Organizing Effective Group Work Sessions

Center for Research on Teaching Excellence
T.A. Orientation - U.C. Merced
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Learning Outcomes

New TA’s will leave this workshop able to:

• Demonstrate an understanding of the benefits of group work.
• Learn techniques for conducting effective group work sessions.
• Consider employing group work in your TA sessions.
What is ‘group learning’?

Examples of Group Learning

- **Ex. Think-pair-share**
  - Temporary interaction
  - Few minutes

- **Ex. Buzz groups**
  - Working groups
  - Problem Solving
  - Fractions of class periods

- **Ex. Group project**
  - Longer term interaction
  - Days to weeks

*Time scale of group member interactions*

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Motivation for Group Learning: If done well, what value does it add to teaching and learning?

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)


Biggs (2003), p. 103.*

Benefits of Group Learning

- Allows students to explore prior conceptions
- Enables Students to Engage in Multiple Learning Styles*
  - Visual Learners
  - Auditory Learners
  - Reading-Writing Preference Learners
  - Kinesthetic Learners
- Transfers a good deal of the responsibility of learning to students.

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

5 minutes:

- Form groups of two or three & introduce yourself & your discipline.
- Allow each person in your group 1-2 minutes to respond to the following questions; Ask one person to record and one to be spokesperson.
  - Reflect on your best group work experiences – what made them good?
  - Reflect on your worst group work experiences – what made them bad?
Strategies For Facilitating Group Work

A. Prior to Group Work

✓ **Plan ahead** – Know what you want your students to achieve from the group activity. Explain to your students why they are asked to do this and what value they are to gain from it.

✓ **Set the rules** – Discuss guidelines for mutual respect among students; Assign specific roles to group members to ensure participation; Announce time allotment for distinct activities and stick to it.

✓ **Forming Groups** – Determine optimum size for planned activity; Student or instructor selected groups?; Temporary or permanent groups?
A. Prior to Group Work – continued

✓ Engage students in a review of potentially difficult concepts, demonstrate relevant examples and allow students to ask questions. (Caution: Avoid monologue lectures covering the entire discussion period)

✓ Be creative! Try different formats for group activities:
  • Group presentations
  • Flash cards
  • Game show competition
  • Use technology: Podcasts, videos, web resources
B. During Group Work

✓ Monitor group activity by interacting with each group and being attentive to student needs:
  • Be a silent observer during group activities where students are allowed to explore prior conceptions.
  • Acknowledge student questions and respond with “open, leading questions” rather than simply stating answers.
  • Encourage students to share their understanding and explain concepts to their fellow classmates.
B. During Group Work – Continued

- Ensure participation by assigning multiple part problems to different group members.
- Check comprehension and productivity by asking members of each group to show and explain their finished work for a particular problem/activity. Having numerical solutions on hand can be useful.
- Allow students to experiment with multiple approaches to problem solving.
- Reward student participation and effort with positive reinforcement. Be sensitive to students’ feelings.
C. Wrapping Up Group Work

• Allow recorders to summarize the group’s results to the rest of the class.
• Select a group or groups to present their work to the rest of the class. Perhaps give extra credit.
• Emphasize the main learning goals of the activity and address unanswered student questions.
• Recognize and give validation for alternate ways of obtaining a result.
• Thank students for their participation.
Resources:

- Thomas F. Hawk, Amit J. Shah (2007) "Using Learning Style Instruments to Enhance Student Learning" *Decision Sciences Journal of Innovative Education*