ENGAGING
THE ADOLESCENT LEARNER

BY DOUGLAS FISHER AND NANCY FREY

The First 20 Days
Establishing Productive Group Work in the Classroom

International Reading Association
www.reading.org

"Next year, I'll make sure my students know _____ from the beginning."

As the school year winds down, effective teachers think back on what has worked and what hasn't. We attempt to capitalize on what we have learned and avoid the mistakes we made along the way. Over time, we polish our practice, sanding off the rough edges until it is smooth. Precision replaces the pell-mell dash across units and semesters. Next year, we say to ourselves, they'll know how to_____.

And before you know it, the new school year is upon us. That first month of school is approximately 20 instructional days in length, and holds both promise and apprehension. As teachers we approach the first month as the time when we can get many of the logistical and procedural kinks worked out with our new students. More important, we can head off problems before they take root. But hard-won experience has taught all of us that we need to start the first day we meet our new students, rather than hope for an imaginary "better time." Hope, after all, is not a plan.

Gradual Release of Responsibility Instructional Framework

We've spent a sizeable amount of time examining the instructional moves that foster learning. The gradual release of responsibility instructional framework owes its theoretical roots to the work of Pearson and Gallagher (1983),

who described how reading comprehension occurs through a system of shared, guided, and independent reading. We've expanded their work across the disciplines and added a key
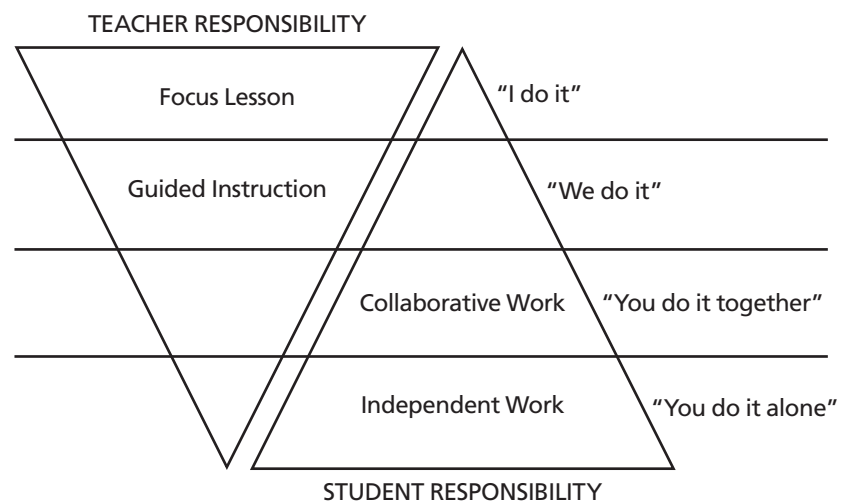
component: collaborative learning (Fisher & Frey, 2008). This is time when students work together to clarify their understanding of skills and concepts they are learning.

Keep in mind that there are lots of different ways students learn collaboratively—from brief partner talks, like Think-Pair-Share, to longer productive group work tasks that the whole class is doing while you are going from group to group. Getting collaborative learning and productive group work in place during the first 20 days of school is critical, as it lays the foundation for learning for the rest of the year.

There are four components of the gradual release of responsibility model, as depicted in Figure 1.

These components can be used in any order:

♦ Focus lessons in which the teacher establishes the purpose of the lesson and models his or her thinking

♦ Guided instruction in which the teacher questions, prompts, and cues students to facilitate their thinking about the topic

♦ Collaborative learning in which students work together, using academic language, to complete a task

♦ Independent learning in which students apply what they have learned individually

TEACHER RESPONSIBILITY

Focus Lesson — "I do it"

Guided Instruction — "We do it"

Collaborative Work — "You do it together"

Independent Work — "You do it alone"

STUDENT RESPONSIBILITY

Fisher, D., & Frey, N. (2008). *Better learning through structured teaching: A framework for the gradual release of responsibility* (p. 4). Alexandria, VA: ASCD. Used with permission.

FIGURE 1 Gradual Release of Responsibility Framework of Instruction

Getting to Productive Group Work

It's not uncommon to hear middle and high school teachers express disbelief about the apparent lack of collaborative skills their students exhibit at the beginning of the year. Some are tempted to wonder whether last year's teachers were awful, or if these kids are indeed clueless. "They're in _____ grade; they should know how to do this by now," is a common complaint. It's true, and the chances are very good that they know how to engage in partner talk or how to work in a small group. It's likely that they've done these things dozens of times in previous years. But the truth is they don't know how to do it for you.

The first 20 days of school is time when you systematically put into place the procedures on which you will rely throughout the year. In addition, you establish a learning environment centered on personal responsibility, respectful discourse, and collaborative problem solving. After all, learning is really about resolving problems to reach competence. And a few years in the classroom has taught all of us that simply posting and reviewing a set of rules isn't enough. We have to embody these rules with actions that reinforce the principles we value. The rules for our classroom are pretty straightforward: *Take care of yourself. Take care of each other. Take care of this place.* But the outward behaviors are the demonstration of those rules.

For these reasons, we put together a calendar of spotlight lessons for each of the first 20 days of school. These lessons usually take somewhere between 10 and 20 minutes, and we do our best to fold them into the content we're teaching. Importantly, the spotlight lesson introduces a skill or procedure; once profiled, we use them as often as possible during subsequent lessons so that students have many opportunities to refine their collaborative learning skills. A calendar for the first 20 days can be found in Figure 2, and we'll discuss each of the lessons in more details in the next sections.

Spotlight Lessons on Personal Responsibility				
Spotlight Lessons on Respectful Discourse				
Spotlight Lessons on Collaborative Problem Solving				
Silent Interview Interview your partner in writing only, then introduce him or her to the class.	**On-Task Partners** When prompted, check to see if your partner is on the right page and the like.	**Helping Curriculum** Offering help, asking for helping, accepting help, declining help.	**Accountable Talk to the Community** Explain your partner's ideas to the class.	**Paired Response Cards** You and your partner have one set of response cards and must agree on an answer.
Noise Meter Discuss how loud noise levels should be in the class.	**Discussion Partners** Discuss with your partner what makes for good communication between students.	**Accountable Talk to the Knowledge Base** Discuss how to ask for clarification, and what should serve as evidence in this content area.	**Think-Pair-Square** Discuss a topic with your partner, then extend the discussion with another set of partners.	**Conversation Roundtable** Create notes about a topic, then discuss these with your group. Write each member's ideas, then summarize on your own.
Novel Ideas Only Brainstorm a list of prior knowledge on a topic, then stand. One group member reads an item on the list, without repeating ideas. Goal is to have the most novel ideas.	**Reading Partners** You and your partners read the same piece of text twice and discuss its meaning.	**Group Response Cards** Your group has only one set of response cards and must agree on an answer.	**Sounding Board** Meet with a partner to share work in progress and provide responses.	**Accountable Talk for Reasoning** How do you disagree with someone without being disagreeable? How do you respond when someone disagrees with you?
Walking Review Seek other students to answer questions on a worksheet. Students must sign their names for each solution. Answer the last question on your own at your desk.	**ReQuest** You and your partners read the same piece of text and quiz one another using questions you each wrote. If one of you can't answer, the other has to show how to locate the answer.	**Numbered Heads Together** Resolve a problem with your group, making sure all group members can answer it. The teacher will identify the spokesperson for the group by selecting a number.	**Opinion Stations** Choose a stance on a controversial topic and discuss your opinion with others who answered similarly, then with someone who had a different opinion.	**Collaborative Posters** Work with your group to create a poster summarizing your work on a topic. Each member must write in a different colored marker.

Most of these are 10–20 minutes in length. All should be modeled by the teacher first! After each instructional routine has been introduced, use it as many times as you can to reinforce and refine skills.

FIGURE 2 First 20 Days of Spotlight Lessons for Teaching Students to Work Productively in Groups

The paper is then returned to the interviewee, who takes it home to decorate the front with his or her name and any relevant icons. Jim would display these silent interviews for the first month so students could learn about their classmates. By emphasizing the purpose upfront ("You're going to introduce your partner to the rest of the class, so find out what you need to know to do so"), students understand from the first day of class that they have a responsibility to others.

On-task partners. As a follow-up to the silent interview, we assign partners to be mutually responsible for making sure the other person is on the right page, has the correct materials, as so on. We pepper our instruction with reminders to on-task partners to check to make sure all is well.

The helping curriculum. There's much discussion among educators and employers about the social and emotional skills needed for learning, employment, and life. Sapon-Shevin (1998) calls it the helping curriculum. She maintains that all people, regardless of age or ability, need to know how to ask for help, offer help, accept help, and politely decline help. We introduce these principles to our students and provide examples and non-examples of each. Students enjoy offering their own stories of each, and we find it is a good way to learn more about one another. Figure 3 is the poster we created for our classroom, and we use these

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Over time, students should exhibit the following behaviors of good group members:

♦ Active listening and listening as an ally

♦ Turn-taking

♦ Participation and engagement

♦ Questioning and responding to the questions of others

Spotlight Lessons on Personal Responsibility

The ability to be a good group member begins with an understanding of responsibility to the team. Our first lessons of the school year involve activities that emphasize the personal responsibility each of us has to ensure the overall success of the group.

Silent interview. Our colleague and friend James Flood introduced us to this activity in his graduate courses. The first day always began with a silent interview of another classmate, conducted completely in writing. After folding a blank piece of unlined paper in half, the partners begin asking a question of one another in writing, then exchange papers to read and answer the question. Papers move quietly back and forth as partners ask questions like, "What's your name?" and "Where are you from?"

After several minutes of these silent interviews, the interviews turn to introductions. Each person is responsible for introducing the partner to the rest of the class.

How have you helped today?

Did you offer help?

Did you ask for help?

Did you accept help?

Did you politely decline help so you could try it yourself?

FIGURE 3   Helping Curriculum Poster

as reminders of what is required whenever we work with others.

Noise meter. Partner talk and productive group work can get loud, so we introduce a noise meter to our students during the first week (Frey, 2010). Made of cardboard and a brad to hold the arrow in place, this is a distinctively unscientific instrument. Because we teach at the secondary level, we treat this with humor (at the elementary level, we've been more formal about it.) Using the noise meter, we discuss different sound levels needed in a classroom, from silent (for test taking), to quiet (for individual work), moderate (partner talk), elevated (group work), and outdoor (never in the classroom!). We have fun practicing each of the levels for unconventional periods of time

FIGURE 4   Noise Meter
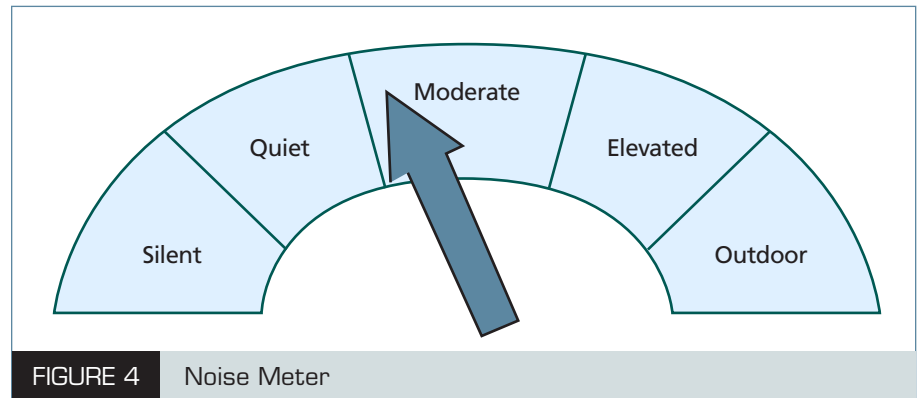
("Let's practice Silent for 44 seconds"). In subsequent lessons, we set the noise meter and remind students about the expected level of voices. If it gets too loud, we make a show of advancing the arrow and asking students to moderate their voices so that everyone can hear and be heard. Figure 4 is our version of the noise meter.

Walking review. This is a great way to review content and use materials traditionally intended for individual work. The curriculum materials from the textbook publisher usually contain worksheets. We repurpose these as a collaborative activity. We select six or seven items and give students 10 minutes to find other people in the class who can answer the questions. Once located, that person writes the answer and initials it. At the same time, each student is doing the same for their temporary partner. We explain that they need to find a different person for each question, and that they themselves can only supply one answer per worksheet. The last item is answered by the paper's owner at his or her desk, which allows for a bit of classroom management as they drift back to their seats. The walking review prompts lots of academic discourse about the subject, and highlights the individual's responsibility to contribute to the learning of others.

ReQuest. As the first month draws to a close, we ramp up the

academic nature of these spotlight lessons. We teach students ReQuest (Manzo, 1969), short for Reciprocal Questioning. Students work with partners and read an assigned passage of the textbook, then individually compose a few questions and answers derived from the reading. Next, the first student closes the book and tries to answer the questions posed by the second. If stuck, the questioner is responsible for showing the respondent where to locate the information. The partners then change roles and repeat the process. We have found this to be an efficient way to ensure that texts are read closely and that individual students who struggle to comprehend are sufficiently supported. As students become more accustomed to the ReQuest instructional routine, we teach additional spotlight lessons on types of questions.

Spotlight Lessons on Respectful Discourse

For group work to be productive, students need to be able to discuss topics in ways that keep the group moving forward. This is especially true because we expect groups to meet with productive failure (Kapur, 2008). This is a state of learning we actively strive for, and it is based on the reminder that we learns from our mistakes. We have noticed that

One of the ways that we help students learn the language of accountable talk is through sentence frames.

For example, the following frames were used to provide students with examples they could use when talking with their group members:

♦ I agree that _____, a point that needs emphasizing since so many people believe that _____.

♦ Though I concede that _____, I still insist that _____.

♦ Although I don't agree that _____, I do recognize _____.

♦ The evidence shows that _____.

♦ My own view, however, is that _____.
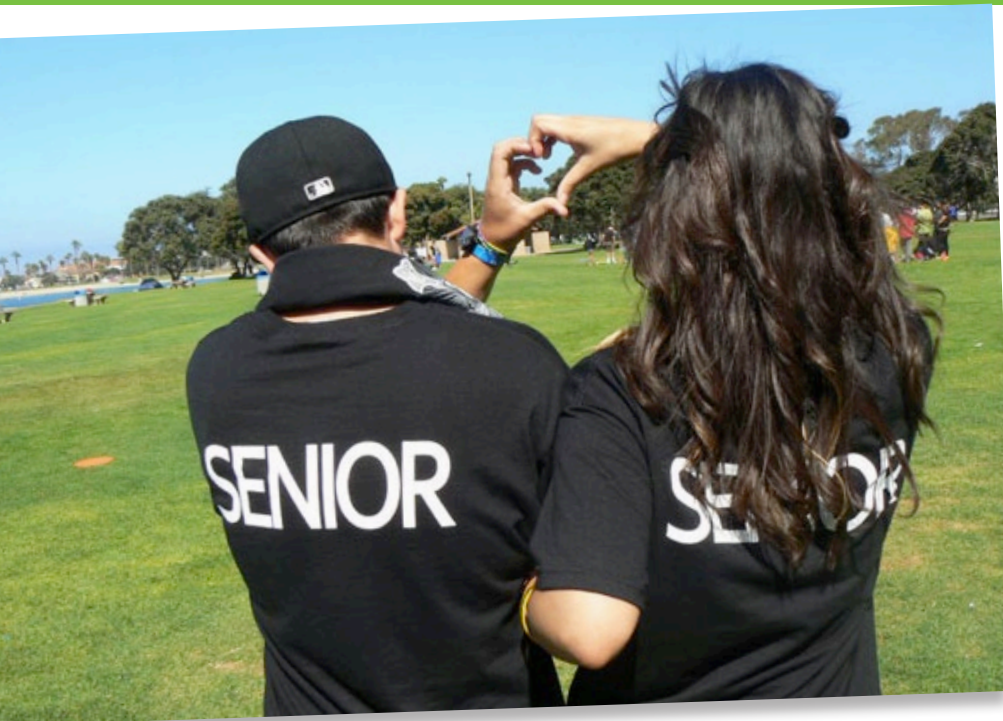
when group work is too easy, groups typically divide the work and go their separate ways until they meet again to assemble the pieces. Ideally, we want the task to be difficult enough so that they have a reason to talk with one another to resolve their confusions. However, this is also likely to bring on moments of argument and debate. As we remind them, "It's OK to disagree. It's not OK to be disagreeable."

Accountable talk. Another cornerstone of our classroom is accountable talk, described by Michaels, O'Connor, and Resnick (2008) as the academic discourse of learners as they discuss, clarify, question, provide evidence, disagree, and develop solutions. Accountability is threefold: everyone is accountable to the classroom community, to the knowledge base, and to reasoned logic. Our spotlight lesson during the first week of school features ways that we report on the ideas of others, and extend them with our own. We make a list of ways to do so, such as, "Can you put the author's ideas into your own words?" and "Tell me more about that." We then give students a discussion prompt and ask them to carry on a conversation with a partner where they encourage one another

to elaborate on an idea. Pulling the whole group back together, we invite students to restate their partner's ideas. We then discuss the importance of listening, not just formulating one's own responses.

During the second week, we feature another spotlight lesson on accountability to the knowledge base. Since we're English teachers, we link this to the rhetorical structures expected when informing or persuading. Using a short piece of text, we analyze it for the writer's main points and identify his or her use of supportive evidence. We then ask partners to work similarly with a second short reading, usually an opinion piece such as whether zero tolerance policies are a good idea or not, and encourage them to provide evidence of the author's claims for one another. We end the lesson with a discussion about the importance of being able to ask for justifications and evidence in our classroom as well.

During the third week we revisit accountable talk, this time spotlighting the need to be able to present a reasoned argument without simply being argumentative. We list ways in which small children argue ("Ah

huh"/"Na uh") and the pointlessness of such an approach. We then list ways that students can voice disagreement without shutting down the conversation. We introduce another topic for discussion and debate (e.g., uniforms in school) then ask partners to list the pros and cons. This gives them a chance to apply some of the strategies we discussed about voicing disagreement.

Discussion partners. The focus of this spotlight lesson is on the basic communication skills that contribute to conversation. Using a silent birthday line-up activity, we then poll the group to discover what behaviors made the exercise harder or easier. This opens up a whole-class discussion about paralanguage, the non-verbal characteristics that include eye contact, distance, expression, body language, gestures, and such. Together we construct a list of non-verbal behaviors that make it easier to be understood during small-group discussions. For instance, "lean in to be heard, and to show that you are listening" is a behavior one of our classes listed this year.

Sounding board. Writing is a key component in our discipline, and we like to provide students with an opportunity to discuss ideas and get feedback from their peers. However, we don't want them to edit each other's work. That's our job. In order to establish a collaborative classroom, we introduce the Sounding Board, explaining the meaning of the term and the importance of having one as a writer. Using the form in Figure 5, we share our own writing with the students and let them serve as our sounding board. Over the course of the next few weeks, we return to this process, eventually installing it as a regular feature in our class.

Opinion stations. During the last week of the first month of school, we increase the academic demand

Writer(s):_____ Reader(s): _____

Date: _____ Title or Topic: _____

1. Writer: Please read your piece to the reader, or explain the idea you have for a piece you will be writing. ☐

2. Sounding Board: After listening, retell the main points to the writer. ☐

3. Sounding Board: What did you like best? ☐

4. Sounding Board: Ask questions about any parts you don't understand. ☐

5. Writer: What new ideas do you have because of this conversation? ☐

FIGURE 5 Sounding Board Feedback Form for Writing

as students engage in these short productive group-work routines. They have had lots of opportunities to talk and get to know each other. Now we want them to apply these communication skills to the language of the lesson. We install five signs around the classroom, locating them in places where people can gather. Each sign mirrors an opinion survey response: Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, or Strongly Disagree. (We omit the Neutral response in an effort to cause students to take a stand.) We pose another discussion topic appropriate to our studies, and likely to provoke a wide array of responses, such as whether curfews keep adolescents out of trouble or if the military should be allowed to recruit in high schools.

After a quickwrite on the question, students stand near the sign that best reflects their opinion. This becomes a small discussion group, and members further explore the topic with others who share a similar opinion. Next we mix the groups, inviting the Agree group to discuss the topic with the Strongly Disagree group. Meanwhile, The Strongly Agree group meets with the Disagree group. Using many of the Accountable Talk strategies we have been fostering all month, students are directed to engage in respectful

disagreement and responsible persuasion.

After several minutes, the students return to their desks and write further about their opinion. We finish with a whole-group discussion about whether opinions changed and why. This is an instructional routine that we return to many times over the course of the year and find it to be an important one for spotlighting in the first month of school.

Spotlight Lessons on Collaborative Problem Solving

A major purpose of putting productive group work into place is so that students can work together to resolve problems. The opportunity to encounter difficulties, clarify understanding, and refine practice is essential for meaningful learning to occur. A misconception among teachers and students is that group work should move smoothly to success with a minimum of bumps along the way. Nothing could be further from the truth. Tasks should be designed so that it is likely students face some false starts, hesitations, or even incorrect responses. The following instructional routines foster a sense of shared responsibility in making sure that all members understand the concepts being utilized.

Paired and group response cards. Our classes are large (aren't everyone's?) and it can be difficult to get everyone participating. We use

response cards, response boards, and even audience response clickers to increase participation. However, we always impoverish the environment by reducing the number of response devices to prompt discussion. Initially we assign one such board or device to each pair of students; we broaden this to groups of four a few weeks later. After posing a question, the students must agree on an answer first, then allow that answer to stand for the group.

Think-Pair-Square. This technique builds on the partner talk we ask students to engage in throughout the lesson. We use this when posing questions that require more conversation. After partners discuss a question, they join another set of partners to extend their ideas. Once the four students have met, we shift back to whole-class discussion of the topic. A benefit we find over the course of the first month is that they become more adept at using features of accountable talk, especially in building on the ideas of one another.

Conversation roundtable. We were inspired by Burke's (2002) conversational roundtable as a method for fostering note-taking and the exchange of ideas. Rather than use a printed graphic organizer, we ask students to fold a paper in quarters, then fold over the interior corner to form a rhombus in the center (see Figure 6). A group of four students jigsaw a reading, film clip, or other resource and take notes about his or her section. As they deconstruct the text, they note what each of the other three members had to say about their section. The center rhombus is devoted to an individual summary. Each student submits a conversation roundtable, giving us insight into both the group and individual accountability necessary in productive group work.
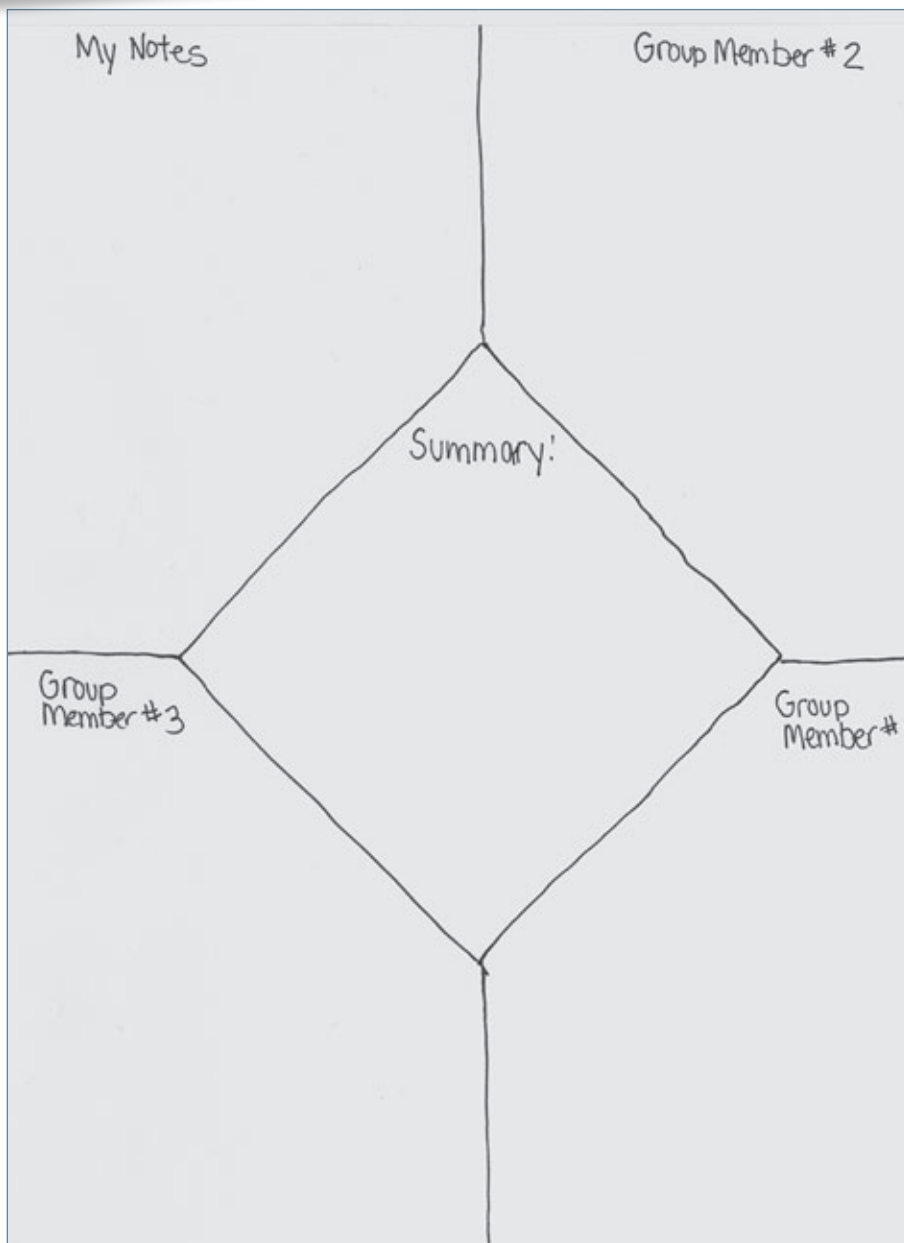

My Notes

Group Member #2

Summary:

Group Member #3

Group Member #1

FIGURE 6   Conversation Roundtable

The applications are endless, as the four components can be assigned to reflect the discipline. For example, our math colleagues reserve the center rhombus for calculating a problem. Each member of the roundtable discusses an aspect needed for solving it:

♦ Explain what the problem is asking in words.

♦ Identify an estimated answer and explain why.

♦ Explain how to calculate it.

♦ Explain how it will be checked and compared to the estimate.

Novel ideas only. We often use collaborative learning to activate background knowledge. This instructional routine requires groups of students to brainstorm a list, usually within a short time period, for example, ways in which two countries respond to conflicts (war, diplomatic negotiations, economic boycotts, etc.) The groups then stand and the spokesperson reads one item from the list. Students are required to listen to the items read by the other groups and cross off ideas on their list when they are announced. This ensures that novel ideas only are offered without repetition. When a group no longer has any items on their list, the entire group sits down. Although the goal is to be the last group standing, we rarely provide tangible awards, relying instead on the motivation of academic rigor.

Reading partners. We assign reading partners to work together for very short pieces of text (directions, captions of photographs, short summaries, and such) to ensure that these more mundane comprehension tasks are not overlooked in an effort to get to major activities. Students read the text aloud to one another and make sure that they both understand what the statement says. This is a bridge between on-task partners and ReQuest, and it builds students' capacity to sustain joint attention on longer passages.

Numbered heads together. This instructional routine requires students to work in groups to make sure that all members know the information (Kagan, Kagan, & Kagan, 1997). Students work in small groups, with each member numbered off. After discussing the question posed, we remind them to check for understanding of all the group members, clarifying any misconceptions. We then choose a number and the member with the corresponding digit answers on behalf of the group. We introduce this instructional routine later in the month so that we can use it repeatedly to review previously taught material.

Collaborative posters. Much of the productive group work students do during the course of the year is for tasks that are longer in duration than just a few minutes. As in common in most classes, groups charged with more complex tasks often report out using chart paper posters. However, a challenge when done traditionally is that it can be difficult to determine who knows what or whether all members contributed. Collaborative posters require that each member uses a unique colored marker (we have them sign their names in their color so we can tell them apart.) A glance at these multi-colored posters gives us a quick informal measure about participation and equitable distribution of the workload.

Get That First Month Ready!

The first month of school is the launching pad for all that will occur during the subsequent eight months. Because collaborative learning is the linchpin between teacher-directed instruction and independent work, it is crucial to establish routines that will be used throughout the year. As the year progresses, other instructional routines are introduced and utilized; however, the ability to demonstrate personal responsibility, engage in respectful discourse, and collaborate to solve problems begins on the first day. Purposeful planning for structures, not just content, ensures that your students will know how to work for and with you.

Additional Resources

Frey, N., Fisher, D., & Allen, A. (2009). Productive group work in middle and high school classrooms. In S.R. Parris, D. Fisher, & K. Headley (Eds.), *Adolescent Literacy, Field Tested* (pp. 70–81). Newark, DE: International Reading Association.

> If all learning is social, why do so many middle and high school students spend the majority of their instructional day working in isolation? The evidence on the effectiveness of collaborative group work is compelling, but productive group work is seen as a challenge by many secondary educators who are concerned about the time and management challenges. In this chapter, the principles of peer learning are reviewed, and practical instructional routines are described. These practices are further illustrated in a high school Earth Science course in which students have frequent opportunities to clarify their understanding in the company of peers.

Vaca, J., Lapp, D., & Fisher, D. (2011). Designing and assessing productive group work in secondary schools. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy, 54*(5), 372–375.

> A history teacher examines what is successful and not successful about group work in his high school classroom and gives concrete suggestions for improving group practice. Topics discussed include preparing students for group work, supporting collaboration, inviting critical analysis, and assessing both group and individual performance.

Ross, D., & Frey, N. (2009). Learners need purposeful and systematic instruction. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy, 53*(1), 75–78.

> The authors explain an instructional framework that gradually releases responsibility from teachers to learners. The article illustrates with an example of real teaching from an arts classroom, and multimedia supplements (www. reading.org/General/Publications/Journals JAAL SupplementalContent jaal JAAL-53-1-Ross supp-1. aspx) further demonstrate what modeling and gradual release of responsibility look like with teachers and teens.

Filkins, S. (2010). Using the Jigsaw Cooperative Learning Technique. Retrieved May 26, 2011 from www.readwritethink.org/professional-development/strategy-guides/using-jigsaw-cooperative-learning-30599.html

> In this strategy guide, you will learn how to organize students and texts to allow for learning that meets the diverse needs of students but keeps student groups flexible.

Schulze, P. (2005). Using Student-Centered Comprehension Strategies with Elie Wiesel's Night. Retrieved May 26, 2011 from http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/using-student-centered-comprehension-884.html

> Working in small groups, students use reciprocal teaching strategies as they read and discuss Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel's memoir Night.

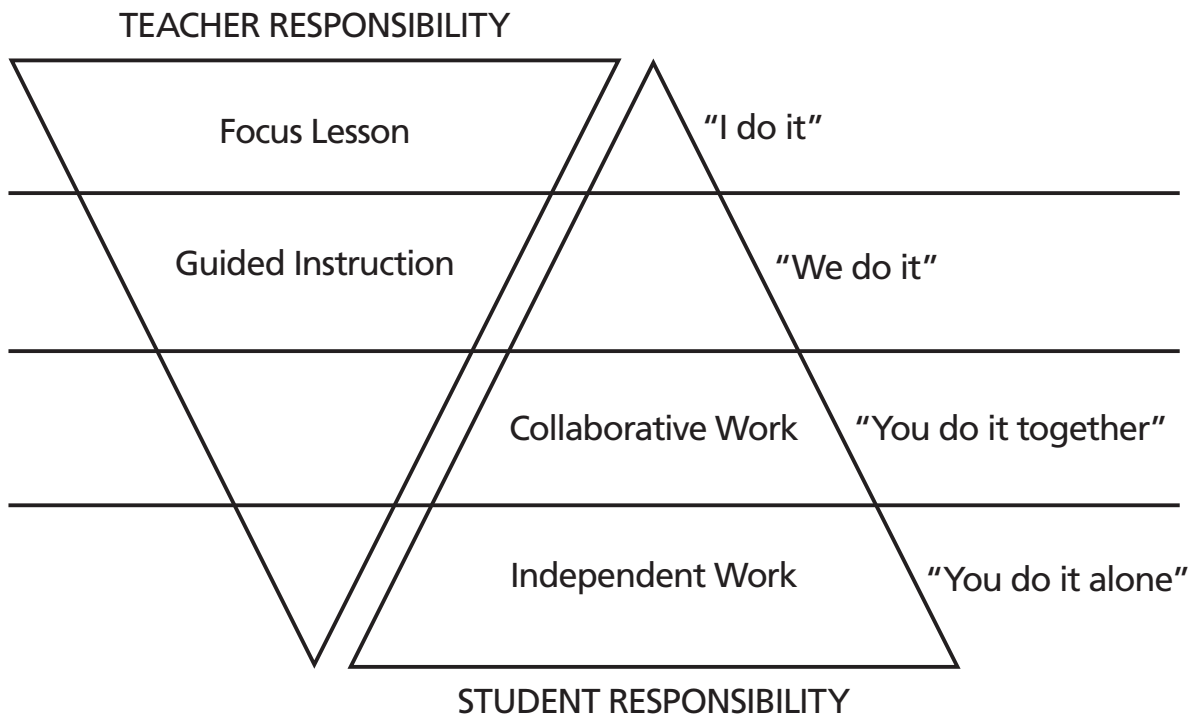**Douglas Fisher** and **Nancy Frey** are professors in the College of Education at San Diego State University and teacher leaders at Health Sciences High and Middle College. They are interested in quality instruction for diverse learners and are coauthors with Diane Lapp of *In a Reading State of Mind: Brain Research, Teacher Modeling, and Comprehension Instruction* (International Reading Association, 2009). You may contact Doug at dfisher@mail.sdsu.edu and Nancy at nfrey@mail.sdsu.edu.

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Pearson, P. D., & Gallagher, M. (1983). The instruction of reading comprehension. *Contemporary Educational Psychology, 8*(3), 317–344.

Sapon-Shevin, M. (1998). *Because we can change the world: A practical guide to building cooperative, inclusive classroom communities.* Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

FIGURE 1. Gradual Release of Responsibility Framework of Instruction

TEACHER RESPONSIBILITY

Focus Lesson — "I do it"

Guided Instruction — "We do it"

Collaborative Work — "You do it together"

Independent Work — "You do it alone"

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Most of these are 10–20 minutes in length. All should be modeled by the teacher first! After each instructional routine has been introduced, use it as many times as you can to reinforce and refine skills.

FIGURE 3. Helping Curriculum Poster
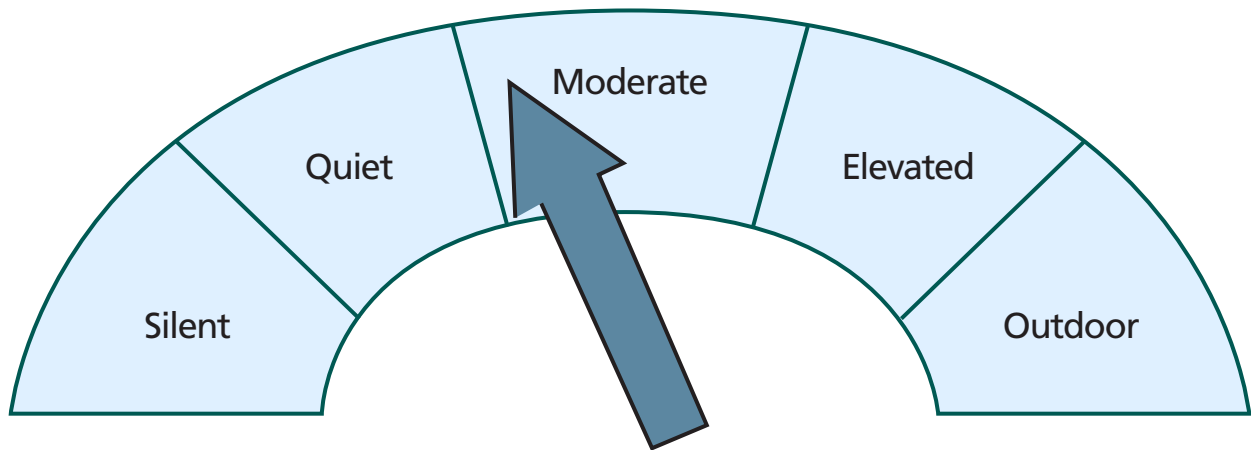
How have you helped today?

Did you offer help?

Did you ask for help?

Did you accept help?

Did you politely decline help so you could try it yourself?

FIGURE 4. Noise Meter

FIGURE 5. Sounding Board Feedback Form for Writing

Writer(s):_____   Reader(s): _____

Date: _____   Title or Topic: _____

1. Writer: Please read your piece to the reader, or explain the idea you ☐
   have for a piece you will be writing.

2. Sounding Board: After listening, retell the main points to the writer. ☐

3. Sounding Board: What did you like best? ☐

4. Sounding Board: Ask questions about any parts you don't ☐
   understand.

5. Writer: What new ideas do you have because of this conversation? ☐

FIGURE 6. Conversation Roundtable

My Notes

Group Member #2

Summary!

Group
Member #3

Group
Member #4