

## Common Mistakes Teachers Make With Cooperative Learning --- And What To Do About Them

1. **Group size too large!** It takes a lot of skill for students to manage a group of 4 or more. Instead, keep group size small: **2 or 3 are best**. Smaller groups are more effective and take less time. In twos, no one is left out. Three's take more skill, but provide more resources. It takes careful planning for someone not to be left out of a foursome.
2. **Not preparing students to work in cooperative groups.** Explain to students why you are using cooperative learning, do a short cooperative learning activity, then have **them** explain how it can help them. Initially, do short get-acquainted and review activities.
3. **Not teaching students appropriate interaction skills.** Ask students to contribute to a **class list of appropriate group behaviors**. Display and continually remind students to use them. Add to the list as needed. Examples: stay on task, contribute ideas, help others learn, encourage everyone to participate, listen with care, show respect for others.
4. **Letting students choose their own groups.** We would all choose our friends to work with if given the choice - it's safer. However, it takes a lot of skill to work with friends and not get off-task. In addition, students need to develop positive working relationships with all class members. Make teacher assigned or random groups so students get to know and work with divergent (and all) class members. Change groups often enough so no-one gets stuck for long with a difficult class member.
5. **Not doing cooperative activities often enough** for students to develop cooperative skills. Have students do something cooperative at **each class session** to reinforce positive cooperative habits. If nothing else, they share what they learned with a partner.
6. **Not planning cooperative lessons with care.** Many teachers confuse group work with coop. learning. They put students in groups, tell them to work together, and wonder why groups aren't successful. But cooperative learning groups have **five essential elements** (positive interdependence, individual accountability, face-to-face promotive interaction, teaching social skills and processing) built carefully into every lesson to teach the students to learn well together. Learn how to include them in each cooperative lesson.
7. **Assuming that students can handle complex tasks** before being taught how to do simple ones successfully together. Students won't know how to learn together unless you teach them how. **Start with short in-class activities** and progress to longer and more significant ones as your students show success. Example: Do two problems together and you're not done until all group members can explain how to do them. Have frequent class discussions on what helps the groups do well.
8. **Emphasizing paper or project completion as a group goal.** With completion as the only goal, there's nothing to stop one student from doing the work and the others from "hitchhiking." Instead, assignments should have a **cooperative learning goal**: a paper or project that everyone helped with, understands, and can explain; mastery of the learning objective by all members; or learning improvement by all members.
9. **An unclear learning goal.** A clear group learning goal is an **easily measured learning goal** so students can determine both group and individual learning success. Example: You are finished when every member in your group can explain the work and/or pass a quiz.