



Literacy Connects

A Content Literacy Newsletter from Regional Professional Development Program-Issue XLIX

Collaborative Learning—Working with Pairs

“It is essential not to lose sight of the fact that we are intensely social animals who can exist only in a complex web of relationships. Our ability to think and share our thoughts and ideas has played a vital part in the human success story.” Susan Greenfield, The Human Mind Explained

In the past decade, brain research has confirmed what many of us have known for years: Learning is constructed and must be a social experience before it is a cognitive experience. With this in mind, cooperative learning is one of the most effective tools teachers have to insure that their students are actively engaged in the lesson, rather than passively listening to the teacher transmit pieces of knowledge.

1. Start cooperative learning activities with pairs before moving to larger groups. Collaborative pairs are easier to facilitate and will reap the same rewards as will larger groups.
2. Collaborative pairs increase the accountability for learning and still provide the opportunity for students to share, grapple with, and collaboratively construct new knowledge.
3. It is almost impossible for learners to think about one thing and talk about another; therefore, simply getting students talking about a concept or skill increases their cognition and ultimately their understanding of new information.
4. Memory is positively impacted when students can link new learning to prior knowledge and connect personally to information. Pairing peers promotes discussion that is often more personal and more strongly linked to the students’ experiences than whole group activities lead by the teacher.
5. Collaborative pairs work best when used during guided practice, for review and for summarizing.
6. Depending on the purpose, it is often useful to pair students by ability levels. Pair students as follows: Low to average; average to average; average to high. Grouping low to high is peer tutoring, not collaborative pairs. Peer tutoring is best for reinforcing recently learned content, not for guided practice on new content. Never group low to low.
7. A few beginning strategies for collaborative pairs are as follows:
 - a. Think-Pair-Share: A relevant question is posed to the class. Students are first asked to “think” or “write” about the question. They then pair with another student and discuss their answers, ideally coming to a consensus. Finally, one student from each pair shares their answer with the class.
 - b. To add more movement to the Think-Pair-Share, have students Stand Up-Hand Up-Pair Up. A question is posed to the class. Students stand-up, make eye contact with another student, raise their right hand, and give their new partner a high five.
 - c. Pairs Check: Students work in pairs to practice skills. They may work simultaneously and then check their work together, or one student may “ask” and one may “answer.” They then reverse roles.

Finally, for maximum efficiency and effectiveness, use a timer for collaborative pair activities. Tell students how much time they have before beginning, and for long activities, periodically remind them of how much time is remaining. For example, during the Think-Pair-Share, allow a minute for students to think or write and another minute or two for them to share. Providing too much time for activities can lead to a lack of focus and off-task behavior. Too little time can create frustration. Try to keep activities moving at a quick pace but be flexible. Watch your students, listen to their discussions, and adjust group time accordingly.

Visit the RPDP website (www.rpdp.net) for a complete selection of *Literacy Connects*.