

# Introduction

Put simply, *cooperative learning* (CL) represents a diverse, growing body of ideas for helping students work together effectively and happily. Put even more simply, CL means group activities done with thought. This approach combines a diverse, growing body of ideas with each teacher's and each class's own experiences, reflections on, and beliefs about what constitutes good education. In contrast to CL, group activities sometimes take place without any forethought. Such impromptu group activities sometimes work fairly well, but our experience suggests that forethought brings rewards and that the literature from CL and related areas provides tools for action and for reflection that increase the chances that students' group activities will be fruitful.

The next chapter "Why Use Group Activities?" provides background on potential advantages of group activities as well as a frank admission of problems that may arise when students work in groups. The chapter has two goals: (a) to whet readers' appetites for using group activities because of the positive effects that student–student interaction can have and (b) to warn readers that the potential feast of learning and enthusiasm offered by group activities must be prepared with care because obstacles await between planning and enacting lessons.

Chapter 3, "Preparing for Cooperative Learning," looks at what needs to be considered before the group activities begin. Just as dinner hosts must consider how to arrange the chairs and which guests should sit together, so too must issues of seating be considered when students come together.

Chapter 4, “Four Teaching Principles for Interaction,” presents four principles that seek to provide the core energy and direction for CL:

1. maximum peer interactions (how many student–student interactions are taking place and how well are students interacting with their peers?),
2. equal opportunity to participate (do all group members have many chances to share in what the group discusses and does?),
3. individual accountability (do all group members use those chances to share with their group mates?), and
4. positive interdependence (do group members feel they are all part of a team and that everyone on that team forms a crucial part of that team?).

Chapter 5, “Four Teaching Principles for Bonding,” presents four principles that keep groups together and encourage members to reach out to others beyond their small group:

1. group autonomy (does being in a group help students become less dependent on teachers?),
2. heterogeneous grouping (do groups usually represent a mix of students similar to the mix of students in the whole class?),
3. cooperation as a value (does students’ circle of concern extend beyond their small group?), and
4. using cooperative skills (does the class know and use skills that help people work together better?).