

Individual Accountability/Personal Responsibility

**“What children can do together today, they can do alone tomorrow.”
(Let Vygotsky, 1962)**

The third essential element of cooperative learning is individual accountability, which exists when the performance of individual students is assessed, the results are given back to the individual and the group, and the student is held responsible by group mates for contributing his or her fair share to the group's success. It is important that the group knows who needs more assistance, support, and encouragement in completing the assignment. It is also important that group members know they cannot "hitchhike" on the work of others. When it is difficult to identify members' contributions, when members' contributions are redundant, and when members are not responsible for the final group outcome, they may be seeking a free ride (Harkins & Petty, 1982; Ingham, Levinger, Graves, & Peckham, 1974; Kerr & Bruun, 1981; Latane, Williams, & Harkins, 1979; Moede, 1927; Petty, Harkins, Williams, & Latane, 1977; Williams, 1981; Williams, Harkins, & Latane, 1981). This is called social loafing.

The purpose of cooperative learning groups is to make each member a stronger individual in his or her own right. Individual accountability is the key to ensuring that all group members are, in fact, strengthened by learning cooperatively. After participating in a cooperative lesson, group members should be better prepared to complete similar tasks by themselves.

To ensure that each student is individually accountable to do his or her fair share of the group's work, teachers need to assess how much effort each member is contributing to the group's work, provide feedback to groups and individual students, help groups avoid redundant efforts by members, and ensure that every member is responsible for the final outcome. Common ways to structure individual accountability include:

1. Keeping the size of the group small. The smaller the size of the group, the greater the individual accountability may be.
2. Giving an individual test to each student.
3. Randomly examining students orally by calling on one student to present his or her group's work to the teacher (in the presence of the group) or to the entire class.
4. Observing each group and recording the frequency with which each member contributes to the group's work.
5. Assigning one student in each group the role of checker. The checker asks other group members to explain the reasoning and rationale underlying group answers.
6. Having students teach what they learned to someone else. When all students do this, it is called simultaneous explaining.

There is a pattern to classroom learning. First, students learn knowledge, skills, strategies, or procedures in a cooperative group. Second, students apply the knowledge or perform the skill, strategy, or procedure alone to demonstrate their personal mastery of the material. Students learn it together and then perform it alone.