

The power of cooperative structures vs cooperative tasks

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An important role of teachers is to ensure that students learn how to work well in a group. The importance of collaboration cannot be understated. It is an essential aspect of social interaction in both school life and in the broader community. The Australian Curriculum includes collaborative skills within the Learning Areas and the General Capabilities.

There is an expectation that teachers deliver an effective, engaging curriculum that incorporates meaningful collaborative learning. A traditional approach to cooperative learning is to provide students with an opportunity to work together to produce a product; be it a poster, a performance or a report. An analysis of the Australian Curriculum shows that this approach alone, to cooperative learning, is insufficient.

For example, one of the Year Two Literacy Content descriptions in the Australian Curriculum states that students are required to “*use interaction skills including initiating topics, making positive statements and voicing disagreement in an appropriate manner, speaking clearly and varying tone, volume and pace appropriately*”.

This Literacy Content description is one of many which students cannot accomplish by simply working in a group to produce a product.

As we know from our teaching experience, students need structured collaborative learning experiences if they are to appreciate the power of tapping into the minds of others. Leaving students to work in a group with only a project sheet is like prompting students to write a creative story given only a blank page. Scaffolding our student's collaborative learning experiences is just as important as scaffolding our students' tasks in literacy and numeracy.

Spencer Kagan in an article titled *The Structural Approach to Cooperative Learning* (1989) explains that activities such as making a team mural or a quilt almost always have a specific content-bound object and thus cannot be used to deliver a range of academic content. Teachers are back at the drawing board each time to produce a new appropriate activity. Kagan explains that structures can be used repeatedly in many different contexts.

These cooperative structures are easily learned and can apply to many varied situations in the classroom. Teachers can also make small variations to these structures to elicit different types of thinking.



Level of thinking elicited	Collaborative structure
Knowledge	Placemat Each student writes their knowledge about a topic in the outer spaces. Conduct a 'Round Robin', so that each participant can share their views. The scribe notes down any common points made in a circle in the middle of the 'placemat'.
Understanding	Global Café The students are given a topic to discuss. At table groups (cafés), the conversation flows as in a coffee shop, with students sharing their understandings, opinions and personal experiences related to the topic. Students randomly move to new 'cafes', forming new groups with different members.
Applying	Jigsaw Students form 'expert groups' who research relevant information on a topic to instruct their 'home group'.
Analysing	Snowball Fight Students record their opinion on a topic on a piece of paper and a snowball fight is held. After a short time, the fight is stopped and students pick up the nearest 'snowball'. They then compare that opinion with their own.
Evaluating	Opinion Continuum Students position themselves along a continuum from strongly agree to strongly disagree. They justify their positions, reconsider and revise based on evaluating others positions.
Creating	Brainstorming with DOVE Students develop their creative thinking during a brainstorm which works through the following steps D defer judgement. O off beat, original, V vast number and E expand, elaborate



Cooperative structures have many benefits including: team building, improving students' communication and social skills, developing concepts, improving decision making, enhancing information processing and more.

The power of repeating these structures in different learning sequences is evident when you look at curriculum such as MAPPEN (getmappen.com).

As co-authors of MAPPEN we have incorporated collaborative structures into a suite of 32 Foundation to Year Six units. We mapped each structure against the types of thinking required in the various levels in Bloom's Taxonomy (table).

Some tools are better used as immersion activities, some for developing content awareness and higher order thinking and some are great as reflective tools after students have completed a task."

Social skills cards have been incorporated throughout MAPPEN. These cards prompt students to think specifically about their social skills

as they are working in groups. These skills include turn taking, offering individual encouragement, compromising, asking probing questions and clarifying ideas.

By providing students with the opportunity to reflect on and apply social skills multiplies the effect of the cooperative structures. Students are able to recognise and work on their social strengths and weaknesses whilst being engaged, for example, in an opinion continuum or a snowball fight. MAPPEN provides professional development as teachers learn about these cooperative structures and incorporate them into other aspects of their teaching.

Perhaps the most powerful aspect of these cooperative structures is the opportunity to see students learn social skills that you know they will need in the classroom, in the playground, and in their personal and professional lives.

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About MAPPEN

MAPPEN is a comprehensive guided inquiry program that addresses the Australian Curriculum standards across the subject areas of Science, History, Geography, Economics and Civics and Citizenship. The authors are Karen Green and Amanda McCallum

To find out more about MAPPEN go to www.getmappen.com



Karen Green

Karen is passionate about providing quality support to teachers so they can, in turn, provide the best possible learning environment and experiences for their students. She wants all students, of all ability levels, to be successful and enthusiastic learners who have positive experiences at school and

develop skills for life-long learning. By co-authoring MAPPEN, Karen hopes to invigorate teachers and demonstrate the elements of a vibrant and meaningful curriculum that excites students and enriches their lives.



Amanda McCallum

Amanda's passion revolves around facilitating the most effective learning experiences for students of all ages and stages. Amanda has always aspired to make a genuine, positive difference in the lives of others. By co-authoring MAPPEN, Amanda believes that both the teachers and students involved will have their lives enriched and their teaching and learning interests stimulated.