teams to ensure that they are on task and working together productively. As a part of the monitoring process, you might point out teams that are successfully using a particular cooperative skill. This helps to reinforce the skill for the whole class as well as that particular team. You may also take notes on team interactions and present them to the team in confidence.

Reflection or Group Processing

Having students reflect on how well they're practicing particular social skills also helps to reinforce the skills. There are a number of ways to guide this reflection, including

- Asking students questions at the end of a class period, like, "Can you come up with two examples of active listening behaviors that you saw in your team today?"
- Monitoring students with an observation form, presenting them with the data and having them discuss its implications.
- Asking teams to fill out an evaluation form - as individuals and then as a team regarding their use of skills.
- Asking students to come up with a plan for how they can improve on particular skills.

Getting Started

Most faculty rely more heavily on one or two of these strategies. To get started, I would recommend selecting a skill that would enhance team performance on a particular academic task. Then, decide which strategy you will feel most comfortable using to develop the skill. Explain to your students what you're doing and how you're going about it. When the activity is over, assess how it went. Don't be afraid to ask students for suggestions in how to improve the process - I've found that when they see I'm making an effort to make class better for them, students can offer a wealth of constructive criticism.

References

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