



*A Union of Professionals*

# Classroom Tips

## **Working with Cooperative Small Groups**





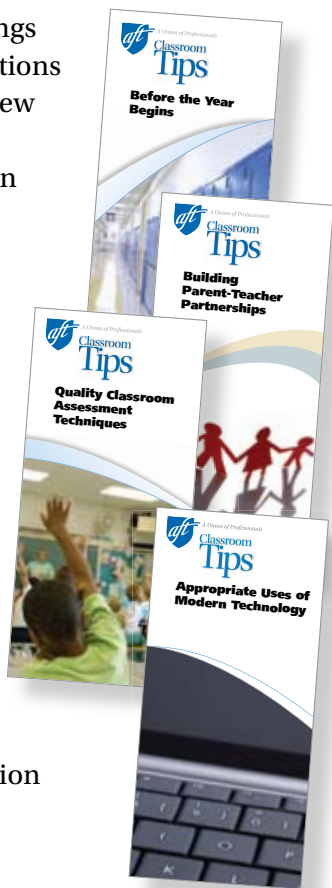
# Classroom Tips

Each new school year brings high hopes, great expectations and challenges for both new and seasoned educators.

The American Federation of Teachers (AFT) has developed a series called *Classroom Tips* to help educators start the year off right and anticipate the year ahead.

*Classroom Tips* is developed with you, the educator, in mind. The tips in this collection are taken from real classroom experiences and are part of the AFT's Educational Research and Dissemination (ER&D) professional development program.

The AFT is a leader in providing educators the resources they need to help them succeed. Visit AFT's Web site for classroom resources at **[www.aft.org/tools4teachers](http://www.aft.org/tools4teachers)** today.



## Benefits of Cooperative Small Groups

Diversified small groups in the classroom provide a good opportunity for students to share information and ideas with each other. The research on cooperative small groups points out the benefits of these interactions and describes the process as a powerful forum for developing students' critical thinking and higher-order skills:

- Cooperative small groups require students to learn from each other through their interactions.
- Cooperative small groups have positive effects on students' interpersonal relationships in the classroom and can improve attitudes of students of different races, ethnicities and academic abilities toward one another.
- Cooperative small groups have a positive effect on achievement and are particularly effective in promoting conceptual and higher-level learning.
- Participation is essential to learning in small groups and can be fostered in a variety of ways.
- The teacher's role in structuring and evaluating classroom activities greatly influences interaction patterns in the classroom.
- Implementing cooperative groups in the classroom represents a shift from direct to indirect instruction and supervision on the part of the teacher.

## Student Participation

Carefully planned cooperative small groups can foster high levels of student engagement, as students spend less time waiting for instructions and feedback. Some studies have found that low-achieving students spend less time off-task in cooperative small groups than in traditionally structured classrooms. Factors that influence student participation include:

- **Tasks**—The type of task will affect student participation. Conceptual tasks that require different abilities to perform them increase participation by students who have weaknesses in basic skills.
- **Motivation**—Competition among groups working on factual material or low-level skills increases students' motivation to help one another.
- **Norms**—Teaching students norms for cooperative behavior and using roles within groups to enforce these norms increase equal participation in groups.
- **Group composition**—Mixing group members in terms of academic achievement, gender, ethnicity and socioeconomic status promotes maximum participation.
- **Accountability for all**—Accountability can be established by requiring each group member to produce an individual product (such as a worksheet or test) using the group to help, or by structuring the task so that each group member is responsible for a specific part.
- **Feedback**—It is essential for students working in cooperative small groups to receive feedback from the teacher on their group products and on the quality of the group process. Students working in groups give and receive peer feedback and need to be taught how to respond constructively to one another.



# Considerations for Co

## Group Composition

Plan group composition ahead of time. Don't plan groups on the basis of friendships. Compose groups heterogeneously, based on ethnicity, gender and academic standing. Post the names of the students in each group and where they are to meet.

## Assigning Small-Group Tasks

A multiability task is a cooperative groupwork assignment that requires a number of different intellectual abilities. Group members will need to understand that the task requires different areas of competence. The multiability approach is ideal for teachers with heterogeneous classrooms and for teachers who wish to foster more active learning.

In selecting a small-group task:

- Pick an interesting and intellectually challenging task.
- Pick a task that is more like something from the adult work world than an ordinary classroom task.
- Pick a task that involves a variety of skills and activities, such as group discussion, interviewing, role playing, drawing a model building, observing, manipulating or reasoning.

## Giving Instructions to Groups

Have all materials carefully prepared in advance. Go over written instructions with the class as a whole. Make clear how group products will be evaluated. Figure out how much time the



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introduction will take so you will have enough time to get the group work started.

If students are going to divide the labor, with each group member making some specialized contribution, be sure to explain that they all are responsible for the quality of the group product. Therefore, it will be necessary to bring everyone in the group back together for integration and evaluation of the final product.

## Delegating Authority

Delegate authority to groups of students to carry out the task. Their decisions are their own to make. They are accountable for the group product. Be prepared to let go and allow the groups to work things through without telling them what to do every step of the way. They must learn to solve problems for themselves.



## Using a Group Facilitator

Appoint one member of each group as a facilitator. Consider selecting students who are usually quiet and may be low-achievers, as well as students you consider outstanding. Make the facilitator's role clear and explicit to everyone concerned. It can include a number of tasks, but the following should always be part of the facilitator's responsibilities:

- See to it that everyone participates.
- Keep the group moving forward on the task to meet the deadline.
- Make sure that students consider each other's opinions and listen to each other.
- Make sure that students give reasons and justify their arguments.

The facilitator can do much to promote collaborative behavior in lieu of your direct supervision.

## Training Facilitators

Facilitators may need help understanding that their role is not to make decisions for the group. They also may need suggestions of tactful ways to get students to participate and listen to each other, and to prevent some individuals from talking too much.

## Be Clear About Materials

Make sure that students are aware of the resources available to support their assignment. These may include library materials, newspapers and resource persons (school faculty members, parents, and leaders from the community, government or universities).

## Addressing Control and Coordination Issues

If a small group is to work together for any length of time, and if the members must make many decisions as a group, you should give students some



special training on desirable behaviors for working in a group. Don't set up a task that demands this set of skills unless you are willing to devote the necessary time to training for group discussion. These new norms for group behavior will do much to support productive group work.

If the task is long-term and has complicated stages, design checkpoints along the way, when you will comment on group plans. You may want to go over progress the group has made with a representative of the group. Try not to second-guess their decisions. Suggest how they can extend their plans if they are not sufficiently challenging. Recommend special resources they may want to use. Ask questions rather than direct behavior. If the class is to coordinate its separate group activities, have a representative of each group meet as a special coordination task force.

## **Wrap-Up**

Bring the class back together after tasks are completed for a performance or report by each group. Be sure to discuss how well groups operated, and how different individuals made contributions to the task.

## **Evaluation**

Group products can be evaluated in a variety of ways: You can evaluate the product; a group can evaluate its own work if it has clear criteria; or other students in the class can learn how to be constructive critics of the product of each group.

You may want to design a test or quiz involving the substance of the material learned in the process of group work. Each group may want to contribute items to the test to see what classmates have learned from their group presentation or product. Be sure to allow group members to assist each other in preparing for any tests.

Student groups should be able to evaluate their own group process and the effectiveness of the facilitator's role.

# Five Great Reasons to Join a Union of Professionals

## The American Federation of Teachers:

**1 Supports you in the classroom.** Effective learning only takes place when high-quality teachers, with the support of other competent professionals, have the materials and assistance needed to accomplish the task. Your union is a strong advocate for quality classroom materials that are aligned to the standards of achievement we expect our students to meet. We also insist that state and district assessments for measuring student progress are aligned with these standards and that the assessments be used appropriately to support student learning.

**2 Helps you prepare.** No matter how well prepared you may have been before entering the classroom, there is always room for improvement. Ongoing professional development that meets you at your point of need is vital for continued growth as an educator. The AFT and its affiliates deliver some of the finest professional development programs available; and in situations where ours are not available, we advocate and broker for you to receive the best training possible.

**3 Stands up for you.** Whether the discussion is taking place in the White House, in the halls of Congress, on the floor of your statehouse, in colleges of education or in your local editorial pages, you can be sure that union representatives are weighing in assertively, ensuring that the collective voice of educators comes through clearly and effectively.

**4 Advocates for your profession.** No one enters the teaching profession without a strong desire to help children reach their potential. Yet, at times the realities of life make this calling difficult to stick with. Adequate salaries and benefits are essential in order to keep the best teachers, paraprofessionals and support staff in our public schools. Working conditions such as manageable class sizes, adequate teaching materials, and discipline policies that support teaching and enhance student learning are important factors in ensuring that the best teachers remain in the classroom.

**5 Keeps you informed.** *American Educator* is one of the most highly respected journals available to keep you informed on current thinking in public education by some of the most capable thinkers and doers in the field. *American Teacher* will keep you on top of the challenges and successes of your colleagues across the country. And a host of optional publications, as well as a comprehensive Web site that will assist you in addressing the particular needs of your school and classroom, provide the balance of a professional literature package that is second to none.



*A Union of Professionals*

American Federation of Teachers, AFL-CIO  
555 New Jersey Ave. N.W.  
Washington, DC 20001  
202/879-4400

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