

How to create healthy dynamics when students work in groups. Appreciative Competition ensures appreciation of everyone's ideas and it stimulates creative solutions. Deciding Line becomes more challenging as the group grows. The Empathy Test helps students to appreciate other points of view.

How can students have discussions or make decisions without creating losers? It often happens that the 'loser' (the person whose ideas are ignored or rejected) is the one that has dared to think differently. It is the student who thinks differently who can really help a group see important ideas or solutions. These exercises also help to develop social skills and thinking and learning skills.

Appreciative Competition

The idea is to find or create a winning idea or the best solution. But instead of pouring all praise onto the best idea, all ideas receive appreciation along the way. This helps to make everyone feel good about their own contribution and more motivated to contribute ideas in future. It also increases learning along the way.

Let's say the purpose is to create a class logo that will help them to be excellent learners.

1. Each individual is asked to find a picture (from your collection, or as a 'homework' task) that represents their idea. After a suitable time, everyone finds a partner.
2. Each person tells their partner 3 or more things they like about their partner's picture or how the picture (or some aspect of it) meets the objective.
3. Only when each person has received at least three appreciates for their idea can they move to the next stage - which is to decide which of the two pictures to take into the next round. Even at this stage, criticism is discouraged.
4. When a pair has decided on one picture, they stand up and create a foursome with another pair that is ready (on 'standby').

They then find a place to sit down together and continue.

5. The previous pattern of appreciates is repeated: each pair appreciates the other pair's picture and then decides (without criticism) which picture to take into the next round. When ready, they stand and wait on 'standby'.
6. At this point it does not matter if a 4 joins a 2 to make a 6, or if a 4 joins a 4, or if a 4 joins an 8. Whatever the combination, there will be just two pictures to appreciate and choose from.
7. Follow this process until the whole class is choosing between the two 'finalists'.

Alternative endings

1. If it is too difficult to have such a discussion in a big group, you can stop the process sooner and have more than two pictures in a 'final' - an event which you then host in the spirit of appreciation.
2. At any stage in the above process you can ask small groups to design new logos - now that they have given so much appreciative thought to what would make a good logo.
3. Each student shows their original picture to the class and says three things that others liked about it. This alternative makes it a memory test which is also a quality check. It also ensures that everyone's picture is appreciated both at the beginning and end of the exercise. Telling others about appreciations you received can be even more motivational than hearing the original appreciation.

Other topics

The example above could fit an art class, or a history class studying heraldry, or in any class for developing the skills of working or learning in groups. It can also be used for exploring moral questions or any situations where there are several options at the outset.

Deciding Line (with Jogger Cards)

Deciding Line has a similar structure to Appreciative Competition but has a different

emphasis which is *to develop group decision-making skills*.

The more real the decision, the better. It could be a decision about what they will do as a whole class project to reduce global warming, or where they will go on their next field trip, or how best to develop the school grounds, or how to raise money for a good cause, or organising a PE lesson for maximum fun and participation.

1. The starting point can be paired conversations, but if the topic is a challenging one that might leave some pairs without an idea, it is better to start with a whole class brainstorm that generates more ideas than you need. Pairs then each choose an idea from the brainstorm - which they can develop (if wanted) while rehearsing the arguments in favour of their idea.
2. You can use the 'standby' system described in Appreciative Competition (above) but I prefer the dynamics of the 'Deciding Line'. For this you need a large room or open space and a line (or rope) on the ground that divides the space in two. One side is for saying 'hello' (the 'standby' side) and the other side is for making decisions.
3. Everyone starts with their partner on the deciding side of the line until they are ready to say 'hello' to another pair. After exchanging greetings, all four return to the deciding side. Each pair presents their case. *At this stage, the listening pair may only express appreciation.*
4. When both pairs have received sufficient appreciation, the deciding begins. The group choose one of the 2 options or merge the options in some way to make a better idea. *At this stage, the 'appreciates only' rule is suspended*, but the focus should be on producing a high quality proposal for the next round.
5. The process builds up as in Appreciative Competition until everyone meets up with two proposals to consider.

Alternative endings

Because decision-making becomes more difficult as the group grows, and because the purposes of 'Deciding Line' is to develop group decision-making skills, consider these options:

1. Pause the process any time after the slowest four have crossed the line and ask everyone to take 'time out' with their partner. Ask them to talk (in pairs) about what they have each done that has helped with 'good group decision-making'. Also ask them to talk about how others they have met so far have contributed to 'good group decision-making'. Then continue.
2. An extra option is to conclude the paired discussion by asking each pair to make three 'jogger cards' each with a word (in thick pen) that reminds them of what they should pay attention to in future group decision-making. These cards are saved until the final whole class decision, at which point one of the pair is a participant and their partner is a coach. The coach stands just outside the circle (and opposite their partner) with their three cards at the ready. Flashing a card with the 'thumbs up' sign means 'well done'; and with the 'thumbs down' sign is a 'jogger' (reminder).

Empathy Test

Empathy Test can follow any paired activity or any group activity in which pairs were working together (such as Deciding Line). Each pair ('A' and 'B') stand back to back 50cm apart. Ask all A's a scaled question about themselves during the activity such as 'How cheerful / motivated / considerate / successful / surprised were you during this activity?' A's show their answer by hand height. B's guess the level of their partner's hand by holding their own hand at the level they guess. When all hands are in place, call 'turn around'. Encourage a few seconds' chat within pairs. Keep alternating roles and be imaginative with your questions. This exercise both tests and develops empathy.