STRATEGIES FOR

PROMOTING AND MANAGING

EFFECTIVE GROUP W ORK

1.   Introduction

> *"Cooperative learning is the use of small groups through which students work together to accomplish shared goals and to maximise their own and others' potential."*
>
> Johnson, Johnson and Holubec (ASCD 1994)

Research has shown that an important factor in improving pupils' learning, motivation and behaviour at school is the opportunity for them to work successfully in groups. Given that we retain 90% of what we say and do, it would therefore seem only fitting that the promotion of collaborative learning opportunities be incorporated as a key feature of the Revised Northern Ireland Curriculum.

However, while pupils may often sit in groups in our classrooms, research also indicates that they do not always work well collaboratively. To quote Ken Richardson, Senior Research Fellow at the Open University:

> *"The virtual absence of group work is one of the most startling findings of a range of research into both primary and secondary schools. Children may work in groups but they very seldom work as groups."*
>
> The Meaning of Intelligence, 1999

Successful group work is not an easy classroom management option. Indeed, it demands a lot of skill on the part of teachers, many of whom may often feel reluctant to implement it either because of lack of confidence, experience and insufficient training, or because they do not wish to undermine their discipline or lose control, particularly of challenging classes or difficult pupils within a class. Nevertheless, given the current drive to raise achievement and promote more autonomous and active learning, it is important that teachers be prepared to *let go* and develop the confidence to try out more collaborative group work strategies

Using co-operative teaching and learning structures (Kagan, 1992) in the classroom can have many benefits for both teachers and pupils. Teachers can:
- organise classes into small groups with a common goal;

- ensure that pupils within a group work collaboratively until they understand and have completed the task;
- ensure that pupils engage in peer teaching, learning and assessment;
- celebrate collaborative efforts with pupils.

Group work can also encourage and help pupils to:
- use and manipulate knowledge in practical situations;
- develop language and social skills needed for cooperation;
- use exploratory language to try out ideas;
- stretch their language as they talk critically and constructively;
- support and build on each other's contributions;
- take turns in discussion;
- develop other important life skills including:
  - ➢ organisation;
  - ➢ negotiation;
  - ➢ delegation;
  - ➢ team work;
  - ➢ co-operation;
  - ➢ leadership
- Develop and increase their thinking skills by explaining and negotiating their contributions to a group. In other words, they are able to use this "low risk" situation to begin to establish what they know and to find out what they have yet to learn;
- Acknowledge and utilise the strengths and talents of individual pupils;
- Explore a topic in a limited time frame;
- Develop a sense of responsibility through group accountability and assessment.

2.   Setting Up Groups/Teams

"What the child learns to do in cooperation with others, he will learn to do alone."

Lev Vygotsky, Mind and Society, 1978

When setting up collaborative learning activities, it is important for the teacher to use his/her professional judgement to decide whether it is best to assign roles or to let the pupils decide for themselves within their groups. The educational maturity of the

pupils, their familiarity with group work and the available time for the collaborative activity can also be key determining factors. However, letting pupils decide for themselves can sometimes incur the risk of them repeatedly playing safe and choosing the role they feel most comfortable with, as opposed to stepping outside their comfort zone and choosing another position which, while daunting, might equally encourage them to develop other skills. To help overcome such situations, the teacher might opt for *role rotation* to ensure that all pupils experience several roles. Other factors to bear in mind when assigning groups might be to mix high and low contributors (as evidenced from previous group activities), gender, age and cultural background. It is important that every pupil understands his/her role within the group. The following role play cue cards (Page 4), also available to download in colour and in poster format from the Resources Page of the BELB's Induction/EPD micro site at www.belb.org.uk/teachers/i_resources.asp?ddid=123 may help pupils understand what they have to do.

Sample Group Role Poster

Working with Others
Effective Group Work

A Good Group Leader
- Clarifies roles
- Communicates clearly
- Delegates fairly
- Ensures everyone understands the task
- Encourages everyone to contribute
- Keeps the group on task
- Considers others views
- Summarises the outcome for the group

The Reporter

It is your job to report on the groups ideas.
You will need to:
- Record information clearly and accurately
- Summarise the main ideas
- Structures feedback clearly
- Report back to class/teacher
You could say:
"In our group the key points were..."
"Our conclusion was that ..."

Sample Group Role Prompt Card

"In classrooms where a sense of community is built, students are the crew not the passengers."

Chris Watkins

PROMPT CARDS FOR COLLABORATIVE GROUP ROLES

GROUP LEADER

The group leader makes sure everyone knows what to do to complete the task.

The Group Leader needs to:
- *Keep the group on task*
- *Ensure that everyone has a chance to participate*
- *Encourage everyone to listen and consider others views*
- *Summarise the outcome for the group*

Useful Group Leader cues:
"What do you think about ….?"
"That's interesting, but we need to get back to our original point."
"What's your opinion/feeling Kate" (etc)

NOTE TAKER

It is the note taker's job to make notes for the group.

The Note Taker will need to:
- *Listen carefully*
- *Write clearly*
- *Summarise main points*
- *Check the accuracy of notes with the group*

Useful Note Taker Cues:
"Could you repeat that point?"
"Is that important?"
"What is the best way to record that?"

OBSERVER

It is the observer's job to look at how the groups carry out their tasks:

The Observer will need to:
- Watch closely what the groups do
- Be impartial/give no personal comments
- Comment constructively on how the group has worked

Useful Observer Cues:
"Group 'a' worked well together because they …."
"Group 'b' spent too much time on …"

RESEARCH RUNNER

It is the Research Runner's job to get resources and information for the group.

The Research Runner will need to:
- Collect and collate information and resources
- Seek clarification from the teacher to help the group understand and complete the task

Useful Research Runner Cues:
"What resources do we need?"
"Shall I ask the teacher to clarify this for us."

TIMEKEEPER

It is the timekeeper's job to keep the group on task:

The Timekeeper will need to:
- Give regular time checks
- Encourage the group to keep to time
- Indicate when a task is about to end (2 minute warning)

Useful Timekeeper Cues:
"We need to finish this task and move on to the next."
"We have 2 minutes to get our main points together."

PRESENTER

It is the presenter's job to report on the groups ideas.

The Prsenter will need to:
- Record information clearly and accurately
- Summarise the main ideas
- Structure feedback clearly
- Report back to class/teacher

Useful Presenter cues:
"Does this sound OK?"
"In our group the key points were..."
"Our conclusion was that …"

3. Categories of Group Work Roles

Researchers Benne and Sheats (1948) identified three different group work role types, including those in the cue cards above, which are exemplified below.

- **Task oriented Roles**

  > **Initiator-contributor**: Generates new ideas.
  > **Information-seeker**: Asks for information about the task.
  > **Opinion-seeker**: Asks for the input from the group about its values.
  > **Information-giver**: Offers facts or generalization to the group.
  > **Opinion-giver**: States his or her beliefs about a group issue.
  > **Elaborator**: Explains ideas within the group, offers examples to clarify ideas.
  > **Coordinator**: Shows the relationships between ideas.
  > **Orienter**: Shifts the direction of the group's discussion.
  > **Evaluator-critic**: Measures group's actions against some objective standard.
  > **Energizer**: Stimulates the group to a higher level of activity.
  > **Procedural-technician**: Performs logistical functions for the group.
  > **Recorder**: Keeps a record of group actions.

- **Social Roles**

  > **Encourager**: Praises the ideas of others.
  > **Harmonizer**: Mediates differences between group members.
  > **Compromiser**: Moves group to another position that is favoured by all group members.
  > **Gatekeeper/expediter**: Keeps communication channels open.
  > **Standard Setter:** Suggests standards or criteria for the group to achieve.
  > **Group observer**: Keeps records of group activities and uses this information to offer feedback to the group.
  > **Follower:** Goes along with the group and accepts the group's ideas.

- **Individualistic Roles** – more self-centred and potentially destructive for the group. These roles place the group member above the group and are destructive to the group.

  > **Aggressor:** Attacks other group members, deflates the status of others, and other aggressive behaviour
  > **Blocker:** Resists movement by the group
  > **Recognition seeker**: Calls attention to himself or herself
  > **Self-confessor**: Seeks to disclose non-group related feelings or opinions
  > **Dominator**: Asserts control over the group by manipulating the other group members
  > **Help seeker**: Tries to gain the sympathy of the group
  > **Special interest pleader**: Uses stereotypes to assert his or her own prejudices

4.   Strategies to Enhance Effective Group Work

In addition to carefully managing the allocation of roles within groups, teachers should also make themselves available to their pupil groups, if or when needed, and:

- Discourage pupil anonymity by limiting the size of the group;
- Allow sufficient time for pupils to plan and discuss within their groups;
- Foster creativity through encouraging pupils to engage in debate as part of their group discussions;
- Promote quality collaborative talk (see below for further elaboration);
- Give pupils both open-ended tasks (e.g. a wide theme to talk about) and also engaging activities (e.g. something of relevance to their interests and age group or a topical theme which draws them in and inspires them to talk about);
- Design formative assessment on both the work itself and the group work;
- Vary the outcomes of the groups, e.g.:
  - ➢ Presentations which engage the audience;
  - ➢ Poster presentations;
  - ➢ Individual follow-up assessments;
  - ➢ A mark or grade which assesses how the group engaged with the task in terms of interaction and cooperation etc.
- Share the final outcomes of the group with the entire class and invite comment.

5.   Promoting Quality Collaborative Talk

Further research of value to pupil collaborative group work is that conducted by a team under Professor Neil Mercer at the Open University (1988), now the University of Cambridge, into the nature and value of children's collaborative talk across a range of subjects including Citizenship, Design and Technology, English, Geography, Mathematics and Science. The research yielded interesting results. While, on the one hand, it found that some types of group talk such as *competitive argument* can often be unproductive, it also highlighted that other types of interaction, including *sharing information and ideas* and *reasoning about problems*, can be very beneficial to the process while simultaneously developing pupils' communication skills. The team identified one particular way of talking, *'exploratory talk'* as being particularly beneficial to collaborative group work. This involves group members in a process of critical but constructive interaction whereby they challenge each other with justified statements and offer alternative ideas and solutions. However, the Research Team found that:

> *"Very little exploratory talk occurs naturally in classrooms when children work together in groups. Pupils do not tend to be very aware of how they talk, do not understand the value of this way of talking and do not realise that this is how teachers expect them to talk in groups."*

Teachers, therefore, have an important role to play in scaffolding group work for their pupils by modelling strategies and coaching their pupils in the art of skilful and successful collaboration. Strategies to try out might include:

- Establishing clear procedures for group work with pupils by first of all asking them to identify, through self-reflection and peer observation and discussion, helpful and unhelpful behaviours;
- Drawing up and agreeing a pupil-driven action plan, e.g.:

	PROGRESS	
We agree	**No different**	**We have kept to the agreement**
To take turns to speak		
To listen to the views of others		
To let people finish what they are saying		
To be quiet when others are speaking		
To look at the person who is talking		
To take part and make suggestions		
To take on a role		
To collaborate to complete the task		
Not to do or say anything rude		
Not to make fun of anyone		

- Emphasising the importance of **exploratory talk** as a tool for group thinking and agreeing a set of *'talk rules'* with pupils under the headings *'Yes'* (for those rules which would promote good collaboration), *'No'*, (for those which would not be helpful) and *'Maybe'* (for those which might be helpful). The following set of **Talk Rule Cards** can be downloaded from the **Teaching Expertise** website @ www.teachingexpertise.com/e-bulletins/language-developing-team-work-young-learners-4120

Establishing Talk Rules - cards for 'Yes, No, Maybe' exercise

Change your mind if you hear a better argument.	Look at and listen to the person who is talking.
Say things to annoy people.	Try to stick to the topic.
If you know something is important, don't tell because other people copy your idea.	Ask questions if you aren't clear about what has been said.
The whole group, not just one member, is responsible for successes or failure.	Always agree with your friends.
Make up your mind straight away and don't change it.	Good talkers should talk most.

- Explaining and clarifying with examples the kind of 'talk' you expect to hear from pupils when they are working together in groups. The following set of prompt questions can also be downloaded from the **Teaching Expertise** website for use with pupils (same Internet address as above).

Prompt Cards to promote *Exploratory Talk*

What do you think?	What are your reasons?	**Encouraging the giving and seeking of reasons**
Is there another way of looking at this?	Have we considered all the factors?	**Encouraging contributions that build on previous comments**
I agree with you because…	I disagree with you because…	**Encouraging speculation**
What have we agreed?	What if…	**Encouraging negotiation, collaboration & consensus**

- Encouraging less experienced and less confident pupils to use the above prompt cards to ask questions;
- Placing a pool of prompt cards in the centre of the table for more experienced and confident learners to refer to on a *needs only* basis;
- Creating a wall display of an ever expanding set of e*xploratory talk* phrases, including those suggested and used by the pupils themselves, e.g.:

  > *I think … because…*
  > *I agree/disagree with … because*
  > *It might be better to …*
  > *An alternative might be to …*
  > *This is a better way because …*
  > *That wouldn't be so good because …*

More detailed information about the research of Professor Mercer and his team, including downloadable lesson plans for promoting skills of *collaborative group work* and *exploratory talk* with pupils, can be accessed from the *Thinking Together Website* @ http://thinkingtogether.educ.cam.ac.uk/

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Resources for Teachers

This page has some resources for teachers and teacher-trainers to use to develop their own and their students' awareness of how talk is used in classrooms.

Many more useful resources can be found in the books for teachers listed on the publications web page!

For Teachers To Use With Children

1. Thinking Together Talk Tally
This a simple observation sheet which a child can use to record the kind of talk they observe when a group of other children are working together.

2. Ground rules for talk: traffic lights
This worksheet can be used as the initial basis for an activity in which younger children (6-8) consider together how to make their talk in groups most effective. (For more about 'ground rules' for talk, see the journal article *Reasoning as a Scientist* which is downloadable from the publications' journals page.)

3. Talking points about group talk
This worksheet can be used as the initial basis for an activity in which children (8-12) consider together how to make their talk in groups most effective.

4. Are these useful rules for discussion?
This is a two-part worksheet which can be used as the basis for an activity in which children (10-14) consider together how to make their talk in groups most effective. (For more about 'ground rules' for talk, see the journal article *Reasoning as a Scientist* which is downloadable from the publications' journals page.)

5. Kate's Choice Software
This software contains an activity which is good for enabling children to practice their **Thinking Together** skills.

For Teachers/Teacher-Trainers To Use

6. Teacher techniques checklist
This is an observation schedule which education students or teacher can use to observe some different ways that teachers use talk in the classroom – and then go on to reflect and evaluate the ways these techniques are used. (For more information about these techniques, see the book *The Guided Construction of Knowledge,* as listed on the publications' books page.)

7. 5 examples of talk in groups
This is a worksheet for helping teachers/ education students develop their awareness of how talk can be used in groups. It lists 3 types of talk which have been observed in classrooms. The idea is to see how well each or any of the examples which then follow fit the 2 types. (For more information about the 3 types of talk, see the book *The Guided Construction of Knowledge*, as listed on the publications' books page.)

Preparation For Group Work

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES AND READING MATERIAL

Alexander, R (2004) *Towards Dialogic Teaching: Rethinking Classroom Talk,* Dialogus

Benne & Sheats (1948) *Identifying both Positive and Negative Group Behaviour*
www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newTMM_85.htm
http://unofficial.capital.edu/faculty/scroft/grproles.htm

DfES (2004) *Pedagogy and Practice: Teaching and Learning in Secondary Schools - Unit 10: Group Work*
www.standards.dfes.gov.uk

Dryden, D and Vos, J (2001) *The Learning Revolution: To Change the Way the World Learns* (Visions of Education)

Joritz-Nakagawa, J *Spencer Kagan's Cooperative Learning Structure*
www.jalt.org/pansig/PGL2/HTML/Nakagawa.htm

Kagan, S (1994) *Cooperative Learning* (San Clemente, CA: Kagan Publishing)

Mercer, N (2004) *Speaking, Listening and Thinking Together*
http://thinkingtogether.educ.cam.ac.uk/resources/

Ontario Curriculum Planner (2002) *Teaching and Learning Companion*
www.ocup.org/resources/documents/companions/telrsta2002.pdf

Partnership Management Board (2007) *Active Learning and Teaching Strategies for Key Stage 3*
www.nicurriculum.org.uk/key_stage_3/index.asp

Richardson, K (1999) *The Making of Intelligence* (Weidenfeld & Nicholson, ISBN-10: 0297842560)

Watkins, C (2005) *Classrooms as Learning Communities*, Routledge