



# Ways to integrate collaboration skills into primary and secondary education

Research suggests that students with good collaboration skills enjoy better performance in school.<sup>1,2</sup> Additionally, employers highly value these skills. As companies move to place greater emphasis on team-based work, individuals who excel at collaboration are likely to be more valued applicants and to receive higher performance ratings from colleagues and supervisors.<sup>3,4</sup>

Collaboration refers to the process of working together to achieve shared goals through coordination and interdependence. It includes these subskills: interpersonal communication, task management, and conflict resolution.

The skill of collaboration should not be confused with cooperative or collaborative learning. Cooperative learning is a teaching method where group work is used to teach a variety of academic skills. Engaging in cooperative learning aimed at instruction of other skills on its own will not necessarily increase students' skill in collaboration. Collaboration skills need to be called out directly and explicitly taught.

Below are some sample learning tasks to give you inspiration for how students can develop and practice collaboration skills in the classroom.

Subject	Learning activity	Skills involved
<b>English literature</b>	Learners brainstorm examples of how symbols are used in works of literature.	Because this activity involves brainstorming, it primarily elicits basic collaborative skills around interpersonal communication, such as listening without interrupting and waiting one's turn before speaking.
<b>History</b>	Learners review a particular historical period (e.g. the Renaissance) and put together a multimedia presentation describing it.	Because learners have to actually produce something together, this activity addresses task management skills in addition to interpersonal communication. Learners need to take an active role in organizing and coordinating the work to successfully produce the presentation.
<b>Language teaching</b>	Learners must reach a decision on where to take a school trip. Each learner is assigned different preferences for the trip, via roleplay cards, some of which are in direct conflict.	Because this roleplay involves inherent group conflict, it elicits conflict resolution skills, in addition to interpersonal communication and possibly task management skills. Learners need to negotiate and balance their individual needs in order to reach consensus.
<b>Maths</b>	Learners are given an amount they may spend on a hypothetical group vacation and must generate a detailed budget. The project involves researching the cost of various vacation activities and making decisions about which activities fit in the budget.	Because learners have to reach a decision, this activity addresses task management skills in addition to interpersonal communication. In order to successfully research the group vacation activities, learners will need to take an active role in organizing and coordinating the work to successfully compile a budget. Additionally, learners need reach consensus regarding what vacation activities fit within the budget.
<b>Science</b>	Identify ideas for improving sustainability practices at your school.	Because this activity involves identifying ideas, but not selecting a best idea, it primarily elicits basic collaborative skills around interpersonal communication, such as listening without interrupting and waiting one's turn before speaking.

<sup>1</sup> Druskat, V. U., & Kayes, D. C. (2000). *Learning versus performance in short-term project teams*. Small Group Research, 31(3), 328–353.

<sup>2</sup> Prichard, J. S., Stratford, R. J., & Bizo, L. A. (2006). *Team-skills training enhances collaborative learning*. Learning and Instruction, 16(3), 256–265.

<sup>3</sup> McClough, A. C., & Rogelberg, S. G. (2003). *Selection in teams: An exploration of the teamwork knowledge, skills, and ability test*. International Journal of Selection and Assessment, 11(1), 56–66.

<sup>4</sup> Stevens, M. J., & Campion, M. A. (1994). *The knowledge, skill, and ability requirements for teamwork: Implications for human resource management*. Journal of Management, 20(2), 503–530.

These are the big ideas behind the learning activities overleaf. Use these to adapt the examples for your students, or as guidance to devise your own learning tasks.

### Collaboration skills should be explicitly taught

Throughout schooling, learners have numerous opportunities to work with other learners. It is easy to assume that this type of group work is sufficient to support the development of collaboration skills, but this is not the case. To effectively support learning, instructors need to explicitly teach collaboration skills.

- 1 Teach learners what good collaboration looks like in terms of desirable behaviors and useful strategies (see the big idea below for examples of specific collaboration behaviors).
- 2 Provide learners with opportunities to practice their collaboration skills, making expectations clear.
- 3 Give learners feedback on their collaboration skills, using evaluation from both peers and instructors.

### Incorporate different aspects of collaboration

There are several different elements of collaboration, and learners should understand and practice these different elements. Three important elements to consider when developing collaboration activities are:

- 1 **Interpersonal Communication** – exchanging information, feelings, and meaning in positive and prosocial ways.
- 2 **Task Management** – organizing the work of individuals and the team as a whole to support the achievement of group goals.
- 3 **Conflict Resolution** – effectively reconciling different perspectives, values, opinions, or priorities within the group.

### Ensure that the features and demands of collaborative tasks match instructional goals

How connected or interdependent the actions of the group members are within a collaborative activity will influence the difficulty of the task as well as which collaboration skills are elicited. Collaborative task demands — what students are asked to do — should be carefully designed to correspond to the current skill level of learners and to the target instructional objective. Three different types of tasks are as follows:

- 1 At the lowest level are activities that require participation in a task, but no coordination of actions. Examples include group sharing or discussion activities where learners simply need to listen to others without interrupting, or take turns. These types of tasks require basic interpersonal communication skills.
- 2 Next are activities that require coordination of individual actions, where learners need to reach consensus on what must be done and determine who will complete which tasks. These types of tasks require interpersonal communication and task management skills.
- 3 Lastly there are activities that require resolution of major conflicts. In this case, there are inherent conflicting needs among group members that must be navigated for successful completion of the task. These types of tasks require interpersonal communication, task management, and conflict resolution skills.

### Scaffold learners' practice of collaboration skills

When collaboration is unfamiliar to learners, instructors can scaffold these skills utilizing the gradual release of responsibility model – “I do, we do, you do”.

- 1 First, the instructor participates in a collaborative activity, explaining specific collaboration skills as he/she goes along. For example, an instructor could offer encouragement during a group discussion (i.e. “That is a great point Sam. I appreciate you sharing it with us”), making it clear to the students that this is an example of a collaboration skill. (“I do”).
- 2 Next, the learners follow along during the task. This could involve completing a collaborative activity with the instructor, with the expectation that learners begin using the skills previously modeled. (“We do”).
- 3 Finally, learners complete a collaborative task on their own, getting assistance and support only when needed. (“You do”).

Are you incorporating collaboration skills instruction in your teaching? Tell us how. [efficacy@pearson.com](mailto:efficacy@pearson.com)