



## ■ Cross cutting theme: Collaborative Learning

### *I win, you win*

#### **What do we mean by collaborative learning?**

To collaborate means to work together towards a common goal. Collaborative learning occurs when learners are organised into small groups, and they work towards common learning goals. The most common forms of collaborative learning are **group-work** and **peer tutoring**.



#### **Collaborative vs Individually organised classrooms**

Traditional teaching methods tend to shy away from group-type learning. Many teachers still believe that a classroom organised individually, and where silence reigns is by far the best learning environment for learners. This quiet and highly structured environment may suit the teacher, but research shows that individual, silent work is quite an ineffective learning environment and can contribute to the continuation of behavioural, emotional, and cognitive difficulties.

#### **Some of the difficulties that may arise in individually organised classrooms are:**

- When learners get “stuck”, and they cannot ask for help, they tend to simply stop working and fail to complete the task.
- Learners often do not ask teachers for help when they are stuck. They either cannot be bothered or may not want to appear stupid in front of their peers.
- Learners with attention difficulties will not be able to focus on this type of activity for too long and they will either start to daydream or they will start to fidget and become disruptive.

#### **Why Collaborative Learning?**

##### **Collaborative learning:**

✓ allows learners to work together in small groups, following a structure devised by the teacher	✓ does not only focus on the transfer of the content of a specific learning area	✓ also teaches many complex processes such as social skills, thinking skills and information sharing techniques.	✓ creates a simultaneous interaction (at the same time) rather than a sequential (one after the other) one, saving much time and promoting more task activity.	✓ makes for less work in the long run, as the teacher is no longer the pivot for all learning.
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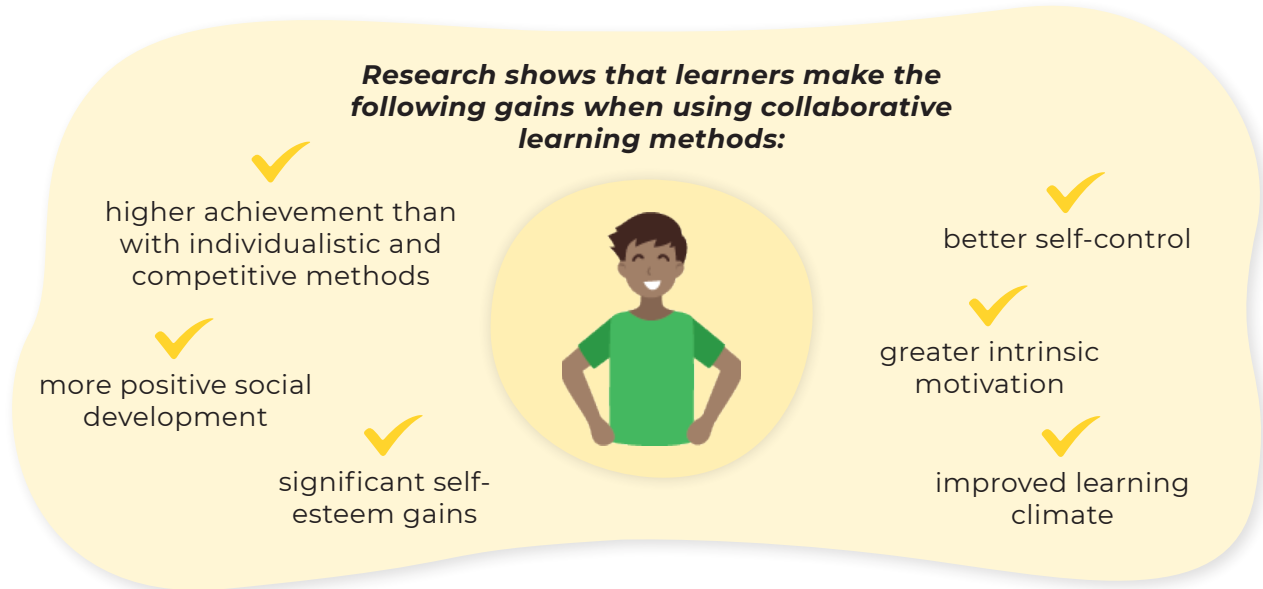
#### **What the research says...**

Some of the greatest educational researchers of our time, namely Vygotsky, Piaget and Feuerstein, all conclude that learning takes place through our interactions with others. In other words, learning is very much a social process (It is also the S in S.P.E.C.I.A.L. i.e. Social Interaction).

Most teachers grumble, sigh, and shake their heads when they hear the term “group-work”. Many teachers are afraid to use this technique as they feel they will lose control of the discipline in their class. There are also many teachers who have tried group work and after one day say that it doesn’t work!



Using collaborative learning is however a logical method of instruction because most of our learning comes from the help and guidance of other people. For example, if you come across something in your life that you find difficult to learn or understand, your natural instinct is to ask someone for help. Collaborative learning is, therefore, compatible with human nature. The development of social capital (the wealth of people connection) is achieved through collaboration when we reach out for help or to help.



### Why does collaborative learning work so well?

- Learners talk more – but appropriately and meaningfully, which enhances vocabulary and language development.
- Small groups can result in lowered anxiety.
- There is more clarity on task structure.
- There is more time on the task.
- There is more time to practice various processes and tasks.
- It allows for more rewards, both immediate and postponed (praise and positive regard from peers and the teacher).
- It allows for more facilitative and encouraging interaction between group members.
- The teacher is not always lecturing and policing learners' behaviour. His or her teaching abilities and knowledge can, therefore, be used more effectively.

### Some notes on preparing you and your learners for collaborative learning

1. If you want to use collaborative learning effectively, and you haven't done so before, you must take the time to **explain what this concept means to your class**. If you suddenly place them into groups without a clear explanation you may well find yourself in the middle of a riot situation, and you will be put off collaborative learning for life!
2. You can explain to them the benefits (listed above) of this method of facilitation. You can point out that:
  - it is one of the main skills of an entrepreneurial way-of-being.
  - without collaboration their ability to solve problems and find innovative solutions is severely diminished.
  - that each member of the group bring his/her own particular strengths, background knowledge, interests, and skills - making the group diverse and stronger.
  - that as individuals we have only certain skills and strengths, but "Teams (groups) should be well-rounded precisely because we, as individuals, are not." Rath and Conchie (2008), Gallup
3. After having discussed the concept, you and your class need to **make the rules together**. Many teachers make the mistake of imposing their rules on learners. The result of this is



that the learners will spend a lot of time breaking the rules. For some reason, people are very attracted to the idea of breaking rules and take great delight in getting away with breaking rules! Children are no different. As you may have noticed, many learners spend a lot of their time breaking teachers' rules instead of getting on with their work.

### Steps for making effective group work / classroom rules

3.1

Discuss the rules that people must follow in “real life” and why these rules are important (for example, road rules or sports rules). Learners need to understand that rules do not only exist at school, but that everyone in the world must follow rules for safety and order.

3.2

Ask the class for their own class rules. You will find that they come up with many ideas. Write them down on the board and edit where necessary.



3.3

Now ask the class why they think each rule should exist. By doing this, you are giving value and meaning to the rules and reasonable explanations as to why they are important.

3.4

Now decide together the consequences of: (a) following the rules and (b) breaking the rules.

By including learners in their own rule-making, you give them a sense of autonomy (the L – Learner Autonomy in S.P.E.C.I.A.L.) and they are less likely to break rules that they have made for themselves.

### Other useful tips before implementing collaborative learning

- Have a quiet signal (e.g., a bell) to assist you in communicating with the groups.
- The greater the structure the better the groups will function both in terms of work done and the level of co-operation achieved.
- Provide the group that is working well with positive attention to encourage the other groups to work in the same way. Resist the urge to pay negative attention to the group that is not working well.
- The teacher can assist learners to work collaboratively by modelling collaborative behaviour.
- Start with simple lessons. Initially use as many team-building exercises as possible.
- **Be patient with everyone**, including yourself, as this turn-around in thinking requires a period of adaptation.

## Collaborative Learning Strategy 1 - Peer tutoring

### What is Peer tutoring

Peer tutoring is when you use stronger learners to help learners who need additional support. It is a simple and useful means of instruction that has much value for teachers, tutors (the stronger learners who teach), and tutees (the weaker learners who learn). Peer tutoring can ease the strain of dealing with large and troublesome classes.



### How to implement peer tutoring in the classroom

The simplest way of implementing peer tutoring in the classroom is by pairing together stronger learners with those who need support. These pairs of learners then sit together, and the stronger learner takes on the role of tutor or teacher and guide, explaining and interpreting information and skills for the tutee.



When planning the peer groups take the following into account:

- Never let the learners choose their own pairs.
- Be careful that the learners you pair together also get on socially. If they cannot bear the sight of one another this scheme will not work at all.
- Explain why you are using this method so that learners get an overview of the benefits and are thus motivated to take it seriously (Recap section above outlining this.)

### Difficulties you may experience and how to solve them

As with all new things, you will probably have some "teething problems" with peer tutoring when you introduce it in your classroom. Here are some comments from teachers about some of the difficulties they have experienced and how they overcame them.

#### Problem 1

*"The first time I tried it, the kids thought it was free time and they did no work at all."*



#### Solution

You need to get the whole class's consent and understanding to overcome this problem. First explain the concept to the whole class and get their opinions. Then explain to your learners that you want to make school easier for them and that peer tutoring will be a fun and easy way of helping them. You may even single out some learners, for example, "Jimmy, you really enjoy maths; wouldn't it be nice to share your passion for maths with someone who might struggle more with maths?" Hopefully the answer will be yes!

Another part of this solution is to have a special meeting with the tutors and explain the value and special nature of their role. Try to get them on your side by explaining that they are now more like teachers than learners. Remind them that the role of the teacher is to guide and support, not to be the "expert" and "tell". You need to explain how much you need their help and thank them for their time. Once you have their co-operation and they see themselves as being important, you shouldn't have much trouble with discipline.

#### Problem 2

*"My tutors started fighting with my tutees, calling them stupid idiots."*



#### Solution

Once again, be very careful which learners you put together. If you see any friction, make changes immediately. Also, you need to make your tutors aware that their role involves kindness, consideration, empathy and understanding as they guide and support their tutees.

#### Problem 3

*"My class became much noisier, and the other teachers complained."*



#### Solution

If you are used to a classroom where the learners work individually and in silence, then you will experience a big increase in noise level because the pairs will be constantly talking to each other. This is healthy noise and means that the pairs are working well. Please note, if you are using peer tutoring and there is silence in the classroom, then something has gone wrong!

If you are the only teacher who is trying peer tutoring, then you will have to explain this method of instruction to your principal and colleagues to get their support.



## Peer tutoring for reading

If you have a big class, you can use peer tutoring to help you with reading development. Pair up the stronger with less able readers and have them either sit at their desks or let them sit outside. Instruct the tutor to listen to the tutee and help her/him correct mistakes and read difficult words. The tutee needs to read the passage over a few times until s/he can read all the words on her/his own.

This lessens the strain on you because you won't have to worry about trying to listen to everyone's reading every day. With peer tutoring, your weaker readers will receive individual attention every day as well as extra practice. You can use this time to either work with extremely difficult readers or listen to a few individual learners everyday to monitor progress and do ongoing assessment.

## Peer tutoring for Maths

Peer tutoring also works well with Maths, which seems to be a subject that many learners find difficult. First explain what you want the class to do and then allow peer tutoring to take over. Instead of you now going around to every learner who needs support, and re-explaining the instructions, the tutor will do this for you. Once again, this frees up a lot of time for you to walk around and assess books or do some individual work with learners who need your input.

### What are the benefits of peer tutoring?

The use of peer tutoring is aimed at being an "I win, you win" method in that it helps tutors, tutees, and teachers.

### How does it help tutors?

- ✓ It is believed that one of the best ways to learn is to teach someone else. A tutor's own learning improves as s/he gives clear and logical explanations to his/her tutee. This is because the tutors must think through their own knowledge very carefully and be sure of their own understanding before they can help their partners.
- ✓ Tutors also benefit **emotionally**. Most studies show that tutoring boosts the tutor's self-esteem and confidence. Tutors tend to feel valuable and useful, and the fact that they help other people creates in them a very positive self-image.
- ✓ Tutors who are highly active or very easily distracted can benefit **behaviourally**. The fact that they are constantly interacting with one other person in a useful and satisfying way will tend to keep them focused and busy and, therefore, less likely to waste their own and other's time.
- ✓ Tutors also seem to develop better **social skills**. They become more considerate of others and develop higher levels of tolerance for learners who are different to them.



### How does it help tutees?

All research indicates that tutees with this form of academic support cope better at school. Tutees' experience of **academic success** due to peer tutoring, improves their **motivation**. Tutees also show improved **self-confidence** because of their improved schoolwork as well as the individual support and attention that they get from the tutor.

### How does it help teachers?

- ✓ Once peer tutoring is in progress you should have **100% class participation**, as one half will be learning, and the other half will be teaching. Because all the learners are busy working you will find that you spend far **less** time dealing with **inappropriate behaviour** and trying to encourage learners into sitting still and getting on with their work. So, there are benefits in terms of better discipline.
- ✓ Over time, your learners should show an overall **improvement in their academic skills** and your professionalism and **job performance will be improved**.
- ✓ Your learners will be **happier** and more **productive**. You will have much more time during the school day to focus on areas that really need attention.
- ✓ You will **not feel exhausted**, because the enormous task of teaching, disciplining, supporting, listening, helping and marking will become the shared responsibility of you and the tutors.
- ✓ You will have the **satisfaction of a job** well done, which will do wonders for your own self-image and motivation.

## Collaborative Learning Strategy 2 - Group-work

Group-work is as effective as peer tutoring but a bit more complex to manage and monitor. Group-work means arranging the learners into small groups of between four to six learners. The learners then must complete tasks as a group.



### Selecting your groups

It is best to select heterogeneous (Consisting of people with diverse characteristics) groups. Try to put a few high achievers in each team. Mix language and gender too.

- Teams of four work well, as you can include pair work within the group.
- On occasion, allow your learners to pick preferred classmates to make up their group.
- You can also sometimes randomly assign learners to groups.

### Effective group work

- The reason that group work often fails in classrooms is that teachers put children into seated groups and then continue to expect them to work individually. This does not work, as the learners simply take it as an opportunity to socialise.



- For groups to be effective the work that they do has to be carefully planned.
- The goal of successful group work is that each member must have a specific task that contributes to an outcome.
- As with all significant learning, ensure that the group:
  - knows the goal of the exercise
  - feels motivated because they see the relevance to them (purpose)
  - is curious and intrigued by a question they want to know the answer to
  - is guided by tasks that keep their attention and engagement
  - doing something that makes them think deeply so that the learning is “posted” to their long term memory.

### How does group-work help learners?

#### Learners' roles within the groups

To make sure that groups function optimally, it is useful to assign roles to each of the learners. We often make the mistake of only assigning one member a role, that of group leader. This often results in more damage than good as the leader invariably takes over and makes the others do exactly what he or she wants.

It is therefore best to assign a role to each of the group members. These roles can vary according to the task that has been set, for example:

For a **discussion**, one may select the following roles:

- A *Taskmaster* to keep the group on task
- A *Gatekeeper* to equalise participation
- A *Recorder* to write down the group's decisions or answers
- A *Quiet Captain* to make sure that the group does not disturb the other groups

For a **group project**, one may select the following roles:

- A *Taskmaster* to keep the group on task
- A *Recorder* to write down the required information
- An *Artist* to decorate the project
- A *Materials Monitor* to obtain the necessary materials and to make sure that the group tidies up after working



Make sure that you discuss what each role entails with your learners to allow them to carry out their responsibilities adequately. Also, vary the roles that you assign to each of your learners.

1. Learners get a **sense of belonging** by being in a group and as they begin to experience some academic success, they become more **motivated** to learn and gain more knowledge.
2. The learners need not depend entirely on the teacher. They come to **depend a lot more on themselves**, as well as the other members of the group. Where learners work individually, they depend almost entirely on the teacher and they have little incentive to help each other as this kind of help feels like, or is regarded as, cheating.
3. Learners in groups also tend to put "loudmouths" in their place, especially if their **behaviour** is detrimental to the overall function of the group. Therefore, groups can alleviate many discipline problems in the classroom. This also allows for the practice of self-regulation where individuals learn the appropriate ways of interacting when they are in a group situation.
4. Learners **talk more**, which enhances vocabulary and language development.



**Here are some warm-up activities to use before you start with "real work".**

### Interviews

As a class or in each group, think up ten interesting interview questions to find out information about the interviewee.

- Each learner must write these questions down.
- In pairs, the learners must interview each other and write down the answers.
- Once the interviews are over, the group members can report back to each other.



### Sharing information

For this type of activity, Learner A thinks of a piece of information or thinks of something that the other learners need to discover. It could be a word like "Politics", or "tree", or "happy". They do this by asking questions to which learners can only say yes/no, true/false. Examples of this type of activity are:

- Mineral, animal, vegetable.
- 20 questions
- Guess what's in my hand
- Charades
- The 30 seconds game

The information that Learner A has can be specified by the teacher and could be linked or confined to classroom learning.

### Discovering identical pairs

A set of four similar pictures is given out to four learners. The fifth learner gets a copy of one of these pictures. The fifth learner must question the other four learners to discover who has the matching picture. Again, only yes/no or true/false answers must be given.

- Identical pairs can include written information for example a description of a holiday destination or a description of a person.
- If you use written information, you will enrich this activity by including reading and comprehension.

### Discovering sequences or locations

Here, Learner A has a set of pictures arranged in a particular order. Learner B has the same pictures but not in any order. Learner B must ask questions and discover the order of the pictures from Learner A.

A more difficult version of this is where Learner A has a model of something (possibly made of Lego or blocks). Learner B has the same pieces and must build the same model by listening to Learner A's verbal instructions.

### Justifying choices

This activity is sophisticated and makes strong demands on language ability and group interaction.



### Planning a holiday to \_\_\_\_\_.

1. Together with your learners, generate a list of items that could be taken on holiday to the place you have chosen.
2. Each learner has a limited amount of luggage they can take. For example, 25 kg on a plane, or 1 suitcase in a car or taxi.
3. As a group, the learners must make one list of what items they would pack and be able **to justify** their choices.