**Group work in class**

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| **Why use group work in class?**   * Group work can be very effective at helping students to engage in ‘deeper’ learning about a topic and so can have a positive impact on academic progress. * Group work can be an invaluable opportunity to learn, hone and practice essential social and collaborative skills (e.g. speaking and listening; negotiation; dealing with disagreement; efficient use of resources and expertise; concentration and application; perseverance; and sustained shared thinking. * Group work provides lots of opportunities for staff-student interactions and so can have a positive impact on staff-student relationships.   **Something to bear in mind**   * Tasks that require inter-dependence, co-reliance and a (fair) division of labour tend to be better suited to group work (e.g. 4 people sitting round a computer could produce high levels of ‘unemployment’). Will your activity be challenging enough to facilitate high levels of engagement amongst all group members? | * It may also be advisable to spend some time setting or reminding people about any general ground rules. For example, *“Everyone’s expected to:*    + - *contribute/take part;*     - *listen ‘actively’;*     - *be reflective, analytical and thoughtful;*     - *be respectful of one another.”*   **Decisions about group sizes and membership**   * There’s no ‘right’ size but the frequency of groups between 4-6 is probably telling. The bigger the group, the more time it tends to spend on the procedural stuff e.g. sorting out roles. With students unused to group work it may be wise to let them develop their group working skills for a while using pairs and smaller groups. * The size / layout of the room will influence decisions about size and membership. * When assigning group membership proximity and/or student preference is often used (i.e. they work with their friends). In a lecture theatre or in very cramped spaces, this may well be the only sensible option if you are to avoid causing chaos. However it doesn’t give students experience of working with new people and encountering new perspectives. Alternatives include: * Counting off i.e. “1,2,3,4. 1, 2, 3, 4. All the 1s together, all the 2s together….”; * Line up by birth date / height / colour of top then divide; * “Choose a sweet. All the Refreshers together, all the Starbursts together…”; * Tutor determined grouping (pre-selection will save time). * However you decide to do it, get people into their groups before giving them the task. If you do it the other way round students will be too busy thinking about who they’re going to be working with to focus on the task.   **Explaining the task**   * Once it’s time to outline the task make sure you do it clearly. For example:   + What are they going to do?   + By when?   + What are you expecting at the end (roughly)? |
| **Before**   * Don’t forget to make your reasons for asking students to work in groups explicit to them; for example what’s the relationship between your group work activities and the rest of the module or course?   **Preparation**  Ask yourself how ‘ready’ your students are to work effectively in groups? It doesn’t ‘just happen’:   * Students need to build up a bit of trust and a sense that they are part of a team before they feel able to engage fully with group work. You could ask them to introduce another group member or to complete an ice-breaker task together. * You might need to propose specific roles for group members particularly if the students aren’t used to working in this way (e.g. time keeper; chairperson; spokesperson; recorder; sceptic; organiser/manager; observer; negotiator). * You may need to provide some guidance on how the group can make decisions (e.g. by combining and amalgamating ideas?; unanimity?; consensus?; majority rule?; authority rule?; ranking and transferable voting?). |
| **Explaining the task contd.**   * Depending on the complexity of the task and the experience of the students it may be a good idea to provide each group with a written *aide memoire* / check list to remind them what they need to do and how long they’ve got. * The clarity of the explanation can be particularly important if you’re using fairly advanced group working techniques such as ‘jigsawing’ or ‘snowballing’. * Once you have explained the task always allow some time for students to ask questions.   **Something to bear in mind**  At this key juncture ‘dead time’ must be avoided at all costs so make sure you’ve done your planning and preparation and that anything and everything you and the students will need is ready and to-hand. You don’t want to be wasting time *shilly shallying* about looking for things. | **After**  Group work is not as ‘quick’ as standing at the front of a room delivering a lecture; students may not cover the same amount of ground as they are tarrying longer on a particular topic or task. As a result:   * Include some plenary time at the end of the session as this can be a very good way of spreading and ‘deepening’ the learning across the different groups. * Ask groups to report on their activities and to outline what they have learned not only about the topic but also about the process of working as a group. This could be done:   + orally (e.g. 2 points from each group; most important thing; most surprising thing; most challenging thing);   + or in writing (e.g. Powerpoint slide; poster; electronic / mobile feedback). * Try and predict possible student responses or outcomes that might crop up in your plenary and prepare some possible responses to these. It cuts down on the amount of thinking on your feet that you have to do on the day and makes it more likely that key teaching points won’t be overlooked. * Offer praise and recognition for students’ group working skills as well as for the sophistication and depth of any academic learning / outcomes.   **Some useful sources of information on group work**  <http://www.learnhigher.ac.uk/groupwork/>  <http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/internationalisation/ISL_Group_Work>  <http://www.infed.org/groupwork/>  <http://www.monash.edu.au/lls/llonline/quickrefs/24-groupwork.xml>  <http://www.kent.ac.uk/careers/sk/teamwork.htm> |
| **During**   * Circulate as best you can while students are engaged in the group work task itself but be sensitive about the impact your presence and interventions might have: by all means respond to queries and requests for clarification but take care not to rush in too quickly to provide answers and solutions. * Have high expectations of the groups, make these clear and don’t be afraid to let students wrestle with things for a bit: harder won gains may be better recalled. If your students are new to group work, make it clear to them why you will be behaving in this way. If you don’t make it explicit then students may not appreciate that your actions are underpinned by a pedagogic rationale and may draw other conclusions instead. * Practice what you preach. If you want to encourage certain behaviours it helps to model them by demonstrating your own high levels of:   + enthusiasm and engagement;   + sensitivity;   + respect;   + willingness to listen to opinions and views different from your own;   + and self-criticism and reflection. |