

Online Discussions

Cooperative and collaborative learning allows students at various performance levels to work together in small groups toward a common objective. The goal of such work is to share alternative viewpoints and challenge, as well as help develop alternative points of view (Sharan & Sharan, 1992). Social learners are responsible for one another's learning as well as their own. According to Slavin (1989), for effective cooperative learning, there must be group goals and individual accountability. Each group member depends on the others to accomplish a shared goal or task. Thus, the success of one student helps other students become successful. When the group's task is to ensure that every group member has learned something, it is in the interest of every group member to spend time explaining concepts to members of the group.

In order to promote quality cooperative learning, planners, facilitators, and moderators of online discussions need to consider the following strategies.

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- Place emphasis on learner-learner interactions.
- Promote social presence by increasing familiarity among learners, and help develop favorable social relationships.
- Assist members of the community of inquiry in caring for one another in a pedagogical sense and value the interaction process (Sharp, 2004).
- Establish teaching presence to help learners make the transition from social to cognitive presence (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2001).
- Share teaching presence responsibilities by appointing learners as discussion topic moderators (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2001).
- Create a variety of social learning activities that allow multiple opportunities for demonstrating knowledge and skill proficiencies designed to address the diverse range of learning preferences and communication patterns that students bring to instructional environments (Bangert, 2004).
- Require learners to reflect periodically on their own performance, the learning experience received, and their learning-style preferences.
- Recognize and respond to communication patterns that can silence some students. For example, recognize put-downs and alienating or competitive dialogue, and respond privately to offending students and encourage them to be more inclusive (Rovai, 2007).

- Intervene indirectly to equalize students' status in the virtual classroom by raising the status of those students with lower status by recognizing the importance of their roles and creating problems or discussion topics that require multicultural perspectives (Cohen, 1994).
- Publicly recognize the work students have accomplished, paying particular attention to low-status students, through actions such as giving praise, citing student contributions, and assigning significant roles in group projects (Cohen, 1994).
- Encourage the use of a connected voice and teamwork. For example, a grading rubric can be used to describe instructor expectations for students to use a connected voice where cooperation and interdependence are stressed over competition and independence (Rovai, 2007).
- Discourage competition among students, as competition creates both winners and losers, and that can create hurt feelings and alienate and silence sensitive students (Rovai, 2007).
- Encourage and reward group activities and cooperative efforts.
- Encourage all students to participate in discussions; use the telephone or e-mail to confer privately with students who remain silent, in order to determine the cause (Rovai, 2007).
- Consider cultural differences by designing learning strategies that encourage the open sharing of views and establish a classroom climate in which one set of values is not automatically given precedence.

Avoid sexist or culturally biased language. For example, avoid language that reflects sexual or cultural stereotyping or adoption of a single cultural perspective.

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