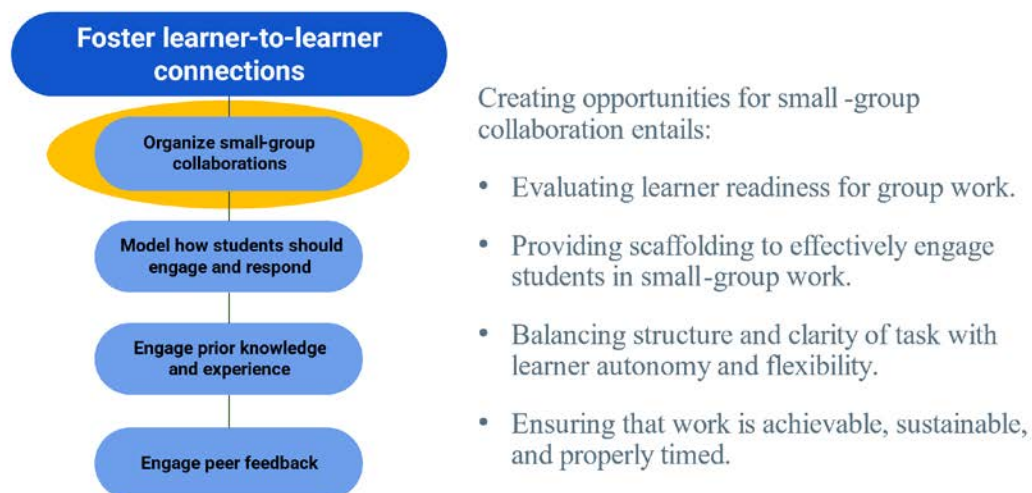


## Activity: Organize small-group collaborations

**Time:** 20 minutes

**Purpose:** This activity helps participants to understand the practice of organizing small-group collaborations among students, which is one way to promote learner-to-learner connections. In this activity, you will break into pairs or triads to read an excerpt from the article, *Creating Effective Collaborative Learning Groups in an Online Environment*, and discuss the small-group collaboration strategies it describes.

### Evidence-based practices



### Instructions: Getting started

1. Choose a timekeeper to keep track of the time to ensure that your group completes the activity.
2. Read the following section, up to the “activity instructions” in the gold bar below and to scan the rest of the instructions. This should take about one minute.

## Activity: Organize small-group collaborations

Research reported by REL West shows that educators play a vital role in effective small group collaborations conducted online. Teachers need to provide scaffolding to help students develop the skills for effective small group collaborations. Teachers should provide a balance between structure and flexibility in assigning group work and be thoughtful in considering what work they assign to groups. Is it work best done through collaboration?

In addition to possessing the skills to effectively collaborate with other learners, students need to feel a sense of community and connection as they enter their small group work. Meaningful collaboration should deepen those bonds of community and connection. To foster connection among students working in small groups, teachers can:

- Use ice breakers.
- Offer ideas to start the conversation.
- Offer statements about expectations regarding participation, etiquette, and guidelines for behavior.
- Help students learn how to retrieve, evaluate, apply, and source information and use technology effectively.

Throughout small group collaborations, it is important for teachers to maintain a supportive presence in the small group. This might involve answering questions, modeling acceptable behavior, and providing enough time for students to fulfill the collaborative learning assignment expectations.<sup>1</sup>

### Activity instructions

1. Participants in the small group should break into subgroups of two or three people.

Each subgroup should click the link to the article *Creating effective collaborative learning groups in an online environment* by Brindley, Walti, and Blaschke (2009) and read pages 12–13. Select one of the seven principles they describe and take up to five minutes to discuss the corresponding questions listed below. If there is time left over, subgroups can read a second strategy.

2. After five minutes, the timekeeper pulls the subgroups back together.

---

<sup>1</sup> Brindley, J. E., Walti, C., & Blaschke, L. M. (2009). Creating effective collaborative learning groups in an online environment. *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*, 10(3), 1–18; in the IES-COVID Resource: REL West. (2020). Ask-a-REL: *Research-based online learning practices*. <https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/west/Ask/Details/100>.

3. The timekeeper asks which strategy each group discussed to find out how many total report-outs to expect. For the next seven minutes, ask subgroups to share what they talked about.

## Reflection

After doing the activity in pairs or triads, consider as a full small group how you might use this activity in your classroom. The timekeeper asks the group to consider the following question and to discuss their thoughts for the last two minutes:

1. What might you need to do to ensure this kind of small-group collaboration helps foster learner-to-learner connections?

## Small-group reading: Creating effective learning groups

Brindley, Walti, and Blaschke (2009) found that, “rather than focus on the grading of collaborative group projects, instructors should incorporate a variety of instructional strategies to improve the quality of group collaboration and to increase the likelihood of student participation.”<sup>2</sup> Each box below contains one of the principles they identified. Discuss the questions in the cell to the right of the principle you have selected.

<b>Excerpt from <i>Creating effective collaborative learning groups in an online environment</i> (pages 12–13)</b>	<b>Mini-group discussion questions</b>
1. <i>Facilitate learner readiness for group work and provide scaffolding to build skills.</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What kinds of activities have you used in the past to help get students ready to use remote tools for collaboration? How did you teach them the skills they needed? What might you do differently in the future?</li> <li>2. What expectations have you set in the past for participation and behavior? How well did those work? What might you change in the future?</li> </ol>
2. <i>Establish a healthy balance between structure (clarity of task) and learner autonomy (flexibility of task).</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What remote learning tools could you use to facilitate small-group collaborations? How would students form their own groups?               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. How would they technically get into groups on your remote platform?</li> <li>b. What prompts would you give them to form the groups?</li> </ol> </li> <li>2. How would you determine ahead of time whether the tasks you outline for small-group collaborations will be achievable, sustainable, and properly timed?</li> </ol>

<sup>2</sup> Excerpted from Brindley, Walti & Blaschke. (2009). Creating effective collaborative learning groups in an online environment. *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*, 10(3), 1–18; in the IES-COVID Resource: REL West. (2020). Ask-a-REL: Research-based online learning practices. <https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/west/Ask/Details/100>, p. 12.

<p>3. Nurture the establishment of learner relationships and sense of community.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What instructional practices do you already use to establish a sense of community among students?</li> <li>2. How do you already model informality, familiarity, honesty, openness, heart, passion, dialogue, rapport, empathy, trust, authenticity, disclosure, humor, or diverse opinions?</li> <li>3. What else might you do to build a sense of community among students?</li> </ol>
<p>4. Monitor group activities actively and closely.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What technologies can you use to monitor small-group collaborations in remote learning environments?</li> <li>2. How can you create a culture of monitoring and feedback so that an instructor performing these functions does not derail student small-group work?</li> </ol>
<p>5. Make the group task relevant for the learner.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. How can you interest students in choosing topics for group work and projects?</li> <li>2. What tools can you use to learn more about student interests and the knowledge and skills learners may bring to a project?</li> <li>3. How can you design collaborative work that rewards students for sharing their knowledge?             <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. What check-ins can you build into collaborative work to ensure students are co-creating project work and/or learning assignments?</li> </ol> </li> </ol>
<p>6. Choose tasks that are best performed by a group</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What kinds of tasks are best performed by a group?</li> <li>2. How can you help students understand how they benefit from small-group work?</li> <li>3. How can you help students who are resistant to small-group work understand how their learning around this particular task will benefit from teamwork?</li> </ol>

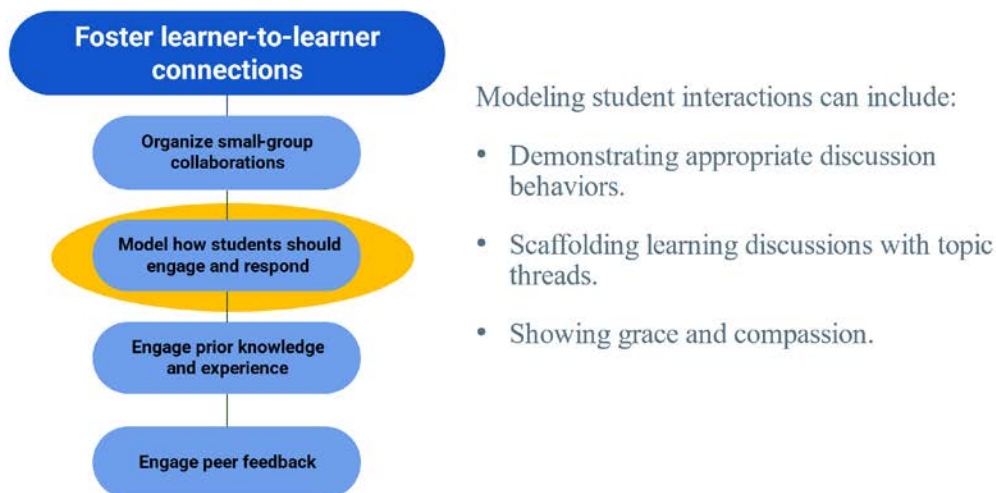
<p><i>7. Provide sufficient time</i></p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. How can you scaffold collaborative learning activities that ask students to engage in group scheduling, planning, and organizing?</li> <li>2. How can you build in check-ins to ensure that students have sufficient time to schedule, plan, and organize their learning in collaborative activities?</li> </ol>
--	--

## Activity: Model how students should engage and respond

**Time:** 20 minutes

**Purpose:** This activity invites participants to engage in a crowdsourcing process. The intent is to develop understanding of the practice of modeling how students should engage in discussions and respond to each other to promote learner-to-learner connections.

### Evidence-based practices



### Instructions: Getting started

1. Choose a timekeeper to keep track of the time to ensure that your group completes the activity.
2. Read the following section, up to the “activity instructions” in the gold bar below and to scan the rest of the instructions. This should take about one minute.

## Activity: Brainstorm how to model student responses

By modeling expectations for student engagement, teachers can help to frame appropriate behaviors for students to adopt. In this activity, developed based on findings from REL Southeast, you will discuss what modeling a discussion might look like for your students and work in small groups to discuss your expectations and goals for student participation. You will have time to plan specifically how to model student engagement.

The key to this activity is to consider how strategies to increase learner-to-learner connections through modeling can be adapted to work for your students in your context. A second goal is for you to think about the structured activity we are modeling and whether it would work well with your students.

Research tells us that teachers can model appropriate discussion behaviors, including encouraging participation, showing compassion, and helping students to understand that they have responsibilities for interacting with each other.<sup>3</sup>

### Activity instructions

1. Spend 15 minutes talking about what this practice means to you and how you might model it for your students (e.g., what words or phrases might you use? During what kinds of activities might you engage in these practices?). Ask a participant to take notes in the template below. Offer as many ideas for how to model this practice as you can.

Practice	How would you model this practice? (e.g., key phrases)
Encourage participation	
Show compassion	
Help students understand that they have responsibilities for interacting with and helping each other	

<sup>3</sup> REL Southeast. (2020). *When teachers and students are separated: Strategies from research on social presence for teaching at a distance*. [https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/infographics/pdf/REL\\_SE\\_When\\_Teachers\\_and\\_Students\\_are\\_Separated.pdf](https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/infographics/pdf/REL_SE_When_Teachers_and_Students_are_Separated.pdf).



## Reflection

After the small groups have shared, the timekeeper asks the group to consider the following questions and ask questions of each other for the final two minutes.

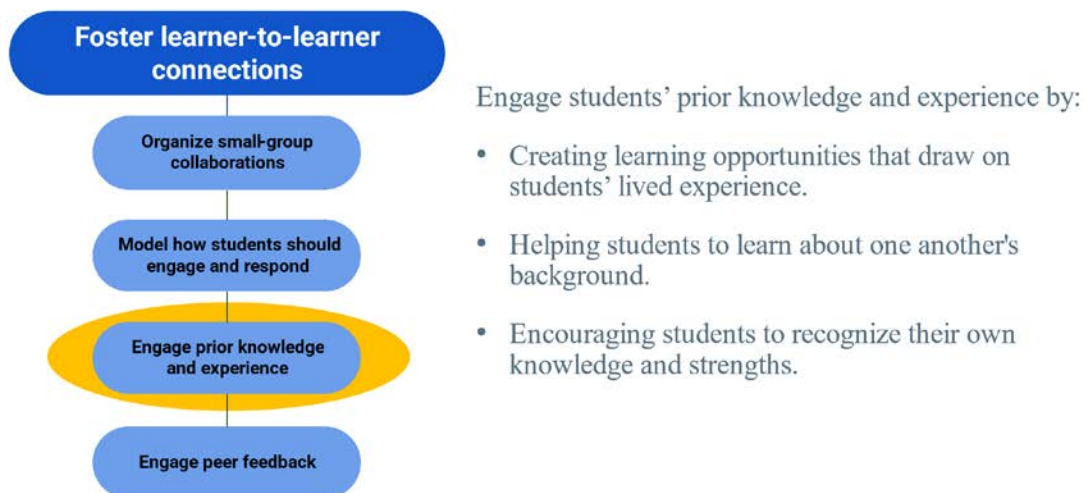
1. What looks promising to you? What will you try?
2. What questions do you have about how to engage in this practice?

## Activity: Engage prior knowledge and experience that students bring to the course

**Time:** 20 minutes

**Purpose:** This activity<sup>4</sup> provides participants a specific protocol to have students share their prior knowledge and experience. Participants will be invited to use the protocol to share their own prior experiences with fostering learner-to-learner connections to determine if it might work in their own classrooms.

### Evidence-based practices



### Instructions: Getting started

1. Choose a timekeeper to keep track of the time to ensure that your group completes the activity.
2. The small group should break down into even smaller subgroups of 3–6 people for this activity.

<sup>4</sup> Adapted from original resource: [https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/appalachia/events/materials/01-28-21\\_Workshop2\\_FacilitatorHandbook\\_Acc.pdf](https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/appalachia/events/materials/01-28-21_Workshop2_FacilitatorHandbook_Acc.pdf)

3. Read the following section, up to the “activity instructions” in the gold bar below and to scan the rest of the instructions. This should take about one minute.

### Activity: “Fortunately, unfortunately”

As reported by REL West, by engaging students in a process of sharing the prior knowledge and experience they bring to the class, you help them to establish collaborative communities of practice with their peers.<sup>5</sup> This practice gives students opportunities to learn more about each other, as well as to recognize their own knowledge and see it as an accomplishment they can build on. As a learning process, this can help students abandon fixed mindsets and adopt a growth mindset by learning from the knowledge and experiences of others.

One way to support students in building collaborative peer communities is to put students into small groups and give each a turn to share their responses to the following questions:

- **Fortunately:** What is something that is going well in your efforts to \_\_\_?
- **Unfortunately:** What is something that is not going well in your efforts to \_\_\_?

### Activity instructions

1. In your full small group, the timekeeper asks everyone to take three minutes to independently come up with their own responses to the following questions:
  - a. **Fortunately:** What is going well in your efforts to transition students back into in-person learning?
  - b. **Unfortunately:** What is not going well in your efforts to transition students back into in-person learning?
2. The timekeeper calls time after three minutes of silent thinking. They then ask each participant to take one minute to share their responses to the questions in their subgroup of 3–6 people. The timekeeper can call out “time to switch” to the entire small group at the end of each one-minute increment, until everyone in the subgroups has had a chance to speak. This part of the activity should take no more than six minutes.

---

<sup>5</sup> Dailey-Hebert, A. (2018). Maximizing interactivity in online learning: Moving beyond discussion boards. *Journal of Educators Online*, 15 (3); in the IES-COVID Resource: REL West. (2020). Ask-a-REL: *Research-based online learning practices*. <https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/west/Ask/Details/100>.

3. After every participant has responded, the timekeeper invites participants to ask questions of each other in the subgroups. This part of the activity should take five minutes.

## Reflection

After sharing experiences and talking as a group, consider how you might use this “Fortunately, unfortunately” activity in your classroom. The timekeeper asks the group to consider the following questions and to discuss their thoughts for the final two minutes:

1. Might this activity work for your students?
2. What adaptations might you want to make to this activity?

## Activity: Engage peer feedback

**Time:** 20 minutes

**Purpose:** This activity invites participants to practice setting up a peer feedback assignment and asking students to use an online tool to provide feedback to one another, which is one way to promote learner-to-learner connections.

### Evidence-based practices

#### Foster learner-to-learner connections

Organize small-group collaborations

Model how students should engage and respond

Engage prior knowledge and experience

Engage peer feedback

Engaging peer feedback can:

- Position students as content resources and increase subject matter understanding.
- Expose students to different approaches to an assignment.
- Promote self-reflection and work motivation.
- Develop critical thinking and communication skills.

### Instructions: Getting started

1. Choose a timekeeper to keep track of the time to ensure that your group completes the activity.
2. Read the following section, up to the “activity instructions” in the gold bar below and to scan the rest of the instructions. This should take about one minute.

## Activity: Use an online tool to support quality peer feedback

Peer feedback can provide an opportunity to empower students to be resources for each other. As noted by researchers from REL Appalachia, quality peer feedback can enrich the learning experience because it:<sup>6</sup>

1. Empowers students to serve as resources for each other.
2. Increases students' understanding of subject matter.
3. Exposes students to different approaches to an assignment.
4. Supports students to engage in self-reflection.
5. Improves students' motivation to improve their own work.
6. Supports students to develop critical thinking skills.
7. Supports students to improve their communication skills.

Teachers can support students to deepen their own understanding of the material by providing rubrics or structured processes to help them deliver detailed feedback to each other as part of a virtual learning experience. Digital tools can be a useful mechanism by which students can deliver their feedback to each other. While we are not recommending any particular tool, some examples include:

- **Learning management systems:** Canvas, Google Classroom
- **White boards:** Google Jamboard, Miro
- **Peer feedback forms:** Peergrade, PeerStudio, Google Forms

## Activity instructions

In triads (groups of three), you will work on an assignment that one of you typically gives to students and that requires you to give them feedback. You will use an online tool to shift that assignment so that students are giving feedback to one another. *The key to this exercise is to test out a remote learning tool for the process of eliciting peer feedback, so do not get too caught up in creating a perfect assignment, rubric, or submission. Rather, try to advance swiftly through the steps in order to see how the online tool works and to consider how it might help during instruction.*

---

<sup>6</sup> All research is cited in the IES-COVID Resource REL Appalachia (2020-2021). *Research-based strategies for effective remote learning.*  
[https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/appalachia/events/event\\_series\\_research-based-strategies-for-effective-remote-learning.asp](https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/appalachia/events/event_series_research-based-strategies-for-effective-remote-learning.asp).

1. The timekeeper tells the entire small group they are to take three minutes to think in triads of a simple assignment that one of you gives to students and that involves giving students feedback on their work. Agree on one assignment to work on together.
2. After three minutes, the timekeeper lets everyone know it is time to move on and take 14 minutes to think about structured processes you could provide for students to deliver their feedback to each other. (The timekeeper should give everyone a time check after twelve minutes.) How might an online tool you used during remote teaching be helpful for this purpose? If you have used an online tool that might be useful for this task, have one person login into that tool and work as a group to create a structured process for the sample assignment. This should include at least one criterion that would be in a scoring rubric and a place for students to deliver their review feedback. Invite the rest of the triad to submit an assignment and then to provide feedback to the other participant.

This exercise uses Peergrade as an example.

- a. Ask participants to log into <https://www.peergrade.io/>. Participants may need to create an account to access Peergrade. (In the upper righthand corner, click “Get Started,” then select your role as “Teacher.” Sign up by providing your name, email address, and institution name. Confirm your account by following the directions in the email message you will receive from Peergrade.)
- b. Once participants are logged in, one person should click on “Create a Class” while the others observe and support the process.
  - i. Select “Create a new class.”
  - ii. Give this class a title, such as “PD Test Case.” (You can change this title later or delete this class.)
  - iii. Once in the Class, click on “Create assignment.”
  - iv. Give a simple title and then select “Next.” (For purposes of this exercise, you can move quickly through creating a title and description, as the rubric is the exercise to get to.)
  - v. Now you are on the Rubric page. You can use or adjust the rubric that is provided or you can click on the “Rubric Library” to search through sample rubrics that are provided. Try to come up with at least one criterion that students would use as they evaluate their peers’ work.

- vi. Select “Next.” At this stage, you can either set up the feedback process as a “Live Session” or as “Homework.” For now, select “Live Session” so you can see how it works.
  - vii. After selecting “Live Session,” click on the “Create Assignment” button at the bottom. This will complete the assignment set up and take you to the tracking page. Here, you can see who has submitted their assignment and been moved into a “reviewer” role, who has completed their review, and who has reacted to the review of their own work.
- c. The “teacher” of this Peergrade class should invite the rest of the triad to complete this assignment by clicking the button to go back to “Class.” In the middle of the screen, you will see a row with icons and the words, “Assignment,” “Participants,” “Class Settings,” and “Summary.” Click on “Participants” and then the “Invite participants” button. Invite your colleagues as Students for this exercise. Enter their names and email addresses and they will get an invitation to the class once you click on “Add students.”
- d. Your triad colleagues, who should already have logged into Peergrade, can either refresh their screen to see the class or click on the link in the Peergrade email they receive. Walk together on their devices through the steps to submit the assignment. Notice that once the assignment is submitted, a student is taken to the screen where they will review a peer’s assignment. Quickly review a submission and submit.
- e. Now you can look at the Peergrade Teacher’s dashboard to see what it looks like when students submit both assignments and reviews.

## Reflection

After doing the activity, the breakout timekeeper should ask the small group to consider the following question and to provide quick responses in two minutes:

1. Do you think you might use the technology you experimented with to support learner-to-learner feedback in your learning environment?