

Teaching

A series of practical and innovative teaching tips for college faculty No. 23

The Top 10...

Best Practices in Using Student Groups to Promote Learning

Properly used, assigning learning tasks to groups promotes student engagement and learning. Group tasks give students a far less threatening situation in which to share ideas, disagree with each other, and push each other to understand more deeply. They also promote appreciation for the way others think. For shy students, they provide an opportunity to raise questions, or even to speak up in class as a spokesperson. How can we help students work effectively in groups?

- ✓ **Give groups important work to do.** Students quickly learn when instructors mainly give students busy work, or throw something to groups at the end of class. Groups can help identify key questions students have on the lesson, develop charts of key points, make connections between ideas, and be integral to the learning experience.
- ✓ **Group size.** 3 to 5 members works best, but 5 might intimidate shy students, can lead to side conversations and some students slacking off as others do all the work.
- ✓ **Expect *some* socializing.** When groups are first formed, people have to get to know each other. Factor that time into your tasks
- ✓ **Composition.** We are social creatures, and it does help students when they connect with others in class, but too much socializing and not much gets done on the task. Particularly with younger students, mix and match people yourself. Watch and listen to early interactions to see if there is a decent mix of socializing and task orientation.
- ✓ **Help students work well in groups.** Make suggestions for how to make their group work effective. Even better, ask the class to build a list of ideas with you. See if they come up with a timekeeper, someone to take notes, some way to stay on track, and sharing emails. Suggest they have a rule

about hearing everyone out, and sharing speaking time. Make sure to get the list printed up, and consider giving an assignment where you only email clues to one person in each group, whose responsibility it is to contact the others (nice incentive to share emails!).

- ✓ **Use groups often.** The more different times you assign tasks to groups, the more students will learn how to work well in groups. Start with shorter tasks of 3 to 8 minutes. Remind them to have a timekeeper, and give them notice when they have only a minute left.
- ✓ **Use groups throughout class.** Spreading group work throughout class sends a message that this is serious, that you expect groups to help with learning tasks. In fact, *start* some classes with group work.
- ✓ **Don't help all the time.** Resist the temptation to help groups, or to give your opinion in disputes. On the other hand, do not distance yourself. Consider helping a bit, but then creating a norm where if a group wants your help or input, someone raises their hand and asks you to come by as their "consultant." Remind them you are not a referee!
- ✓ **Have group projects handed in periodically.** There is no need to have everything handed in, but collecting group reports regularly sends the message that these are important. Make comments to the group on their work. Suggest ways to improve.
- ✓ **Regularly grade group work.** Students know that what really counts in class are things that are graded, so collect and grade group work regularly. Be clear how group work contributes to their overall grade.

Bonus!

- ✓ **Ask regularly for your students' help** by requesting input into how you give directions and use groups in class. Make it clear that you want to help their groups succeed.
- ✓ **Expect some problems and have relief valves.** One relief valve is to schedule group evaluations where members can speak with each other about their participation. Another relief valve is to say that after XX weeks, you will move people to new groups. Another is to say that groups that are struggling should get in touch with you to discuss the problem. Involve students by having them help you create a group experience review form for the class.

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