

Effective Student Groups

Basic group activities

Standard cooperative: students have the same information and work together on the same task.

Combining: students have different information and rely on other students to complete a task.

JigSaw (collaborative+combining): Begins with a cooperative activity in which each group becomes “expert” on a separate part of a larger problem. Then they break up and recombine in new groups composed of one expert from each of the previous groups to work on a larger problem.

Group formations

While short activities might work fine with self or random selection, its preferable for the instructor to create groups for longer-term projects. Try to create groups that take into account student skills, but fairly distribute work. Try to form groups in odd numbers (3 or 5). A general rule of thumb: shorter projects = smaller groups.

Group roles

Possible roles for group members:

Facilitator.Responsible for getting the group started, keeping it on task, and involving all members.

Recorder.Responsible for keeping a record of what happens in the group meeting.

Spokesperson/Reporter. Responsible for summarizing group decisions for the larger class.

Time keeper.Responsible for keeping group on task and on time.

Reality checker. Responsible for noting group decisions and whether they are realistic.

Spy. Responsible for getting info from other groups when appropriate.

NOTE: in a ‘role play’ activity, group roles would be assigned much more specifically. For example, if students are simulating a Congressional hearing, some students may become ‘senators’ and prepare questions, others would be ‘witnesses’ presenting prepared research, and still other students might be ‘reporters’ to provide stimulating questions to both parties.

Tips to promote strong groups

Get group members to interact. Tasks should require consensus on concrete decisions based on analysis of a complex issue. Ideally, tasks require student interdependence - in other words, they can’t do it on their own.

Provide space for collaboration. Take advantage of mobile furniture, ask students to physically move around to find space to work together, or find alternate space that allows the group members to be physically proximal and able to have a comfortable discussion.

Make student thinking visible. Provide ways to let groups physically document their work: whiteboards, laptops, big post-its, newsprint, periodic updates and reports on discussion boards, previews of work, etc.

Individual accountability. Set the expectation that each individual, not the just the group, is accountable for completion of the task. This may take the form of requiring pre-class preparation before entering groups, calling on individual students in class to report back to the whole class, collecting individual work or basing a significant part of individual grades on behavior that promotes team success.

Competition. Depending on your course structure, consider setting up ‘competitions’ for longer term group projects. Provide ‘awards’ based on different aspects of the assignment. EX; Ask student groups to create websites that inform the public about global warming. When students present the sites, award the best communication plan, the best design, the strongest content, etc.

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Suggested Technologies for Group Work Online

Blackboard: Use the Discussion Board to create private group forums that group members can use to discuss and work on projects. Ask a 'reporter' from each group to post to a 'main' course forum that everyone in the class can see. The Bb blog tool can be used in a similar way. Bb also includes a wiki tool that allows groups to work collaboratively on web-based projects and provide comments and edits along the way. <http://blackboard.duke.edu>

Google Docs: Provides a simple, web-based way for students to work collaboratively on papers. As in Microsoft Word, students can see changes made to documents and comments made by others - but because it's web-based, students can access the document online without emailing or downloading/uploading the document. <http://docs.google.com>

Wikis (ex: PB Wiki, Wikispaces, etc): Several free wikis are now available on the web. Groups can create entire web projects collaboratively building knowledge by pulling resources together, writing and re-writing content, and collectively designing the presentation of information. Wikis can also be convenient tools for groups to use to post updates on other projects, facilitate or schedule group meetings, and share other documents. <http://pbwiki.com> <http://www.wikispaces.com>

Assessing Group work

Specify and discuss the grading criteria you will use based on your objectives. Consider letting students have some input into these criteria before they are finalized, as student control increases the sense of ownership and responsibility the students will have for the group activities. Using rubrics can help better illustrate and communicate your expectations.

Use a "ticket in." Require students to work individually outside of class on the group assignment (e.g., complete a worksheet, write and/or answer discussion questions) and to bring their individual work to class. This serves as their "ticket in" to the group work. Students without their ticket are not allowed to participate in group work that day.

Require a brief, written division of labor report from each group. How often did they meet? Who was present? Who did what parts of the group project or assignment? This reminds the students who is and isn't doing their share and gives you information to use when grading.

Allow or ask groups to self-evaluate their group. Ask groups to write or report on how well their group is working. What's working well? What could be done better?

Include peer input as part of the students' grades (e.g., 20 percent of the grade is determined by peer ratings).

Further reading

Boettcher, J. and Conrad, R. (1999) Faculty Guide for Moving Teaching and Learning to the Web.

Davis, B. G., Collaborative Learning: Group Work and Study Teams. <http://teaching.berkeley.edu/bgd/collaborative.html>

Hewlett Project, University of Texas. <http://www.utexas.edu/academic/cte/hewlett/>

Ledlow, S. (1996). Using Jigsaw in the College Classroom. Arizona State University Center for Learning and Teaching Excellence. Available online: <http://cite.asu.edu/active/usingjig.pdf>

Michaelsen, L. K., (2002). "Getting Started with Team Based Learning" in *Team-Based Learning: A Transformative Use of Small Groups*, Praeger, Michaelsen, L.K., Knight, A. B., and Fink, L.D. eds.