

Teaching Tips

A Forum for discussion and tips for advancing teaching and learning at Mona

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Special points of interest:

- The Teaching Tips Newsletter is a publication of the Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL) at the UWI, Mona.
- The Newsletter is published once per month and provides tips for improving teaching and learning in higher education. It is available online (<http://myspot.mona.uwi.edu/CETL/>) as well as in the office of the CETL.
- If you have an area that you would like us to explore in this newsletter, do not hesitate to contact us at the CETL.

Some Tips for Using Collaborative Learning

What is collaborative learning (CL)?

Collaborative Learning (CL) is a group teaching and learning arrangement utilised to enhance the learning of students. Learning opportunities are created for working together through discussion and other high impact activities. Accordingly, learners work in teams or groups of two or more persons to solve problems, to complete a learning activity or just to support each other in learning a new concept. They actively support each other as together they engage one another in processing and synthesizing information and concepts. For instance, students actively apply the learned knowledge to solve problems via presenting and exchanging ideas. It is also a strategy allowing for open-ended interaction. There are generally learning goals of discovery, understanding, and the production of knowledge. In many instances, especially in sites of higher education, groups are self-managed. Further, CL helps learners to develop higher order thinking skills. It is a learner-centred teaching and learning approach and when properly applied will advance learning leading to meaningful outcomes. It challenges students socially, emotionally, and intellectually depending on the content that is set. In this teaching and learning arrangement, teachers serve as guides, facilitators of learning, or coaches guiding students throughout their learning process.



Here are some tips you will need in utilising the CL arrangement in your face-to-face class or online:

1. Create Mid-sized Groups

Divide the class into manageable groups. Assign four or five students per group. This is best since with this number the group is considered mid-sized. With this there should be some diversity to enable very good group discussions. In a face-to-face classroom, assigning groups is easily done by the teacher or allowing the students to form their own groups. There are various recommendations as to how groups might be formed. For some best practice see <https://tomprof.stanford.edu/posting/1532>.

In a learning management system (LMS), for instance, Our Virtual Learning Environment (OurVLE) at the University of the West Indies, Mona Campus, forming and utilising groups is easily accommodated with the use of the group tool available in the LMS. In the popular web conferencing tools, Zoom and Blackboard Collaborate Ultra, break out groups are easily created to accommodate CL in an online class.

2. Clear Group Goals

From the outset of the group exercise, establish clear group goals. This is extremely important in the quest for effectiveness in learning and the development of the various skills and competencies being targeted. Clear group goals will set the parameters in which learning will occur. For CL arrangement to work well, each student needs to have a commitment to individual accountability. This will certainly make a major impact on group members as they recognise that the purpose of the group is unambiguous. This is communicated in meaningful ways in the

preparatory activities for using CL. As the facilitator of learning, you must prepare students properly for CL.

Sustaining the Group

3. Group Norms

Sustaining the group requires great group norms and good interaction. The research is indicating that CL is enhanced with the use of meaningful interactions. Therefore, in formulating the group create opportunities for student interaction and negotiation. This is easily facilitated in the face-to face classroom by in-class and out-of-class activities. In the online classroom, the break out group features are available using the web conferencing tools or using the group feature in the LMS.

Please note that at times students will come to a group learning opportunity with various operational/behavioural norms. Norms already established and embraced might go unquestioned and just get passed down. However, if these norms are problematic, for instance, resulting in bad behaviour or communicating hurtful biases, action is needed to change them, either by changing group members or by using alternative perspectives to develop a new norm. It is useful to remember that norms should be flexible and change with situations so that rigidity and inflexibility do not contribute to the disintegration of the group.



4. Trust and Open Communication

Trust and open communication are important to sustain the learning group. Therefore, efforts at team building must be ongoing. Emotional issues and problems with interpersonal relationships are addressed and are not left to fester and cause major problems. Help students to develop team building skills.

5. Assign Roles

Assigning roles is also important in sustaining the group. There is much virtue in assigning a role to each member of the group. Experts at CL suggest that for best results, assign each person a specific role such as leader, recorder, reporter, and fact checker, etc. This is done in order to ensure that everyone has something to do and ultimately this leads to better interactivity and a greater investment of time in the group learning activity/project. Groups will also consider other tasks and assign appropriate roles such as someone who is responsible for initiating discussions, another for clarifying points, also a summarizer of content. In some groups there is need to challenge assumptions, research and report on significant issues and within the structure of the group there is sometimes need for a consensus builder.

Group strategies within CL

6. Using the Jigsaw

Several group teaching and learning strategies might be introduced within a CL arrangement. The jigsaw is one recommended since the workplace is oftentimes understood to operate somewhat like a jigsaw. For the use of this strategy, the assignment will have to be subdivided into sub tasks. So, for instance, in one group of five students (the original learning group), each student will have a sub-task. Each student will research the assigned area (sub-task) and develop expertise in this area to be able to teach others. Then, students with the same sub-task from the different original groups meet to discuss the topic that they have received and have researched. This creates opportunities for learners to be supported in their learning enterprise and strengthened as they seek to deepen their understanding of this sub-task. Afterwards, they return to their original learning group to share the content which was learned. This type of collaboration allow students to become experts in their assigned topic.

Reference

Clifford, M. (n.d.). What are the best collaborative learning tips and strategies for teachers?
TeachThought University. <https://www.teachthought.com/pedagogy/collaborative-learning-tips/>

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