



Implementing group work in the classroom

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1. Introduction

Group work can be an effective method to motivate students, encourage active learning, and develop key critical-thinking, communication, and decision-making skills. But without careful planning and facilitation, group work can frustrate students and instructors and feel like a waste of time. Use these suggestions to help implement group work successfully in your classroom.

2. Preparing for small group work

Think carefully about how students will be physically arranged in groups – will it be easy for groups to form and for all students to be comfortable? Also think about how the layout of your classroom will impact volume – will students really be able to hear one another clearly? How can you moderate the activity to control volume?

Insist on professional, civil conduct between and among students to respect people's differences and create an inclusive environment.

Talk to students about their past experiences with group work and allow them to establish some ground rules for successful collaboration. This discussion can be successfully done anonymously through the use of note cards.

3. Designing the small group activity

Identify the instructional objectives. Determine what you want to achieve through the small group activities, both academically (e.g., knowledge of a topic) and socially (e.g., listening skills). The activity should relate closely to the course objectives and class content and must be designed to help students learn, not simply to occupy their time. When deciding whether or not to use group work for a specific task, consider these questions: What is the objective of the activity? How will that objective be furthered by asking students to work in groups? Is the activity challenging or complex enough that it requires group work? Will the project require true collaboration? Is there any reason why the assignment should not be collaborative?

•Make the task challenging

Consider giving a relatively easy task early in the term to arouse students' interest in group work and encourage their progress. In most cases, however, collaborative exercises should be stimulating and challenging. By pooling their resources and dealing with differences of opinion that arise, groups of students usually develop a more sophisticated product than they could as individuals. See the Centre for Teaching Excellence (CTE) teaching tip "Group work in the Classroom: Small-Group Tasks" for some ideas.

•Assign group tasks that encourage involvement, interdependence, and a fair division of labour.

All group members should feel a sense of personal responsibility for the success of their team mates and realize that their individual success depends on the group's success. Allocate essential resources across the group, so that group members are required to share information (e.g., "Jigsaw" method) or to come

up with a consensus; randomly select one person to speak for the group; or assign different roles to the group members so that they are all involved in the process (e.g., recorder, spokesperson, summarizer, checker, skeptic, organizer, observer, timekeeper, conflict resolver, liaison to other groups). Knowing that peers are relying on you is a powerful motivator for group work. Another strategy for promoting interdependence is specifying common rewards for the group, such as a group mark. See the CTE teaching tip “[Methods for Assessing Group Work](#)” for more information.

▪ **Decide on group size.** The size you choose will depend on the number of students, the size of the classroom, the variety of voices needed within a group, and the task assigned. Groups of 4-5 tend to balance well the needs for diversity, productivity, active participation, and cohesion. The less skilful the group members, the smaller the groups should be (Gross Davis, 1993).

▪ **Decide how you will divide students into groups.** Division based on proximity or students’ choice is quickest, especially for large and cramped classes; however, it means that students end up working together with friends or always with the same people. To vary group composition and increase diversity within groups, randomly assign students to groups by counting off and grouping them according to number; or have them line up according to birthday, height, hair colour, etc., before dividing them; another idea is to distribute candy (e.g., Starburst or hard, coloured candies) and group students according to the flavour they choose. For some group tasks, the diversity within a group (gender, ethnicity, level of preparation) is especially important, and you might want to assign students to groups yourself before class. Collect a data card from each student on the first day of class to glean important information about their backgrounds, knowledge, and interests. Alternately, ask students to express a preference (e.g., list three students with whom they would most like to work or two topics they would most like to study), and keep their preferences in mind as you assign groups.

▪ **Allow sufficient time for group work.** Recognize that you will not be able to cover as much material as you could if you lectured for the whole class period. Cut back on the content you wish to present in order to give groups time to work. Estimate the amount of time that subgroups need to complete the activity. Also plan for a plenary session in which groups’ results can be presented or general issues and questions can be discussed.

▪ **Try to predict students’ answers.** You won’t be able to do this perfectly—expect the unexpected—but by having some idea about what students will come up with, you will be better prepared to answer their questions and tie together the group work during the plenary session.

4. Design collaborative work in multiple constellations and form

Spairs, small groups, large groups, online synchronously, online asynchronously, etc. Some students might be better at contributing after they have had time to digest material, while others might be better at thinking on the spot; other students will defer to others in large groups but actively contribute in pairs; all roles should be valued and included.

5. Introducing the group activity

Demonstrate you are prepared for the group session. Arrive punctually, have a handout prepared that relates specifically to the task, and carry through on tasks that you promised to do when you last used group work in the classroom (Race, 2000).

Share your rationale for using group work. Students must understand the benefits of collaborative learning. Don't assume that students know what the pedagogical purpose is. Explicitly connect these activities to larger class themes and learning outcomes whenever possible. If they do not see the value of the group activity, they might conclude that you are using group work merely to get out of course preparation or lecturing.

•**Have students form groups before you give them instructions.** If you try to give instructions first, students may be too preoccupied with deciding on group membership to listen to you. Or, by the time they have determined their groups, they may have forgotten what they are supposed to do.

•**Facilitate some form of group cohesion.** Students work best together if they know or trust each other, at least to some extent. Even for brief group activities, have students introduce themselves to their group members before attending to their task. For longer periods of group work, consider introducing an ice breaker or an activity designed specifically to build a sense of teamwork.

•**Explain the task clearly.** This means both telling students exactly what they have to do and describing what the final product of their group work will look like. Explaining the big picture or final goal is important, especially when the group work will take place in steps (such as in snowballing or jigsaw). Using visual structures like charts and sequential diagrams is often helpful, as is the use of sentence starters and specific questions. Remember to include time estimations for the activities. Estimate on the low side; students will work most efficiently as the deadline approaches. If necessary, you can increase the time available.

•**Prepare written instructions for the students.** Either post the instructions on an overhead or PowerPoint slide or, if some of the groups will leave the room, distribute a handout.

Set ground rules for group interaction. Especially for extended periods of group work, establish how group members should interact with one another, mentioning principles such as respect, active listening, and methods for decision making. See the CTE teaching tip “[Group Decision Making](#)” for more information.

Let students ask questions. Even if you believe your instructions are crystal-clear, students may very well have legitimate questions about the activity. Give them time to ask questions before they get to work.

6. Monitoring the group task

Monitor the groups but do not hover. As students do their work, circulate among the groups and answer any questions raised. Also listen for trends that are emerging from the discussions, so that you can refer to them during the subsequent plenary discussion. However, be unobtrusive and avoid interfering with group functioning; allow time for students to solve their own problems before getting involved. Even consider leaving the room for a short period of time, because your absence can increase students’ willingness to share uncertainties and disagreements (Jaques, 2000).

•**Expect a lot of your students.** Assume that they do know, and can do, a great deal (Brookfield & Preskill, 1999). Express your confidence in them as you circulate the room.

•**Be slow to share what you know.** If you come upon a group that is experiencing uncertainty or disagreement, avoid the natural tendency to give the answers or resolve the disagreement. The learning that is accomplished through group work might be slower, but it is generally harder won and thus better. If necessary, clarify your instructions, but let students struggle—within reason—to accomplish the task (Race, 2000).

▪**Clarify your role as facilitator.** If students criticize you for not contributing enough to their work, consider whether you have communicated clearly enough your role as facilitator.

7. Ending the group task

Provide closure to the group activities. Group work can succeed or fail based on how you incorporate it into the rest of the class and the course. Students need to see how their work in small groups was useful to them and/or contributed to the development of the topic. Thus, end with a plenary session in which students do group reporting:

How group reporting is done “can make the difference between students’ feeling that they are just going through their paces and the sense that they are engaged in a powerful exchange of ideas” (Brookfield & Preskill, 1999, p. 107).

1. Oral reports

Have each group give one idea and rotate through the groups until no new ideas arise. Or have each group give their most surprising or illuminating insights or their most challenging question. Typically, you should record the ideas raised to validate their value, but limit yourself to key words.

2. Written reports

Have each group record their ideas on a transparency and either present them yourself or have a group member do so. One variation on this is to have groups record their conclusions on a section of the blackboard or on newsprint that is then posted on the wall. Students then informally circulate around the room and read each other’s answers. Alternately, you can ask students to move around the room in small groups, rotating from one set of comments to another. As they rotate, they keep up a discussion, treating the comments written on the newsprint or blackboard as a new voice in their discussion. They can add their own comments in response. Another variation on written reports is to have students write brief comments on Post-it notes or index cards. Collect them, take a few minutes to process them or put them in sequence, then summarize their contents.

▪Model how you want students to participate

When responding to students’ answers, model the respect and sensitivity that you want the students to display towards their classmates. Also readily acknowledge and value opinions different from your own; don’t favour clones! Be willing to share your own stories, critique your work, and summarize what has been said.

▪Connect the ideas raised to course content and objectives.

Recognize that groups might not come up with the ideas you intended them to, so be willing to make your lecture plans flexible. Wherever possible, look for a connection between group conclusions and the course topic. However, be aware that misconceptions or inaccurate responses need to be clarified and corrected either by you or by other students.

▪**Avoid impromptu lectures.** They interrupt the flow of the conversation during the plenary session and, because they are not prepared, tend to be relatively poor lectures (Brookfield & Preskill, 1999).

▪**Don’t provide too much closure.** Although the plenary session should wrap up the group work, feel free to leave some questions unanswered for further research or for the next class period. This openness reflects the nature of knowledge.

Ask students to reflect on the group work process. They may do so either orally or in writing. This reflection helps them discover what they learned and how they functioned in the group. It also gives you a sense of their response to group work.

A final thought ...

Successful group work requires not only careful preparation and facilitation but also regular reflection and reassessment afterward. After a class of small group activities, reflect on the group work process and refer back to the notes you made before class. Add comments about what worked especially well and what you would change in the future to make the exercise run more smoothly. Also discuss your use of group work with other instructors, and ask for their suggestions. If you feel that your facilitation skills are weak, work to strengthen them. The references listed below would be a good place to begin, or contact CTE to book a consultation or classroom observation.

The theories of learning that appear to be gaining the most attention in the recent educational literature emphasise the importance of the social and dialogic aspects of higher education (for example, Woo and Reeves, 2007; Boekaerts and Minnaert, 2006; Carlile and Jordan, 2005; Lave and Wenger, 1999; Roth, 1999). At the same time, the development of and support for innovative teaching strategies and programmes are key aspects of higher education policy. Group work is just such an innovative strategy, which can foster the social and dialogic aspects of learning. Unfortunately, academic staff's efforts to promote group work are often hindered by the resources needed to support it (Rangachari, 1996). In many institutions, it can be difficult to implement group work comprehensively in large classes, particularly in large first-year and second-year undergraduate programmes. This reduced opportunity for social and peer-supported learning can be a key factor in inhibiting both student retention and social learning.

Enquiry-based Learning (EBL) has also been gaining prominence in undergraduate programmes internationally (Pastirik, 2006; Roberts et al, 2005; Kahn and O'Rourke, 2005). EBL can give learners the opportunity to develop professional and personal skills ranging from teamwork and leadership skills to problem-solving and information skills, as well as personal attributes such as the ability to take responsibility for their own learning and actions (Barrett et al, 2005; Savin-Baden, 2004). EBL creates an environment in which the learners, often working in groups, are supported in determining their own lines of enquiry. They identify what is known; what needs to be learned; what information is required; how it is to be acquired, processed and applied; and how it is to be shared with others (Barrett et al, 2005). This approach is not new to many disciplines, where it may previously have been described as problem-based learning (PBL) (Savin-Baden, 2004), design exercises, investigations, case studies or project-based learning. The essential, common ingredient is that an initial "trigger" (the problem, design specification, area for investigation or case) stimulates the group to pursue a particular line of enquiry, through which learning is achieved. The groups are supported by a range of resources including online, paper-based and human resources.

References

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