



## New Chalk Talk

The Center for Learning and Teaching Newsletter  
Teaching News

The Center for Learning and Teaching  
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### Cooperative Learning (1)

One of the mandates of the Center for Learning and Teaching at AUC is to encourage an ongoing discussion about teaching and learning on campus. As a first step, we began publishing this Newsletter as a means of promoting successful teaching strategies as well as addressing teaching and learning issues that face our faculty.

Taking my cue from last fall's Newcomer's Orientation Program, I focused my attention on topics that appeared to be of interest to our faculty: assessment, critical thinking, plagiarism/cheating and teaching with technology. This was a good start and, in our previous issues, we touched on these important topics.

The Newsletters have generated other queries from faculty members, as was reflected in our last issue (*Volume 2, Issue 1: How to encourage pre-class reading*).

Today's subject matter is a response to a colleague and friend who approached me with questions regarding an interesting group assignment she was giving to her class. Her questions addressed important features of what is known in the literature as "cooperative learning", an important learning strategy to which we are devoting this issue and the next.

Most research on cooperative learning (Johnson, Johnson, and Smith, 1991) has shown that it helps students learn best and retain information longer, develop their critical thinking skills, and provides opportunities for them to interact with each other as they would in real life situations.

#### What is cooperative learning and how can it be applied successfully?

Broadly defined, it is learning that occurs when groups of students are given a specific task and work together toward a common goal.

There are many features of cooperative teaching that already occur in AUC classrooms, such as open discussions, interactive lectures and case studies, which do not necessarily involve group work. Cooperative learning is implemented either through informal study groups that involve very little structure, or through more formal learning groups that work together for an extended period of time to complete a specific task. We shall be addressing the latter type of cooperative learning where the **groups are highly structured and task oriented**.

The successful application of cooperative learning involves three key aspects: **the group, the task and the assessment**.

## A) The group.

**Size:** According to Johnson, Johnson and Smith (1991), the highest level of success occurs when the groups are kept small. Groups of two to three maximize the students' involvement and create a sense of interdependency.

**Composition:** The choice of the group should be the instructor's responsibility: left up to the students, they will probably choose their friends which may lead to a situation where they neglect their work in favor of some other activity. It is recommended to form groups of heterogeneous ability levels. In such groups, the brighter students' learning is enhanced when they teach others, and the less-capable students benefit from the one-to-one attention.

**Group management:** In general, we should not assume that students know how to work effectively in groups. Teachers need to proceed slowly and with patience to help them develop cooperative skills, such as a willingness to help one another and to participate equally in the group work. This is often an obstacle because students find it difficult to let go of the competitive attitude they acquire in school towards fellow students. Some educators recommend having groups evaluate how they are functioning by having them answer questions such as: what could each member of the group do to have the group function better?

*To be continued*

### Sources:

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