

Collaborative learning

Moderate impact for very low cost, based on extensive evidence.

+5

Collaborative or cooperative learning can be defined as learning tasks or activities where students work together in a group small enough for everyone to participate on a collective task that has been clearly assigned. This can be either a joint task where group members do different aspects of the task but contribute to a common overall outcome, or a shared task where group members work together throughout the activity.

Some collaborative learning approaches also get mixed ability teams or groups to work in competition with each other, in order to drive more effective collaboration. There is a very wide range of approaches to collaborative and cooperative learning involving different kinds of organisation and tasks, but this summary does not include Peer tutoring, which is reviewed separately.

How effective is it?

The impact of collaborative approaches on learning is consistently positive, but it does vary so it is important to get the detail right. Effective collaborative learning requires much more than just sitting pupils together and asking them to work together; structured approaches with well-designed tasks lead to the greatest learning gains. There is some evidence that collaboration can be supported with competition between groups, but this is not always necessary, and can lead to learners focusing on the competition rather than the learning it aims to support. Approaches which promote talk and interaction between learners tend to result in the best gains.

How secure is the evidence?

Evidence about the benefits of collaborative learning has been found consistently for over 40 years and a number of systematic reviews and meta-analyses of research studies have been completed. In addition to direct evidence from research into collaborative learning approaches, there is also indirect evidence where collaboration has been shown to increase the effectiveness of other approaches such as mastery learning or digital technology. It appears to work well for all ages if activities are suitably structured for learners' capabilities and positive evidence has been found across the curriculum. Not all of the specific approaches to collaborative learning that are adopted by schools have been evaluated so it is important to evaluate any new initiative in this area.

What are the costs?

The direct costs involved are very low, though professional development is advisable. Estimated costs for a class of 25 pupils are about £500 or £20 per pupil per year, plus the costs of monitoring and evaluating impact of adopting the approach. Overall the costs are estimated as very low.

What should I consider?

Before you implement this strategy in your learning environment, consider the following:

1. Pupils will need support and practice to work together; this does not happen automatically.
2. Tasks need to be designed carefully so that working together is effective and efficient, otherwise some pupils will try to work on their own.
3. Competition between groups can be used to support pupils in working together more effectively within their group, though over-use of competition can focus learners on the competition rather than succeeding in their learning so it needs to be used cautiously.
4. It is particularly important to encourage lower achieving pupils to talk and articulate their thinking in collaborative tasks as they may contribute less.
5. Have you considered the professional development required to support effective use of these approaches?