

Collaborating

**“In the long history of the world, those who have learned to collaborate and improvise most effectively have prevailed.”
—Charles Darwin**

Education has changed. The old view of a classroom filled with students sitting quietly at their desks, with the teacher as authority and holder of knowledge, handing out photocopied sheets of uniform work, no longer meets the needs of our students. Now we know much more about how students learn, and our teaching must be a response to that. One of the biggest changes in education is the concept of collaboration and what that means in the classroom. A collaborative activity is one in which the participants must share and negotiate to solve problems and complete tasks. This group knowledge and experience then helps them form and develop their own ideas.

Primary students love to collaborate with others in the classroom by showing and sharing. They often visit the teacher to show what they have made or found, or just to talk about ideas they have and to get feedback or reinforcement for a job well done or a good idea. They do this with peers too, calling classmates over to “look” or moving into groups to see what others are doing. As students get older, social talk is a dominant text in the classroom, as students work through ideas together and share their thinking. They answer complex questions, solve problems, and interact using rich dialogue while collaborating.

On the most basic level, the single- or multi-touch aspect of the IWB requires students to communicate and collaborate. They need to talk to each other in order to complete any group activity, to ensure that the IWB follows their direction and that they receive the feedback or meet the learning goals they are striving to achieve. The interactive whiteboard can support collaboration by making it possible to archive work to be revisited and shared later, or by providing opportunities for feedback that can be given in the form of reinforcement for activities completed.

The interactive whiteboard is also a tool that allows students to collaborate on many more levels in large and small groups in the classroom. Students can work together using the digital tools available on the interactive whiteboard to

- View common images or watch video.
- Store ideas and questions on a new unit or topic. Ideas can then be moved, sorted, and marked up as the students gain a stronger understanding of the information.
- Respond to questions posted by the teacher or each other and then receive feedback by accessing links set up by the teacher.
- Investigate Internet links or play interactive games set up by the teacher.
- Collaboratively create movies using multicultural or multilingual characters.

With Junior/Intermediate students, this is a wonderful way for students to talk and produce a product that demonstrates higher-level thinking skills. The theme of the movies can be assigned based on content being explored in class.

Access www.xtranormal.com for user-friendly, multicultural movie-making software for movies that are easily published online.

The first step in setting up students for success as they collaborate in the classroom is to organize effectively for both large and small groups to work together, and to provide meaningful activities to support that.

Organizing for Collaboration: Incorporating the Social

“Information becomes knowledge through purposeful social interactions.”

—Michael Fullan

Research tells us that students learn best when they have the opportunity to engage in social interactions with teachers and peers that

- Guide their learning.
- Allow for social language that gives them the opportunity to express ideas, negotiate, and problem solve.
- Are guided by high-level questions that encourage critical thinking.

Understanding your class dynamic, how students collaborate and interact, has impact on how your classroom operates. When you look at your class as a whole, the range students present in terms of ability, interest, motivation, and enthusiasm toward a given idea guides your teaching. The dynamic of how your students interact with each other and with you also affects how you set up your classroom and create lessons. Some ways to incorporate a social-learning philosophy are to

- Group your students in various ways: heterogeneous groups for some types of learning and homogeneous groups for others.
- Use paired work for some tasks: i.e., using “think, pair, share” when students are required to answer questions; or grouping students in pairs for problem-solving tasks.
- Encourage talk in your classroom as students work through learning tasks.
- Use the IWB to allow students to participate in social groupings with other classes in other schools or with their families.

Traditional

A traditional K–4 classroom is structured in a number of ways: students choose partners, partners are assigned (either by naming partners or by proximity in a seating plan), or groups are formed for a given task. These groups are either heterogeneous (stronger/weaker students together), homogeneous (like students together), or random. Students generally stay together in groups for long periods of time; for example, when teachers form reading groups for small-group reading instruction.

IWB Advantage

Just as we can interact with information on the IWB, the structure of student groupings can also be interactive when an IWB is used. One idea is to simply post a table on the IWB and explain to the students that they need to work with a variety of people (never the same person twice). They can sign in and complete assigned activities with various partners, rotating through their own created groups. As students progress through the activities, they select new partners by moving the names around, yet still displaying the previous partnership by cloning their names. They can track who they have worked with and see who they still need to work with.

An Interactive Idea for Collaboration

Objective

To provide opportunities for students to interact with classmates and to collaborate in a safe environment.

Hook

Share a quick video clip on the IWB showing the earth's rotation around the sun and highlighting the seasons. Set up a link on the word for each season. The link will take the students to a graphic that represents that season. As each season is displayed, have a student drag the word into the top row of a table set up on the IWB. You may want to take a screenshot of the graphic for each season as a visual display for the lesson, especially in the earlier grades.

Lesson

1. Each student gets a different partner for each of the four seasons. The partners can be arranged heterogeneously or homogeneously.
2. Set up a chart like the one below and display it on the IWB. When you call out "Summer partners," students work in that grouping for a given activity.
3. Throughout the year, students are provided with many possibilities to interact with different peers in the class. Here is a sample rotational chart with students A, B, C, D, E, F, G, and H:

<i>Summer</i>	<i>Spring</i>	<i>Fall</i>	<i>Winter</i>
A & B	A & C	A & D	A & F
C & D	B & E	E & H	B & C
E & F	D & G	B & G	D & H
G & H	H & F	F & C	C & G

4. At various points, when students need to be paired up for tasks or just in talk partners, the students work in seasonal partners. At the end of the task or activity, the students will have worked with a variety of peers. The same idea can be used with groups. The partner pairings shown in the table can be dragged into group formations and displayed on the IWB: e.g. drag A & B together with E & F for a group activity. Groupings can be changed simply by dragging different combinations from the table together. Students can participate in the formation of groups.

Closure

Change the seasonal partners each term. Periodically give students a chance to reflect on their experiences by posting a link on the partner display to a private self/peer evaluation. Have the students work in their seasonal partners to consider questions like these: Which peers did they find supportive to work with? Which peers would be good to work with again? Why did they think that combination was successful? Students and teachers can later refer to this information when arranging groupings.