



# Best Practices for Using Social Learning Structures









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The Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) classroom is an ecosystem for promoting social and emotional development. Because SEL is not an academic subject, it should not be taught like one. SEL is about transforming negative behaviors into positive behaviors. For this reason, there must be more social interactions and role playing in the SEL classroom than in any other.

Clinical psychologist Spencer Kagan introduced a structural approach to collaborative learning in 1985. The approach utilizes the application of *structures* to organize classroom social interactions.<sup>1</sup> *Structures* differ from activities in that they are not dependent upon content; they may be used across different subject areas and grade levels. The initial *structures* have evolved over time and many adaptations and variations have subsequently been developed. There are currently over 200 *structures*, addressing a variety of functions. Kagan asserts that *"an important cornerstone of the approach is the distinction between 'structures' and 'activities.'"* QuaverSEL supports the use of *structures* in the presentation of SEL lessons. This white paper highlights various structures that can be used effectively in the QuaverSEL class.

## 1. Role of Social Learning Structures in SEL Classroom

There are three phases of social interaction in an SEL classroom where social learning structures can be used:

- **Gathering** - This phase often includes a welcoming or pre-class meeting to bring the students together and explain what is going to be taught. The idea is to show students the benefits of planning and allow them to chart the progress of the class. The purpose is to make sure each student feels welcomed and included, with the expectation that each student will participate and be heard, that students will have the ability to influence the course of the activity, and that participation will result in a personal benefit to the student. The gathering can be held in concentric circles, a regular classroom configuration, or in groups.
- **Learning Activities** – The purpose of this phase is to provide students with the knowledge needed to understand the emotions and social situations they will experience and the skills they will use in coping with them. QuaverSEL activities are centered around a piece of music or story that carries the central message of the lesson to students. The music introduces emotion, which results in optimal learning. The activities also involve discussion and role playing, both subjects of white papers available to you.
- **Summary and Reflections** – In this phase the teacher summarizes the SEL lessons covered in the lesson and provides time for students to reflect on what they learned and how to apply the lessons into their everyday living.

Social learning structures permeate every phase of the SEL classroom. By interacting with one another, students are able to better understand the emotions of themselves and others. Interaction with one another also encourages students to relate to one another and better resolve conflicts that arise. Interacting will also increase teamwork in problem-solving situations.



## 2. Different Social Learning Structures and Their Uses

Social learning structures rely on a variety of physical frameworks.

- Pairing Students
- Grouping Students
- Forming Facing Lines
- Forming Concentric Circles
- Using Fishbowl Approach

### 2.1 Working with the Entire Class

The key to a social learning structure is to have the students interact among themselves. A critical exercise where the entire class is engaged is learning the music or story that is the central part of the lesson. When students listen to the Quaver song and watch the on-screen animated activities, they are introduced to the SEL topic through a message embedded in the materials, provoking thought and discussion. The teacher can lead the discussion as explained in the white paper on Teacher Led Discussions.

The entire class can be a social learning structure. The teacher can engage the whole class by explaining rules, making announcements, and encouraging questions. One student could ask the question and the teacher asks another student to answer it. Students could ask the teacher questions as well. Improving the bond between the teacher and the students is another goal of SEL. The stronger the bond, the greater the learning.



### 2.2 Pairing Students

In this structure, students are organized into pairs which will allow students to get to know one another more personally. Because the way in which students are paired can be important, consider the following methods:



- **Homogeneous Pairing** - Here it is important to pair higher achieving students together and lower achieving students together. This may seem counter-intuitive but the best results can often be achieved through homogeneity.
- **Randomly-Assigned Pairs** – If the goal is for students to become better acquainted with one another, you can randomly assign them. This will achieve a good cross mixture of relationships.
- **Student's Choice** – Students choose their partners. This can take longer but already established friendships will be strengthened and the teacher will become aware of students who need help socializing with classmates.
- **Proximity Pairing** – In this approach the student simply turns and talks or works with the person next to him or her. The teacher could say to the left or right or in front of or behind them.

## 2.3 Grouping Three or More

Here the teacher organizes the students into groups of three, or more students. The students can engage in a *mindful minute* to reflect on the lesson and then discuss their reflections. They could talk to one another about how they see their future changing as a result of what they learned in SEL class. Or they could discuss the situation in the lesson and how they would react.

Options for grouping the students are as follows.

- **Teacher's Choice** - The most efficient way is for the teachers to make a choice. The teacher could point out the four corners of the classroom and assign students to each corner.
- **Count Off** – If the teacher wants to form groups of four for example, he or she asks the students to count off in sequence from one to four. After getting to four the next student starts at one and the all the one students form a group, and so on. This can be done for any sized group.
- **Lead Students** – The teacher selects one student to lead each group and those lead students select the group members in turn. Because this method can lead to feelings of isolation, it should only be used in classes with strong bonds and supportive environments.
- **Group By Interest** – The teacher names the subject each group is to work on and the students select the group they want to participate in.
- **Maitre D'** – Another way is to select a student to be the maitre d' of the activity. This student will call for groups of different sizes as if they were sitting for a table in the restaurant.
- **Jigsaw**- When a discussion is done in the group, one student in the group peels off and goes to the next group to explain what his or her first group discussed. This stimulates the discussion in the next group.



## 2.4 Facing Lines

This structure is used to introduce students a pair at a time. Two lines with an equal number of students face each other. After one exercise, where two students collaborate, the end student of one line peels off and goes to the head of the line. This ensures each student works with each student in the other line. The exercise could be as simple as showing different emotional facial expressions to one another.

## 2.5 Concentric Circles

This is a variation of facing lines, with two groups of students facing each other in either an inner or outer circle. To be best executed, there should be the same number of students in each circle. Students complete a task and then rotate the outer circle around the inner one ensuring that students get to work with all the other students as a pair. The advantage of this structure over the facing lines is that it's easier to see all the students participating. This social learning structure could be used for simple or short discussion such as learning each other's names at the beginning of class.

## 2.6 Fishbowl

This is a useful social learning structure where one group listens and then evaluates another group. In concentric circles (as described above) the inner circle discusses a topic while the outer circle silently observes. When the discussion is complete, the outer circle discusses the inner circle's discussion adding new points of view.

There are other social learning structures which are shown below along with the CASEL competency they help develop.

**Social Learning Structures and Suggested Uses**

Learning Structure	Suggested Uses	Self-Awareness	Self-Management	Social Awareness	Relationship Skills	Decision Making
Simple Circle	Assemble Gatherings	X			X	
Four Corners <sup>2</sup>	Way To Organize Group Discussions			X		
Concentric Circles	Creating Different Pairs			X	X	
Facing Lines	Rotating Student Interactions	X		X		
Maitre d' Play music	Creates Groups Who Self Select				X	X
Jigsaw*	Students rotate to different groups – new group member teaches what was learned	X			X	
Fishbowl*	Students observe other student discussion – then change roles			X		X
Hot Potato	Choosing students to participate		X			

<sup>2</sup> Kagan, S. Cooperative Learning. San Clemente, CA: Kagan Publishing, 1985, 1986, 1987, 1988, 1989, 1990, 1991, 1992, 1993.





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