How can we make group-work effective in discussions or labs?

Center for Research on Teaching Excellence
T.A. Orientation - U.C. Merced
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Intended Workshop Outcomes:

- Participants will share best practices relating to group work.
- Participants will be familiar with the benefits of facilitating group learning in their classroom.
- Participants will leave with concrete ways to effectively facilitate group work.

What is ‘group learning’?

Examples of Group Learning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ex. Think-pair-share</th>
<th>Ex. Buzz groups</th>
<th>Ex. Group project</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Temporary interaction</td>
<td>Few minutes</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Working groups</td>
<td>Fractions of class periods</td>
<td>Longer term interaction</td>
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Time scale of group member interactions

Activity: Share your experiences with group work – the good and bad.

5 minutes:

- Turn to a neighbor or two & introduce yourself & your discipline

- Allow each person in your group 1-2 minutes to respond to the following questions; Ask one person to record.

- Reflect on your best group work experiences – what made them good?
- Reflect on your worst group work experiences – what made them bad?

If done well, what value does group work add to teaching and learning?

Teacher’s perspective:

- Transfers a good deal of the responsibility of learning to students.
- Preparation is different, more creative – you prepare to facilitate learning not to talk for 50 minutes!
- Teaching is more rewarding – you see your students learn as they work with each other and you!
- You learn about your students as they work, which will make you a more effective teacher!

Student learning perspective:

Students learn more when they actively mentally engage with the material and talk about it.

Biggs (2003), p. 103.

More evidence of the value of student engagement to student learning.

“Ten to fifteen minutes is about the length of time an adult can concentrate on a lecture.” (Johnson, Johnson & Smith, 1991)

How can we best facilitate group productivity?

- Plan ahead – know what it is you want your students to achieve from the group activity and plan it to achieve that.
- Explain to your students why they are asked to do this and what value they are to gain from it. Working in groups is a major life skill!
- Use optimum group sizes for planned activity; 5 to 6 people for ‘consensus groups’ like buzz groups, pairs for peer review

Establish shared norms for how to interact in a group and how to resolve conflict. Ex. summarize another’s perspective before responding.

Plan to engage all students in a group.
- Assign roles – Ex. recorder, reporter, checker, questioner
- Require a timed minute share period for each student during which no one is allowed to interrupt. Have recorder, record.
- Support and enforce group identity & limit group splintering by only responding to inquiries made by the group as a whole.

Resources:

- Handelsman, Miller and Pfund, Scientific Teaching (Wisconsin Program for Scientific Teaching, 2007)