Facilitating Effective Group Work

Preparing for 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.

Introducing the group activity

- **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. 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.

- **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.
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.

Group decision making

There are a variety of ways to make decisions as a group; the seven-step decision-making model presented below offers an effective structure for choosing an appropriate course of action for a particular task or project. It can also be an effective method for dealing with a problem or interpersonal conflict that arises within the group.

1. **Identify the decision to be made.** Before beginning to gather information and list alternatives, it is important for you as a group to understand clearly what you are trying to decide so you have a goal on which to focus your discussions. Potential questions to ask are: What are the particulars of the assigned task? What are we being asked to do? What conflict is affecting our group effectiveness? What barrier to effective group work are we facing?

2. **Analyze the issue under discussion.** Once you have defined your goal (i.e., the decision to be made or the problem to be overcome), examine the data and resources that you already have, and identify what additional information you may need. Ask yourselves: What is causing the problem? For whom is this a problem? What is wrong with the current situation? Why do we need to deal with this issue/decision? Where else can we find resources?

3. **Establish criteria.** Identify the criteria or conditions that would determine whether a chosen solution is successful. Ideally, a solution will be feasible, move the group forward, and meet the needs of every group member. You may want to rank the criteria in order of importance (for example, circumstances may be such that some issues may not be fully resolved). Consider these questions: What would make a solution/decision successful? What issues need to be dealt with in the solution? What criteria will help us determine whether everyone is happy with the solution/decision? Are some criteria more necessary than others?

4. **Brainstorm potential solutions.** Using the resources and information collected above, brainstorm for potential solutions to the problem or decision identified in step 1. This
involves collecting as many ideas as possible. At this stage, ideas should not be criticized or evaluated. Some questions to ask include: What are some possible solutions that would meet most of our established criteria? Are there any options that we may have overlooked? What could we do in the absence of constraints?

5. **Evaluate options and select the best one.** Once you have a list of potential solutions, you are now ready to evaluate them for the best alternative according to the criteria identified in step 3. Remember that you may be able to combine ideas to create a solution. Ideally, everyone would agree with solution (a consensus), but it is possible that not everyone will. In this case, you will need to use a different decision making methods (see methods in next section). Additional questions to ask when evaluating alternatives are: What are the pros/cons for each option? Which option is the most realistic to accomplish for now? Which option is the most likely to solve the problem for the long-term?

6. **Implement the solution.** This involves identifying the resources necessary to implement the decision, as well as the potential obstacles, then taking action. Decide: What should be done? How? By whom? By when? In what order?

7. **Monitor and evaluate the outcome.** Based on the criteria identified in step 3, evaluate whether the decision was successful. If not, revisit step 4 to evaluate the other options or generate new ones.

### 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 the class/tutorial with groups reporting back to the full class.

- **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 presentation 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 session and, because they are not prepared, tend to be relatively poor lectures (Brookfield & Preskill, 1999).

- **Don’t provide too much closure.** Although the 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.

[https://uwaterloo.ca/centre-for-teaching-excellence/teaching-resources/teaching-tips/alternatives-lecturing/group-work/implementing-group-work-classroom](https://uwaterloo.ca/centre-for-teaching-excellence/teaching-resources/teaching-tips/alternatives-lecturing/group-work/implementing-group-work-classroom)

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Five Basic Elements of Cooperative Learning

There are five fundamental elements involved in implementing cooperative learning that distinguish it from standard group learning. The elements of cooperative learning are:

1. **Positive Interdependence:**
   This means the group has a clear task or goal so everyone knows they sink or swim together. The efforts of each person benefit not only the individual, but also everyone else in the group. The key to positive interdependence is committing to personal success as well as the success of every member of the group.
   - The group has only one pencil, paper, book, or other resource.
   - A task is divided into jobs and can't be finished unless all help.
   - Pass one paper around the group on which each member must write a section.
   - Each person learns a topic and then teaches it to the group (Jigsaw method).
   - Offer a reward (e.g. bonus points) if everyone in the group succeeds.

2. **Individual and Group Accountability:**
   The group is accountable for achieving its goals, and each member must be accountable for contributing a fair share of the work toward the group goal. No one can "hitchhike" on the work of others. The performance of each individual must be assessed and the results given back to the group.
   - Students do the work before bringing it to the group.
   - One student is chosen at random and questioned on the material the group has studied.
   - Everyone writes a paper; the group certifies the accuracy of all their papers; the instructor chooses only one paper to grade.
   - Students receive bonus points if all do well individually.

3. **Interpersonal and Small Group Skills:**
   These are basic teamwork skills. Group members must know how to provide effective leadership, make decisions, build trust, communicate, and manage conflict.
   - Be on time for group meetings and start them on time.
   - Listen to others. Don't be so busy rehearsing what you are going to say that you miss other group members' points and ideas.
   - Don't close the road to mutual learning by interrupting or using language that can be regarded as a personal attack.
   - Make sure everyone has the opportunity to speak.
   - Don't suppress conflict, but do control and discipline it.

4. **Face-to-Face Promotive Interaction:**
   This means that students promote each other's success by sharing resources. They help, support, encourage, and praise each other's efforts to learn. Both academic and personal support are part of this mutual goal.
   - A student orally explains how to solve a problem.
   - One group member discusses a concept with others.
   - A group member teaches classmates about a topic.
   - Students help each other connect present and past learning.

5. **Group Processing:**
   Group members need to feel free to communicate openly with each other to express concerns as well as to celebrate accomplishments. They should discuss how well they are achieving their goals and maintaining effective working relationships.
   - Group members describe each other's helpful and unhelpful behaviors and actions.
   - As a group, make decisions about which behaviors to continue and which behaviors to change.

http://tutorials.istudy.psu.edu/cooperativelearning/cooperativelearning4.html