Let us now understand how to design a collaborative learning environment. The teacher has an important role to play in designing the activities for collaborative learning. S/he needs to select appropriate topics for the activities, divide the students into groups in an appropriate manner, provide leadership, and evaluate the outcomes. The following steps are generally followed while designing the activities of collaborative learning:

1) Selecting the topics: The first step is to select the topics from the subject which he/she has been teaching and their learning outcomes, which are to be included. The whole course should not be selected but certain aspects of the course that needs to be augmented should be carefully chosen for collaborative learning. Group work or team work is employed in thos e situations where the students are expected to demonstrate problem–solving skills or decision-making skills or apply theoretical knowledge to real world problems.

2) Forming groups: The teacher forms groups and assigns students to these groups. The groups are usually kept small, of 4-6 students each, for better outcomes.

3) Introducing the activity: The teacher introduces the activity to the students, explains the objectives and the processes for carrying out the activity. The teacher also sets a time limit for the activity.

4) Teaching students how to work in groups: Students are usually diverse with different abilities, academic interests and cognitive styles. It is important for the teacher to know the weaknesses, strengths and learning needs of each student and assign them groups in such a manner that it ensures cohesiveness. There could be different types of students in the group, for example, there would be skeptical students, there would be shy students, and there would be dominating students. The teacher has to teach them how to work in an environment of collaboration by applying their interpersonal and organizational skills. The teacher needs to explain the students to recognize the importance of listening, clarifying statements, providing good feedback, keeping discussions on task, probing assumptions and evidence, eliciting viewpoints and perspectives, mediating conflicts, and summarizing the presentation findings. The ground rules for working in a team also need to be spelt out. The teacher should assign roles to the students, such as facilitator, note taker, planner, evaluator, etc.

5) Provide guidance: The teacher is not there to dominate the activities but to provide gentle guidance and mentorship. The teacher needs to provide appropriate feedback and ensure the communication is flowing within the group. It is important to allow students make their own decisions about how to proceed.

6) Evaluation: The teacher needs to take into account the individual effort and the team effort while grading the group work. The group members should also be asked to assess their operations during the activity. The overall achievement should be based on both the final outcomes and the assessmentof the group on their operations.

When you design activities for collaborative learning, you need to prepare a checklist containing several elements. For your ready reference, such a checklist is provided below. You might like to add more to it, as per your needs.

Checklist

1) Nature of the activity: Design the activity with a structure in mind, e.g., structure it pertaining to the physical, spatial, or temporal domain. For example, you might want the students to go around a tour of the school campus to look for the plants growing there. Or, you might like then to look at a painting for some time and then write down their thoughts.

2) Process: You would need to explain the process of the activity. You may also let the students know who they will work with, who will go first or second, and what they will use for carrying out the tasks. Let them know the process.

3) Rationale: Formulate the rationale for an activity and tell it to the students. Let them know how it will help them improve their abilities.

4) Expectation: Let the students know what you expect of them during the course of the activity. Basically you would like to test their learning outcomes, and interpersonal and organizational skills. For example, they need to show you, tell you, or write down what they are doing and read it or tell others when they have finished the activity.

5) Motivation: Design the activity in such a way that it motivates the students to participate in the activity and learn from it. Make it a fun activity with things that interest your students.

6) Accommodate the learning speed of every student: You need to design the activities in such a way that all your students are able to participate equally even if the pace of their learning is different. For example, some students in a group may complete the activity early. You may design the activity in such a way that they help the other students in the group catch up.

7) Timeline: Your design should take into account the attention span of your students. The activity should not take longer than their attention span or less time to learn.

8) Learner satisfaction: In the design, you would need to take care that the students are satisfied at the end of the activity. They should feel a sense of success.

9) Reflection time: You need to design the activity in such as way that it should have some reflection time for the students while they are carrying out the tasks. They should be able to reflect before they respond.

10) Evaluation: You may design the evaluation of the outcomes of the activity. For this you need to evaluate the contribution of the individual student and also the final product of the whole group. You would have told them your expectations early on. For example, you would like them to listen to each other, provide feedback, mediating conflicts, summarizing results, etc. The final product could be in the form of explicit and tacit knowledge.

ICT

Usually the ICTbased products of explicit knowledge would be wikis, blogs, documents, illustrations, audios, videos, a product or a process, etc. The products of tacit knowledge could be videos or face to face interactions. Tell them about the grades you are going to give them for their individual contribution and the final product.