



Literacy Connects

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Cooperative Learning: A Powerful Tool for Motivation

The effective use of cooperative learning has been proven to have a positive effect on students' internal motivation (see *Literacy Connects XLI* for information on Internal Motivation Theory and its impact on student learning). In fact, cooperative learning is one of the few classroom strategies that has the potential to impact all four of the basic psychological needs: Belonging and connecting; power and competence; freedom; and fun. In order for cooperative groups to be effective, students must feel that they belong to a community that is caring and respectful. Taking time with class-building activities is an investment, not only in building and maintaining these positive relationships, but also in preparing students for successful cooperative learning experiences (see *Literacy Connects XXX, XXXI and XXXVI* for building community activities). In *Research on Educational Innovations*, Ellis and Fouts state, "Of all the educational innovations we have reviewed...[which include brain-based learning, multiple intelligences, learning styles, direct instruction, mastery learning, among others], cooperative learning has the best and largest empirical base" (1997, p.173). A meta-analysis of 375 experimental studies on achievement indicates that cooperative learning results in significantly higher achievement and retention than do competitive and individualistic learning. Not only does cooperative learning result in higher achievement and greater long-term retention, it also tends to result in 1) higher-level reasoning; 2) more new ideas, strategies, and solutions generated; 3) transfer of what is learned from one situation to another; 4) positive attitudes toward the subject being learned, and 5) time on task.

Creating successful cooperative groups, however, is tricky business, even for the veteran teacher. Cooperative learning activities must be structured in ways that avoid conflict, keep students on task, encourage individual accountability, and promote fair assessment. Teachers who are not accustomed to cooperative learning should start with pairs working together before they move to larger groups (see *Literacy Connects XLIX* for ideas on effective student pairing). To avoid many of the pitfalls associated with cooperative groups, teachers should first focus on HOW they group their students. Grouping students heterogeneously has the most profound effect on student achievement and student motivation. Teams should be teacher selected so that they are made up of a range of low, middle, and high achievers. Belonging and connecting provide the initial motivation for students to work. As they experience success, students who were previously less motivated begin to sense that "knowledge is power" and want to work harder. Often the stronger students find it need-fulfilling to help the weaker ones, while the struggling students are more likely to contribute when their part is smaller and they can depend on help from others. Without heterogeneous grouping there is little chance for all students to learn enough in depth to make the vital "knowledge is power" connection.

Cooperative learning encourages students to depend less on the teacher and more on themselves, their own creativity and other members of their team. By relying on one another and working independent of the teacher, students build relationships while gaining both power and freedom. Learning teams provide the structure that can help students transcend the disengagement that plagues our schools by tapping into the psychological needs necessary for intrinsic motivation.

Now, for the actual classroom strategies: Go to [RPDP.net](http://www.rpdp.net)—English Language Arts—Middle or High School—Literacy Connects Resources folder—Cooperative Learning Strategies

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