# 19 Using Small-Group Development to Facilitate Cooperative Learning Base Groups

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Cooperative learning base groups are long-term groups with stable membership that usually stay together for at least a term. Base groups are appropriate when you have large numbers of students in your classes and the subject matter is complex.

When you facilitate base groups, it will help you to understand small-group development. Regardless of size or type, small groups typically go through predictable stages over time. Small-group development experts such as Kent Curtis, M. A. C. Jensen, R. B. Lacoursiere, George Manning, Steve McMillen, and B. W. Tuckman have named and described these stages. According to these experts, small groups move through four developmental stages: forming, storming, norming, and performing. Obviously, it is in the best interest of base groups to move through the first three stages as quickly as possible in order to develop high performance teams. If you, as facilitator, understand the stages of small-group development, you likely will be better able to facilitate base groups moving more quickly toward the fourth, high-performing stage.

**Stage I, Forming.** According to the experts, when groups first come together and form, they need to deal with the issue of trust. New groups are unclear on their purpose and members don't know what to expect. They are facing a new social situation, with some discomfort and apprehension. Consequently, they likely will be cautious. They'll be trying to figure out what is going to happen, who's who in the group, where they fit in, and how they will be treated by other group members. They'll also be trying to figure out what is OK behavior, what is the nature of their group's tasks, and how they will deal with each other to accomplish the task. Interactions likely will be light and superficial and mostly directed toward you, the formal leader. At this stage, groups will not have developed any skill and knowledge as teams. When you first form your base groups you can expect them to be cautious, excited, anxious, and to perform at a low level. You also can expect individual members to be anxious, searching for structure, silent, and cautious with you and group members.

**Stage II, Storming.** Once the base groups have formed, they usually move into a period of storming, when they need to deal with the issue of conflict. In this stage, individual members will react to what has to be done, question your authority, and feel increasingly comfortable being themselves. The groups likely will exhibit conflict and resistance to the task and structure, even as they increase their productivity through increased skills and knowledge. Members may express their concerns and frustrations more openly, and feel freer to exchange ideas. At this stage, they are learning to deal with differences in order to work together to meet their goals. Typically, members will exhibit power struggles for influence. Groups that don't get through the storming stage successfully will exhibit divisiveness and low creativity. After your base groups have formed you can expect them to exhibit conflict over the task and the structure. On some occasions you may have individual members who: confront you, the cooperative learning facilitator; polarize among the team members; test group tolerance; and behave in a fight or flight manner.

**Stage III, Norming.** This is the stage in which explicit or implicit norms of behavior are developed that are considered essential for the groups to accomplish their task. Order forms, as does group cohesiveness. Members begin to identify with their groups and develop acceptable ways to complete assignments, resolve differences, make decisions, and solve problems. They enjoy meetings and exchange information among themselves freely. Group (or team) productivity increases as skills and knowledge

continue to develop. After your base groups have successfully stormed, you can expect them to reach agreement on roles and tasks, and norms of behavior, including team member and leadership behavior; and to increase their cohesiveness, morale, and productivity. You also can expect individual members to shift from power struggles to affiliation; from confusion to clarity; from personal advantage to group success; and from detachment to involvement.

**Stage IV, Performing**. The fourth stage, the payoff stage, is performing. If your base groups have successfully moved through issues of membership, purpose, structure, and roles, they will now be able to focus their energies on group performance: completing tasks and solving problems together. They will take initiative and achieve results. As they achieve progress, morale will go up and they will have positive feelings about each other and their accomplishments as a team. Base groups will now be teams that business and industry call "self-directed work teams." They will no longer be dependent upon you for direction and support; instead, members can take on leadership roles as necessary. You can expect your performing base groups to exhibit good communication and teamwork, individual commitment, high morale and group pride, and high team performance. You can also expect base groups to use a wide range of task and process behaviors: monitor and take pride in group accomplishments; focus on goals as well as interpersonal needs; and maintain the values and norms of the group. Individual members will exhibit interpersonal trust and mutual respect, actively resolve conflict, actively participate, and be personally committed to the success of the group.

**Your Role as Small-Group Development Facilitator**. As cooperative learning facilitator, you can help base groups move through the first three stages of small-group development as quickly as possible so they can reach the high performance stage. According to Manning et al. your small-group development facilitator role in each of the four stages is slightly different.

In the forming stage, you can **reduce uncertainty** by: (1) explaining the purpose of the groups and their goals, (2) providing time for questions, (3) allowing time for members to get to know each other, and (4) modeling expected behaviors.

In the storming stage, you can **reduce conflict** by: (1) hearing all points of view; (2) acknowledging conflict as an opportunity for improvement; (3) adhering to core values, such as truth, trust, and respect; and (4) maintaining democratic and humanistic ideals.

In the norming stage, you can **encourage norm development** by: (1) modeling listening skills, (2) fostering an atmosphere of trust, (3) teaching and facilitating consensus, and (4) providing team-centered learning.

In the performing stage, you can **help groups succeed** by: (1) being prepared for temporary setbacks, (2) focusing on task accomplishments and interpersonal support, (3) providing feedback on the work of the groups, and (4) promoting and representing the groups.

Manning et al. believe it is helpful to view each of the stages in the life of groups from two points of view. "The first is *interpersonal relationships*. The group moves through predictable stages of testing and dependency (forming), tension and conflict (storming), building cohesion (norming), and finally, establishing functional role relationships (performing)."

"At the same time, the group is struggling with *accomplishing tasks*. The initial stage focuses on task definition and the exchange of information (forming). This is followed by discussion and conflict over the task (storming). Next comes a period of sharing interpretations and perspectives (norming). Finally, a stage of effective group performance is reached (performing)."

If you and your base groups have done your jobs exceedingly well, you will have groups that exhibit the "dazzling dozen" characteristics of effective teams described by Manning, et al.:

1. Clear mission
2. Informal atmosphere
3. Lots of discussion
4. Active listening
5. Trust and openness
6. Disagreement is OK
7. Criticism is issue oriented, never personal
8. Consensus is the norm

9. Effective leadership
10. Clarity of assignments
11. Shared values and norms of behavior
12. Commitment

**Stage V, Adjourning**. If you're an experienced cooperative learning base-group facilitator, you undoubtedly know the fifth stage in small-group development, one most of the experts don't address: adjourning. As your base groups near the end of the term, they typically will begin to think about how they will feel when the groups are no longer groups. They usually will experience some sadness or regret at the idea of separation.

In the adjourning stage, you can **encourage closure** by: (1) acknowledging and honoring the feelings about relationships that have developed; and (2) allowing farewell rituals. If you have super high-performing groups, they may not even need your encouragement. They may perform the task of closure—their final task together—all by themselves.

# 20 College Classrooms' Lost Gold Mine: The Cooperative Base Group

Susan E. Gruber and Darlene Vanselow Habanek

Included in the list of challenges for contemporary college classrooms is empowering students to become not only successful, but also caring adults who are committed to the academic success of their peers. The popular press enumerates the need for modern-day citizens to have well-developed communication and collaboration skills. Unfortunately, these skills are not generally reinforced in traditional classrooms, which maintain one-way communication flowing from the instructor to the students and the lecture-practice-test sequence for learning. Cooperative-learning structures used in college classrooms provide organized and systematic choices for varied learning experiences which foster the development of social skills needed for collaboration and communication around academic tasks.

One valuable cooperative structure is base groups. In our college courses we begin each class session with a base-group meeting. Base groups are heterogeneous, long-term cooperative-learning groups with stable membership which meet regularly. The purpose of these meetings is to provide each member with support, encouragement, and assistance needed to complete assignments and make good academic progress. Members hold each other accountable for striving to make academic progress.

For faculty members to use base groups, they must understand how to set them up, as well as what activities to use initially, in the middle and at the close of the term. There is a solid research foundation supporting the use of base groups; they are also generally enjoyed by both students and instructors.

# Setting Up

## Group Size

In setting up base groups, the first decision that must be made is the size of the groups. We have found that it is easier for a group of four students to get together outside of class to work on projects or to build academic support for study and review together. This size also allows for absenteeism or for students who drop the course before the end of the term.

## Assigning Students to Groups

The next decision to be made is the assignment of students to groups. There are several methods that can be used to assign students to groups: team-of-instructors' assignment, random assignment, student self-assignment, or individual-instructor assignment. There are two types of classes which influence the group assignments: cohort and regular classes. With a cohort of students who are taking most of their courses together, a team of instructors would meet to assign students to groups based on jointly-determined criteria. These criteria might be based on: a) where students live, b) transportation issues, or c) academic interests. These base groups would then remain constant for all courses for the duration of the program (as long as four years in some cases).

For regular-class base groups, students might be assigned randomly. Students would count off and join students with the same number. For example, in a class of 32, students would count off from 1-8, forming eight teams of four. Another group-formation procedure would be to have students self-assign according to criteria such as living in the same area, people you don't know, different gender and age, and full- and part-time students. After students find each other, a data sheet can be produced as an initial assignment where group members report information based on criteria specified for forming groups. This sheet would be turned in to the instructor for review to assure heterogeneity, and then placed in the base-group folder for future reference by students and instructor.

If the class is small, the instructor might employ other methods to determine group membership, such as a sociogram and/or information gained from informal observations. A sociogram, often used by sociologists, is a method of gaining information about group dynamics and/or interaction patterns among people. When using a sociogram, the instructor asks students to list two or three peers in class with whom they would like to go to a movie or have a cup of coffee (social events) and to list two or three different peers with whom they would like to work on a project or paper (academic tasks). The instructor would then form groups of three or four people around isolated students, always reserving the right to adjust the final group assignment based on academic ability, social skills and other criteria important to the course. To use informal observations for assigning students to groups an instructor would gather data early in the course by observing student interactions during group work and whole-class discussions. For example, the instructor would note which students talk a great deal or seem to pull away from the group, and which students appear to have a solid knowledge base versus those who struggle with the course content. This information is then used to form effective heterogeneous cooperative base groups.

After deciding on group size and composition, decisions must be made as to what the members will do in their base groups. Below are activities that can be used at the beginning, during or at the end of a session.

## Activities

Base groups meet at the beginning of each class session. Members pick up their base groups' folders, arrange their desks or sit two-by-two if in a lecture hall (or a room without moveable chairs) and carry out basic activities.

*Folders.* Groups give themselves names which they write on the tabs of their folders along with their group numbers. Group members also write their names on the outside of the folders. Some groups may choose to decorate their folders with things they have in common or symbols that represent their groups. This might be an ongoing task for the groups. In a class of 100 with 25 or more

base groups, we take pictures of the groups on the day they are assigned to their base groups. During the next session students tape these pictures to the inside of their folders, writing their names across their pictures. This practice helps us learn students' names faster so we can refer to them by name, in and outside of class and when they send E-mail during and after the course.

*Routine Tasks.* Attendance can be taken in the group. The Membership Grid (see Trust/Self Disclosure Tasks) can be used as the attendance record by having students write absent on it if a person is missing rather than allowing it to be filled in the next time the person attends class. Other records can be kept by the base group as well if this is important in the course (i.e., hours spent in lab or internship or fieldwork since the last session, or interviews completed).

*Homework Check.* Students check one anothers' homework to see if it is complete, if there were any problems with the assignment or with understanding the material. Arrangements can be made for a time outside of class when the base group can meet to provide academic or cognitive support to group members. Checklists of skills, concepts, processes and procedures can be completed within groups to determine the kind of support members need in order to understand the information in the course.

Other interesting activities to complete at the beginning of class meetings include:

*Trust/Self Disclosure Tasks.* With this task students share something personal about themselves. This is entered on a Membership Grid which gives the history of the group. Questions can be posed, such as favorite teacher and why, favorite relative and why, farthest place from this room traveled, most dangerous experience, hobby, qualities of a best friend, famous person you would like to learn from, person who had the most impact on your life, where and with whom you learned to resolve conflict, favorite movie, best thing that happened to you since last session, and so forth. These questions provoke self disclosure which facilitates the personal support that group members need to become a connected productive group. (For more information on using and understanding small groups see the previous article.)

*Review of Relevant Learning.* Periodically, we check what the students have read, thought about, or done that is relevant to the course since the last session. Each member gives a succinct summary of this to his/her base group. Sometimes students are asked to do a One Minute Paper individually before they share with their groups. This can be turned in via the group folder for the instructor to review. Students might bring resources they have found or copies of articles and other work they wish to share with their group members.

*Peer Editing of Required Papers.* Before papers are handed in to the instructor, base group members can peer edit them. They might check grammar, organization, style and other aspects of the writing process. We find that papers are of much higher quality when students are given some class time for peer editing.

*Group Processing.* To assist groups to function better, students are periodically asked to reflect on and give feedback to each other and the instructor about working together. Students might answer questions on what they like about each other, what they like about themselves, how they would rate themselves and the other group members on their involvement in their groups. Students might be asked to write about what is going well in their groups, what needs to be improved and how they will do this. Team members sign these papers, put them in the folders for the instructor to review and use for group processing activities. Reflection on how the groups are working helps to improve the functioning of the groups. Without this reflection, dysfunctional groups tend to remain that way throughout the term and students become angry and bitter about group work. To have honest processing, however, the trust level must be high in the groups. Trust activities are an important aspect of building effective group functioning.

During class sessions, base groups can be used for both informal and formal cooperative-group work.

*Informal Group Interactions.* When lecturing or making a longer presentation, instructors break "teacher talk" into shorter periods of time (for adults about 10-15 minute time blocks). At the end of that "talk" time, students are asked to turn to their base groups or to one member of their base group and answer a ques-

tion that the instructor has posed based on the information just presented. This process transforms the students into active rather than passive learners. Students are randomly selected from different groups to present a response based on the interaction with their partners. Sometimes they give written responses which are then placed in the folders. During an hour session, this may be done three or four times.

*Formal Group Work.* Students complete a formally-structured group project in their base groups on an area of concern or issue in the field. We use base groups when heterogeneity is important or changing groups is not critical to the project. At other times we use other team configurations based on grade level or subject area when base groups would not be as effective. The decision to use base groups or to form different groups for a project is dependent on the outcome desired. For example, a case study analysis can be done by forming groups using one person from three different base groups. Or, a Jigsaw of course material could be structured with the base group being the teaching/learning group with individuals studying and planning how to teach their section with members of other base groups who have responsibility for the same section of the materials.

At the end of class sessions, base groups can be used for closure. Some of these tasks might be similar to those used at the beginning or during the class session.

*Closing Tasks.* At the end of the session, base-group members should check to see that each member understands the assignment(s) and if anyone will need support. This checking might take the form of a meeting or just talking with each other on the telephone between sessions. Group members might set goals about what they will read or have completed before the next session. In addition, members might discuss what they learned during the session. They might even check their notes to be sure they have all of the important information. Further, members might discuss how they can apply what they learned during the session in a real-life situation. Group members might rate themselves as to how well they worked together during the day. And, of course, there should be a celebration of the hard work and learning which took place. Someone in each group is responsible for being sure all papers are

in the base-group folder and that the folder is returned to the instructor prior to leaving class.

## Research Support

The research support for using cooperative base groups is extensive.

*Social Support.* Social psychology tells us that "receiving social support and being held accountable for appropriate behavior by peers who care about you and have a long-term commitment to your success and well-being is an important aspect of progressing through college" (Johnson & Johnson, 1989).

*Achievement and Productivity.* Cooperative efforts result in high achievement and greater productivity than competitive or individualistic efforts (Johnson & Johnson, 1997).

*Concern for Self and Others.* Conger (1988) found that without a balance between concern for self and concern for others, concern for self led to a banality of life and, even worse, to self-destructiveness, rootlessness, loneliness, and alienation. Individuals are empowered, are given hope and purpose, and experience meaning when they contribute to the well-being of others within an interdependent effort.

*Sense of Belonging.* When students feel they are supported and known by other students, they tend to feel less alienated and more positive about remaining in college. This kind of support has been shown to combat dropping out of school (Johnson & Johnson, 1989).

## Conclusion

Cooperative-learning base groups are at the heart of all our courses. We have collected data and comments from students concerning their feelings about being in base groups. Not only do students benefit through both personal and academic support, we as instructors benefit.

*Student Comments:* Some students have reported that:

"Base groups helped me to develop a connection with other students. It forced me to expand my friendships,"

"As a new student to college, it was a reassuring way to get adjusted to classes,"

"I had people to count on when I missed class,"

"The tasks we did at the beginning of each class as a base group got us on task and kept me on schedule for readings and assignments,"

"Having feedback from other students and forming answers made the material clearer," and

"I felt more prepared for large group discussions."

*Authors' Experiences.* After using base groups over several years in teaching both undergraduate and graduate courses, we have found that:

*We can both view and be part of the social interaction,

*We hear and can address student concerns quickly and housekeeping chores can be taken care of expeditiously,

*Absent students can get remedial assistance from their base-group members,

*Ready-made groups are set up for activities, and

*Base groups provide constant, appropriate modeling of collaborative efforts in the classroom.

As more careers use teamwork to meet goals, institutions of higher education have an obligation to change the paradigm of how we conduct courses. When students interact with each other, we see that they not only achieve at higher levels, they also care more about each other. Even though structuring and organizing base groups requires time and thought initially, the benefits more than pay back the time and effort for both instructors and students. Base groups have been a gold mine in our courses.

# 21 Structured Controversy/ Constructive Controversy

David W. Johnson, Roger T. Johnson and Karl A. Smith

Using academic conflicts for instructional purposes is one of the most dynamic and involving, yet least-used teaching strategies. Although creating a conflict is an accepted writer's tool for capturing an audience, teachers often suppress students' academic disagreements and consequently miss out on valuable opportunities to capture their own audiences and enhance learning.

Controversy exists when one student's ideas, information, conclusions, theories, and opinions are incompatible with those of another. Structured academic controversies are most often contrasted with concurrence seeking, debate, and individualistic learning. For instance, students can inhibit discussion to avoid any disagreement and compromise quickly to reach a consensus while they discuss the issue (concurrence-seeking). Or students can appoint a judge and then debate the different positions with the expectation that the judge will determine who presented the better position (debate). Finally, students can work independently with their own set of materials at their own pace (individualistic learning).

## Structured Controversy in Environmental Education

Topics on which we have developed curriculum units include the following and many others: "What caused the dinosaurs extinction? Should the wolf be a protected species? Should coal be