

Critical Teaching Skills for Planning Partner and Small-Group Work

InTASC Standard #3: Learning Environments
Standard #8: Instructional Strategies

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After reading this chapter, you should be able to:

- 8-1** Provide examples of ways to use peers in instruction.
- 8-2** Explain the benefits, potential problems, and reasons for using peers in instruction.
- 8-3** Recognize when to plan for using peers in instruction as routine or one-time events.
- 8-4** Describe the planning decisions necessary for using partner and small-group work, including determining the size and membership of groups, how tasks will be shared, and prerequisite skills and knowledge.
- 8-5** Discuss the critical management skills for organizing and managing partner and small-group work.
- 8-6** Summarize ways to respond to the skill diversity of students when planning partner and small-group work.

CHAPTER OUTLINE

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 8-1 WAYS TO USE PEERS IN INSTRUCTION 8-2 BENEFITS, POTENTIAL PROBLEMS, AND REASONS TO USE PEERS IN INSTRUCTION <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 8-2a Benefits 8-2b Benefits for ELLs 8-2c IES Practice Guide Recommendation 8-2d Potential Problems 8-2e Reasons to Use 8-3 WHEN TO PLAN FOR USING PEERS IN INSTRUCTION | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 8-4 PLANNING DECISIONS FOR PARTNER AND SMALL-GROUP WORK <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 8-4a Determining the Size of Groups 8-4b Determining How Students Will Share Tasks 8-4c Determining Prerequisite Skills and Knowledge 8-4d Deciding Who Will Work Together 8-4e Deciding How to Incorporate Technology 8-5 ORGANIZING AND MANAGING PARTNER AND SMALL-GROUP WORK 8-6 RESPONDING TO SKILL DIVERSITY WHEN PLANNING PARTNER AND SMALL-GROUP WORK |
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Introduction

Another important aspect of preparing activities and lessons for a diverse classroom is planning how students will work and learn together. The ideas presented in this chapter are considered important components of primary interventions (tier 1) in a response to intervention (RTI) approach. Differentiation is achieved through the selection of specific strategies that will help provide successful experiences for a particular collection of students with diverse needs.

Throughout this book, we emphasize the importance of active student participation in the diverse classroom. Teachers must carefully and imaginatively plan to ensure that all

students are involved and can obtain success. Teachers cannot be everywhere at once, but they can use students in the class to help them facilitate learning through peer groups. There is clear empirical evidence of the effectiveness of peer-assisted instructional approaches (see meta-analyses such as Rohrbeck, Fantuzzo, Ginsberg-Block, and Miller 2003; and Roseth, Johnson, and Johnson 2008).

Read about Ms. Wakamatsu and what she is planning for her class in Teachers in Action 8.1. Then, as you read this chapter, think about how she could use peers in instruction. You may imagine that Ms. Wakamatsu is teaching any grade level.

TEACHERS IN ACTION 8.1: A LOOK AT MS. WAKAMATSU'S PLANNING

Ms. Wakamatsu has been teaching reading comprehension skills. She typically presents information about a comprehension skill to the whole class. Following this, she meets with small groups one at a time, leading them in reading and discussing what they've read. The rest of the class works independently during this time, usually on worksheets meant to provide practice of the comprehension skill. She is not satisfied with the independent work time. She doesn't think her students are learning very much and that the time is largely wasted. A recent conversation with a teacher friend has made her interested in planning for using peers in instruction, particularly during what has been independent work time.

8-1 Ways to Use Peers in Instruction

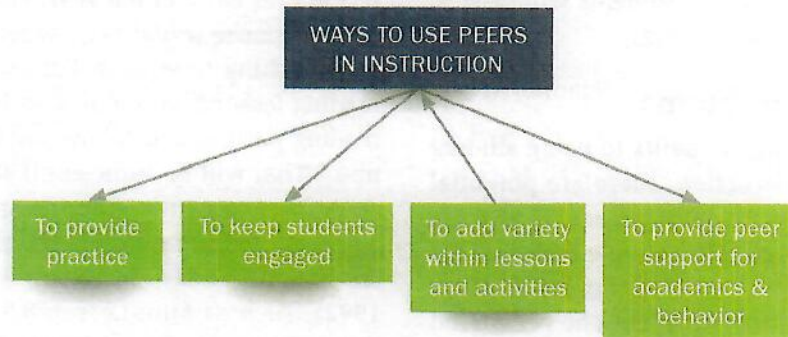
Teachers can have peers work together in many ways for various purposes (see Figure 8.1). Here are some examples:

- *Active participation strategies.* As teachers present, explain, and demonstrate during lessons, students may be encouraged to process new information with peers through techniques such as "tell your neighbor."
- *Support strategies.* Peer helpers may provide assistance with paying attention, reading directions, homework, and so on to students with learning or behavior difficulties.

- *Activities.* An activity plan may incorporate the use of groups or teams of students for working on projects, solving problems, engaging in discussions, playing games, and so on.
- *Supervised practice in lessons.* Include partner or small-group practice as a bridge between teacher demonstrations and individual practice.
- *Extended practice.* Plan ongoing partner practice, such as using flashcards for building accuracy and fluency on math facts, for enhancing vocabulary, and so on.
- *Structured discovery.* Pairs or groups of students may work together to discuss examples and nonexamples in order to discover a concept or rule.
- *Informal presentation.* Following a presentation, students may form debate teams and prepare arguments based on the information presented.
- *Behavior management.* Teams may earn points for quick transitions with students helping and reminding each other of the rules.

Notice that in all of these examples, partner or group work builds on teacher instruction but does not replace it. Gersten and colleagues point out that "Peer-assisted learning is not...a substitute for teacher-led instruction. It is an evidence-based approach intended to replace some of the independent seatwork...that students do, for example, when the intention is to provide practice and extended learning opportunities for students" (2007).

There is a wide variety of **cooperative learning** and **peer tutoring** programs and groupings that can be very effective in a diverse classroom. Cooperative

Figure 8.1 Ways to Use Peers in Instruction

learning can range from formal and structured (e.g., Jigsaw) to informal and unstructured (e.g., think-pair-share). Peer tutoring can be effective in numerous content areas, and it can be used within a single classroom or an entire school, and with same age or cross-age students.

8-2 Benefits, Potential Problems, and Reasons to Use Peers in Instruction

There are important benefits and good reasons for using partner and small-group work in your classroom, but there are also potential problems if you don't incorporate critical teaching and management skills in your planning.

8-2a Benefits

Having students work with their peers can increase opportunities for active responses and practice with immediate feedback (see Photo 8.1). Peer coaching, for example, has been shown to be an effective

and efficient way to provide assistance to struggling readers during independent work time in general-education classrooms (Marr et al. 2011). Having students work with partners or in groups may also be motivating, provide the opportunity to practice social skills, increase social integration, and offers another method of teaching. These benefits help satisfy individual differences and preferences and increase engaged time. All students are able to participate in and benefit from peer-assisted instruction, including average and above-average achievers, low performers and students with disabilities, and English language learners (ELLs) (Gersten et al 2007).

8-2b Benefits for ELLs

Carefully planned partner and small-group activities can provide English language learners with many opportunities for language use. Peers can serve as language models and can provide feedback within a safe setting. Opportunities to discuss new information with other students, including those who speak the same native language, can facilitate learning.

8-2c IES Practice Guide Recommendation

Recommendation 5 of the IES Practice Guide *Effective Literacy and English Language Instruction for English Learners in the Elementary Grades* is to "Schedule regular peer-assisted learning opportunities" (Gersten et al 2007). The authors identified a strong level of evidence to support this practice. Specifically, they recommend that teachers have students at different levels of ability or English proficiency work together in pairs about 90 minutes a week. This work should consist of structured academic tasks on which the student partners practice



Photo 8.1 Having students work in pairs has many benefits. They can practice social skills and receive assistance from their peers.

and extend what was taught during regular instruction. Prior to beginning work, students will need to be taught how to work with peers.

8-2d Potential Problems

Although there are many benefits to using student pairs or groups in instruction, there are potential drawbacks as well. Simply telling students to work together is rarely enough. Most people have had experience working with others at school or at work when much time was wasted, when one person did all of the work, or when nothing was accomplished. Using peers, like all other teaching techniques, requires careful planning to avoid time spent chatting, fighting, or exchanging misinformation or to prevent chaos as students are forming groups or moving furniture. Students will not necessarily know how to work together, cooperate, share, listen, encourage, or challenge each other. Be sure to establish and communicate rules or routines and to assess and teach necessary **cooperative social skills** (see Chapters 10 and 18 for more information).

8-2e Reasons to Use

Don't assume that using peer collaboration is always superior to individual work. Consider the reasons for using partners or small groups. For example, in an activity, the benefits of having students work on group projects rather than on individual projects might be to generate more ideas, provide the opportunity for individuals to study one narrow topic in depth (if topics are distributed to individual members of the group), and provide the opportunity to practice cooperative social skills. To bring about a higher success rate, you may use peers as part of supervised practice to provide additional support as students are attempting new skills. Be sure that all students involved in peer practice will benefit from it.

8-3 When to Plan for Using Peers in Instruction

Spending time on advance planning goes a long way in helping peer work go more smoothly. There are two times to plan for using peers in instruction: One is at the beginning of the year or quarter, and the other is when you are developing a lesson or activity plan. If you will be routinely using a particular type of partner or group work, such as buddy

reading or study groups, then plan and teach those procedures early in the year. That time will be well spent because it will help avoid repeated planning and teaching time later. For example, in plans for reading lessons, you may simply write, "Find your reading partner and follow the buddy reading routine." That will be sufficient if students have previously been taught the routine and have established partners. If you have taught a mini-lesson on using the **Numbered Heads Together** procedure (Kagan 1992), such as Mini-Lesson 8.1, you only need to write "Form Numbered Heads Together groups" in your activity and lesson plans. See Chapter 10 for more information on planning mini-lessons to teach behavioral skills.

In some cases, teachers will plan for the use of peers as a one-time event. For example, suppose you are planning an inquiry activity for science class tomorrow. For that particular activity, you must plan the membership, the meeting places, and the procedures for the groups to follow. You would write detailed directions into the "activity middle" component of the activity plan.

8-4 Planning Decisions for Partner and Small-Group Work

Regardless of when you plan for using peers in instruction, you'll need to make decisions about the size of the groups, how tasks will be shared, the prerequisite skills and knowledge, and who will work together. Some of the following suggestions are adapted from various authors (Johnson et al. 1991; Slavin 1995; Arends 2004).

8-4a Determining the Size of Groups

Decide whether it is preferable to use pairs of students or small groups. Small groups typically range from three to six members. Consider the following factors when determining the most appropriate group size:

1. *More cooperative social skills are needed in larger groups.* It is easier to share materials, take turns, or reach consensus with one other person than it is with five other people. Also, in larger groups, equal participation is more difficult to achieve. The decision about group size, therefore, should be partly based on the level of cooperative skills the students have. Note that it can be tempting

Mini-Lesson 8.1

THE "NUMBERED HEADS TOGETHER" PROCEDURE

OBJECTIVE: Class will follow the Numbered Heads Together Procedure (form group, count off, begin discussion) within 1 minute.

EXPLAIN:

- Sometimes, when I ask a question, I'll ask you to get in Numbered Heads Together groups to talk over answers.
- You'll follow three steps (*on poster*):
 1. Form groups. This means turn your chairs so two people in one row and the two people across from them in the next row become a group. (*diagram on board*)
 2. Count off. Count off from 1 to 4 so each person in the group has a number.
 3. Begin discussing. Start sharing ideas right away. Everyone must be heard. Make sure everyone understands and can summarize the group's ideas.
- Do this quickly, beginning your discussion within 1 minute.
- When you've finished discussing, I'll draw a number and ask the person with that number to speak for the group.

SHOW: (*arrange in advance*)

- Everyone watch while we show you what this looks like. Signal the number of the step when you see it.
- A student (*acting the part of the teacher*) reads a question from the board ("What color are the principal's eyes?") and says, "Get in your Numbered Heads Together groups to answer this question."
- I (*sitting in student desk*) and three students turn chairs, count off, and begin discussing. We agree on an answer.
- Acting teacher draws a number and asks that person to share the group answer.

REHEARSE:

- Now everyone will practice.
- The question is: "Were there more days of sunshine than days of rain this week?" Get in your Numbered Heads Together groups to discuss it.
- Give positive and corrective feedback as needed; keep track of time.
- Call on different numbers in each group to give answer.

to avoid setting up larger groups altogether because of difficulties some students have working in them. However, because larger groups simply work better than small groups for some tasks, it is important to continue working on teaching cooperative skills so that students learn those skills needed to work successfully in a larger group.

2. *All groups do not necessarily have to be the same size.* You can accommodate diversity by having some smaller and some larger groups. This may need to be done anyway, depending on the total number of students in the class. For example, if you have 23 students, you could form five groups with three members and two groups with four members.
3. *The type of task may influence the group size.* If students are to take turns reading aloud, they will get more practice in groups of two than in groups of three or more. Larger groups may be

appropriate if the task is a project where each student has something different to do, such as researching a different topic, and all tasks can be done at once.

4. *The task may logically divide itself.* Group size may be determined by needed roles, such as a reader and a writer, or according to the content, such as reporting on the three branches of government.
5. *Time is a factor.* Typically, the larger the group, the more time will be needed. For example, if the students are to discuss or solve problems together, more time will be needed for larger groups so that each member gets a chance to contribute.
6. *Sometimes, more mundane elements must be considered.* The number of materials or available equipment, the size of tables, and so on may all affect group size.

8-4b Determining How Students Will Share Tasks

It is important to consider what each student will do during the partner or group work and to communicate this to the students. It is usually not enough to simply tell students to work together, cooperate, help each other, teach each other, or discuss. You'll need to be more specific about the procedures. For example, for partner practice on vocabulary, you might say, "Partner 1 will define the first word, and Partner 2 will use it in a sentence. Then switch for the second word."

Teachers may think about the typical roles needed in partner or group work, such as reader, recorder, checker, encourager, and timer. Then, they may decide which roles are needed in a particular task. It's most efficient to directly teach those roles that will be commonly used so all students know how to carry them out. You'll also need to decide whether the teacher or the group will assign the roles. (See Teaching Plan 5 in the Appendix for an example.)

One benefit of having each student assume a specific role in the learning activity is that it helps ensure that all students are involved. Another is that carefully planned roles can increase the likelihood that all students will learn the information necessary for reaching the objective. Additionally, achievement levels increase when students' roles are linked and they feel part of a group effort to succeed (Leighton 2014; Kagan 2007).

If it is difficult to figure out what each student will do, ask yourself whether this is a task that can be shared or whether the size of the group is appropriate. Remember that not all learning is best done in group situations.

8-4c Determining Prerequisite Skills and Knowledge

In addition to analyzing whether students have the necessary content knowledge and skills, you'll need to analyze whether they have the interaction skills required to be successful at the task. The following examples illustrate how you may consider required academic and social skills as you plan:

1. Provide instruction on summarizing paragraphs before partner work. This ensures that all students have the necessary preliminary content knowledge on how to summarize. However, you would also need to decide whether students

have the skills to listen to each other, to accept criticism, to take turns, and so on.

2. Before planning to have students discuss a particular topic in small groups, decide whether they have the necessary information or knowledge about the topic to make a discussion productive. You also need to analyze the students' discussion skills, such as making relevant comments, criticizing ideas rather than the person, and asking for clarification.
3. To form groups and pick a subject to investigate, students have to possess not only the necessary research skills, but also skills in offering ideas, reaching consensus, and so on.

Several options are available for teaching students who do not have the prerequisite cooperative social skills to be successful at the task. First, avoid the problem by changing the lesson or activity to eliminate the use of peers, or structure the task carefully to help students be successful—that is, provide clear and specific directions, change the group size, assign specific roles, and so on. Finally, you may wish to pre-teach the necessary social skills (see Chapters 10 and 18 for more information on teaching behavioral skills).



TECH NOTE

Your students may enjoy using online social networking, desktop video conferencing, blogs, wikis, and so on when working with peers. Remember, however, that they may have the technology skills but not the collaboration skills necessary. Be sure to assess and teach the relevant cooperative social skills.

8-4d Deciding Who Will Work Together

Teachers may sometimes choose to form groups at random or to allow students to decide who to work with. More often, teachers choose to plan the membership of pairs and groups carefully. When students will be working together for more than brief periods of time (e.g., for a 1-hour science experiment or a month-long reading partnership), consider the following factors as you form groups:

1. *Skills.* Consider the task and purpose when choosing whether to pair or group homogeneously

or heterogeneously. For example, if you intend to individualize the content of the tasks—with some students needing to practice addition facts, some working on multiple-digit addition, and some working on multiplication—then choose homogeneous pairs so both students are getting practice on the skills they need. On the other hand, if all students are practicing the same skills, it makes sense to pair a higher achiever with a lower achiever. In that way, students who are skilled at the task can help the lower achievers, while reinforcing their own learning by giving explanations. When forming pairs and groups, it is important to consider the study and interaction skills of the students, in addition to academic skills.

2. *Compatibility.* You'll also want to consider how students get along together when forming pairs and groups. Students who actively dislike each other or who distract each other should not be put together, unless the purpose is to provide practice on conflict resolution or on ignoring distractions. Also, consider cultural diversity in cooperation and communication skills. For example, discuss with students variations in what is considered acceptable in expressing opinions and disagreements. Some students may be uncomfortable with raised voices and table-pounding. This is a good opportunity to broaden perspectives.
3. *Integration.* Another consideration in forming pairs and groups is that of promoting social integration. Mixing boys and girls, individuals with and without disabilities, and students from varied cultural backgrounds can increase tolerance and promote friendships in the classroom. However, the teacher must carefully plan for this outcome.

8-4e Deciding How to Incorporate Technology

There are numerous benefits to students when they use technology while working with peers. It can increase achievement in academics and the use of technology, create positive attitudes toward cooperation and technology, increase social competencies and cognitive development, and foster positive relationships with team members (Johnson and Johnson 2008).

Technologies can be selected for helping peers work together by the function they serve (e.g., to

help students plan and organize, to gather information, to communicate, and to construct products). Some examples are:

- *Planning and organization.* Interactive whiteboards, software programs such as Kidspiration and Inspiration, and interactive online calendars such as Cozi.com are all tools that can assist students in figuring out how to break down tasks and divide up responsibilities. Technologies such as the Boogie Board eWriter, the All-Turn-It Spinner, and Recordable Answer Buzzers can help foster participation by a diverse group of students.
- *Gathering information.* Access to the Internet through iPads, Kindles, Nooks, and computers can provide endless opportunities for gathering research and providing practice with reading activities (see Photo 8.2).
- *Communication.* E-mail, texts, Google Docs, and Dropbox can all help students communicate with each other while working on cooperative tasks.
- *Products.* Internet access and word-processing programs (e.g., Word, Pages), presentation programs that allow design work (e.g., PowerPoint, Keynote), video software (e.g., Windows Movie Maker, iMovie), and Internet access to photos and other images (e.g., Google Photos, Apple Photos, and editing programs such as Adobe Photoshop) can all help students produce professional-looking documents and presentations.

While there are numerous benefits for using technology when peers are working together, it is

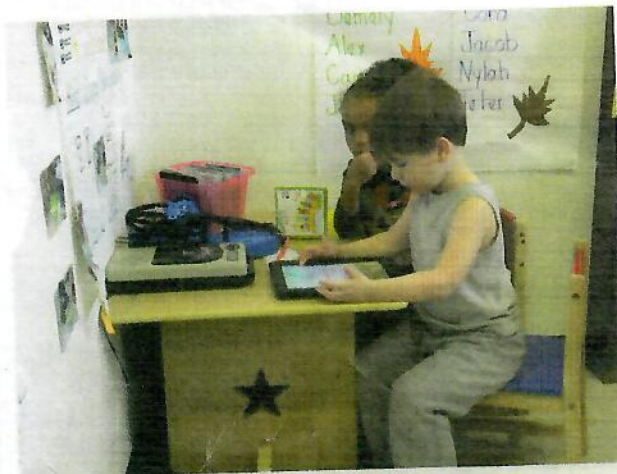


Photo 8.2 Tablets can be used to supplement classroom learning.

also important to remember that its use can either facilitate or hinder learning, depending on the conditions under which it is used (Johnson and Johnson 2008). It is important to make sure the technologies that you are considering will work well given the students you have and the learning task they will share. This includes making sure students have the skills to manage the technology and making sure the technology lends itself to being shared.

Teacher Checklist 8.1 is an overview of key considerations when planning for partner and small-group work. You can use it as a guide as you write lesson and activity plans.

TEACHER CHECKLIST 8.1: PLANNING PARTNER/GROUP WORK

- ✓ Do I have a rationale for using partner/group work in this lesson/activity?
- ✓ Am I planning appropriate group size(s)?
- ✓ Am I planning how students will share tasks?
- ✓ Am I planning to clearly communicate (by saying, writing, showing) directions for how tasks should be shared?
- ✓ Am I planning how to check for understanding of partner/group procedures?
- ✓ Do my students have the necessary academic knowledge/skills to do this partner/group work?
- ✓ Do my students have the necessary cooperative social skills to do this partner/group work?
- ✓ Am I planning to preteach or review needed cooperative social skills?
- ✓ Am I planning the membership of pairs/groups based on student needs and skills?
- ✓ Am I planning how to communicate pair/group membership?
- ✓ Should I assign roles to students within pairs/groups?
- ✓ Am I planning a room/desk arrangement to facilitate partner/group work?
- ✓ Am I planning how to quickly regain attention during partner/group work?
- ✓ Am I planning how to communicate behavior expectations for partner/group work?
- ✓ Have I thought about the appropriate behaviors I want to acknowledge?

(continued)

- ✓ Am I planning how to monitor the behavior and learning of pairs/groups?
- ✓ Am I planning the logistics for partner/group work?
- ✓ Am I planning smooth transitions to, from, and within partner/group work?
- ✓ Have I responded to my class's skill diversity in my planning for partner/group work?
- ✓ Do my students know how to use the technology I have selected?
- ✓ Will the technology I am considering help students work cooperatively and efficiently?

Professional Resource Download



8-5 Organizing and Managing Partner and Small-Group Work

The teacher needs to support cooperative behaviors by careful planning for management and organization. That is the last element in the teacher checklist and one of the most important. Following are examples of how you can use critical management skills to plan effective partner and small-group work (see Chapters 11 and 12 for a complete discussion of these critical management skills):

1. *Arrange the room to facilitate group or partner work.* When students will be working together briefly, as in active participation strategies, it makes sense for students who sit near each other to be grouped together. Teach students who their "neighbor" is (e.g., the person to their left) and who is included in their small group so these groupings can be set up quickly during instruction. If desks are in rows, plan for odd numbers and for the person at the end of the row when thinking about partnerships. Show students how to turn or move their chairs to form small groups. (Note that you will not want much furniture-moving for brief group work.) If your typical arrangement is to have desks in clusters or if students sit at tables (see Photo 8.3), then you'll need to designate partners. Consider whether peer practice will be used often



FIGURE 8.3 Take room arrangement into account when planning partner or group work.

when making desk arrangements and seating assignments.

Sometimes, you will form pairs and groups based on factors other than seating proximity. In that case, decide where in the room groups will meet and then plan for moving desks or tables. If students are to work together, they will need to be physically close together. No one should be physically excluded from the group, and everyone should be able to see the materials and each other. Situate the pairs and groups far enough apart so that groups do not distract each other and so they can be easily monitored.

Plan how to gain attention. When students are focused on each other in pairs and small groups, they may not easily see or hear the teacher. Therefore, plan a strong signal for attention such as ringing a bell or turning off the lights. Also, when students are working and talking together, it can be difficult for them to shift their attention back to the teacher. It may be helpful to provide practice in responding quickly to the signal for attention. It may also be helpful to provide time alerts, such as, "In 3 minutes, I'll ask you to finish your discussions and listen to my directions for the next activity."

• *Communicate behavior expectations.* Think about the rules and routines that apply and the social skills that students will need for success during the partner or small-group work, and communicate these to the students. Consider the examples

of cooperative social behaviors in Example 8.1. They demonstrate how complex partner and group work can be and how important it is to teach students relevant rules, routines, and social skills. (See Teaching Plan 5 for examples.)

EXAMPLE 8.1: COOPERATIVE BEHAVIORS NEEDED FOR GROUP WORK

- Moving into groups
- Staying with the group
- Talking in quiet voices
- Accepting partners politely
- Taking turns
- Doing your share
- Listening to others
- Disagreeing politely
- Accepting feedback
- Reaching consensus
- Getting help
- Sharing materials
- Encouraging participation
- Taking others' perspectives

In addition, plan how you will communicate the procedures for working together to the students. Be sure that your directions are clear and concise. Be sure that students know the task expectations—that is, individual and group objectives, the timelines, and the evaluation procedures. Put all of these in writing rather than simply saying them.

4. *Acknowledge appropriate behavior.* Plan to acknowledge students for following the behavior expectations you've communicated and for using other important cooperative skills. Think about the behaviors that are challenging for individuals. If some students tend to dominate, acknowledge them for letting others participate. If some students are uncomfortable talking in groups, acknowledge them when they make a contribution. Acknowledge the group as well as acknowledging individuals: "Your group managed to reach consensus even though each of

you began with very different goals. Well done.” These kinds of statements provide students with valuable feedback that is directly related to the skills needed to work with others.

5. *Monitor student behavior.* Be sure to move around to monitor each group or pair. Your proximity will encourage students to stay on task. If you are sitting with a group, position yourself to see the other groups. Think about which pairs or groups may need more monitoring and interaction with you, such as encouragement, feedback, and reminders.
6. *Plan for logistics.* You may want to designate, or have the groups designate, individuals to gather, distribute, and return needed materials and equipment for the group.
7. *Manage transitions.* The transition to and from group or partner work has the potential to be chaotic. Don’t let this keep you from using this effective teaching method; instead, plan carefully to avoid wasted time and behavior problems. Plan how to communicate who will work together, such as listing groups and their members on the whiteboard for students to read. Plan where groups will meet. You may display a diagram or map, or put signs up to show where groups are to sit. Describe and demonstrate how to move desks and chairs if that’s necessary. Communicate behavior expectations for the transition itself. (Proactively teaching the routine of how to move into groups will be time well spent.)

8-6 Responding to Skill Diversity when Planning Partner and Small-Group Work

If students are not yet skilled at working with partners or in small groups, don’t avoid using these teaching methods, but do temporarily minimize the cooperative skills needed. You can do this in various ways:

- Use smaller groups; students will find it easier to cooperate with one or two people than with four or five.
- To ensure that all students have a chance to participate in a group discussion, coach students who

are hesitant to contribute to the discussion as well as the other group members (Stockall 2011).

- Assign roles and tasks rather than having the group make all decisions.
- Provide enough materials to minimize the necessity for sharing.
- Be careful in assigning group members; good friends or bad enemies may have difficulty working together.
- Focus on one cooperative skill at a time, and review it just before the partner or small-group work. For example, ask students to state what listening to your partner looks like and sounds like.
- Be direct about how to solve problems. For example, say, “If more than one person wants to go first, then use rock-paper-scissors to decide.”

Remember Ms. Wakamatsu and her plan for trying to use peers in instruction when teaching reading comprehension skills? See Teachers in Action 8.2 for some of her ideas. Also look at Reflecting on Your Teaching 8.1 after you have taught a lesson using partner or group work.

TEACHERS IN ACTION 8.2: MS. WAKAMATSU’S PLAN FOR USING PEERS IN INSTRUCTION

Strategy. While the teacher is working with a small group, the rest of the class will work in pairs to complete reading tasks intended to provide practice with the comprehension skill she taught to the whole class. Ms. Wakamatsu will select the partners based on their reading skills and how well they work together. She will explicitly teach them a structured routine to follow so that they can use their time well.

Reasoning. Ms. Wakamatsu has learned that there is a strong research base for this practice. Using partners in this way will benefit students by providing support in practicing their reading comprehension skills when Ms. Wakamatsu isn’t available to them, and it will allow students to receive feedback as they practice.

What else does Ms. Wakamatsu need to consider to ensure that her plan for using partners will be effective? How else could she use peers in instruction?

REFLECTING ON YOUR TEACHING 8.1

After teaching a lesson or activity that incorporated partner or small-group work, take the time to reflect on the effectiveness of your instructional approach and planning. How did your students respond? Did they achieve the learning objective? Did some

students struggle? What would you do differently next time? You may wish to structure your reflection by using this Reflection Form. Add items that interest you particularly for the lesson you taught.

REFLECTION FORM: USING PARTNER/SMALL-GROUP WORK IN A LESSON OR ACTIVITY

How did it go?	Reflection
Were the group sizes appropriate?	
Did group members work well together?	
Did students have needed academic knowledge to be successful?	
Did students have needed cooperative social skills to be successful?	
Were my directions clear for sharing tasks?	
Was I able to quickly regain attention when needed?	
Did my room arrangement and logistical planning prevent wasted time?	
Were the strategies I selected effective for ensuring the success of all students?	

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Summary

Having students work with partners or in small groups during lessons and activities is a strategy with many potential benefits. However, careful planning is needed to ensure that students work together

effectively and efficiently. Planning is necessary to determine the size and membership of groups, how students will share tasks, and how to evaluate the knowledge and skills needed by students.

Key Terms & Definitions

Cooperative learning: A strategy where students work together to accomplish a clearly defined learning objective or complete a task. Specific structures for cooperative learning activities can be formal (e.g., Jigsaw) or informal (e.g., think-pair-share).

Cooperative social skills: Those skills needed to work successfully within a group. Examples of cooperative social skills are listening to others, sharing materials, encouraging participation, and accepting partners politely.

Numbered Heads Together: A cooperative learning strategy where students are placed into small teams and assigned a number (e.g., 1–4). The whole group receives recognition if a randomly selected student within the team answers correctly.

Peer-tutoring: A peer-mediated strategy in which students serve as academic tutors and tutees. Generally, a less skilled tutee is paired with a more skilled tutor.

Portfolio Pointers

- Use teaching videos to demonstrate your proficiency in building the learner collaboration and interpersonal communication/social skills necessary for success in partner and small-group work. (InTASC Standard 3: Learning Environments)
- In planning documents, highlight varied uses of partner and small-group work to meet the needs of learners and encourage deeper understanding and application of knowledge. (InTASC Standard 8: Instructional Strategies)