

Cooperative Learning Strategies for Group Work and Group Discussion

- **Circle the Sage** – With students in groups, the teacher first polls the class to see which students have a special knowledge of the topic being covered. For example, the teacher may ask who in the class was able to solve a difficult math problem, or who knows the chemical reactions involved in how salting the streets melts snow. Those students (the sages) stand and spread out in the room. The teacher then has the rest of the classmates each surround a sage, with no two members of the same initial group going to the same sage. The sage explains what they know while the students listen, ask questions, and take notes. All students then return to their groups. Each in turn, explains what they learned from the sages. Because each one has gone to a different sage, they compare notes. If there is disagreement, they stand up as a team. Finally, the disagreements are aired and resolved as a class.
- **Deliberating in a Democracy** – Students discuss a reading in groups of 4-6 using a structured process that encourages civil dialogue and the consideration of multiple perspectives. For information about the process and sample readings, go to www.deliberating.org.
- **Find & Discuss** – Prior to students arriving, the teacher should create cards that contain an open-ended question. Place students into pairs (or small groups) and have each pair/group draw one question card. Participants should be given a designated amount of time to discuss. Pairs/groups that finish first may be allowed to return their card and draw another.
- **Grouped Partners** - The class is divided into groups of four, in which students choose a partner. Each set of partners moves to opposite places in the room. Each set of partners is given an alternative assignment (something to learn that they will then teach the other two partners in their group.) Partners work to master the material provided and can consult with other partners working on the same material. Partners then rejoin into their groups of four and each set of partners will teach the other set. At the end of the activity, groups should review how well they learned and taught, and how they might improve next time.
- **Jigsaw** – Divide students into small groups, and give each group a particular subject or reading to become experts on (generally groups of 5 work well.) Each original group should understand that they are to work together to learn the material provided to them to the best of their ability, since in the second phase of the jigsaw they will be regrouped with students from alternate groups who learned about different topics. They will then each be responsible for teaching about their original assigned topic to the students in their second group.

In the second phase, students will form new groups containing one student from each of the original five groups. Thus, a new mixed group is formed where each student will teach their new group about the subject they learned about in their original group.

Teacher tip: If students are given a handout of information in their first groups, it is advised all topics be copied on different colors of paper. This will mean that each student's paper in their first group will be the same color. In the second group, no two students should have the same colored handout and each group should contain at least one of each color.

- **Literature Circles** - In literature circles, small groups of students discuss a piece of writing in depth, with the discussion being guided by students' response to what they have read. Literature circles can be used to

discuss books, poems, news articles, short stories, etc. Through this structured process, students are able to effectively engage in critical thinking and reflection as they read, discuss, and respond to written material together. Students reshape and add onto their understanding as they construct meaning with other readers. Finally, literature circles guide students to deeper understanding of what they read through structured discussion and extended written and artistic response. The structure of the process and roles utilized in Literature Circles can vary. Go to www.litcircles.org as a starting point for more information.

- **Numbered Heads** - A group of four is established. Each member is given numbers of 1, 2, 3, or 4. Questions are asked of the group. Groups work together to answer the question so that all can verbally answer the question. Teacher calls out a number (i.e., 2) and each two is asked to give their group's answer. As a continuation, teachers can then tell students to reform new groups based on the number they were assigned (i.e. all 1's find each other, all 2's find each other, etc.) Once regrouped, students can summarize the information/opinions shared in their first group and continue discussing with their new group members. Additional questions can also be provided.
- **Paideia Seminars** - The Paideia Seminar is a formal, collaborative, intellectual dialogue facilitated with open-ended questions about a text. It is a very powerful form of dialogic instruction for students and is specifically intended to teach the conceptual understanding of the ideas and values inherent to your curriculum. For more information on how to lead a seminar with your students, go to www.paideia.org
- **Philosophical Chairs** - This is an effective tool for encouraging critical thinking and the consideration of multiple perspectives.

Prior to the activity, provide students with some balanced background information (meaning, multiple perspectives are provided) to the controversial issue to be addressed (i.e. a homework reading.) Set up three separate lines of chairs in a three sided square or "U" shape. Label the set of chairs on one side of the room as the 'agree' section, the other as the 'disagree' section, and the chairs in the middle as the 'unsure or neutral' section. Write a statement on the board/chart paper that relates to the reading for which students will choose to agree, disagree, or remain undecided. When the activity begins, students will choose their seat in the room based on their current opinion. (Remind students to be brave enough to choose for themselves rather than following friends.)

Once all students are seated, the discussion is started by one student stating why they selected their particular position followed by a response from a student on the opposing side. Each time a student speaks, require them to summarize the previous speaker (using their name in their summary) before they present their own thoughts. (For example, "I heard Megan say that she believes the War in Iraq is justified based on the threat of WMD, but I disagree. I feel it is an unjust war, since no weapons were ever uncovered...")

As the conversation continues, if students are affected by a strong argument presented by another student, they are allowed to change their position.

During the first few Philosophical Chairs, the teacher may need to serve as a mediator to ensure that students are not all trying to speak at the same time and that the correct procedure as described above is followed.

At the conclusion of the activity, students should be given 5-10 minutes to reflect on the activity in writing. (Teachers may want to pose questions such as: What was your original position on this issue? What is your current position? Why do you think your position changed or did not change? What are the most compelling arguments from those opposite your opinion that you heard today?)

There are multiple variations and uses for this strategy. Teachers interested in more information should simple search “Philosophical Chairs” on the Internet, where numerous articles and resources are available.

- **Round-Robin Brainstorming** - The class is divided into small groups (4 to 6) with one person appointed as the recorder. A question is posed and students are given time to think about possible responses. After the "think time," members of the team share responses with one another round-robin style. The recorder writes down the answers of the group members. The person next to the recorder starts and each person in the group (in order) gives an answer until time is called.
- **Think-Pair-Share** – This involves a three step cooperative structure. During the first step individuals think silently (or even write) about a question posed by the teacher. Individuals pair up during the second step and exchange thoughts. In the third step, the pairs share their responses with other pairs or the entire class. This works well at any point during a lesson, whether as a warm-up or mid-way through a lecture.

As a variation, prior to students arriving, the teacher can create cards that contain open-ended questions based on the day’s lesson or theme. Place students into pairs (or small groups) and have each pair/group draw one question card. Students should be given a designated amount of time to discuss the question. Pairs/groups that finish first may be allowed to return their card and draw another.

- **Three Minute Review** - Teachers stop any time during a lecture or discussion and give teams three minutes to review what has been said, ask clarifying questions or answer questions.
- **Three Step Interview** – With students in groups, each member of the group chooses another member to be a partner. During the first step individuals work with their partners asking clarifying questions related to the subject matter being taught (these questions will likely be provided by the instructor). During the second step partners reverse the roles. For the final step, members share their partner's response with the group.
- **Values Clarification** – As a pre-discussion activity, teachers can create a list of statements that illicit an “agree” or “disagree” response from students. Label one side of the room with a large “Agree” sign and the other side with a “Disagree” sign. As the teacher reads each statement, students will choose the side that corresponds with their opinion. Alternatively, teachers can label the length of the room (or hall if additional space is needed) with the numbers 1-10, 10 being the strongly agree/like and 1 being strongly disagree/dislike. Pose various statements to students and allow them to place themselves along the line based on the depth of their agreement/disagreement with the statement, or the depth of their like/dislike of the subject matter described.
- **World Café** - The World Café is an innovative yet simple methodology for hosting conversations among students about questions provided by the teacher. These conversations link and build on each other as students move between groups, cross-pollinate ideas, and discover new insights into the questions or issues that have been posed.

For detailed instructions on hosting a World Café in your classroom, go to <http://theworldcafe.com>. In summary, the classroom should be rearranged prior to student arrival so that seating allows for 4-5 students to sit in conversation clusters. (Utilizing the school’s media center may be most convenient for this activity.) Cover each table with bulletin board paper or butcher paper, and provide colored markers in the middle of the table. (Having soft jazz music can also help set the “conversation stage.”)

The process and rules of discussion should be explained to students prior to the World Café. Upon student arrival, they should take a seat at their conversation cluster and begin discussing an initial question posed by the teacher. Students should be encouraged to write, doodle, and draw key ideas on the paper as they discuss. Upon completing the initial round of conversation, teachers should ask one student to remain at the cluster as a “host,” while everyone else serves as “travelers” or “ambassadors of meaning.” These students switch tables and form new groups, carrying with them the themes, answers, questions, etc. discussed in their first group. The student table host welcomes the new group and briefly shares the main ideas, themes, questions, etc. of the first conversation. Each student then shares what was discussed at their initial cluster. Students can continue discussing the first posed question with their new group, building on one another’s contributions and expanding their understanding of the initial question posed. Teachers may also choose to pose a new question for consideration. This process can then be repeated.

After several rounds of conversation at the World Café, teachers should facilitate a whole class conversation based on what was discussed and learned throughout the process.