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**Date:** July 2015

**To:** Larry Ferlazzo ([larryferlazzo@gmail.com](mailto:larryferlazzo@gmail.com))

**From:** REL West Reference Desk Team

**Re:** Summary of information on collaborative vs. cooperative learning

Request: What is the difference between “collaborative” learning and  
“cooperative learning,” and do the Common Core State Standards recommend one or the other?

Response:

Regarding the differences between collaborative learning and cooperative learning, we have not found any literature on whether Common Core State Standards recommend one or the other. We have prepared the following memo information on collaborative vs. cooperative learning.

Citations include a link to a free online version, when available. For those resources that do not have a free, full-text version available online, we have attached a .PDF version. All citations are accompanied by an abstract, excerpt, or summary written by the author or publisher of the document. We have not done an evaluation of the methodological rigor of these resources, but provide them for your information only.

**References**

1. **Journal articles on collaborative vs. cooperative learning**

Davidson, N., & Major, C. H. (2014). Boundary crossings: Cooperative learning, collaborative learning, and problem-based learning. *Journal on Excellence in College Teaching*, *25*(3), 49. Retrieved on July 14, 2015, from <http://northweststate.edu/wp-content/uploads/files/BoundaryCrossings.pdf>

*Abstract:* Since the 1960s, there has been growing and sustained interest in small-group learning approaches at the school level and in higher education. A voluminous body of literature in this area addresses theory, research, classroom practice, and faculty development. The approaches most highly represented in the literature are cooperative learning, collaborative learning, and problem-based learning (PBL). In this article, the authors compare and contrast these approaches through answering questions such as the following: What are the unique features of each approach? What do the three approaches have in common? How are they similar, and how are they different?

Joung, S., & Keller, J. M. (2004). *The effects of high-structure cooperative versus low-structure collaborative design of decision change, critical thinking, and interaction pattern during online debates.* Chicago, IL: Association for Educational Communications and Technology. Retrieved on July 14, 2015, from <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED485151.pdf>

*Abstract:* The terms “cooperative” and “collaborative” are sometimes used interchangeably in reference to group learning activities in classrooms and in online settings. However, they can be viewed as differing in terms of characteristics such as pre-structure, task structure, and content structure (Strijbos & Martens, 2001; Panitz, 1996). This study attempted to help clarify these differences and the effects of the two types of groups on learner performance in an online debate. The study investigated the effects of a highly structured cooperative learning (HSCP) group, which had pre-assigned debate positions as a pre-structure, argumentation scaffolding as a task structure, and evaluation scaffolding as a content structure, compared to a low structured collaborative learning (LSCL) group, which did not have these structures, in terms of pre-service teachers, decision changes, critical thinking, and interaction patterns. Results demonstrated that there were greater amounts of critical thinking, and of critical and dynamic interaction patterns in the HSCP than LSCL group.

Reinhardt, C. H., & Rosen, E. N. (2012). How much structuring is beneficial with regard to examination scores? A prospective study of three forms of active learning. *Advances in Physiology Education*, *36*(3), 207–212. Retrieved on July 14, 2015, from <http://advan.physiology.org/content/36/3/207.long>

*Abstract:* Many studies have demonstrated a superiority of active learning forms compared with traditional lecture. However, there is still debate as to what degree structuring is necessary with regard to high exam outcomes. Seventy-five students from a premedical school were randomly attributed to an active lecture group, a cooperative group, or a collaborative learning group. The active lecture group received lectures with questions to resolve at the end of the lecture. At the same time, the cooperative group and the collaborative group had to work on a problem and prepare presentations for their answers. The collaborative group worked in a mostly self-directed manner; the cooperative group had to follow a time schedule. For the additional work of preparing the poster presentation, the collaborative and cooperative groups were allowed 50% more working time. In “part 1,” all groups worked on the citric acid cycle, and “in part 2,” all groups worked on molecular genetics. Collaborative groups had to work on tasks and prepare presentations for their answers. At the end of each part, all three groups were subjected to the same exam. Additionally, in the collaborative and cooperative groups, the presentations were marked. All evaluations were performed by two independent examiners. Exam results of the active lecture groups were highest. Results of the cooperative group were nonsignificantly lower than the active lecture group and significantly higher than the collaborative group. The presentation quality was nonsignificantly higher in the collaborative group compared with the cooperative group. This study shows that active lecturing produced the highest exam results, which significantly differed from collaborative learning results. The additional elaboration in the cooperative and collaborative learning setting yielded the high presentation quality but apparently could not contribute further to exam scores. Cooperative learning seems to be a good compromise if high exam and presentation scores are expected.

1. **Blogs and other online resources on collaborative vs. cooperative learning**

Clare, J. (2015). *The difference in cooperative learning & collaborative learning*. Blog in Teachers With Apps. Retrieved on July 14, 2015, from <http://www.teacherswithapps.com/the-differences-in-cooperative-learning-collaborative-learning/>

*Excerpt:* There has been much written to help teachers differentiate between cooperative learning and collaborative learning. Deciding which approach suits the purpose and the final goal of a lesson is not always obvious. First, defining collaborative learning and cooperative learning and how they both contribute to pivotal knowledge building and critical thinking skills can be confusing. The purpose of both approaches is the same; to provide students opportunities to engage with each other in thoughtful learning. The underlying premise of these techniques is that learning is enhanced by peer interaction.

Long-Crowell, E. (n.d.). *Cooperative and collaborative learning in the classroom*. Retrieved on July 14, 2015, from <http://study.com/academy/lesson/cooperative-and-collaborative-learning-in-the-classroom.html>

*REL West Note:* This is a 10-minute video on the definitions of collaborative learning and cooperative learning, and the differences between them in the classroom.

Teaching Channel. (n.d.). *Collaboration vs. cooperative learning*. Retrieved on July 14, 2015, from <https://www.teachingchannel.org/videos/collaboration-vs-cooperative-learning-nea>

*REL West Note:* This is a 3-minute video on the differences between collaboration vs. cooperative learning.

**Methods**

**Keywords and Search Strings Used in the Search**

“Collaborative vs. cooperative learning”; “cooperative learning” AND “collaborative learning” AND “Common Core State Standards”

**Search of Databases**

EBSCO Host, Google, and Google Scholar

**Criteria for Inclusion**

When REL West staff review resources, they consider—among other things—four factors:

* **Date of the Publication:** The most current information is included, except in the case of nationally known seminal resources.
* **Source and Funder of the Report/Study/Brief/Article:** Priority is given to IES, nationally funded, and certain other vetted sources known for strict attention to research protocols.
* **Methodology:** Sources include randomized controlled trial studies, surveys, self-assessments, literature reviews, and policy briefs. Priority for inclusion generally is given to randomized controlled trial study findings, but the reader should note at least the following factors when basing decisions on these resources: numbers of participants (Just a few? Thousands?); selection (Did the participants volunteer for the study or were they chosen?); representation (Were findings generalized from a homogeneous or a diverse pool of participants? Was the study sample representative of the population as a whole?).
* **Existing Knowledge Base:** Although we strive to include vetted resources, there are times when the research base is limited or nonexistent. In these cases, we have included the best resources we could find, which may include newspaper articles, interviews with content specialists, organization websites, and other sources.

This memorandum is one in a series of quick-turnaround responses to specific questions posed by educators and policymakers in the Western region (Arizona, California, Nevada, Utah), which is served by the Regional Educational Laboratory West (REL West) at WestEd. This memorandum was prepared by REL West under a contract with the U.S. Department of Education’s Institute of Education Sciences (IES), Contract ED-IES-12-C-0002, administered by WestEd. Its content does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of IES or the U.S. Department of Education nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. Government.