**4-6-22 Guide to Teaching Students to Work in Groups**

**COLLABORATIVE LEARNING**

A Step-by-Step Guide to Teaching Students to Work in Groups

A strategy for giving students explicit feedback on group interactions promotes participation and collaboration.

By [Cheyanne Freitas](https://www.edutopia.org/profile/cheyanne-freitas)

March 10, 2022



Tony Tallec / Alamy

Today, students in my Integrated Math 1 Support Class are taking a group quiz. As they work together, I overhear them say things like “I think we need to combine like terms” and “Did you multiply to get 3x squared?” and respectfully correct one another by saying, “I think it should be negative since it’s a negative times a positive.”

What distinguishes today from yesterday? This is the first time I’ve used the group feedback strategy with these students, and in a matter of minutes, it’s made a world of difference.

Collaborative learning allows students to solve problems, construct explanations, critique other students’ reasoning, and engage in rich academic discourse. But as teachers, we all know how difficult it is to get students to communicate and collaborate. The group feedback strategy can help students learn effective group-level behaviors and understand the interactions you expect. It promotes student participation, collaboration, and equity.

Teachers take public notes while students work in groups. This strategy works for assessments, labs, literature circles, and study groups. You can use this strategy for large or small tasks and remind students of these expectations whenever they work in groups. Here are some ideas for using it in your classroom.

Start of newsletter promotion.

**Keep Up With Education Research**

We read the major academic journals and case studies so you don’t have to. Sign up for *The Research Is In*, and we’ll send you the key takeaways once a month.

[**I want that**](https://www.edutopia.org/account/signup?grades=&subscribe=researchNewsletter)

End of newsletter promotion.

**PREPLANNING**

Before starting a task, make sure that students understand your expectations. Give them a list of expected group norms ahead of time. You may want students to (1) ask and answer clarifying questions, (2) share ideas with team members, (3) justify reasoning, and (4) critique and question the reasoning behind team members’ perspectives.

During team tests, for example, I want to see students explaining ideas and strategies to one another, leaning in and looking at each other’s work, asking questions, respectfully disagreeing with teammates, and working on the same problems at the same time so that various suggestions and strategies can be shared and discussed. I do not want to see students working on problems individually, copying answers from others without understanding the work, or having lengthy off-task conversations.

**IMPLEMENTATION**

During implementation, display your student feedback to drive student actions. This way, students understand the implications of their actions and words as they work.

Feedback can take many forms. Typing on a document table while projecting it, typing on a designated slide or in the speaker notes section while students collaborate on a virtual assignment, or writing feedback on posters around the room are just a few suggestions. Use color coding, plus or minus signs, and a dynamic grade to help students distinguish between positive and negative feedback. Consider the group’s work and their discussions.

Highlight the positive interactions you witness and explain why they are positive as well as who was involved. Recognize students for their valuable contributions, such as clarifying questions or providing a small idea that sparks further discussion. I publicly acknowledged it when a quiet student mentioned a “box” that helped his teammates remember the area model tool. It communicated to the entire group that his comment was valuable and raised the student’s standing within the group and in the classroom.

Keep negative remarks to a minimum to highlight and reinforce positive actions. I like to include neutral comments for random things I hear or notice; it’s a fun way to connect with students while also letting them know you’re paying attention. When a teammate read something in a British accent, I commented. The team laughed and was surprised that I heard it from across the room. The British accent became an inside joke for the rest of the year.

Encourage students to read the comments you provide to their own and other groups for more ideas on how to interact positively. Keep a list of [sentence frames or sample feedback](https://sites.google.com/site/mathwithfreitas/teacher-resources/group-feedback-strategy?authuser=0) handy if you worry about running out of comments.

**DEBRIEFING AND GRADING**

Share your feedback with the entire class. Allow them time to read through each group’s comments. I also recommend holding a class debriefing discussion the first few times you use this strategy to acclimate the students. During this 5-minute discussion, I usually highlight a positive team point or ask students to share one they will try next time.

Some teachers prefer to give grades, while others prefer to give feedback. I think it’s important for teachers to hold students accountable for their collaboration, and I’ve had more success when group feedback is graded. One idea is to weigh the group task’s collaboration score equally with the academic work completed.

Each time I give students a group test, I grade their collaboration and weigh it as 40 to 50 percent of their group test grade. This has inspired both high achievers who usually work alone and low achievers who don’t want to let down their teammates.

You could also make this grade dynamic so that students must demonstrate positive collaboration in order to receive full credit, but they can also lose points for negative behaviors.

For example, start all groups with a 6 out of 10 scale that increases by one point for positive comments and decreases by one point for negative comments. Whether or not a grade is assigned, providing feedback and communicating positive collaborative behaviors should always be prioritized.

I recommend implementing this strategy semi-regularly; even once every few months will have a long-term impact on how students collaborate in your classroom.