



STRATEGIES

for
Cooperative
Learning

To Ma—may the liberation you experienced on Walker’s Creek
continue to heal our lineage. Your love is a constant balm.

Publishing Credits

Corinne Burton, M.A.Ed., *President and Publisher*
Aubrie Nielsen, M.S.Ed., *EVP of Content Development*
Kyra Ostendorf, M.Ed., *Publisher, professional books*
Véronique Bos, *VP of Creative*
Alison Behnke, *Senior Editor*
Kevin Pham, *Graphic Designer*

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Welcome

What are your experiences with wholeness in education? How often do you consider and plan for the many domains of development: physical, psychological, cognitive, social, and emotional, particularly as they connect to your and your students' identities? How frequently do you think about the brain in relationship to the nervous system? And how might wholeness move us toward equitable learning environments where both adults and students thrive?

I know these aren't easy questions—yet I believe answering them is critical to your students' well-being and learning, as well as your own. And my hope is that the strategies in this book help you build and support the skills, habits, and mindsets needed to not just navigate but embrace wholeness. Wholeness honors the differences and complexities of humanity and moves us toward a more caring and just world.

Navigating wholeness has been a long journey for me. Slowly developing reflective practices like mindfulness and focusing on cultivating my own social and emotional skills are steps that have positively impacted my nervous system, mental health, and sense of joy and humility in the world. I find this particularly important as someone who has a high adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) score. The score is not destiny. I am proof, as are many others! High ACEs scores are not destiny for our students and communities either. When we choose to implement strategies that consider and welcome our students' wholeness, we create identity-affirming learning environments that protect against mental health risks, support joy, boost academics, and interrupt historical inequities.

Cooperative learning, alongside transformative social and emotional learning (tSEL), is a powerful way to practice wholeness in the classroom through its emphasis on student voice and collaboration. You probably already use many elements of both cooperative learning and social and emotional learning with your students. This book's simple and effective strategies emphasize the relationship between the two concepts, offering ways to create an identity-affirming learning environment that honors wholeness and well-being for all of us—adults included.

This book does not contain a list of basic cooperative learning lessons or activities. Instead, each strategy offers a way to explicitly pair a tSEL competency with the academic goals and objectives of any cooperative learning lesson. These strategies also highlight the importance of cooperative learning that is responsive to all student identities; the strategies are therefore centered in healing. This partnership of the tSEL strategy with your responsive cooperative learning lesson supports well-being for you and your students.

When I was a first grade teacher, this kind of partnership ensured both joyful engagement and academic growth. For example, my classroom co-constructed a call and response to use for SEL skill reflection at the end of a responsive cooperative learning lesson. Students looked forward to singing while referring to a visual list of SEL skills such as “work the whole time” and “try your best.” I would sing the phrase, “Did you work the whole time?” Students would sing back “work the whole time” and give themselves a private, close-to-their-bodies thumbs-up, thumb to the side, or thumbs-down for reflection. These reflections often echoed success with academic goals and objectives associated with the responsive cooperative learning lesson.

Similarly, when I was a literacy specialist, community agreements paired with responsive cooperative learning lessons ensured both meaningful interaction and academic progress. Students led SEL reflection time at the end of cooperative learning lessons by volunteering to review our community agreements and provide examples of what went well and what could be improved for next time. Again, these reflections often echoed academic growth during a lesson. Truly, explicitly focusing on wholeness in this way cultivates a joyful classroom climate and leads to academic, social, and emotional success.

This wholeness approach prioritizes safety, belonging, and dignity for all—things I needed as a child and young person. Writing this book has been part of my journey toward my own healing. It is also a way for me to advocate for other educators to create learning environments that honor all of us as whole, unique individuals, so we can, in turn, restore our collective humanity. I wish you well on this powerful journey!

—Sabrina

Cooperative Learning, Transformative SEL, and Teaching with a Wholeness Lens

When we teach with a wholeness lens, we honor the dynamic relationships among physical, psychological, cognitive, social, and emotional development with regard to our students' identities. Responsive cooperative learning supports this wholeness through its conditions for connection. Adults and students learn to work together in co-constructed, significant ways that hold one another accountable for engaged, responsive learning. Everyone participating in a responsive cooperative learning lesson boosts their communication skills as they navigate ideas, opportunities, conflicts, roadblocks, resources, and perspectives. These conditions for connection offer opportunities to deepen relationships, center meaningful experiences, and amplify authentic learning, all of which, in turn, enhance a sense of belonging and agency in the classroom.

However, responsive cooperative learning's conditions for connection don't occur without intentional and explicit transformative SEL instruction. Social skills are the keys to connection, and transformative SEL is thus a key element in preparing and planning for responsive cooperative learning opportunities. As the Learning Policy Institute and Turnaround for Children, in partnership with the Forum for Youth Investment and in association with the Science of Learning and Development (SoLD) Alliance, noted in *Design Principles for Schools: Putting the Science of Learning and Development into Action*, "The primary energy source for the wiring of the brain is human connection; the neurochemicals and hormones that are released through human relationships are the fuel causing neurons to fire and connect" (2021, 87). Connection is the fuel for life and learning.

Accessing this fuel is at the heart of every strategy in this book. When we intentionally use transformative social and emotional learning (tSEL) to support the conditions for the most effective, responsive cooperative learning, we prepare our students and ourselves to openly and thoughtfully engage in exploring academic content and making connections from regulated nervous systems. We are authentic, at ease, alert, and curious, and we anticipate joy in learning—conditions that support our mental health and well-being.

Before discussing this powerful partnership of responsive cooperative learning with transformative social and emotional learning, let's dig into some basics about each.

“

As teachers, the greatest gift we can offer our students is our presence and our ability to see and accept them as they are.

—Meena Srinivasan

”

Defining Cooperative Learning

What is your personal experience with cooperative learning? How often do you remember engaging in it as a student? How regularly do you facilitate it in your classroom? Did you know that there are three main structures for cooperative learning groups? Are you familiar with the five essential elements associated with cooperative learning? Let's get into it!

David and Roger Johnson, codirectors of the Cooperative Learning Institute at the University of Minnesota, provide helpful parameters for cooperative learning (Johnson and Johnson, n.d.). Cooperative learning groups can be set up in three ways:

1. Informally, for short amounts of time for processing learning at any time during a lesson
2. Formally, for structured, longer-term complex tasks
3. As a base for long-term cooperation and support with personal or academic tasks, goals, and routines, such as class attendance and homework completion

When using the strategies in this book, you'll likely pair them with the formal, structured style of group work. When planning these formal, responsive cooperative learning lessons, it's important to consider group size (three to five students per group is ideal), as well as specific, responsive academic goals and objectives that align with diverse student identities. These goals and objectives should incorporate five essential elements:

1. Positive interdependence (students working together toward a goal)
2. Accessing and applying social and emotional competencies
3. Individual accountability of each student
4. Promoting fellow group members' success in service of the lesson's goals
5. Group processing (time to reflect and debrief at the end of a lesson)

These five essential elements all rely heavily on social skills, which is why focusing on responsive cooperative learning through the lens of transformative social and emotional learning is so important and effective. Using this lens helps you create the conditions for a caring, just, and joyful learning environment where academic outcomes improve and relationships thrive through authentic communication and meaningful lesson content.

“

One of the goals of education is not simply to fill students with facts and information but to help them learn how to learn.

—Zaretta Hammond

”

Defining Transformative SEL

What are your experiences with SEL? When and where did you learn about it? Have you ever thought of SEL as transformative? To better understand transformative SEL, let's consider SEL's five key competencies as defined by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) and the five associated concepts (which CASEL refers to as focal constructs) that make them transformative (CASEL, n.d.).

At its core, social and emotional learning is about our humanity—individually and collectively. How do we connect to ourselves and others? How do we process our experiences through our identities and emotions? How do we aspire to impact our communities and eradicate inequities? To help us answer these questions and build our students' and our own social and emotional skills, CASEL identifies the following five interrelated competencies we can cultivate on our journeys:

- self-awareness
- self-management
- social awareness
- relationship skills
- responsible decision-making

These powerful competencies can be strengthened in students when we intentionally integrate them with instructional practices such as responsive cooperative learning. And they become transformative when we pair them with five related concepts of identity, agency, belonging, problem-solving, and curiosity. These five concepts provide the theme of each section of strategies in this book:

- self-awareness and identity
- self-management and agency
- social awareness and belonging
- relationship skills and problem-solving
- responsible decision-making and curiosity

Transformative SEL (tSEL) goes beyond SEL to center innovative strategies that strive to close long-standing gaps in educational opportunities and outcomes. It highlights our collective rights and our collective responsibilities for creating caring and just learning environments that honor our differences, particularly the differences of those who have been historically excluded from our educational systems.

Transformative SEL invites relationship-building based on co-learning between adults and students, and in turn, helps create caring and just learning environments that center student and community strengths, partnerships, and solutions for inequities. And it is, in large part, this focus on connection, affirmation, and collaboration that makes tSEL such a natural and effective partner to responsive cooperative learning.

“

Every child deserves an education that guarantees the safety to learn in the comfort of one's own skin.

—Dena Simmons

”



Building the Relationship Between Cooperative Learning and Transformative SEL

As we explored in the previous sections, the foundational, essential elements of responsive cooperative learning all rely heavily on social skills that honor diverse student identities. By explicitly and intentionally approaching responsive cooperative learning through a tSEL mindset, we cultivate these social skills in service of creating a learning environment that is welcoming, affirming, and equitable—all while supporting academic skills and goals.

In this book, you will explore responsive cooperative learning through each of the five tSEL competencies and their associated concepts (or focal constructs). These competencies are dynamic and interconnected. However, separating them into individual competencies facilitates individual understanding first, followed by a deeper understanding of the relationships among them.

When you choose a strategy within a competency section, it becomes a tSEL anchor for your responsive cooperative learning lesson planning. Paired with the academic content you will cover, this anchor will support and build social skills needed for the lesson. This pairing supports a wholeness lens that considers diverse physical, psychological, cognitive, social, and emotional development in lesson planning, making even more effective use of your learning time and setting you and your students up for authenticity, engagement, and growth.

“

Cognitive, academic, social, and emotional development are inextricably linked.

—Science of Learning and Development Alliance

”



Intentional Strategy Design

As you navigate this book, you will find that every strategy relies on two core approaches: activation and reflection. Once you choose a strategy to focus on during a responsive cooperative learning lesson, you can choose an activation tool and a reflection tool to use as you teach the academic content of the lesson alongside tSEL. Taking this consistent approach to integrating responsive cooperative learning and tSEL eases students' cognitive load and allows you to focus on the key concept of each strategy in partnership with the academic content of your lesson. You can flip to any strategy and reduce your lesson prep time!

Each strategy is structured with a three-paragraph design (reducing *your* cognitive load!):

- First, an overview paragraph introduces the strategy's **focus** and **goals**.
- Next, a paragraph discusses how you can **activate** the strategy through brainstorming with students and looks at how this activation connects the strategy to your responsive cooperative learning lesson's academic goals and objectives. Activation recommendations are differentiated by grade level in the strategy's "Make It Real" section. On page 12, you'll find a list of Activation Tools to choose from—and of course you can also call upon other known favorites too.
- Finally, a third paragraph focuses on how your group can **reflect** at the end of your responsive cooperative learning lesson. On page 13, you'll find a list of Reflection Tools to choose from—but again, feel free to use other preferred reflection activities as well.

This intentional design ensures that you can implement these strategies in a predictable way given limited prep time. We can all deepen our learning through the power of routines—students and teachers alike.

Speaking of learning for teachers, be sure to also check out the Adult tSEL feature in each strategy. This feature invites you to model and grow your own transformative social and emotional skills alongside your students. Your wholeness is critically important for your life inside and outside the classroom, and your modeling of these skills will deeply impact your students.

Strategy Walkthrough

Let's walk through an example of how you can engage with this intentional design. Say you are planning a responsive cooperative learning lesson on exploring and analyzing the character traits of a protagonist in a story chosen to honor students' diverse identities. The main character is complex, and students have been having strong reactions to the character's choices in the story.

You decide that it's important for students to recognize and process their own emotions associated with the character, especially since their opinions about the character vary, so they need a strategy to navigate potential conflicts in their groups during the responsive cooperative learning lesson. You choose the "Honor Emotions" strategy on page 20 (in the Strengthening Self-Awareness to Cultivate Identity section) and pick an activation tool and a reflection tool from the lists on pages 12 and 13.

Next, you open the lesson by talking about your own emotions associated with the protagonist's traits. You encourage students to name their initial emotions through the activation tool and encourage them to continue naming their emotions as they explore and analyze the protagonist's traits with their small groups.

At the end of the lesson, the reflection tool helps students process how their feelings about the protagonist might have changed during the lesson and how their different, personal emotions may have played a role in their individual analysis of the main character's traits. You can share your own shifting emotional landscape during the lesson too!

Activation Tools

Activation tools support strategy brainstorming. I encourage you to be flexible with the tools and to scaffold according to your students' needs. For example, you may need to provide a sentence stem and visual for each strategy. You may need to model an example and then invite students to model as well. These scaffolds encourage whole-group engagement.

Anchor Charts: Anchor charts name the thoughts, ideas, and processes that you and your students will connect to a strategy. You and your students can co-construct an anchor chart as a whole group, or you might invite students to create anchor charts in their small groups. The chart (or charts) should remain visible during group learning for easy reference.

Journaling: Journaling provides an opportunity for individual processing of students' ideas connected to the strategy. Consider offering space for students to share their journaling thoughts with their small groups or as a whole group. This tool can also support private processing.

Sticky Notes: Sticky notes can be a way for students to anonymously connect their ideas to a strategy. Invite students to use their sticky notes to share their thoughts about a strategy and then anonymously place them in a location where you can process them.

Turn and Talk: Turn and Talk encourages verbal processing of ideas connected to the strategy. Students physically turn and chat with a student or students near them to brainstorm their collective thoughts about the strategy. Consider also offering time for pairs to voluntarily share with the whole group.

Think-Pair-Share: Think-Pair-Share honors individual think time along with collaborative verbal processing and sharing of the strategy. Provide individual, silent time for students to brainstorm their thoughts associated with the strategy, then provide time for them to pair up and verbally share their ideas. Consider offering time for pairs to voluntarily share with the whole group.

Hands-Up, Pair Up: Hands-Up, Pair Up encourages movement, inclusion, and verbal processing. Invite students to raise their hands and move around the classroom to pair up. You will know when everyone is paired up when you see all hands paired in the air. Once that occurs, invite students to chat about their ideas connected to the strategy. Consider offering time for pairs to voluntarily share with the whole group.

Pencil Talk: Pencil Talk provides a silent space for students to share their thoughts about a strategy. Consider posting multiple charts around the room or titling multiple sections of the board with the strategy. Invite students to let their pencils "talk" about the strategy by noting their ideas on the posters or with sticky notes for the board. Consider inviting a student to read the group's collective thoughts aloud.



Reflection Tools

Reflection tools support learning synthesis, engagement, and growth. They provide a space for students to actively reflect on what went well during the cooperative learning lesson and what could go better next time. Reflection tools support student voice and meaning making.

Whole-Class Discussion: Whole-class discussions invite students to engage in the strategy reflection questions collectively. Post the questions in a spot visible to all and consider providing a couple of minutes for individual, silent reflection before opening it up for a whole-class discussion.

Small-Group Discussion: Small-group discussions invite students to engage with the strategy reflection questions in their small groups. Encourage all group members to participate and consider offering a couple of minutes of individual, silent reflection before beginning the discussion. Circulate among the groups and take note of students' reflections.

Journaling: Journaling provides a private way to process the strategy reflection questions and can offer a physical space for you to consider and review students' individual processing. Consider your capacity to provide feedback on students' strategy reflection questions.

Creating Art: Creating art associated with the strategy reflection questions offers a creative venue for self-expression. Provide materials (such as markers, paper, clay, pipe cleaners, and so on) and consider inviting students to share their art with one another.

Exit Slips: Exit slips provide a written artifact of students' strategy reflections. Consider printing the reflection questions on cards. Students can then hand their answers in at the end of each cooperative learning lesson.

What Next?: What Next? provides the opportunity for students to process the strategy reflection questions and then consider how they will apply their reflections to other areas of their life. Post the strategy reflection questions, offer time for processing, and then ask students how they will use their reflections in other areas of their lives.

Still Wondering: Still Wondering provides space for students to process the strategy reflection questions and then note what they are still wondering about the strategy, which encourages a classroom climate of curiosity. Post the strategy reflection questions, offer time for processing, and then ask students what elements of the strategy they are still wondering about.

Digital Content

At the end of the book, you'll learn how to access a list of digital articles associated with the strategies in the book. These articles are practical, research-based quick-reads to further your interest in a particular strategy. Many contain tangible examples. I hope they will be helpful, efficient references for you!



Cultivating Your Own Transformative SEL Skills for Facilitating Cooperative Learning

As educators, our mental health and well-being are central to our own wholeness and therefore to our ability to navigate wholeness in our classrooms. We are powerful models of tSEL for our students and can build on this truth to create the learning conditions for all to thrive. Each strategy in this book incorporates adult reflections centered on the strategy's tSEL skill, which will strengthen your own tSEL skills alongside those of your students.

When facilitating responsive cooperative learning lessons, cultivating your own tSEL has multiple benefits. You engage in healthy communication with and alongside your students. Just as their empathy, patience, and kindness increase, so do yours. Your cultural competence and responsiveness deepen, as well, by considering how your own identities shape your facilitation and creation of lessons.

Engaging with responsive cooperative learning through the lens of tSEL supports and affirms the wholeness of your students, explicitly and intentionally pairing social skills with academic learning. This wholeness is for you too. By strengthening your skills within tSEL's concepts of identity, agency, belonging, collaborative problem-solving, and curiosity, you deepen your humanity along with that of the students you teach.

“
Through practicing self-reflection and self-awareness, developing cultural humility, and gaining exposure to culturally responsive pedagogy, educators can expand their knowledge of how to use SEL to humanize and honor all students.

—Meiko Lin, Svea Olsen, Dena N. Simmons, Miriam Miller, and Shauna L. Tominey

”



How to Use This Resource

Choose a strategy and give it a try! And of course, you know your group best—so don't hesitate to modify these strategies to suit your students' unique needs. All the strategies in this book are designed to be flexible and to apply to all grade levels and topics.

This introductory text provides a description of the strategy.

Differentiation ideas are provided for three grade ranges.

COOPERATIVE LEARNING | Strengthening Self-Awareness to Cultivate Identity

Honor Emotions

Transitioning to a responsive cooperative learning lesson sparks multiple emotions for students. Having intentional space and time to check in and name emotions strengthens self-awareness, calms the nervous system, and prepares students for the lesson's academic goals and objectives.

Activation: As a whole group, using one of the Activation Tools on page 12, invite students to brainstorm potential emotions and the ways in which they can honor the different ways each individual expresses those emotions. After discussing the academic goals and objectives of the day's responsive cooperative learning lesson, invite students to share aloud what emotions they are feeling in relationship to the lesson. Encourage students to share their feelings throughout the lesson.

Reflection: At the end of the lesson, use a Reflection Tool from page 13 to provide time for students to debrief their experiences with naming emotions throughout the lesson. How did naming their emotions support their academic learning? How did it feel to articulate their feelings to fellow group members?



Make It Real

Grades PK–1

During the activation brainstorm, offer the sentence stem "I feel . . ." Prompt students to share pleasant and unpleasant feelings and how they express them. Encourage students to honor different ways of expressing emotions.

Grades 2–5

During brainstorming, invite students to consider multiple ways of naming pleasant and unpleasant feelings. Discuss how we express feelings differently. How can students support one another in naming their emotions?

Grades 6–12

Invite students to consider the complexity of pleasant and unpleasant emotions and how they are experienced differently based on our individual cultural identities. Also discuss how multiple emotions can happen simultaneously. How can students honor complex emotional experiences?



Adult tSEL

What is your relationship with emotional awareness? How can naming your emotions support your well-being? Model the importance of honoring emotions by naming your own emotions in relationship to the responsive cooperative learning lesson's academic goals and objectives.

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This section prompts you to reflect individually on your tSEL skills and how they connect to the lesson and to your students.

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Strengthening Self-Awareness to Cultivate Identity

When we center the concept of identity alongside self-awareness, we explore how we perceive ourselves as individuals and also as part of the communities around us. Having a clear sense of self supports our ability to navigate adversity, to interrupt inequities, and to develop holistically (academically, socially, and emotionally). When you choose a strategy from this section and pair its tSEL lens with academic goals and objectives, you encourage this identity development in your students (and yourself) during responsive cooperative learning lessons and beyond.

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