



Envision's Guide to Teaching the Art of Collaboration

Students must learn collaboration in order to be well-prepared for college and careers. However, effective teamwork doesn't just "happen." So how do we teach students collaboration skills?

This download presents an overview and group exercises to teach students skills in three areas of collaboration:

- Listening
- Arriving at consensus
- Collaborative accomplishment through individual contribution

Listening

It's easy to forget that listening is actually a critical component of good communication skills. Start a classroom discussion in which students contemplate what it means to be a good listener. Eye contact, empathy and supportive responses are important, as well as some of the "p-words" listed as the "Norms of Collaboration," such as paying attention and paraphrasing (to ensure comprehension). "Pausing" is another of the "norms," meaning you must pause to let a team member express themselves. Group projects quickly become unproductive when everyone talks at once. The same is true if only one member monopolizes the discussion.

After the discussion, conduct this simple exercise:

- Organize the class into groups of 4 or 5
- Present each group with a different topic and ask them to discuss what they think is most interesting or important about the topic, and why. Give them no other instructions. Topics could include:
 - A recent class lesson
 - Recent events around campus or in the news
 - The presidential election
 - An issue pertinent to their age group, such as bullying, friendship, planning for the future, etc.
- Allow the groups 15 minutes to discuss
- After the group discussion, instruct the students to take out a piece of paper and write at least once sentence about the opinion voiced by each person in their group, and then write a sentence about the opinion they stated themselves.
- Next, randomly call on students and ask them to read what they have written about a specific member of their group. For example, ask Ashley to read what she wrote about Adam's opinion, and then ask Adam to read the sentence he wrote about himself. Compare the two sentences. Did Ashley accurately remember and interpret Adam's opinion? If so, she must have been listening well when Adam spoke during their team discussion.



- After several students from each group have had the chance to compare their answers out loud, ask them to reassemble in their groups, swap papers and check each other's answers. Students receive 1 point for each accurate interpretation of their team members' statements. If there are 4 students in the group, the maximum score possible for each student is 3 and the maximum group score is 12.

If the group scored high, ask them to reflect on what they did well. If they scored low, ask them to determine what went wrong. If all the students in the group remember what Adam said, but don't remember what Ashley said, it's likely that Ashley wasn't given adequate time to speak. If no one remembers much about what *anyone* else said, perhaps they were all talking at once, or busy thinking about their own opinions and not listening well.

Finally, ask the students if anyone started out their group discussion with one opinion, but changed their mind after listening to the opinions expressed by their classmates. If so, they took a step toward another important collaborative lesson: coming to a consensus.



Negotiation and Consensus

An effective group must agree on a course of action, but agreement is not always easy, given the varying ideas and opinions of the team members. To address this challenge, again start with a class discussion, asking your students to identify the elements of successful negotiation.

During negotiation each party expresses their opinions and goals. Eventually, all parties must arrive at an acceptable middle ground. Therefore, a good negotiator must know how to:

- Clearly and concisely express their own point of view
- Explain how their proposal benefits the group as a whole, or moves the project forward
- Prioritize their own needs, understanding which points they are willing to compromise on, and which points are deal-breakers
- Listen carefully to opposing views, paraphrasing to ensure accurate comprehension
- Ask pertinent and revealing questions, to better understand the opposing side's argument
- Assess what the opposing side truly feels is most important
- Remain patient and flexible
- Identify areas of existing consensus, and build on them
- Operate for "the greater good," with a willingness to set aside ego or personal gain

After building a list of good negotiation elements in the class discussion, conduct a few brief exercises that enable students to practice some of the identified skills. For example:

Identifying Priorities – Both Yours and the Opposing Sides': Put the students in pairs and ask them to spend five minutes discussing what they hope the future will bring. At the end of the discussion, ask each to write down the single thing they considered *most important* for their own future, and their best guess on what their partner considers most important. Then have them compare notes and assess what clues each gave that demonstrated their true priorities during the discussion.

Asking Good Questions – Write a series of 3-5 topics on the board, which you consider to be good discussion topics. Topic examples might include: the presidential election, the role of technology in society, the biggest challenges facing today's youth, etc. Then ask the class to pose good, probing questions on these topics; questions that generate a meaningful and fruitful discussion. Often the best questions are open-ended, with the answers requiring true thought. They should be neutral, designed to reveal your counterpart's opinions, rather than to interrogate or dispute. For example, "What would you do in a situation like _____?" is better than, "How did you come up with *that*?"

Building a Consensus – To conclude this exercise, arrange the students in small groups and simply ask them to come up with a plan that they all agree upon. It can be a plan for any kind of hypothetical activity: throwing a birthday party, choosing a book to review, performing a community service, etc.



Collaborative Accomplishment through Individual Contribution

When working toward a group goal, assigning roles can be incredibly helpful. The task should be structured in a way that requires the input and participation of every group member, and, as a result, all group members learn from each other. Each student should be held accountable for their own contribution. Members of the group will not only be rewarded based on the success of the entire group, but also on their own work.

Here is an assortment of simple exercises to help your students practice collaborative accomplishment:

Play to Your Strengths – Present your class with a series of questions, each addressing very different topics. For example, you might ask one question each about math, science, history, grammar, technology and pop culture. First, ask the students to individually assess how many answers they know on their own. Then arrange students in groups of 4-6 and then ask them to reassess their collective answers. The results should show them that each member brings different strengths and knowledge sets to the table. They can then apply that understanding when they go forward with group projects.

My Piece of the Pie – After students are arranged in their groups, assign them a broad topic to research. In order to best accomplish this exhaustive goal, each group member will research *one* section of the material and then teach it to the other members of the group. The team will only gain a full understanding of the topic when all members have contributed their pieces. You may choose to quiz the entire class on the material, to assess how well each group did at bringing all the elements together.

Group Creativity – Collaboration generally requires problem-solving, critical thinking and creativity. A group can optimize their project results when they collect ideas from all members and then select the best ones. A fun way to demonstrate the appeal of collaborative creativity is to select an imaginative topic and then ask the groups to create a story on that topic. To start, each group member independently thinks up four elements of the story. They can choose any kind of element that appeals to them – an opening scene, an interesting villain, an alluring event, a plot twist, an exotic setting, an unforeseen impediment, a dramatic conclusion, etc. All group members then share their elements and enjoy the opportunity to weave a complete story with unexpected and creative components.