

Group Work—Ideas to Promote Collaborative Learning and Build Learning Communities

Sarah Volkman, Simmons College, Nursing

Why Work In Groups?

- Engage students in "active learning"
- Students working in groups learn more of what is being taught and retain it longer
- Students working in a collaborative group are more satisfied

- Generate broad array of possible alternative points of view or solutions to a problem
- Give students to work on a project that is too large or complex for an individual
- Allow students with different backgrounds to bring their special knowledge, experience, or skills to a project and explain their orientation to others
- Give students a chance to teach each other
- Give students a structured experience so that they can practice skills applicable to professional situations

- Students who have difficulty talking in class may speak in a small group
- More students, overall, have a chance to participate in class
- Talking in small groups can help overcome the anonymity and passivity of a large class

- Use of collaborative learning can be fearful for the faculty, as they do not have direct control of the learning process. Nevertheless, careful design of group work can ensure a successful learning model.

Planning Group Work

- For group work to be successful the activities must be carefully planned. Be clear on the purpose of group work and the learning goals that it is expected to accomplish. This can take time—so be prepared!
- Give group work early in the semester so that students are familiar with how collaborative learning works and become comfortable with the process.
- Group work should have clear goals: Why are they working together? What are they expected to accomplish?
- It is helpful if you suggest ways to break down the task into smaller units, allocate responsibility for different aspects of the work, allocate organizational responsibility, and provide a suggested timeline with checkpoints for the work to be completed.
- Be explicit about how group work will be graded.

Types of Group Work

Informal Learning Groups are ad hoc temporary clustering of students within a single class session. Examples include peer-pairs during lecture or small groups to answer a question posed during section.

- Helpful to see if students are getting the course content, to give students the opportunity to integrate and apply course concepts, or to change the pace of the class.

Formal Learning Groups are established to complete a specific task, such as perform a lab experiment, write a report, carry out a project, or prepare a position paper. These groups may complete their work in a single class session or over several weeks.

- Helpful to streamline to workload
- Helpful to provide students opportunity for peer feedback
- Helpful to emulate the workplace environment

Study Teams are long-term groups (usually working over the course of a semester) with a set membership that provide support, encouragement, and assistance in completing course requirements and assignments. Very valuable in large courses where complex material is being discussed.

Forming Groups

- Should students form their own group or should they be assigned?
- Size is important—generally between 3 and 7 people per group allows for discussion and participation, depending upon the assignment.
- Resources—provide students an opportunity to interact to complete the task

Designing Group Work

- Design tasks that are interdependent. Each student should have a role in the completion of the task and the success of the group depends upon everyone doing their part.
- Make group work relevant.

Grading Group Work

- The grade for the work can be awarded to the individual or the grade of the work done by the group can be given to all members of the group.
- Part of the grade may be the student's participation in the group discussion or activity.
- Part of the grade may include quantitative score.
- Group members can anonymously "grade" the participation and contribution of the members of the group.

Sources

UC Berkeley <http://teaching.berkeley.edu/bgd/collaborative.html>

Harvard University <http://bokcenter.harvard.edu/docs/wigintro.html>