Creating a Collaborative Learning Environment

12 Tips for Creating a Collaborative Learning Environment

Modern employers prefer soft skills over technical skills in their employees. According to a *Forbes* article, employers are willing to teach on-the-job technical skills, but they only want to make that investment in employees with soft skills such as collaboration, leadership, communication, humility, and agility.

In short, for K-12 students to be prepared for future career success, they must be given opportunities to practice these soft skills with their school peers.

How can teachers create a collaborative learning environment and/or incorporate collaboration into the classroom? First, it's important to practice the skills and set the expectations that will allow students to engage in collaboration for more meaningful learning. *Edutopia* offers advice for how to scaffold deep, meaningful collaboration. Educators can lay the groundwork for students to work together productively, and then refer to our list below for ways to ignite and support a collaborative curriculum. (Hint: show this to your principal or school admin in charge of purchases, so they can see the value of collaboration and what is needed to support it!)

1. **Start with Seats:** Don't let rigid row seating arrangements stymie collaboration. Instead, either allow students to turn their desks to face one another, arrange desks in groups, or create a collaborative area in the classroom that allows a group of students to face one another or gather together around a computer monitor or interactive flat panel. Roller chairs allow older children to easily move into groups or navigate between multiple work centers during a complex project, and nesting chairs can quickly vacate the class space to allow for larger activities.

2. **Don't Table That Idea:** Utilize nesting/teaming tables. These unique tables save on classroom space by stacking when they're not in use. Many of them are also convertible and can be used together to create smaller or larger collaborative opportunities. Easily switch between small group "pod learning" tables and large group collaboration with flexible table configurations. Whiteboard top tables also handily facilitate group collaboration.

3. **Think Outside the Bell:** This won't fly in every school, but there are schools that allow for class time flexibility and class period trading. Educators can work together to trade class times when students are entrenched in a complex project and would benefit from having two class periods of uninterrupted work time. This is very beneficial for when students are working on deeper level projects that require focus.

4. **Present This:** Give the gift of presentation skills by encouraging group presentations for younger students. This gives them practice at speaking in front of large groups without having to be all alone in the front of the room. Students can gain further practice by splitting up a project among a small group

and presenting their portion of the project to one another. Portable presentation stations turn any space into a small group or whole class presentation opportunity.

5. **Public Creation:** This is a great way to get numerous students working together in art class and beyond. Painted murals are the most well-known examples of public art, but others can be created from less permanent mediums including chalk, sticky notes, tape, or even baby powder. For other classes, students may come together to create a public timeline spanning the hallway (History), a public sentence diagram (Language Arts), or geometric shapes and equations. Students collaborate through a planning process and then the execution phase.

6. **Make Picking Easy:** Make it easy to break students up into groups. One teacher suggested cutting different colors of paper into pieces and passing them out as students filter into the classroom. Students with the same color then work together. You can also use your interactive flat panel to randomize groupings if don't want to handpick groups.

7. **Fishbowl It:** To give students the opportunity to practice both the listening and speaking skills necessary for successful collaboration, form two circles of student desks, one inside the other. The inside group responds to and discusses a teacher prompt, and the outside group takes notes on what is being said. Then the groups switch.

8. **Play!** For students not naturally inclined to speaking up or contributing, collaboration can be a particularly slow skill to develop. Show them that interacting with material and their classmates can be fun by playing interactive games. Collaboration isn't just students' heads bent to a shared task; it can look like a game of team Jeopardy and involve fun and even laughter!

9. **Pre and Post Test:** Even the most attuned teachers can't track every single group member's contributions, and some students will definitely contribute less than others. Serve students with pre-tests and post-tests to assess their learning during a group project. Let students know the tests will help you assess if they immersed themselves in the material. It's easy to push a test to student devices with Intune for Education, Microsoft's new software "control center" that enables you to manage all classroom devices in one place (and features a lockdown feature for device use during testing).

10. **Confidential Peer Assessments:** In addition to pre and post-tests, peer assessments give teachers insight into who contributed to the group objective and who did not. It's a matter of opinion whether or not to factor the assessment into the students' grade, but either way, it gives important insights into which students to work with on the importance of collaboration or watch more closely in the next round.

11. **Invest in Space Savers:** Technology like 1:1 devices and interactive whiteboards support collaborative learning environments, but all that extra tech takes up classroom space. Charge tablets and notebooks in a portable, space-saving cart like the Odyssey High Capacity Charge Cart by MooreCo.

12. **Get Tech-y:** Old school Spalding notebooks, construction paper, and chalkboards facilitated collaboration in the 90s—and these still have their place—but students should also learn about the collaborative hardware they'll find in future workplaces. Familiarize students with collaboration of the future by giving them time on an interactive flat panel touch table. If the classroom only has one, rotate groups through.

Bonus Tip: Get Help! There are many collaborative classroom solutions, and it's difficult to know which one is best for you. That's why Troxell has invested in industry expert, Emily Cook, who works round the clock with school and district leaders to learn about their needs, research the best products, and design a collaborative environment that suits their goals and curriculum. To get started, email emily.cook@trox.com or call Emily directly at 800-352-7912 extension 1725.